

Lack of Leadership Endangers India's National Security

by Ramtanu Maitra

Despite India's emergence in the post-Cold War days as a major potential Indian Ocean power and a nation friendly to all global powers, the inability of India's present-day leaders to act to ensure the security of its immediate vicinity has worsened its security situation during the last few years.

One of the oft-repeated excuses presented by the Indian leadership for the growing security problems inside India, and in its vicinity, is the Pakistani support lent to cross-border terrorism. While there is hardly any doubt that Pakistan, and its intelligence agencies, are deeply involved in endangering the security situation within India, it is also evident that Indian leaders have not acted decisively, and thus, have weakened India both internally and externally. The political leadership, from the bottom up to the highest level, has become masters of knee-jerk reactions to serious security breaches, and has failed to work out a comprehensive plan that would ensure long-term security.

The role of China's modern leaders stands out in contrast. In his first interaction with the media on Dec. 2, India's new Chief of the Naval Staff, Adm. Sureesh Mehta, said: "China, we believe, is shaping the maritime battlefield in the region. It is making friends at the right places. If you don't have the capability to operate in those waters, for a length of time, then you need friends who will support your cause, when the time comes, so definitely China is doing that, as there are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and down below, Africa. So it is a known fact that we are ringed by states, which may have a favorable disposition towards China. They are looking 20 years ahead."

In other words, what Admiral Mehta spelled out is that India, unlike China, has not succeeded in developing a trusted relationship with the nations surrounding it, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, eastern coastal nations of Africa, and Sri Lanka, and India is not looking ahead either. Because he is a Navy man, Admiral Mehta spoke about countries that are located on the Andaman Sea, Indian Ocean, and Arabian Sea. If he had been an Army man, he would have pointed out that New Delhi has further weakened India's security situation vis-à-vis Nepal and the entire northeast of India, by not projecting the importance of the region vis-à-vis India's security

and development.

In fact, the land corridor that connects India to Myanmar, and, situated between Bangladesh and Nepal, Bhutan and China, is thick with insurgents and has become as dangerous as the areas that border the Line of Actual Control on the Indian side of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. Infiltration from Bangladesh into India, although not by armed men, is significantly larger in number than that which occurs along the Line of Actual Control. Indian intelligence has repeatedly warned New Delhi that a large number of poor Bangladeshis who are moving into India, are now being recruited by the secessionist forces in northeastern India. The secessionists are helped by various forces, including the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and drug money generated from Myanmar, and elsewhere.

Chinese Objective

Almost a decade ago, a Chinese academic told this author that the way Beijing looks at its own security is perhaps different from the way New Delhi does. For China, the most important task is to secure its geographical boundary all around. Once that objective is achieved, the next step would be to secure a wider perimeter, wherever possible. This objective is of particular importance to Beijing now, since China has adopted a model of development which requires a massive supply of raw materials on a regular basis, and consumption of energy sources scoured from around the globe, to convert the raw materials into finished products. As a result, China has moved south and east, and is ensuring the maritime seaways through which the raw materials and energy sources would find their way, to keep China growing. Under the circumstances, what China adopted is a strategy of visionaries.

Beyond that, China has completed the single-track meter-gauge railway link that connects Gormu City in Qinghai province to Lhasa in Tibet, by breaching the mighty Kunlun Shan ranges on the "Roof of the World." This is the world's steepest and highest railway line, with more than 960 km of the track laid at altitudes over 13,000 ft and nearly 560 km over permafrost earth. According to the Indian assessment, the project, besides linking Lhasa-Beijing-Shanghai by rail, will drasti-

FIGURE 1



Source: EIRNS.

cally reduce the travel time from Gormu to the Tibetan capital, from 72 hours to 16 hours. It will also provide China an opportunity to annually transport 5 million tons of cargo from mainland China to Tibet, and 2.8 million tons of mineral resources in the reverse direction. In military terms, the rail link gives China the capability to mobilize up to 12 divisions (of 12,000 men each) a month.

In India's west, Beijing has reportedly signaled its approval of a Pakistani proposal for construction of a trans-Himalayan pipeline that will carry crude oil from the Middle East to western China. The pipeline, when complete, will connect the deep-sea Gwadar port to China's remote regions, from where oil will be shipped across thousands of kilometers to the coastal areas, where most of the energy demand is centered.

Also included in the plan is building, in Gwadar, a refinery-cum-petrochemical complex, which will initially have an annual refining capacity of 10 million tons (200,000 barrels a day), which will later be increased to 21 million tons. Pakistani officials expect to get Beijing's approval for the project

by the end of this year. In addition, what is in the works, but has been delayed by the endless instability in Afghanistan, is the link-up of future oil and gas pipelines from nearby Central Asian nations to this proposed trans-Himalayan pipeline.

In other words, China is acting exactly like a power that wants to grow, and is making sure that its supply lines remain uninterrupted. To maintain the supply lines free of trouble, China is setting up military and naval bases, linking up with nations that are within its wider security perimeter, and helping them with required infrastructure. As a result, most of India's neighbors, if not all, have become of a "favorable disposition towards China," as Admiral Mehta pointed out.

New Delhi's Deceptions

Reactions in New Delhi to all these developments occurring around India reflect the weakness of the leadership. Privately, most leaders exude deep concerns about Chinese "intent." They talk of a steady encircling of India. But, instead of taking necessary steps which would ensure security to India, they talk in public about "growing trade relations" with

FIGURE 2



China. The main purpose of this litany is an attempt to convince the Indian people that China would never pose a threat to India, because of the fast-developing trade relations. Such statements are issued primarily to absolve the leadership of their responsibility to ensure security to the 1 billion-plus people.

It is true that China does not pose a threat to India as of now, and, if Indian leaders show some capability in the near future to do whatever is necessary to ensure security to their people, two strong and powerful nations could live reasonably peacefully next door to each other. However, it is also true that the emergence of a secure and confident China, and a threatened and leaderless India, is a distinct possibility, and the situation is enough to be of serious concern to many.

A glimpse of things to come became available to all when, days before China's President Hu Jintao's rare visit to India in November, China's Ambassador in New Delhi chilled relations by declaring Arunachal Pradesh, a state covering some 84,000 square kilometers (33,000 square miles) in the north-east of India, to be part of China. Although China's map clearly shows that Arunachal Pradesh belongs to China, and the area is part of disputed areas between China and India,

the Ambassador's statement ensured that no serious discussion to resolve the matter could take place during President Hu's visit. India's reaction was no stronger than official outrage and unofficial weariness, but it was clear that China deliberately trod on weak India's toes.

The other characteristics of these weak Indian leaders, who seem to live in a state of denial, is not to ask from other major nations, such as Russia or the United States, what it would need to secure its immediate perimeter. It is not likely that either Russia or the United States would give India what it needs; but the Indian leaders are busy explaining that they are taking control of the nation's security, when they are not.

One of the comical aspects of India's security discussions, is the expression of unfailing confidence in a "developing U.S.-India strategic doctrine." What that doctrine really means, no one can explain, beyond saying that the two "largest democracies" have so many things in common. However, that thin façade, when subjected to a scratch, or two, crumbles and exposes the inherent and seemingly irreconcilable differences between the two militaries on what is needed to ensure security in the region.

This was documented extensively in a report on the India-U.S. military relationship, issued in 2004. Commissioned by the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, the report was written by Booz Allen Hamilton Associate Julie MacDonald. She presented the results of her study at an invitational conference in Washington in early December 2004, "Bridging U.S.-India: A Defense Perspective."

The Indian military's historic distrust of its U.S. counterpart, because of the latter's on-going military support to Pakistan, its record as an unreliable supplier of hardware, and the uncertainty of U.S. intentions is well known. Likewise, the U.S. military's suspicion of the Indian military, based on India's relationship with the erstwhile Soviet Union and the present Russia, the lack of transparency in the Indian system and India's weak export-control regime, is also relatively well known. But the key divergence between the Indian and U.S. militaries, MacDonald finds, is centered on how the two look at Asia and the Indian Ocean basin.

Not only do the two have differing perceptions of the threats in Asia, but they articulate divergent ideas about the ultimate objectives for a military-to-military relationship, MacDonald states. The United States views India as a long-time military partner that will take up more and more responsibilities in Asia and assist with U.S. bases; the U.S. appreciates India's strategic relations, size, and sophisticated

military. By contrast, the Indian military envisions the relationship developing slowly, with tangible and immediate results all along the way in terms of technology transfer and investment in defense industries. In the Indian view, the relationship must be an equal partnership.

What Are the Internal Threats?

Within India, the situation is no better. From time to time, particularly after some mayhem occurs, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh lashes out against Pakistan's ISI for setting up cells within India and for carrying out disruptive activities. Last July, when a series of explosions on Mumbai's railroads ripped apart the trains and killed more than 200 people, Prime Minister Singh accused Pakistan, and assured the Indians that he would prove the Pakistani involvement. However, the evidence that India produced since was summarily ignored by Pakistan, and even India's ally, the United States, did not lend a helping hand to make sure that its other ally, Pakistan, would admit its guilt. However, in April, the same Indian Prime Minister had warned that India's "single biggest internal security challenge" is the Maoists, who have cut a wide swath through the country from north to south, from Bihar to Tamil Nadu, and have developed a strong link with the powerful Nepali Maoists. On that occasion, Manmohan Singh expressed concern over the militarization of the Indian Maoists with "superior army-style organization, better trained cadres, attacks on large targets through large-scale frontal assaults, better coordination, and possible external links. We must recognize that such extremism is a threat to our democracy, our way of life," he said.

Then, last month, Indian intelligence reported that suspected al-Qaeda terrorists were infiltrating southern India, to perpetrate attacks on airports in Tamil Nadu and Kerala in early November. Security was further stepped up at airports across India following a possible hijack alert issued by the FBI on Nov. 11. The FBI told Indian intelligence agencies about an intercepted e-mail that detailed plans to hijack a plane flying to the United States or to Europe from India. Separately, a letter received by the Trichy Airport authority prior to the FBI alert, indicated that ten members of an al-Qaeda suicide squad were planning to bomb Chennai Airport. The anonymous letter also added that operatives had penetrated airports in Chennai, Trichy, Madurai, Coimbatore, and Kerala.

It is evident that the leaders are not only unwilling to act effectively to ensure security within India, but are not sure who, or what, poses the maximum threat to the nation. It often seems that the Singh government has taken a leaf out of the book of the Bush-Cheney Administration in the United States, to raise internal "threat perception" for political purposes alone.

Lack of leadership at the highest level has also affected India's military. Over the years, the Indian military has procured a vast amount of equipment. However, the lack of lead-



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Adm. Sureesh Mehta, Chief of India's Naval Staff, pointed out that China is "looking 20 years ahead," and "making friends at the right places." The clear implication is that India is not.

ership, particularly the lack of clarity about what should be the mission of the military as a whole, in light of growing power projection by China, and a collusion between Pakistan and China in order to ensure security of China and its immediate vicinity, has made the Indian military somewhat rudderless. Add to that, the incessant criticism of India's long-embattled Defense and Research Development Organization (DRDO). Over the past three decades, its accusers claim, DRDO has invested billions of dollars into a high-prestige, ambitious long-range ballistic missile, high-tech light combat aircraft, a new main battle tank, and even a touted nuclear submarine—with almost nothing to show for it.

However, the latest report on Nov. 26 indicates that the DRDO has redeemed itself. This should have a positive effect on the Indian military, which must assert itself now to spell out clearly, as Admiral Mehta did, and as the People's Liberation Army in China tells the Beijing leaders, that the country's leadership cannot afford to bargain away the nation's security any longer.

On Nov. 26, the Indian military reported that its first test of a missile designed to intercept other missiles was a success, amid its ongoing efforts to develop a home-grown ballistic-missile interception system. The test saw a surface-to-surface Prithvi-II (earth) missile shot down over the Bay of Bengal by a similar missile fired seconds later.

India, a nation with nuclear weapons, borders two nuclear states, China and Pakistan. Developing a sound anti-missile system will, no doubt, help to make obsolete those nuclear weapons that other nations possess. Moreover, such success would provide relief to more than 1 billion Indians who live under the nuclear shadow extended by the two neighboring nations.

However, to turn this into reality, India needs leaders who can envision the future, provide hope to the people, and project a clear picture of what India could be. Unfortunately, the present leadership cannot think beyond how to keep discordant political groups in the fold, in order to stay in power.