The Geostrategic Import of the Coming Bay of Bengal Naval Exercise

by Ramtanu Maitra

Come September, India will host a major naval exercise in the strategic Bay of Bengal, located between mainland India, Bangladesh, and the western shores of Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia, Indian Defense Ministry officials report. The war maneuver will bring together naval forces from four other countries: Australia, Japan, Singapore, and the United States. The 20 warships that will participate include two nuclear aircraft carriers from the United States, the *USS Nimitz* and *USS Kitty Hawk*, and one non-nuclear carrier from India, the *INS Viraat*. In addition, the five-day maneuvers will also see in action shore-based Jaguar deep penetration strike aircraft of the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy's Sea Harrier jets and Sea King helicopters from the *INS Viraat*. Indian defense officials point out that the location of the planned naval exercise has been chosen to maintain distance from the arc of the Pacific Ocean, and skirts the borders of Russia and China where such moves could arouse Beijing's sensitivities.

From all available accounts, it can be assumed that the September naval exercise will be the biggest held in the region by far. Last April, the United States, Japan, and India conducted their first joint naval exercises off the Japanese coast. That was a one-day goodwill exercise, as one Indian official pointed out, and did not involve many maneuvers. The *Mysore*, an Indian guided-missile destroyer, along with two U.S. destroyers and three escort ships of Japan's Self-Defense Force (SDF), were among the vessels that took part in the exercise off Chiba prefecture (state) on Japan's eastern coast, according to Japan's Defense Ministry. No doubt the September exercises will be dramatically different.

A Troubled Area

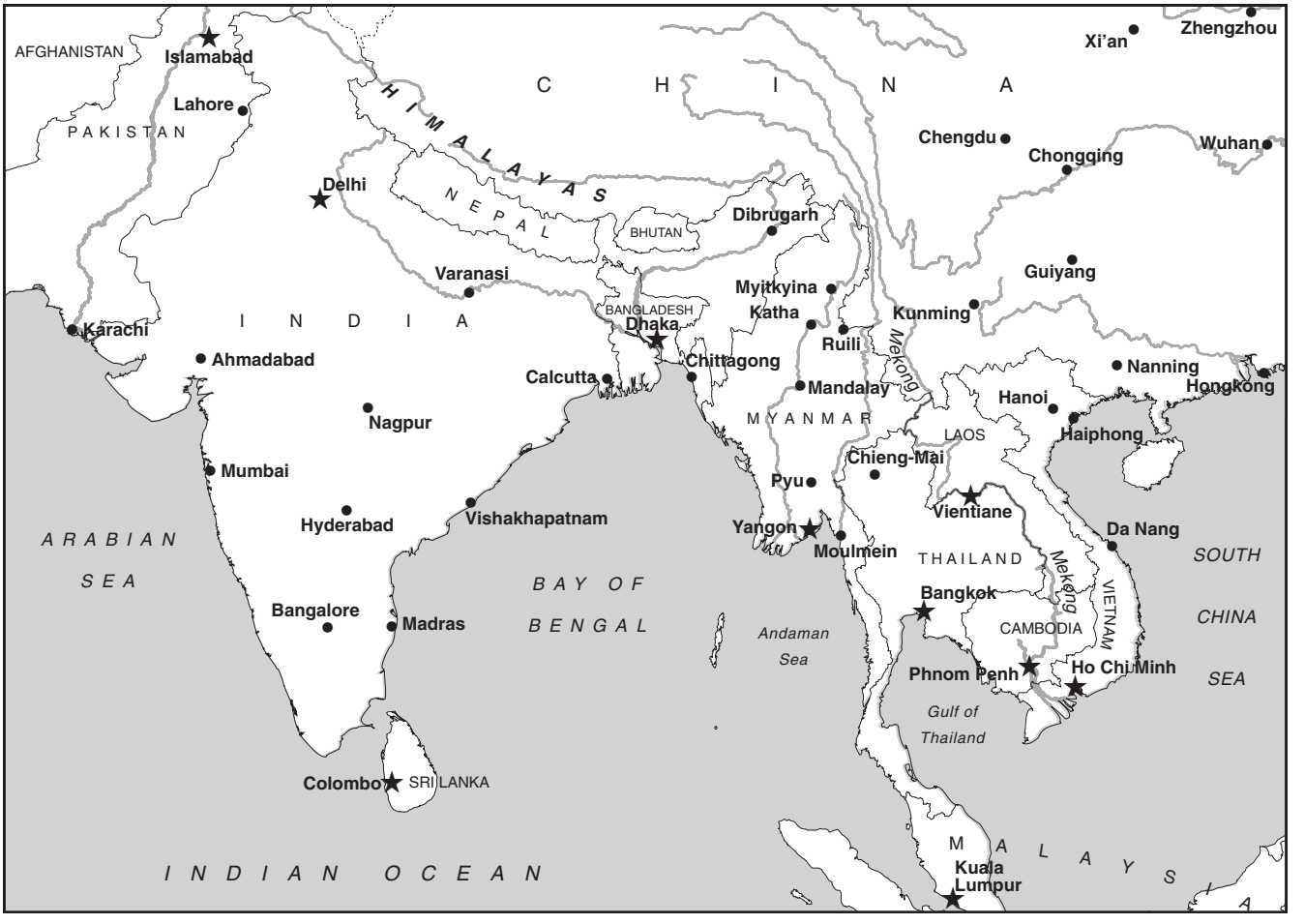
The maneuvers will take place at a time and place of great instability, much of which has spun off from the Anglo-American reactions to the 9/11 event. Not far from where the September exercise will take place is the Persian Gulf, the cockpit of the current Iraq conflict, and potential attack on Iran.

The situation in Iraq is deteriorating every day, and the fear of involvement of citizens, if not of the governments of Iraq's neighbors, in this civil war looms large. The presence of about 200,000 foreign troops, of which 170,000 are from the United States, and almost 30,000 private, armed security forces, mostly from western countries, have not succeeded in drawing down the level of violence which exceeds 100 deaths every day in Iraq.

East of Iraq, the United States and the NATO member-nations have been engaged for over five years in trying to physically eliminate the Islamist Taliban militants, who have been entrenched in Afghanistan since 1996. The invaders' self-proclaimed war on terror was launched soon after the 9/11 event. Having achieved a quick military victory in the Winter of 2001, the foreign troops find themselves getting increasingly bogged down by insurgents who can no longer be identified simply as the old Taliban. As a result of the presence of almost 50,000 foreign troops, and an explosion of opium production unprecedented in the history of Afghanistan, violence has spread far and wide. The upheaval has spilled over into bordering Pakistan, making a section of that nation ungovernable. The anti-U.S. and anti-foreigner insurgents, under the garb of being Islamic extremists, have now launched an attack against the powers-that-be in Islamabad.

Sandwiched between Iraq and Afghanistan is Iran, which is very much in the cross-hairs of the United States. Iran is also under pressure from the European nations, for engaging in a uranium enrichment program, ostensibly to power its future nuclear power plants. Influentials within the United States, belonging to the bloodthirsty faction represented by Vice President Cheney and some of the neoconservatives, are exerting pressure on the White House and the Pentagon to use all means, including military, to bring about a regime change in Tehran. They are now in the process of developing a theory that says that no solution to Iraq or Afghanistan is possible unless the evil regime of Iran is uprooted.

Because of this relentless campaign of the Cheney-led cabal, and the Iranian unwillingness to give up uranium enrichment, a war-like situation has come to prevail in the Persian Gulf. As of now, the United States Fifth Fleet has two aircraft carrier strike forces lodged in the Persian Gulf, and the third carrier strike force, under the *USS Enterprise*, is on its way. The arrival of the *USS Kitty Hawk* in 40 days or so, in the Bay of Bengal, which is in striking distance of the Persian Gulf, raises fears of more military activities in the region in the coming weeks.



Signs of Unease

Looking at the scorecard before us, as well as the map, there is clearly good reason to become uneasy when the Bush Administration talks about security and stability. There is no question that under the Bush Administration, U.S. nuclear doctrine has been undergoing radical redesign, to further the imposition of a new imperial order. The U.S. move toward setting up a missile interception system in central Europe is correctly seen as part of this shift. Military sources have told *EIR* that the most radical aspect of that redesign has been the consolidation of offensive nuclear warfare capabilities, with both missile defense and current and future space-war capabilities.

Thus, the September naval exercise is likely to make nations in Eurasia, particularly Russia and China, suspicious. Although Russia, a close and long-term ally of India, has not expressed any discomfiture officially, China, with which India is in the process of developing a better mutual trust and understanding, has.

There's a recent history to China's reaction. The U.S.A., India, Japan, and Australia met in May on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in Manila to set up a new "quadrilateral" grouping. Although no agenda was set up for the talks, these quadrilateral consultations drew Chinese ire. Beijing issued protest demarches (formal diplomatic communications) to each of the four states.

The meeting was preceded by a joint statement on May 1 by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso, and Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma, who spoke about a common strategic objective of continuing to build upon partnerships with India to advance areas of common interests and increase cooperation, recognizing that India's continued growth is inextricably tied to the prosperity, freedom, and security of the region. Since then, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said India is not "ganging up" against China, and that the quadrilateral group is "not a military alliance." Subsequently, Australia's Defense Minister Brendan Nelson has tried to allay Beijing's fears, saying there was no quadrilateral security alliance comprised of Australia, the U.S.A., India, and Japan in the offing.

But that is unlikely to satisfy Beijing, which fears that Washington is fashioning a "China containment" strategy involving India, Japan, and Australia. The Bush Administration's record, and the nature of the Cheney-led cabal in the United States, naturally worry the Chinese.

What also concerns Beijing is the growing military interaction between the U.S. military and that of India. While the naval exercise is one major event, it is evident that India is becoming increasingly addicted to the U.S. and Israeli arms and equipment and technologies associated with these. Last year, the Indian Navy made its first big procurement from the United States by purchasing the 17,000-ton *USS Trenton* (LPD-14), an Austin-class amphibious transport dock. Recently, Indian defense officials said Washington has offered the giant landing ship, *USS Nashville*, to the Indian Navy, and New Delhi has shown interest.

U.S.-Indian Military Relations

There's no question that the U.S.-Indian military relationship has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. As pointed out recently by the U.S. Ambassador to India David Mulford, since 2002, the United States and India have been partners in more than 30 military exercises. At the recently held Aero India 2007 air show in Bangalore, American high-technology systems were brought to India by U.S. defense companies, which, in an impressive display, highlighted the next frontier of their desired military relationship.

At Aero India 2007, U.S. defense companies demonstrated flights of the F-16 and F/A-18A fighter jets, the C-17 heavy-lift aircraft, the naval reconnaissance P-3 Orion, and the CH-47 Chinook cargo helicopter. More than 20 U.S. companies, including Boeing, Lockheed Martin, General Electric, and Raytheon, well known for their respective technology and defense manufacturing, were present at the air show. Recently, Lt. Gen. Jeffrey B. Kohler, director of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency in the U.S. Defense Department, was in India. He told news reporters in Delhi that India and the United States are close to signing an agreement under which their armed forces will provide each other logistics support on a reciprocal basis. Kohler said the accord had been presented to India's Cabinet Committee on Security. The Americans usually describe such a pact as an "acquisition and cross-services" agreement. It was listed as a logistics support agreement at the suggestion of India, he said.

"The agreement will ease joint operations by the armed forces of the two countries during exercises and in coming to the aid of people struck by natural calamities," Kohler said, making it clear that the accord did not in any way imply the stockpiling of weapons on each other's soil.

"The armed forces of the two countries are having frequent interactions and face immense difficulties by way of fuel supplies and other logistics. With such an agreement in place, it would ease things for both militaries," he said. The U.S. has signed similar agreements with 65 countries, including a recently concluded pact with India's neighbor Sri Lanka.

Israel, the American Proxy

Moreover, India's growing relations, military in particular, with Israel, which is considered an American proxy in that part of the world, is often bracketed as part of the Indian-U.S. relationship. India has started a $2.5 billion joint venture with Israel to develop an advanced range surface-to-air missile capable of detecting and destroying hostile aircraft, missiles, and spy planes, news reports said. India's Cabinet Committee on Security, chaired by the Prime Minister, approved the project between the Defense Research and Development Organization and Israel Aerospace Industries for developing the missile system. Over the years, India-Israel arms and military relations advanced quietly. Israel is now India's second-largest supplier of arms, Russia still retaining its number one position. Recently, an Indian warship visited Israel, and a seven-member Israeli delegation, led by Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Major Gen. Moshe Kaplinsky, was in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, to the utter dismay of the anti-Indian Kashmiris and the Pakistanis.

Discussions with the visiting army delegation on that occasion focused on anti-militancy operations in the region and also on how the Indian army is challenging the infiltrators from Pakistan across the Line of Control (LoC). India has followed Israeli advice and fenced with barbed wire the 720-km-long LoC with Pakistan.

Security: An Urgent Need

On the other hand, there is little doubt that to enhance security in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean rim countries, naval cooperation between the United States (with the world's largest navy at its disposal), India, Japan, and Australia is an urgent necessity.

A very important element in all this is the steady development of India-Japan relations. Recently, Japan has committed itself to a nearly $100 billion Delhi-Mumbai industrial freight rail corridor. It is said that when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visits India in August, the project will come alive.

In recent years, New Delhi has observed a changing mood in Japan's governments. Unlike the insular and chauvinistic underpinnings of its rise in the pre-World War II era, Japan today is different, and trying to develop a foreign policy of its own. What prompted Japan's focus on India, evident from Japan's recent diplomatic overtures and initiatives, can best be answered by Japanese policy-makers. But, it is clear that Japan and India are likely to become close partners in coming years, based on common values and strategic interests.

One analyst, Anirudh Suri, in an article in the *Asia Times*, recently noted that the rise of China, and increasing tensions between China and Japan, have altered Japan's sense of complacency. Tokyo has therefore become more proactive in tak-

ing leadership in Asia, seeking Asian partners to limit, if not contain, China. Building on former Prime Minister Koizumi's January 2002 proposal for a new Asian regionalism based on the promotion of market economics and democratic values, Prime Minister Abe has envisaged an "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity," made up of democratic nations lining the outer rim of the Eurasian continent, Suri wrote.

But, despite Japanese concerns, neither Japan nor India are likely to be railroaded by the United States' anti-China cabal, into a policy of "ganging up" on China.

The 'Trust Deficit'

Nor is India likely to become a trusted ally in other Anglo-American war drives.

One complication is the U.S. relationship with Pakistan, whose armaments the U.S.A. is modernizing. Washington has delivered two F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan, and will hand over another 24 shortly, the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad has announced. These join 34 F-16s already in Pakistan's armory.

The delivery of F-16s did not create an anti-American fervor in India, but New Delhi firmly believes that Pakistan's desire for modernized weapons is for the single purpose of challenging India, which considers a hostile and well-armed Pakistan, friendly to China, to be a strategic threat to India.

Last April, at a two-day workshop at the Indian Defense Studies Analysis (IDSA), a New Delhi-based think tank, discussions took place on emerging U.S.-Indian strategic relations. One Indian analyst pointed out that although Indians are eager to obtain U.S. technology, a "trust deficit" still exists, based on past U.S. sanctions on India, and Indians worry that at a crucial time they might not be supplied with replacement parts if the relationship goes bad again.

At the same time, it was pointed out at the conference that India is in fundamental agreement with the idea of the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations for allied naval cooperation (referred to as the 1,000 ship navy), and in fact has already engaged in some activities compatible with that goal, including tsunami relief, patrolling the Straits of Malacca, and evacuating refugees from Lebanon. Lieutenant General Kohlers' " 'acquisition and cross-services" agreement is also geared in that direction.

A senior Indian military official delivering a luncheon address to the conference cautioned that Indo-U.S. relations are likely to remain fluid, and unpredictable. He asserted that those relations can be better described as an "evolving entente," and argued that given its size, location, and ambitions, India will always march to the beat of its own drummer.

The official stated that when dealing with a potential conflict situation, the Indian political and civil leadership tends to follow a restrained, consensual approach on the domestic as well as international level. He added that India's primary effort is invariably to shape the security environment through cooperative peace, rather than plan on the basis of inevitable armed conflict.