

India Seeks More Nuclear And Military Cooperation

by Ramtanu Maitra

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov and his Indian counterpart, George Fernandes, signed a \$1.5 billion deal in New Delhi on Jan. 20, whereby the refurbished Russian aircraft-carrier *Admiral Gorshkov* would be delivered to India by 2008. India's only carrier at present, the *INS Viraat*, was built for defense and has a limited range. *INS Viraat* has hardly a decade of service left, while India's indigenously-built aircraft carrier, the Air Defense Ship, will not be ready before 2010.

The Long-Awaited Signing

The 44,000 ton *Admiral Gorshkov* is the last in a series of four Project 1143 air defense ships, officially known as aviation cruisers. The aircraft carrier was designed for STOVL (Short Take-Off Vertical Landing) aircraft, and was commissioned by the Russian Navy in 1987, but did not enter service until 1988. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, all four aviation cruisers were retired between 1991 and 1994, with the *Admiral Gorshkov* being the last to be withdrawn. The ship will be given to India free. But the project will cost close to \$1.5 billion, involving repair and modernization of the ship, the installation of the most up-to-date arms systems, the delivery of an air group (MiG-29K fighters and Ka-27 and Ka-31 anti-submarine picket helicopters), and the setting up of the relevant coastal infrastructure. All in all, several dozen contracts were signed.

Ivanov said that the *Gorshkov* deal will be followed by contracts to include the creation of port infrastructure. He called it too early to talk about price. But an Indian aviation industry source told the media that an option of 30 additional MiG-29s has been discussed. Overall, the eventual sum of contracts could come up to \$3 billion, said Konstantin Makiyenko, deputy head of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies. Makiyenko said the *Admiral Gorshkov* deal is the first major arms contract with India since 2001, when a \$700 million agreement was signed for 310 T-90C tanks to be either delivered or built under license. More than 130 tanks have already been delivered, and more units are being sent for assembly in India, Ivanov said in New Delhi. The remaining 12 Su-30MKI fighters under a 1996 deal will be delivered later this year.

Although India's naval chief Adm. Madhvendra Singh said the country was making no compromises and getting the

"best deal" in its efforts to buy the heavy aircraft carrier, others point out that the carrier purchase by India is the front end of a much larger deal yet to be worked out. Writing for the *Times of India* on Jan. 21, defense analyst Manoj Joshi pointed out that the *Gorshkov* deal is merely the sweetener for a more complex, semi-covert arrangement to give teeth to India's nuclear deterrent.

More Than Gorshkov

What India is seeking from Russia, as a *quid pro quo* for buying the old aircraft-carrier, is to lease at least two nuclear submarines and several nuclear-capable bombers. Joshi pointed out that India still lacks reliable delivery systems for the nuclear weapons it possesses. "The Agni missiles are still under development, and in the meantime, existing Indian Air Force fighters are designated for nuclear delivery even though they were not designed for the purpose. The Russians will lease four TU-22M3 nuclear bombers with the claim that these are sub-strategic aircraft of limited range," Joshi said. These bombers have a massive 24-ton payload and are likely to be equipped with supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles as well.

India and Russia are in the process of developing these BrahMos missiles. The ramjet-powered BrahMos draws extensively on technology from the 3M55 Oniks-Yakhont anti-ship missile. Serial production will be split 50:50 between Russian and Indian industries. On the other hand, with the Mig-29K, the Indian Navy will get a formidable capacity for protecting its carrier-based groups.

To some, the aircraft carrier deal ensures continuation of India-Russia relations centered on military hardware. But it is widely known that India, to modernize its military, is looking at more than one source. Makiyenko said that despite the long relationship, Russia will have to make good on its obligations to ward off growing competition from Israel and France. And the United States has identified India as a potential customer. President George W. Bush said in early January that the United States and India will expand cooperation on missile defense.

But Ivanov, prior to his Jan. 20-21 visit, had emphasized that India-Russia deals go well beyond the buyer and seller relationship. In a Jan. 19 interview with the RIA Novosti military analyst, Viktor Litovkin, Ivanov said: "We have no geopolitical, cultural, or any other contradictions. We have very similar views not only on the issues of big politics, defense, and world order, but also on common things of everyday life. . . . The military-technical co-operation . . . dates back to 1960. Since then, the overall volume of contracts in the sphere of military-technical co-operation reached \$33 billion.

"The joint creation of the BrahMos missile," Ivanov said, "became a new form of Russian-Indian co-operation. . . . We have created a naval missile that has no analogues in the world in many respects. But our co-operation is not limited to this.

We are working jointly on the T-72 and T-90 tanks for the land forces and the Su-30MKI plane for the air force. Last year Russia dispatched modern frigates to India. . . . I foresee that the co-operation of our defense enterprises, from the initial stages of the joint creation of weapons and embracing R&D, creation, production, and tests, will gain considerable weight.”

The Russian Defense Minister also told RIA Novosti that Russia, India, and China may join to create a fifth-generation warplane. Talks on the issue have already taken place; Ivanov expressed hope that such a triple union is beneficial not only for this project, but also in many areas of military and technical cooperation in the defense sphere.

Russian Nuclear Reactors

Negotiations over acquiring the *Admiral Gorshkov* for the Indian Navy have reportedly been going on since 1994. The two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding in December 1998, during a visit by Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. It took another six years to get India’s Cabinet Committee for Security (CCS) to clear the deal. Some analysts claim the delay had something to do with India’s requirement for more Russian nuclear reactors.

Russia is setting up two 1,000 megawatt VVER reactors in Koodankulam in Tamil Nadu. According to the Indian Atomic Energy Commission Chairman, Dr. Anil Kakodkar, the Koodankulam site could accommodate four more reactors to make it a 6,000 MW cluster. “Two VVER plants are now being set up with their (Russian) cooperation. Let it come up. Then we will see,” Kakodkar said. “There is space for four more reactors. What kind of reactors this will be, we will be able to decide only in the future,” He spoke in 2002 at the RMK Engineering College at Kavaraipeetai.

Though both India and Russia have said that they are keen on additional plants of the 1,000 MW capacity at Koodankulam, the talks, which have been on for some time now, seemed to hit a barrier. Dr. Kakodkar noted wide differences in perception between India and Russia in nuclear cooperation. He indicated that the atomic energy commission was prepared to look at “any country” willing to offer the nuclear power technology that India was looking for. Asked if India was looking at French or Canadian reactors, he said India could look at anyone willing to offer the technologies that the country wanted.

A clue can be found in the recent statement of the American President. On Jan. 12, Bush announced the long-anticipated agreement with India on deepening cooperation in civilian nuclear and space activities and hi-tech trade, calling the deal the “next steps in strategic partnership with India.” The proposed cooperation will progress through a series of reciprocal steps that will build on each other,” the statement read. “In order to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, relevant laws, regulations, and procedures will be strengthened. . . . These cooperative efforts will be under-

taken in accordance with our respective national laws and international obligations.”

The references reflected the difficulties the two sides had in arriving at the unprecedented deal, since the U.S., as a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, is obliged not to help countries such as India, which is a non-signatory. It is interesting that while Sergei Ivanov was signing the sale of the *Admiral Gorshkov* in New Delhi, India’s high-profile External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha was in Washington meeting President Bush. The ostensible reason was the thawing of India-Pakistan relations and the success of the South Asian Association of Regional Countries (SAARC) summit in early January in Islamabad. But beyond that, it is likely that the nuclear issue was discussed. Moscow must have followed the events closely, considering whether to plan to deliver the four more VVERs. Dr. Kakodkar is interested in setting up at Koodankulam.

Arabian Sea Presence

The introduction of the *Admiral Gorshkov* will provide India’s Navy a stronger presence in the Arabian Sea. It has achieved unprecedented expansion in recent years; India is setting up its security in the Arabian Sea, and eventually in the Indian Ocean. According to India’s *Defense Year Book 2003*, the bluewater Indian Navy has embarked on an ambitious submarine production plan. It is giving priority to procurement of aircraft carriers. It has acquired five new ships: two frigates from Russia; one missile corvette each from Goa and Mumbai’s shipyard; and a missile boat has been manufactured at Garden Reach Workshop at Kolkata.

According to a report in *Navy International* in April 2001, India is developing a 300 kilometer submarine-launched ballistic missile, Sagarika. Again, India is developing the medium-range Dhanush submarine-launched ballistic missile exclusively for the Indian Navy. The Navy is also seeking another variant of the Dhanush, a surface-to-surface ballistic missile capable of striking land targets with a range of 500 kilometers.

The deal with Russia will not benefit India alone. It is going to help the Russian military-industrial facilities as well. According to one official quoted in the Indian news dailies, the Severodvinsk machine-building enterprise, or Sevmash, where the *Gorshkov* has been idle since 1997, will get a boost. Currently, the company’s 23,000 employees survive on an average salary of a little more than \$100 per month, making an oil platform for state oil company Rosneft and constructing four nuclear submarines for the navy. “In Soviet times, we had 40,000 staff and made five ships per year. Now we make one in a decade,” a company official said. But he insisted that Sevmash has all the skilled labor it needs to carry out the retrofit of *Gorshkov* without outside specialists.