Strategic Partners in Defense

By RAHUL BEDI

Burgeoning U.S.-India defense and strategic relations are poised to increase following the continuing series of joint military exercises, equipment sales, reciprocal visits by senior commanders and doctrinal exchanges.

The latest impetus to strengthening bilateral strategic ties came last September when Washington eased export controls on India's civilian nuclear and space facilities. Since January 2003 the two sides have worked on liberalizing high technology transfers to India as a follow-up on the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) initiative.

U.S. restrictions on transferring space and "dual use" technologies that came into effect after India's first nuclear test in 1974, and were reaffirmed after the 1998 nuclear tests, were initially eased and sanctions were lifted in 2001. India is signatory to none of the nuclear-restraint regimes such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

"These efforts [on the NSSP] have enabled the U.S. to make modifications to U.S. export licensing policies that will foster cooperation in commercial space programs and permit certain exports to power plants at safeguarded nuclear facilities," the two sides declared in a joint statement in Washington, D.C.

"The first phase in the NSSP is more fixed on the space side," India's Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran said after talks with U.S. Under Secretary of State Marc Grossman in Washington, D.C., ahead of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's meeting with President George W. Bush in New York last September. When we get to the second phase, it will be focused perhaps a little more on the nuclear stage, he added. New Delhi, in return, has promised to tighten controls on further exporting this technology garnered from the United States.

In November 2002, India and the United States established the High Technology Cooperation Group (HTCG), the first formal working group Washington set up with any country to deal seriously with this long-standing bottleneck in bilateral relations over high technology transfers. Ever since, progress has been gathering momentum following a series of high-level meetings in the two countries between senior officials.

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Above: Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld makes a statement after his meeting with his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee in New Delhi in December.
Top, right: Indian and American soldiers board an Indian transport plane in Agra in May 2002 as part of a joint military exercise.
Top: U.S. and Indian Army paratroopers at the Agra exercise.

"Any effort to develop a strong political and economic relationship between India and the United States must address the technology denial issue. No worthwhile strategic relationship can be built between the two countries unless the strategic issues involving India's nuclear and missile programs are resolved in a manner consistent with India's dignity, security and sovereignty," says former Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal who negotiated extensively with the United States. Sibal, presently India's envoy in Moscow, warns, that considering the sensitivity of the subject and its linkage to the non-proliferation issue, progress was bound to be slow. But the seriousness with which the exercise is being undertaken was unprecedented, he adds.

The sixth Defense Policy Group (DPG) meeting chaired by India's former Defence Secretary Ajay Prasad and U.S. Under Secretary for Defense Policy Douglas Feith in New Delhi last June reaffirmed their commitment to close military and strategic ties shortly after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh assumed office.

The DPG highlighted headway made in the Malabar, COPE India and Cooperative Cope Thunder, Yudh Abhyas, and the Iroquois series of military exercises. There was also greater progress in interaction and interoperability between both militaries through 2004. The United States also issued invitations to India for the July 2004 Missile Defense Conference in Berlin and Roving Sands Exercise in 2005, and a series of four missile defense planning events culminating in a Command Post Exercise in 2006.

One area of discussion at the June DPG meeting concerned the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) that seeks to formalize the logistical relationship between the two militaries. Both sides discussed the draft ACSA agreement, which is still pending with the Indian government. This agreement is a logistics billing arrangement that could cover issues such as mutual billing for charges on exercises and other services provided.

"Indo-U.S. Military Relationship: Expectations and Perceptions," an analysis prepared by a non-U.S. government organization, Information Assurance Technology Analysis Center (IATAC), in

A strong U.S.-India defense partnership could be a key stabilizing factor in the future Asian environment.

Military cooperation has included regular joint exercises and equipment deals. Fighting terrorism is a high priority for both India and the U.S., despite some differences on strategic issues.

October 2002, concluded that Washington's motive in forging closer military ties with New Delhi was to have a "capable partner" to take on "more responsibility for low-end operations" in Asia.

The IATAC report, produced after interviewing 82 senior American and Indian officials, mostly military personnel linked closely with furthering bilateral security ties, views the strategic relationship with India as a "hedge" against losing significant allies such as Japan and South Korea. American interviewees argued that with India as a strategic partner, the future Asian environment might be less threatening and more easily managed.

Fearing that Asia could become hostile and dangerous to continuing American military presence in the region, the report argued that the United States also considered strategically engaging India as a "future investment." After 9/11 Washington has, other than in Afghanistan and to a lesser extent in Pakistan, significantly extended its military presence across Asia through a complex web of alliances backed by economic incentives. This includes defense cooperation agreements with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, a limited degree of influence over turbulent states such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, and a military presence in Southeast and Far East Asia that is presently being reviewed.

India has already allowed the U.S. Army admittance to its Counter Insurgency Jungle Warfare School (CIJWS) at Virangte in the northeast, but is still considering opening up the High Altitude Warfare School (HAWS) at Gulmarg in western Kashmir.

But despite this restriction, U.S. and Indian special forces jointly conducted high altitude exercises in Ladakh in September 2003 to augment "inter-operability" between the two armies. These exercises, conducted after similar maneuvers at Agra a year earlier, were the first time India had permitted foreign troops into the geographically strategic region bordering Pakistan and China for the three-week Balanced Iroquois/Vajra Prahaar (lightning attack) exercises.

Courtesy PACOM

"The exercises—that included rock craft, cliff assault techniques and surveillance—were at heights above 11,500 feet on barren hills and rocky terrain not available in the U.S.A," says former Lieutenant General Arvind Sharma, commander of the locally based XIV corps that hosted the maneuvers. The exercises herald a new long-term strategic and military understanding between India and the United States that has emerged after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he added.

India is working to acquire $31 million worth of special forces equipment to enhance its counter-terrorism capabilities and for "equipment commonality" to facilitate future joint operations. Details of the equipment purchases are still being worked out.

Meanwhile, the Indian Air Force (IAF) sent its Jaguar fighters to participate in Cooperative Cope Thunder 2004 exercises in Alaska in July, five months after carrying out joint aerial maneuvers at Gwalior—the first ever since 1963. The maneuvers in Alaska were the IAF's first refueling mission outside India.

The 10-day Cope India 2004 maneuvers at Gwalior were the IAF's largest and longest air combat exercise with a foreign air force and the visitors conceded they had been "bested" by their hosts in dog-fights and air combat missions. The IAF similarly upstaged the U.S. Air Force at Alaska, much to their hosts' surprise and chagrin.

Underpinning other areas of strategic cooperation are weapons sales to India and a budget hike for the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program through which Washington sponsors Indian military personnel for training courses in the United States. In 2004, the IMET budget increased to $1.25 million, up from $1 million a year before, when 43 Indian officers attended military courses in America.

Since sanctions were lifted in 2001, the United States has sold India $200 million worth of defense equipment under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreement. To ease weapon transfers, U.S. congressional clearance is now necessary only for military goods worth more than $14 million, placing India in the same category as close American allies Japan and South Korea.

Deals finalized with the United States include the purchase of 12 Thales-Raytheon Systems AN/TPQ-37 Firefinder artillery locating radar, 40 General Electric F 404-GE-F2J3 engines for the locally designed Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), deep submersible rescue vessel systems and spares for Sea King helicopters.

Military officials say the first AN/TPQ-37 systems were delivered in Chennai in February while the rest would be handed over in batches of two. Two refurbished radars loaned to the Indian Army for familiarization in July 2003 would be returned as the new radar systems arrive. Indian Army personnel have also been training at El Segundo, California, for more than a year on this radar system that is capable of detecting artillery positions 28 to 32 kilometers away and tactical missiles from a distance of up to 50 kilometers with a 10-meter accuracy.

U.S.-India defense cooperation has reached a new high, with all three military branches engaging in joint exercises. At the 10-day Cope India 2004 in Gwalior, air force personnel from both sides discuss the finer points of a combat exercise before the operation.

Indian Air Force handout/© AP/WP

American F-15C fighters (foreground) and Indian Sukhoi-30 fighters fly in close formation during a joint exercise over Gwalior in February 2004.

In addition, the Indian Navy is negotiating with the U.S. government to acquire eight to 12 refurbished P-3C Orion maritime strike/reconnaissance aircraft via U.S. foreign military sales (FMS), the former chief of naval staff, Admiral Madhavendra Singh, acknowledged a few months ago. "The U.S. is one of the few countries with such aircraft on offer for sale," Admiral Singh declared, adding that the navy wanted to extend its "limited" maritime patrol capabilities as part of its overall power projection capabilities. India's military is also interested in the Patriot anti-missile system.

The United States acknowledges the Indian Navy as a "stabilizing force" in the Indian Ocean region and wants a closer working relationship with it as it straddles the strongest area of strategic convergence—sea-lane protection. According to senior U.S. officials, naval cooperation is perhaps one of the more promising and non-threatening areas of service-to-service cooperation for the United States and India.

The two navies have held five rounds of exercises since the late 1990s off India's western coast, while a sixth in the Malabar series is due to take place later in the year.

For its part, the Indian Navy is also reportedly not averse to joining the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the Regional Maritime Security Initiative. The PSI is a response to the growing challenge posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), their delivery systems, and related materials worldwide. Under the initiative, 11 countries have committed themselves to disrupting the illicit trade in WMD by interdicting vessels, aircraft or other modes of transport in their territory or territorial waters that are reasonably suspected of carrying suspicious cargo. The Indian Navy's joining the initiative would give it teeth and significantly extend its reach.

In response to the recent tsunami disaster, for example, the United States and India put years of joint exercises into practice by working closely to bring relief to devastated areas in Sri Lanka and other affected areas in the region. Close and successful cooperation in providing tsunami relief was vivid evidence of how far the U.S.-India defense relationship has progressed and a template for future joint efforts to address common regional security and humanitarian contingencies.

Potential U.S. sale items include transport aircraft to replace the IAF's aging fleet of Soviet-supplied platforms. "We have opened talks with the Indian Navy for the P-3C Orion and with the IAF for around 50 C-130J transport through Foreign Military Sales," says Dennys Plessas, vice president for business initiatives at Lockheed Martin Aeronautics. The United States has also indicated its willingness to make Perry-class frigates available to India as well as Sea Hawk helicopters to replace its aging fleet. Chemical and biological protection equipment is also on offer.

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Top: Ambassador David C. Mulford and wife Jeannie aboard the F-15E Strike Eagle aircraft at the Aero India 2005 at Yelahanka Air Station, Bangalore, in February.
Above: An American participant stands on the wing of a Stratotanker KC-135 as an Indian Sukhoi-30MKI takes off during Aero India 2005.

Showing its keen interest in increasing its arms sales to India, the United States had it largest ever participation in the Aero India 2005 in Bangalore in February. In addition to five state-of-the-art aircraft brought by the U.S. Department of Defense, 15 American defense and aerospace companies showcased their products and expressed interest to deepen commercial ties with India.

In other areas, Washington and New Delhi are committed to continuing their dialogue on missile defense that began in June 2000. Indian experts attended a subsequent session on the subject in Colorado in 2002. India also attended the multilateral ballistic missile defense conferences in Kyoto and Berlin in 2003 and observed the U.S. Roving Sands missile maneuvers in Berlin last July.

The United States is also conducting Joint Staff talks with India's Integrated Defence Staff, established three years ago. Washington hosted delegations to its National Defense University and tri-service institutions that, in India, are still in their formative stages. Both militaries were also engaged in peacekeeping exercises, drawing upon India's vast experience in this field over the past five decades.

But differences in perception over strategic issues persist. The United States envisions India's role in Asia in a much broader context while New Delhi's concerns are limited to its immediate turbulent neighborhood, where continuing turmoil threatens to spill over its borders.

Washington's priorities in the region center around the war on terrorism, China's burgeoning military and economic power, nuclear developments on the Korean peninsula, the future military role of Japan and good governance in West Asia. India's concerns focus on cross-border terrorism problems with Pakistan, the incessant flow of economic refugees across the eastern frontier with Bangladesh, and the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Sri Lanka's unresolved ethnic conflict and China's growing influence in Myanmar are other areas of immediate anxiety for India.

"India principally wants the U.S. to partner it in shaping the strategic space in the region which could otherwise be usurped by other regional players," says Brigadier Arun Sahgal (Retd.), the first director of net assessment in India's Integrated Defence Staff. Continuing interaction at the policy and operational levels should, over time, build a strategic concurrence of interests for the sake of stability, he added.

Another area where India hopes to change Washington's policy is the strategic rationale of dealing with New Delhi via the Pacific Command (PACOM), while neighboring Pakistan is handled by the Central Command (CENTCOM).

Indian officials remonstrate that many of their pressing strategic concerns and issues most conducive to closer military cooperation with the United States lie outside PACOM—cross-border terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, stability in Central Asia and protecting energy flows from the Persian Gulf region. Consequently they are more inclined to bypass PACOM headquarters in Honolulu, Hawaii, and press their strategic advocacy in Washington where many issues get submerged in bureaucracy.

Senior Indian military officers argue that the difference is not so much of procedures as of priorities. PACOM's priorities are centered around China, Japan and the Korean peninsula and suffer from what many term "strategic fatigue" when it comes to dealing with India. Discussions to resolve these differences gained ground when General Nirmal C. Vij became the first Indian Army Chief to visit CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa, Florida, in early 2004. Official sources said both sides agreed to regular interaction between CENTCOM and New Delhi, with the possibility of posting a senior Indian one- or two-star liaison officer in Tampa.

"Eventually Indo-U.S. defense relations have to overcome bureaucratic resistance from the State Department and their Indian counterparts," says Brigadier Sahgal. Domestic political constituencies would ultimately facilitate this relationship and make it firm, he adds. □

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