

U.S. Pressures India To Send Troops to Iraq

by Ramtanu Maitra

There exist convincing indications that in recent weeks Washington has stepped up a diplomatic offensive to drag India into the Iraq quagmire. On June 15, a Pentagon team, led by Peter Rodman, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA), arrived in New Delhi armed with arguments to convince the government that it is necessary for India to send troops to Iraq and help the U.S.-U.K. troops to stabilize that country. From available media reports, it is evident that New Delhi has remained undecided but, at the same time, is making efforts to satisfy the Bush Administration.

To stave off the Yankees, at least temporarily, the Indian leadership has made known its anxieties over troop deployment. External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha told reporters on June 15 that the Indian government will take part in consultations with other countries in Iraq's neighborhood in order to "take appropriate decisions as necessary."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee met with Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, president of the Indian National Congress, the main opposition party, on June 15. On June 4, Mrs. Gandhi had written to the Prime Minister expressing the Congress Party's concerns over the troop deployment in Iraq. Later, Congress Party chairman of the foreign policy cell, K. Natwar Singh, told reporters that Congress has suggested to the governing coalition, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), that it should consult other political parties as well as "important countries in the region."

Impatient Washington

Meanwhile, some powerful forces based in the Pentagon and associated with U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and such neo-conservatives as Doug Feith, Paul Wolfowitz, and David Wurmser, are in no mood to wait and watch. They have already moved to forge a group in India in favor of deploying Indian troops. This lobby is led by Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Lal Kishenchand Advani; National Security Advisor and Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Brajesh Mishra; and the pro-U.S., pro-Israel faction within India's intelligence services. In fact, the entire pro-deployment faction enjoys the blessings of the Israeli and American lobby within India.

Both Mishra and Advani were in Washington recently; Mishra came in early May, while Advani embarked on June 8 on a week-long jaunt to drum up support within the Indian

community in the United States. On record, however, Advani remains cautious. *The Statesman* on May 30 indicated that Brajesh Mishra has already promised Washington on troop deployment. Advani—who had told the media that the opposition to deploying troops, "without all the facts, gave their one-sided opinion that sending troops to Iraq is wrong"—is a quintessential politician and would not commit himself fully without having a clear reading which way public opinion is going. Moreover, he would be careful not to antagonize his boss with any categorical statement. That is why, when Rumsfeld "dropped by" to see Advani at his Washington hotel, he reportedly told Rumsfeld that the "matter is under consideration" and that "a decision will be taken after taking all aspects into account."

Nonetheless, Washington has read Advani carefully between the lines, noting his statement that "the opposition does not have all the facts." In came Rodman, whose boss is the hawkish Undersecretary for Defense Policy Doug Feith, with his military delegation to brief the Indians about the conditions in Iraq. Besides meeting the Indian delegation led by B.S. Prakash, a bureaucrat, Rodman also met with Mishra and Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal.

A part of the offensive is led by U.S. Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill. Blackwill, who has resigned as ambassador to take up a teaching position at Harvard next Fall, has tried to assure the nay-sayers, promising that "if the Indian troops were deployed, they would do so under the Indian flag." In addition, Blackwill claimed that the United States has embarked upon a process to "strengthen political, economic, and military-to-military relations with those Asian states that share our democratic values and national interests." "That spells India," argued Blackwill, who is also a close friend of Advani and strong advocate of a U.S.-India alliance.

Meanwhile, the pro-deployment faction within Indian intelligence has leaked to the media, that the U.S. aims to put Indian troops in charge of law and order and internal security in the Kurdish north, where there has been no resistance from Ba'athist remnants. This would allow U.S. troops to redeploy to central Iraqi areas where there is Ba'athist resistance. It is further reported that Pakistani troops would be asked to assist the U.S., in search and destroy missions against the resistance.

The 'Reconstruction' Carrot

Washington's carrot to entice the Indian leaders, and to which Mishra, Advani, and some others have already got attracted, has a number of components.

To begin with, India is convinced that the United States has no desire to leave Iraq soon. The post-war reconstruction and modernizing of the semi-functional oil fields will be carried out under the U.S. control. Washington will hire subcontractors from the region, to get the physical work done, and New Delhi is aware that those who comply with America's Iraq policy would be the chief beneficiaries. Some Indian media suggest that the United States has promised India a

share in the spoils.

The *Times of India*, based on an interview with Blackwill in May, reported that the United States is holding out the carrot of a “major role” in the post-war reconstruction. Both the Indian External Affairs Ministry and the U.S. Embassy quickly denied the report. At the same time, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) held a seminar in Baghdad recently and issued a statement saying the Indian businessmen in India, as well as in the Persian Gulf, are hoping for a share in the lucrative Iraq reconstruction work. One FICCI official said that while the big reconstruction work is sure to go to U.S. companies, “the subcontracting would come to India.”

Another component, which Mishra and Advani represent, calls for a stronger India-U.S. alliance to fight the war against terrorism. This faction continues to flail the dead horse—otherwise known as “American efforts to stop Pakistani cross-border terrorism in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, carried out to bleed India.” This faction claims that the United States is keen to befriend India, even at the cost of deserting its old Cold War ally Pakistan. Their argument suggests that the Pentagon, driven by its worries of an emerging powerful China, is ready to help India, in order to make India a strong ally.

The third component is the military-to-military cooperation. Once a victim of America’s Cold War policies, the Indian military now longs for U.S. arms and military technologies. Last year, 750 U.S. Navy personnel joined the Indian Navy in the Arabian Sea, for what was described as the largest-ever bilateral exercise, meant to increase operational compatibility between them. In May 2002, both armies held a major joint exercise—Balance Iroquois—in the northern Indian city of Agra. This faction within the Indian defense establishment would like to appease the Americans and support sending Indian troops to Iraq.

Consultations with China and Russia

While there is no denying that Rumsfeld and others have clubbed together a pro-deployment lobby at a very high level of Indian policymakers, the battle is yet to be won. The opposition to deployment remains a strong current, as the issue has become politically charged.

On June 22, Vajpayee will travel to China on a six-day tour. The visit is of great importance, since Vajpayee will be the first Indian prime minister to visit China in a decade. During these ten years, the world has changed significantly, and perhaps, China has changed even more. But during those years the India-China relationship has shifted from one of veritable animosity to friendship. Whereas its fruits are yet to mature, there are indications that, particularly since the Iraq War, the India-China relationship has now the potential to go beyond simple economic cooperation, to include the necessity to maintain security in the region. In May, just before announcing fresh talks with Pakistan to settle disputes, Prime

Minister Vajpayee had acknowledged that the Iraq War has changed the world situation once more.

India and China will certainly discuss the fall-out of the Iraq War at the highest level. It is also expected that the summit between these two Asian giants, may decide for India to deploy the troops under the U.S. occupation, or only under UN auspices. New Delhi does recognize the breakdown of law and order in Iraq, and would like to help. Earlier, New Delhi had made it clear that Indian troops will participate in Iraq as a part of a UN peacekeeping force.

Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, who was in Delhi on June 16, made it known that Russia is concerned about the ramifications of having India send soldiers to keep the peace in Iraq outside of the United Nations umbrella. Ivanov told Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes, “It is the sovereign right of any country to decide whether to send troops to Iraq, but I can say quite categorically that Russia is not planning to send any soldiers there.” Ivanov’s statement on behalf of Russia, which has been a longtime, all-weather friend of India’s, will not go unnoticed.

Critics Articulate Their Arguments

The opponents of the troop deployment have expressed a number of their concerns. Some of these concerns have been articulated by former Chief of Staff Gen. V.P. Malik in a recent article. Malik wants to know: What will be the exact

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nature of the mission? What is the scope and involvement of Indian personnel in Iraq? What will be the rules of engagement? What legal cover will the force personnel have for performing their duties? Will the mission involve maintenance of law and order, maintaining internal security, or prospects of confronting any guerrilla forces? What will exactly be the political and military chain of command and control? And, will Indian forces have adequate authority for the safety and security of their personnel?

There also exists strong opposition from political opponents, as well as the majority of Indian citizens. Objections have been raised on moral grounds, due to the widely perceived illegitimacy of the U.S.-U.K. invasion and occupation of Iraq, even though the UN subsequently provided a fig leaf to the *fait accompli*.

Moreover, the anti-Iran dimension of the U.S. operation in Iraq worries the critics of Indian troop deployment: India has a strong association with Iran, and the presence of Indian troops on Iran's borders, at a juncture when Washington is provoking Iran, could adversely affect Tehran's relations with Delhi. It is widely acknowledged that the India-Iran relationship goes far beyond economic interests, and that it subsumes common strategic objectives. Anti-troop deployment forces also claim that unwise association with unwise U.S. operations in Iraq, under whatever cover, can cause irreparable damage to the relations with Tehran.

Opponents also note that the Indian Parliament had unanimously opposed the U.S. invasion, echoing the sentiments of the vast majority of Indians. Moreover, there also flows in India a strong current of belief that Washington's war against Iraq is far from being over and is now in its second phase. Therefore, presence of Indian troops will inevitably force New Delhi to side with the Americans against the Iraqis. Many senior Indian analysts believe that the Iraqi opposition may soon gel into a "nationalist guerrilla force" against the occupiers. A majority of Indians also believe that the prolonged Anglo-American presence in Iraq is not for the purpose of installing a government of the Iraqis' choice, but one of America's choice. To put it succinctly, most Indians believe that to help the American and the British occupying forces at this juncture is tantamount to supporting a colonial force.

There is a further concern, having to do with domestic sectarian strife, that New Delhi must consider before deploying troops to Iraq: Several Muslim groups within and outside of India have identified the BJP's role—and particularly that of Advani—in the Hindu fanatics' demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1995, whose site is holy to the Hindus. That vicious act has further alienated India's large Muslim minority from the Hindus. Critics of troop deployment believe that sending troops to quell Iraqi nationalist forces, would further convince Indians of the anti-Muslim and fascist motives in the BJP's domestic and foreign policymaking apparatus.