

India-U.S. Military Alliance Threatens Trilateral Cooperation

by Ramtanu Maitra

In recent months, the India-China border dispute has made the headlines at a time when both Beijing and New Delhi were expanding their economic relations rapidly. The first Chinese discontent was expressed just a week ahead of Chinese President Hu Jintao's state visit to India on Nov. 20-23, 2006, when Beijing's Ambassador to New Delhi, Sun Yuxi, claimed that the state of Arunachal Pradesh is a Chinese territory.

"In our position, the whole of the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory. And Tawang is only one of the places in it. We are claiming all of that. That is our position," Sun Yuxi said on Nov. 13. Arunachal Pradesh, located at the northeastern corner of India, bordering Myanmar and China, is part of a disputed boundary that provoked an India-China border clash in 1962, and remains disputed even today.

Ambassador Sun Yuxi's voice had created a turmoil in Delhi, particularly the timing of it. While the Indian media criticized the Chinese Ambassador's "hegemonic" message, Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, on Nov. 24, after President Hu Jintao had left India, told the Lok Sabha (Lower House) of the Indian Parliament that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India and this status was "not debatable." This statement came when members of opposition parties raised the issue in both houses, the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Elders).

The subject was kept under wraps till early Spring of 2007, when the Indian media found out that Beijing had denied a visa to an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, who comes from Arunachal Pradesh and was part of a large delegation of IAS officers to China. The visa was denied on the grounds that Arunachal Pradesh was always a part of Chinese territory and therefore, the individual did not need a visa.

Once the Indian media began berating China for its "arbitrary and devious action," on May 29, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee held talks in Hamburg with his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi. The ministers also reviewed progress of the special representative talks on the vexed boundary issue, reports indicate. The meeting took place on the sidelines of the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM). Nothing much was said about the outcome of the meeting, other than it was "fruitful."

Missile Defense Issue

This development puzzled many observers, who contended that Sino-Indian relations had never been better. Both China and India are in a growth mode and have more or less accepted a common economic agenda. In addition, both these nations, along with Russia, have indicated on more than one occasion that they would participate in a trilateral development program which would not only benefit all three nations, but the region as a whole.

But, what was missed in this observation is the growing concern within Russia, and China as well, about the Bush Administration's development of a missile defense system, and India's stated willingness to be a part of it. Both Russia and China have come to the conclusion that the United States, under the Bush Administration, is in the process of reviving the Cold War, identifying Moscow and Beijing as its future foes.

Briefly, the United States, with support of the Blair Government in Britain, plans to locate powerful missile-tracking radar in the Czech Republic, as well as interceptor missiles in Poland, to combat what it says are threats to global security from Iran. On June 8, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed that the United States locate part of the system at the Russian-leased radar station at Gabala, in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. On June 20, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia saw no threat from Iran's ballistic missiles, and was perplexed as to how Washington could use this to justify a planned U.S. defense system in Europe. "We do not see any kind of threat from Iran. Thus, we do not understand why, in order to justify the installation of a U.S. anti-ballistic missile system in Europe, you have to bring up the pretext of a genuine Iranian threat," he added.

In other words, it should have been pretty clear to India what its best ally, Russia, thinks about the intent of the Bush Administration to set up a missile defense system. But, apparently it was not. For months, the Manmohan Singh government in India has also been fully aware of China's stated opposition to the U.S.-Japan efforts to develop a missile defense system in Asia. On June 6, Beijing came out in the open when China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told reporters that China has "grave concerns" about U.S. and Japanese plans, noting that a missile defense system will "impact stability and the strategic balance. . . . It is not conducive to mutual trust of major nations and regional security," Jiang said. She warned, "It may also cause new proliferation problems."

At the time, China was responding to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, and his Japanese counterpart, Fumio Kyuma, who were speaking at the sixth Asia Security summit of the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) in Singapore, and had emphasized that a defense was necessary to stop rogue nations and terrorist organizations from using rockets to deliver weapons of mass destruction.

China's representative at Singapore, Lt. Gen. Zhang Qingsheng, deputy chief of the People's Liberation Army, told reporters that the development of an anti-missile system by the United States, Australia, and Japan could destabilize Asia. China would oppose "very strongly" any attempt to extend such a system to cover Taiwan, he Zhang added.

Quadrilateral Security

According to Siddharth Varadarajan, writing in *The Hindu* of June 14, concrete plans for a new quadrilateral dialogue process, which would include India, along with the United States, Japan, and Australia, were firmed up after the visit to Delhi in May of Japan's Vice Foreign Minister, Shotaro Yachi. The first "exploratory meeting" at the level of senior officials took place on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) security policy meeting in Manila on May 24-25. The United States was represented by Christopher Hill, Washington's point man for the six-party talks on North Korea; India by Additional Secretary K.C. Singh from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA); Japan by Chikao Kawai, Deputy Vice Minister for Foreign Policy; and Australia by Jennifer Rawson from its Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Largely mindful of China's concerns, however, the four countries decided to meet without any formal agenda and not to publicize the meeting itself, or the subjects discussed, Varadarajan pointed out. "In the run up, the Chinese had issued a *démarche* to all four of us to find out what was going on, and I suppose we were conscious of not trying to create the impression of a gang-up against them," a senior Indian MEA official told *The Hindu*.

In fact, China also noted that the Indian, Japanese, and Australian navies had worked together under U.S. "leadership" after the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, and in April this year, India, Japan, and the United States staged trilateral naval exercises off Japan's eastern coast.

It is evident from Varadarajan's report, and the Chinese reaction to the quadrilateral dialogue, that the Manmohan Singh government has no compunction in betraying the trust of China, its next-door neighbor, a militarily powerful nation, a likely economic power in the coming decade, and, most importantly, a major cog in the trilateral relations, along with Russia, to develop Eurasia and stabilize the region.

But this little devious act by the Congress Party-led government, which has sidled closer to the Bush-Cheney Administration than perhaps any other previous Indian government, is a step in the wrong direction, according to Beijing. The earlier step that New Delhi took in June 2005 went mostly unnoticed outside of China, and the two signing partners—India and the United States.

The U.S.-India Military Agreement

On June 28, 2005, the United States and India signed a "New Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship"

(NFDR). Then-Indian Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee, who signed the agreement, kept it pretty much under wraps until it was signed. Some observers point out that the secrecy was perhaps a measure to avoid a negative response within the strategic community in India, which is highly dubious about the avowed American intent of promoting peace and stability in the region. The secrecy was also necessary to prevent prior response from such important nations as China and Russia.

The NFDR is in essence a U.S.-India Defense Agreement of ten years' duration. According to Dr. Subhash Kapila, an Indian analyst, among the highlights of the Framework is the clause that this "Defense Agreement is not a 'defense pact' as some have made it out to be. It is only a 'Framework for U.S.-India Defense Relationship.'"

Under the NFDR, Washington has offered high-tech cooperation, expanded economic ties, and energy cooperation. It will also help to step up a strategic dialogue with India to boost missile defense and other security initiatives, launch a "defense procurement and production group," and work to cooperate on military "research, development, testing and evaluation." Given India's broken military procurement system, the know-how transfer will be every bit as valuable as the technology transfer—maybe more so.

In the area of missile defense, for instance, an analyst pointed out that efforts will begin with efforts to secure approval of Patriot PAC-3 missiles for India (previous offers had involved less advanced PAC-2s).

Furthermore, the NFDR envisages joint and combined exercises and exchanges between the two sides, naval pilot training, and increased cooperation in the areas of worldwide peacekeeping operations and expansion of interaction with other nations "in ways that promote regional and global peace and stability."

As the *Times* of India, noted at the time: "Indicative of New Delhi's broader goals is a paragraph in the agreement that talks of the two sides working 'to conclude defense transactions, not solely as ends in and of themselves, but as a means to strengthen our countries' security, reinforce our strategic partnership, achieve greater interaction between our armed forces, and build greater understanding between our defense establishments.'"

India Against China?

There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that Washington's move to boost relations with India, a country which was on the opposite side during the Cold War, is part of the Bush-Cheney cabal's strategy to counter the growing influence of China.

There are many around U.S. Vice President Cheney and former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who support increasing defense cooperation with India, to help it confront future Chinese influence. In addition, a number of senior policymakers and analysts in the United States see that

India may become the countervailing force to China in the next decade.

Many in India in positions of power, publicly deny any such connection. The majority of people in the country are not willing to simply toe a U.S. line, jeopardizing India's vital interests, which encompass good and strong relations with both China and Russia, as well as friendly relations with the United States. There is no question that Indian-Chinese relations have improved on a wide range of issues in the last decade. In April 2005, India announced a strategic partnership with China, with the underlying theme of peace and prosperity.

At the same time, the Indian leadership under Prime Minister Singh remains mute about a Chinese threat, but expresses concerns about growing Chinese military, political, and economic influence in the region. The Indian Navy sees a potential threat in the expanding Chinese Navy. The ambitious \$8.1 billion Project Seabird, started by India to develop the third naval base at Karwar in the state of Karnataka, is part of Indian's strategy to extend and protect its maritime zone of influence (the project includes a full operational naval base structured around an aircraft carrier, naval armament depot, air force station and missile silos). Joint U.S.-India naval exercises in the Malacca Strait were a signal, addressing increasing Chinese naval presence in the region, some observers point out.

China has not said much about these expanding U.S.-Indian defense relations. But there is no doubt that Beijing has closely observed the developments and has put in place safeguards to protect emergence of a potential threat.

China has provided military assistance to Pakistan to counterbalance some of India's recent gains. In 2001, China succeeded in getting Pakistan's approval to share the new Pakistani naval base at Gwadar. This provides several benefits to China, including Chinese access to Persian Gulf resources, a potentially useful military base to counter increasing U.S. influence in Central Asia, and as a damper on Indian naval power, serving as a wedge between the Middle East and India.

It is evident that the Manmohan Singh government is trying to walk a fine line to serve its own strategic interests. On one hand, it is trying to improve economic and trade relations with China, while on other hand it wants to expand security relations with the United States to get advanced technology to modernize its military. While New Delhi is not likely to directly challenge Beijing, or side wholly with Washington, if there is significant policy disagreement between India and China, there exists a danger that any hostility between India and Pakistan, or unexpected events in the region, can put a severe strain on India-China relations.

Given the explicit military dimension, the proposed quadrilateral security arrangement could be one of those unexpected events in the region. At least, China has definitely taken note of it, and has responded by claiming Arunachal Pradesh once again as its own.