

China and India Make Military Breakthrough

by Ramtanu Maitra

The month of December was the occasion for some high-powered diplomatic maneuvering in New Delhi and Beijing, as U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited the Indian capital on Dec. 9, and Indian Army Chief Gen. Nirmal Chandra Vij was given the red-carpet treatment in Beijing on Dec. 23-29.

It is evident from the Rumsfeld visit that Washington, eager to set up a naval presence in the northern Indian Ocean, is courting New Delhi. While the courtship is still at a very early stage, the Indian move to develop military cooperation with China sends a signal to the United States. Beyond that, it shows a steady development of understanding on behalf of these two large Asian nations, that security of this highly populous South and Southeast Asian region can be ensured through military cooperation between Beijing and New Delhi.

Following General Vij's visit, Chinese Vice President Zeng Qinghong was quoted saying, "Trust has been promoted between China and India after Vij and his party concluded their eight-day China tour."

The Deputy Chief of Staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), Gen. Xiong Guangkai, described General Vij's visit as "a big event for the militaries of our two countries," and said China was willing to make concerted efforts to promote cooperation between the two armies.

"The development of Sino-Indian relations is the need of the times and the common aspiration of the people of both countries as well," the official Xinhua news agency quoted Chinese Vice-President Zeng Qinghong as saying. Zeng told Vij that China would like to further expand the friendly relations with India and other neighboring countries, to achieve common prosperity.

General Vij said, during the meetings with Chinese leaders, that "trust between the two militaries has deepened in recent years as bilateral cooperation has been enhanced in all fields." According to sources close to Beijing, China and India will cooperate in defense, aerospace, and of course, commerce and trade.

General Vij's visit took place at an extremely significant point in time. On Dec. 9, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was in Delhi. While in Delhi, he indicated that the two countries were ready to transform their relations into practical steps, by saying that Washington wanted their de-

fense ties to be further “knitted” together. He said his meeting with Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee was “excellent,” and cited numerous defense interactions, joint military exercises, and exchanges as an indication of growing relations between the two countries’ military establishments.

“We intend to see these ties further knitted together in coming months and years,” the U.S. Defense Secretary said in the wake of India’s External Affairs Minister K. Natwar Singh’s warning that the supply of American arms to Pakistan could have a negative impact when the Indo-Pak talks were at a “sensitive stage.”

The American Initiative

Although Rumsfeld and Mukherjee were tight-lipped about the issues discussed at the meeting, Indian officials told the media that the two countries were “close to reaching an agreement on the U.S. Navy providing assistance to Indian naval submarines in case of distress in the high seas.”

The two countries are also involved in a substantive dialogue for supplying India with the U.S. Missile Defense System based on Patriot missiles, and for the supply of Deep-Sea Rescue Vehicles. “The governments with which we are either carrying out or discussing missile defense cooperation include Japan, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Australia, Canada, Israel, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Russia, Turkey, Spain, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Ukraine, Taiwan, and India,” U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control Stephen Rademaker said in Washington.

Speaking at the American Foreign Policy Council’s Conference on “Missile Defenses and American Security,” Rademaker noted that India and the United States had also conducted joint missile defense workshops. In January 2004, President George W. Bush and the then-Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had announced the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) initiative, which included an “expanding discussion” on missile defense, Rademaker said. The NSSP “includes a strategic stability dialogue with India, including an expanding discussion on missile defense,” he pointed out.

Washington is also keen to play down India’s concern over supply of arms to Pakistan; the United States today said it would like to be a “bigger supplier” of weaponry to New Delhi. “The U.S. Administration is deeply sensitive to India’s views on these matters,” U.S. Ambassador David Mulford told a group of reporters in New Delhi, when asked about New Delhi’s concerns over the defense supplies that could adversely affect the positive sentiments for the United States in India. The United States, he said, hoped that a “bigger relationship” with India could be created. “We would like to be a bigger supplier of military equipment and weapons to India,” he added.

However, sources said that India’s concern about Washington as a reliable supplier continues to remain as strong as ever. During Rumsfeld’s short sojourn to India, New Delhi

expressed a strong interest in purchasing the advanced PCA-3 version of Patriot missiles. But, the best that the United States could offer was the PCA-1 version, used in the two Gulf wars, and found wanting.

Red-Carpet Treatment

China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) welcomed General Vij, the first Indian Army Chief to visit China in ten years. The PLA opened up many of its defense facilities as part of a visible effort by Beijing to enhance mutual trust and understanding. Vij’s visit came ahead of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s scheduled visit to India in March 2005.

Bilateral ties between the two countries have developed rapidly in recent years. Former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited China in June 2003, and signed a historic joint declaration.

During his visit, General Vij invited the Chinese military to join, for the first time, in a military exercise in non-traditional anti-terrorist security. He reviewed the naval search and rescue exercise jointly conducted by India and China last year, Xinhua reported. China and India last year held their first-ever joint naval exercises.

The Indian Army Chief was also accorded a ceremonial welcome at the PLA headquarters. This was followed by his talks with the PLA’s Deputy Chief of Staff, Gen. Xiong Guangkai. General Vij also visited the PLA’s National Defense University, and witnessed some programs and exchanged views with a Chinese military think-tank. He called on Chinese Defense Minister, Gen. Cao Gangchuan, and held wide-ranging talks with his Chinese counterpart, Gen Liang Guanlie, agreeing to deepen military-to-military ties.

General Vij also inspected a Chinese army garrison in the financial hub of Shanghai, toured military facilities in the port city of Qingdao, and travelled to China’s historic capital Xi’an, the government reported.

There is also a growing trend in Southeast Asia in particular, to bring in both China and India to ensure security in the region. The new Malaysian Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, who had visited China recently, was in India in mid-December. Reports indicate he sought strategic partnership with India in the areas of defense and Information Technology during his meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Diplomats said that Prime Minister Badawi has also sought military-to-military cooperation, Indian weapon systems, and joint patrolling of the Malacca Straits to check terrorism and piracy. He revealed to Indian Premier Manmohan Singh and Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee a draft defense policy which will come into force by June 2005.

In line with that policy, Malaysia will invite serving and retired foreign military experts to train its military in war-fighting and intelligence-gathering, and sources said the Malaysian Prime Minister solicited Indian participation in that program.