

U.S. and India

By Conn Hallinan | May 6, 2003

In the wake of the Iraq War, growing tensions with Iran, and a possible confrontation with North Korea, it would be easy to miss the formation of yet another Washington think tank. But the freshly minted U.S.-India Institute for Strategic Policy is an organization to watch and one that may help reveal the next target of American power: containing China.

The Institute, closely aligned with the ultra-conservative Center for Security Policy, is the outcome of a series of quiet meetings and low-profile joint military operations between the U.S. and the government of prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, dominated by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

In May of last year Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and one of the most hawkish members of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's inner circle, hosted a meeting of the U.S.-India Defense Policy Group to map out joint defense strategies for the two countries. These included planning joint naval patrols of the strategic Malacca Strait, workshops on ballistic missile defense, and cooperation in defense technology. While the goal, according to conference documents, was to build "stability and security in Asia and beyond," according to PR Chari of the New Delhi-based Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, "stabilization" is a code: "What they really mean is how to deal with China."

China is certainly on the minds of administration-linked think tanks. As Lloyd Richardson of the Hudson Institute told the *Financial Times*, India has the "economic and military strength to counter the adverse effects of China's rise as a regional and world power. India is the most overlooked of our potential allies in a strategy to contain China." That analysis was paralleled in a recent, classified U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) document revealed by *Jane's Foreign Report*. The document argues that "China represents the most significant threat to both countries' (India and the U.S.) security in the future as an economic and military competitor." The document also quoted an unnamed U.S. admiral as saying that

both the U.S. and India view China as a strategic threat, "though we do not discuss this publicly." The document goes on to observe that U.S. relations with its "traditional" allies in Asia—South Korea and Japan—have become "fragile," and concludes that "India should emerge as a vital component of U.S. strategy."

Military ties between the two nations have blossomed, culminating in the recent Malabar IV exercises, which coordinated the efforts of Indian and U.S. battle groups, including cruisers, destroyers, frigates, submarines, aircraft, and several thousand personnel. The Indian navy has launched a 30-year program to construct a fleet capable of projecting power into the South China Sea. According to the *Financial Times*, India plans to parlay its military cooperation with the U.S. into beefing up its arms industry and supplementing China as a major regional arms supplier.

Relations between the two nations have been tense since India lost a 1962 border war with China, and the Vajpayee government regularly accuses China of aiding Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. "Reliable and widespread reports of Chinese nuclear and missile proliferation to Pakistan cause deep concern," Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Soinha said in January, adding that he was disappointed "over the pace of improvement in the relationship between India and China."

That relationship is not likely to improve if the Chinese think the Indians are ganging up with the White House to "contain" China. Almost as soon as the Bush administration took office, it altered China's status from "strategic partner" under Clinton to

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“strategic competitor.” The administration’s U.S.-China Security Review Commission argued that China is “in direct competition with us for influence in Asia and beyond,” and that in “the worst case this could lead to war.” When President Bush threatened North Korea with nuclear weapons last year, he leveled the same threat at China in the advent of a China-Taiwan war.

The administration lifted sanctions against India for its 1998 violation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and resumed arms sales. Even the White House’s choice for Ambassador to India, Robert Blackwell, must have set off alarm bells in Beijing. Blackwell was a member of the Vulcans—candidate George W. Bush’s team of foreign policy advisers—most of whom opposed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) and supported deployment of an ABM system. The Chinese have long felt the ABM system now being assembled in Alaska is aimed at them.

Joining up with the Bush administration’s strategy to “contain” China may not be a path India wants to follow. China is indeed a growing power in Asia, with the sixth-largest economy in the world. But there is no evidence it is particularly aggressive. It has certainly played a peacemaker role on the Korean peninsula.

And military competition with China will be painful for the average Indian. India spends \$14 billion a year on its military, while half of its children are malnourished, and 350 million people go to bed hungry. One third of India’s one billion people are illiterate, and the country spends only 1.9% of its Gross Domestic Product on education, about half of what most East Asian countries spend.

The burdens of poverty and illiteracy are likely to be far more destabilizing to India than Chinese influence in Asia, and India should have no illusions that a military alliance with the U.S. will open the aid spigots. American foreign aid has been declining for decades, and U.S. economic difficulties, coupled with the Iraq War, will undoubtedly accelerate that trend.

The burdens of empire eventually outweigh the benefits.

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