

US-Indian military ties: an incendiary factor in an unstable region

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Even as India and Pakistan have moved to the brink of war, Washington has been quietly strengthening its strategic ties with New Delhi in a range of areas—including military training, intelligence and the sale of sophisticated hardware. The Bush administration's promotion of the Indian government, led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), as a "strategic partner" has added a further profoundly destabilising factor to relations on the Indian subcontinent.

Although barely reported in the international press, the US and India last month held their first joint military exercises in more than four decades. The two-week war games, which were held in the Indian city of Agra and concluded on May 28, were code-named "Balance Iroquois" and involved Indian para-commandos and US Special Forces, along with military aircraft from both countries.

Exact details of the exercise have been kept secret but its basic object was training in air-borne assault and closer collaboration. US Embassy spokesman Gordon Duguid said it was "the largest army exercise ever to take place between US and India and reflected a growing military cooperation. It is taking place in the framework of our ongoing military-to-military relationship and it will be the first of a regular series of exercise."

The most significant aspect of "Balance Iroquois" was that it took place at all. With India poised for war against Pakistan, the decision not to cancel the exercise could only encourage the BJP-led government to take a more belligerent stance. It was a clear indication of Washington's determination to consolidate close ties with New Delhi, regardless of the consequences.

Further combined exercises are planned later in the year. In October, joint naval manoeuvres will take place in the Arabian Sea for the first time involving a cruiser-destroyer group of three or four warships and maritime reconnaissance aircraft. Indian soldiers will train with American Special Forces from the US Pacific Command in Alaska. The site of the exercise is worth noting—the cold, mountainous terrain in Alaska being similar to that of India's borders with its two regional rivals Pakistan and China.

The developing US ties with India mark a sharp shift from the relations that prevailed on the Indian subcontinent during the Cold War. India maintained a close economic and strategic relationship with the Soviet Union from where it obtained the bulk of its military hardware. For decades, Washington used its alliance with Pakistan and a succession of military juntas as a counterweight to New Delhi and Moscow in the region. In the 1980s, the CIA used

Pakistan as its base to train, fund and arm anti-communist Mujaheddin groups in Afghanistan to the tune of billions of dollars as a means of undermining the USSR.

But with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the whole strategic equation began to shift as Washington sought to establish its domination over the huge oil and gas reserves in former Soviet Central Asia. The Clinton administration imposed sanctions on both Pakistan and India following a series of rival nuclear tests in 1998. But in 1999, Washington exploited clashes between Indian troops and Pakistan-backed Islamic militants in the Kargil region of Kashmir to open up new relations with New Delhi.

Defence and intelligence links developed by Clinton received a further boost under the Bush administration, especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks in US. The US lifted the remaining sanctions on India over the nuclear tests and accelerated its intelligence sharing with the Indian military establishment, in particular over Islamic extremist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The US "global war on terrorism" and its invasion of Afghanistan tied in with India's branding of all Islamic fundamentalist groups, including those opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir, as "terrorists".

Over the past year around 50 high-level defence and state visits have taken place between the US and India, including by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh. Reciprocal visits by US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld to India and Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes to Washington took place last November and January respectively. The US top brass—including General Myers, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, his predecessor, General Henry Shelton, and Admiral Dennis Blair, Commander of US forces in the Pacific—have all visited India.

The cornerstone of US-Indian military relations is the Defence Policy Group (DPG), formed last year to consolidate previous attempts to coordinate military policies. Joint executive steering groups have also been established between the two countries for each of the three services—army, navy and air force. Like the training exercise in Agra, the DPG has continued to function throughout the current standoff with Pakistan, even amid the acute tensions that followed the attack on an Indian army base in Kashmir on May 14.

An Indian team was invited to Colorado Springs, ahead of the DPG meeting, for a US presentation on its missile defence project. As one Indian official noted with satisfaction: "Ordinarily, at any

other time, the tense border situation would have simply sidelined the DPG meeting. But it is a measure of how far we have come that discussions moved ahead even during this crisis.”

The formal DPG meeting took place in Washington on May 21-24 in Washington, with Indian Army Chief and chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee General S Padmanabhan in attendance. The joint statement following the meeting boasted that the two countries had charted a “new course” in past year, which “entails rapid growth in cooperation on defence and security matters. In a matter of months, the US and India defence establishments have translated the broad vision for the relationship into action.”

While New Delhi previously relied on the Soviet Union, then Russia, for military supplies, US arms sales to India are accelerating rapidly.

In April the Indian army acquired eight AN/TPQ-37 Firefighters, an artillery-locating radar system, at a cost of \$US146 million. The AN/TPQ-37 can pinpoint mortar, rocket launchers and artillery at a range of up to 300 km after tracking a shell for just a few seconds. A US Defence Security Co-operation Agency spokesman commented with delight: “We have no one here who can recall our ever having sold a major weapons system to India.”

The US Defence Department underscored the key role of India in US strategic planning, declaring: “This sale [of the radar system] will contribute to the foreign policy and national security interests of the US by helping to improve the security of a country that has been and continues to be a force for political stability and economic progress in South Asia.” As far as “stability” and “progress” are concerned, it should be noted that the sale took place as around a million Indian and Pakistani troops, backed by artillery, tanks, missiles and warplanes, confronted each other on high alert along the border.

The Bush administration has already cleared the sale of engines and avionics for the long-delayed Indian Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) project. Senior Indian defence officials are expected to hold talks in the near future with their US counterparts to explore possibilities for joint research, development and production of military weapons systems. On May 13, a joint US-India defence industry seminar was held in Washington to discuss India’s acquisition and procurement policies, the opportunities for private sector investment in the Indian defence market and the streamlining of technology and export licensing to speed up military sales.

US-Indian military collaboration is not confined to the Indian subcontinent but extends to naval cooperation in a swathe of ocean from the Middle East to South East Asia. In February 2001, the US Navy participated for the first time in an international fleet review organised by the Indian Navy in Bombay. Last December the two countries reached an agreement on naval cooperation to secure the maritime routes between the Suez Canal and the Malacca Strait. In March, the two navies conducted a combined training exercise in the Malacca Strait.

While the joint patrols are taking place under the banner of “the war against terrorism,” the real aims are to ensure US control over key naval routes such as the Malacca Strait, through which a substantial portion of world trade, including in oil and gas, pass. Known as “chokepoints,” these sea-lanes provide Washington

with a means for exerting pressure, direct and indirect, on its rivals in the region.

Yossef Bodansky, the Director of the US Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, recently pointed to the strategic significance of the Malacca Strait, saying: “The global strategic growth and expansion of aspiring powers can be contained and regulated through the mere control over the movement of their naval forces through the Strait of Malacca.”

Bodansky also identified the primary US target, declaring: “For Beijing, this reality is increasingly a vital interest. Any Chinese naval and military surge into the Indian Ocean—a major strategic priority of Beijing—must pass through the Strait of Malacca. Beijing considers its surge into the Indian Ocean as part of a strategic surge of global proportions... in a strategic grand design that anticipates the possibility of a major military clash with the US in the foreseeable future.”

His comments are in line with Bush’s aggressive stance toward China. In the course of the 2000 election campaign, Bush declared Beijing “a strategic competitor”. The “war against terrorism” has been used as the pretext to set up US military bases in Central Asia, provide military aid to Nepal, establish close military ties in South East Asia, particularly in the Philippines and strengthen relations with Taiwan, Japan and South Korea. Control over the Malacca Strait is a key element in this strategy of encirclement and the choice of India as a partner in this exercise is not accidental.

New Delhi’s willingness to participate is bound up with the ambitions of the Hindu chauvinist BJP and more broadly of the political establishment to transform India into a world power. Jasjit Singh, director of New Delhi’s Institute of Defence Analysis, gave voice to these sentiments when he bluntly declared China to be “our central strategic competitor economically, technologically, politically and militarily”.

The BJP’s advocacy of an alliance with the US stretches back to the 1962 war with China in which the Indian military suffered a humiliating defeat. The first-ever joint Indian-US war games took place in the aftermath of the conflict. The Jana Sangh, the forerunner to the BJP, called for the establishment of permanent military ties with the US, arguing that India would have defeated China if it had had American backing.

Four decades later, substantial sections of the ruling elite are backing the BJP’s position as a means of advancing Indian interests on the subcontinent and more broadly. The combination of a Hindu chauvinist government in New Delhi and a US administration, which demonstrated its willingness to recklessly engage in military adventures, is an explosive mixture in an already unstable region.



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