India embraces Bush and national missile defence project

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The Bush administration's campaign to win international support for its plan for a national missile defence (NMD) program has produced at least one highly significant shift in strategic relations.

Many European powers have been critical of the US plan, which will directly undermine the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) treaty signed between the US and the Soviet Union in 1972 to halt a new arms race. In North Asia, Japan and South Korea have been cautious in their comments, while Russia and China, who regard the proposal as directed against them, are openly hostile.

The reasons for the general nervousness in international ruling circles are clear. No one takes seriously Bush's justification for the NMD plan—that it is necessary to defend the US against missile attack from so-called rogue states such as North Korea and Iraq. By erecting an anti-missile shield and reducing the risk of retaliation, the US will strengthen its hand to intervene aggressively around the world.

Given the decidedly cool reception, India stands out for its positive, almost enthusiastic support for the NMD plan. On May 2, less than 24 hours after Bush gave his first speech on strategic issues including the anti-missile project, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) issued a statement hailing it as a "highly significant and far-reaching" step to transform "the Cold War's security architecture."

The MEA went on to state that "India lauds the desire of the US to make a clean break with the past" especially from "the adversarial legacy of the Cold War". It then described Bush's proposals as "a strategic and technological inevitability" in moving "to a cooperative defensive transition that is underpinned by further cuts and a de-alert of nuclear forces... We note with appreciation the US's resolve to seek dialogue, consultation and cooperation with the country concerned."

The MEA's statement was particularly remarkable given that only months ago External Affairs Minister Jawant Singh had warned that the US anti-missile plan would only add to India's security problems by encouraging China to build more effective weapons.

At that time Singh commented: "We have consistently held a view that opposes the militarisation of outer space. The NMD will adversely influence the larger movement towards disarmament of which India is a staunch advocate. We believe that technological superiority will result in a reaction in other parts of the world, thus reviving the possibility of yet another and newer arms race. We cannot support this development."

Just last month, however, during a visit to Washington by Singh, Bush pointedly called him to the White House for an unscheduled meeting on relations between the two countries. Singh emerged from the meeting full of effusive praise for the new president. "I think a great many things that are being said about President Bush are completely untrue," he commented. "He is a marvellous person... It is a completely mistaken notion that he does not have a handle on things." Singh described the visit as "the start of a new era" in US-India relations—a theme that was taken up in sections of the Indian media.

Following India's endorsement of Bush's May 1 speech, relations between the two governments have further blossomed. US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice phoned Singh in early May to inform him that New Delhi would be on the itinerary of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who was being dispatched to brief "friends and allies" in the region including Japan, South Korea and Australia about the NMD plans. The *Times of India* noted: "India is ready to sup at the table of great nations... Rice has said in recent meetings, and evidently the administration is keen to prove it."

Armitage was in New Delhi on May 12, the third anniversary of India's nuclear tests in 1998, which resulted in US sanctions on India. He chose to use the occasion to say that the US was worried about Pakistan's development of a nuclear arsenal, pointedly omitting any reference to India's own nuclear weapons. All the signs indicate that the US is preparing to drop what remains of its economic sanctions on India and to turn a blind eye to India's nuclear weapons as part of developing a closer economic and strategic alliance with New Delhi.

A tilt becomes a lurch

India's abrupt about-face marks a certain break with the whole framework of its previous foreign policy. It is a sharp indication of the rapidly shifting relations on the Indian subcontinent. India's embrace of the rightwing Bush administration is a far cry from the situation even a decade ago when New Delhi, as one of the leaders of the so-called non-aligned group of countries, attempted to assert a limited independence by balancing between the US and the Soviet Union—with a decided "tilt" towards the latter.

During the Cold War, the US developed close ties with Pakistan, particularly in the 1980s when Washington relied on Islamabad to provide a base of operations for the CIA's covert backing of Islamic fundamentalists fighting the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, strategic relations in South Asia have shifted. The US now regards the Islamic groups, which it assisted finance, train and arm and now hold power in Afghanistan, as a danger to its strategic and economic interests in Central Asia and a threat to the stability of the region.

When India and Pakistan exploded nuclear devices in 1998, Washington made an "even-handed" response—slapping sanctions on both countries until they signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). But in 1999, the Clinton administration signalled a shift towards New Delhi when, in the midst of fighting in the Kargil region of Indian-controlled Jammu & Kashmir, Washington leaned heavily on Islamabad to withdraw its support for Kashmiri separatist fighters battling Indian troops.

Closer ties between Washington and New Delhi were forged last year when Clinton became the first US president in 22 years to visit India. Clinton and Vajpayee signed a joint "vision statement" and a series of other economic and strategic agreements between the two countries. By contrast the US president touched down only briefly in Pakistan and then only to insist that the military regime rein in Islamic extremists. Since the Clinton visit, India and the US have engaged in a series of top-level

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meetings on strategic issues and exchanged military intelligence.

With the advent of the Bush administration, the discernable “tilt” towards New Delhi appears to have become a lurch. The US not only has significant economic interests in what has been, until recently, a large and expanding market but views India as a useful ally on the politically unstable subcontinent. Sections of the Republican rightwing who espouse a far more aggressive policy towards Beijing have also aired the possibility of using India, which fought a border war with China in the 1960s, to put pressure on China.

For its part, the ruling National Democratic Alliance led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) seems to have wholeheartedly embraced the prospect of closer ties with the US, despite the potential for rupturing relations with Moscow and leading to conflict with Beijing.

Rightwing Hindu extremists see US support as an opportunity to assert a more dominant position within the region against Muslim Pakistan. In the *Pioneer*, columnist Sandhya Jain referred to the US relationship in openly communal terms, describing India and America as “civilisational allies” because both are threatened by Muslim fundamentalism. She went on to map out a position for India like that of Israel in the Middle East:

“A defensive umbrella in which a tracking satellite can find and neutralise enemy missiles in mid-air is no small protection for a country physically surrounded by civilisationally hostile forces. The Opposition assertion that this would reduce India to a US satellite is *jejune*, and merits contempt. India would no more be a satellite than France or Germany was under NATO. But she would be allied to the most powerful country of the free world, a country that is fiercely loyal to its friends, as witnessed by its abiding friendship with Israel.”

Sharp opposition in India

The significance of New Delhi's support for the US anti-missile plan is also underscored by the sharpness of the divisions that it has opened up in Indian ruling circles. The opposition Congress Party, which dominated Indian politics for decades after independence and was the leading proponent of the non-aligned movement, has condemned the Vajpayee government in scathing terms. Congress Party leader K. Natwar Singh—a former foreign secretary and minister of state for external affairs—warned that uncritical support for NMD may amount to antagonising China and described the government's stand as “dangerously immature and irresponsible”.

Editorials in a number of major Indian newspapers ridiculed the government and warned about the risks involved in supporting the Bush plan.

The *Times of India* in a comment entitled “Bush Fire” commented: “Maybe there is something that the rest of the world doesn't know, perhaps an angle that was personally conveyed to external affairs minister Jaswant Singh by US national security adviser Condoleeza Rice when she called him from Washington. Only this could explain the irrational exuberance of New Delhi's response to US President Bush's declaration... [Previously] India reiterated its commitment to ridding the world of nuclear weapons. By backing the US adventure on the ballistic missile defence system, New Delhi is ensuring the opposite, since the first reaction of China will be to expand its arsenal and its second will be to set up a system of its own...

In its editorial “Playing second fiddle,” the *Hindu* warned: “India's uncritical acclamation of the new strategic ‘vision' of the US President, George W Bush, has only underlined the Vajpayee administration's all too eager willingness to jettison the right to strategic autonomy, if not also an independent foreign policy. By acquiescing in the emerging strategic agenda of the sole superpower, New Delhi finds itself embarrassingly alone among all the global powers and emerging players. Not only that. What New Delhi has failed to accomplish is to clarify how it can virtually adopt Mr Bush's American agenda in regard to nuclear security and missile defences as India's own strategic vision.”

But one of the most strident attacks on the Vajpayee government was made in the fortnightly *Frontline* magazine—a forum for small ‘l' liberal, “left” and Communist Party writers. While one certainly would not expect an article from this milieu outlining an independent class standpoint for the working class, the *Frontline* article, entitled “India's abject surrender,” is notable for the way in which it echoes, in more vivid language, the lament in the openly bourgeois press that the government is rashly tearing up decades of foreign policy.

“It is a crying shame that India, once an apostle of peace, and a nuclear abolition advocate, should have become sordidly complicit in Bush's historic nuclear misadventure. This degeneration in India's posture became obvious most dramatically three years ago with the embrace of nuclear deterrence which it had rightly called ‘abhorrent' for 50 years. It has got further consolidated with India's growing ‘strategic relationship' with Washington and its increasing acceptance of America's agenda in security, economy, trade, and the environment... Blinded by its own pitiable obsession with seeking legitimacy for its nuclear weapons, New Delhi is now prepared to go to any lengths, including becoming America's vassal in Asia...

“New Delhi seems to have been seized by a bout of irrationality, even dementia, in welcoming what have been called ‘madcap missiles'. Or else, it would not have adopted a stand that so self-evidently and gravely undermines global security, regional strategic balances and its own interests. This must not pass. The government has no democratic mandate to effect such a draconian, even suicidal, change of policy. It is the duty of India's political class and the thinking citizenry to oppose this abject capitulation to the Star Wars mindset and to fight for global nuclear weapons elimination.”

While *Frontline* correctly points to the recklessness with which India tested nuclear weapons in 1998, the hysterical tone of the article only serves to underscore the political impotence of its standpoint—a hankering after a mythic past when India, as a non-aligned power, was a champion of “peace” and “disarmament”. So-called independence was always a chimera—the product of the peculiar postwar period, during which economically dependent countries like India could manoeuvre between the Soviet and US blocs and Indian leaders could strut the world stage posturing as “peacemakers”. This whole charade was given the blessing of various left groups and the Communist Party of India, which, in foreign as in domestic policy, allied itself with the so-called progressive sections of the ruling class.

The rapidity with which the Indian government has abandoned its previous foreign policy precepts underlines the fact that there is no going back. New Delhi is enunciating the developing view of sections of the Indian ruling elite that if India attempts to manoeuvre independently in the changed international climate, it risks the danger of being caught in the crossfire between the major powers. Moreover, by forming a firm alliance with the US, India is in a far stronger position to aggressively pursue its own interests within the region.

The dangers for ordinary working people throughout the subcontinent are self-evident. This year's Indian budget included a dramatic increase in military spending and, last week, as US official Armitage was holding talks in New Delhi, the Indian armed forces were engaged in their biggest war games in over a decade in an area near the border with Pakistan. The manoeuvres, which involved around 50,000 troops, tanks, artillery and more than 100 combat aircraft, once again ratchetted up tensions in a region where four nuclear-armed countries—India, Pakistan, China and Russia—share borders.

The answer to this increasingly volatile situation does not lie in attempting to resurrect a “non-aligned, non-nuclear” India but rather in building a genuinely internationalist and anti-capitalist movement of the working class to defend its independent class interests.

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