

India, Iran, & the United States

By Conn Hallinan | October 19, 2005

This is a tale about a vote, a strike, and a sleight of hand.

For the past six months the United States and the European Union (EU) have led a full court press to haul Iran before the UN Security Council for violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NNPT) by supposedly concealing a nuclear weapons program. Last month, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) voted to declare Iran in “non-compliance” with the Treaty, but deferred a decision on referral to the Security Council until Nov. 25.

The Strike

On Sept. 30, more than a million Indian airport and banking workers took to the streets to oppose a plan to downsize financial establishments and privatize airports, but also to denounce the ruling Congress Party as “shameful” for going along with the Sept. 24 “non-compliance” vote in the IAEA. The strikers were led by four Left parties that are crucial allies of the Congress-dominated United Progressive Alliance government.

The Alliance controls 270 votes in the Parliament. The Left holds 64 seats to the Congress Party’s 145. The Alliance’s other 61 seats come from a diverse group of small parties.

Why was India lining up with the United States and the EU against Iran, especially since it risked alienating essential domestic allies? Why would India jeopardize its relations with Iran while it is engaged in high-stakes negotiations with Teheran over a \$22 billion natural gas deal, and a \$5 billion oil pipeline from Iran to India via Pakistan?

To sort this out one has to go back to early this year when CIA Director Porter Goss and U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld testified before Congress that China posed a strategic threat to U.S. interests.

Both men lobbied for a “containment” policy aimed at surrounding and isolating China.

One key piece on this new Cold War chessboard is India, which under the previous right-wing government saw itself as a political and economic rival to Beijing. But there was an obstacle to bringing India into the ring of U.S. allies stretching from Japan in the East, to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in Central Asia.

In 1974, using enriched uranium secretly gleaned from a Canadian- and U.S.-supplied civilian reactor, India set off an atomic bomb. New Delhi was subsequently cut off from international uranium supplies and had to fall back on its own rather thin domestic sources. Yet another set of barriers was erected following India’s 1998 nuclear blasts.

But the Bush administration realized that if it wanted India to play spear bearer for the United States, the Indians would need to expand and modernize their nuclear weapons program, an almost impossible task if they couldn’t purchase uranium supplies abroad. India produces about 300 tons of uranium a year, but the bulk of that goes to civilian power plants.

According to the 2005 edition of “Deadly Arsenals,” India presently has between 70 and 110 nuclear weapons, plus 400 to 500 kilograms of weapons grade uranium on hand. Given India’s present level of technology, a stockpile of that size can produce about 100 atomic weapons.

Those weapons, however, are fairly unsophisticated, and too big and clunky for long-range missiles. Nor are Indian missiles yet capable of reaching targets all over China, although the Agni III, with a range of 2,000, miles is getting close.



The Sleight of Hand

So here comes the sleight of hand.

On June 28, Indian Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee met with Rumsfeld to sign the U.S.-India Defense Relationship Agreement, which gives India access to sophisticated missile technology under the guise of aiding its space program.

The defense pact was denounced by the Communist Party of India/Marxist—one of the parties in the Alliance’s governing coalition—as “fraught with serious consequences,” that would end up making India like “Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, all traditional military allies of the United States.”

The June agreement was followed by a July 18 meeting of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush that ended U.S. restrictions on India’s civilian nuclear power program, and allowed India to begin purchasing uranium on the international market.

While the Bush administration is telling the U.S. Congress that the pact will encourage civilian over military uses of nuclear technology, Manmohan Singh told the Indian Parliament, “there is nothing in this joint statement that amounts to limiting or inhibiting our strategic nuclear weapons program.”

Indeed, by allowing India to buy uranium on the open market, the pact will let India divert all of its domestic uranium supplies to weapons production. That would allow it to produce up to 1,000 warheads, making it the third largest arsenal in the world behind the United States and Russia.

Of course there was a price for these agreements: India had to vote to drag Iran before the Security Council. The Americans were quite clear that failure

to join in on the White House’s jihad against Teheran meant the agreements would go on ice. “India,” warned U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA), will “pay a very hefty price for their total disregard of U.S. concerns vis-à-vis Iran.”

So that explains the vote. But is the Congress Party really willing to hazard its majority in the Parliament and endanger energy supplies for the dubious reward of joining the Bush administration’s campaign to isolate Iran and corner the dragon?

Well, a “sleight of hand” can work both ways.

Right after the Sept. 24 vote in the IAEA, according to the Indian newspaper, *Frontline*, the Iranian ambassador to the IAEA told the Indian delegation the natural gas deal was off. Then President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad gave an incendiary interview to the United Arab Emirates based newspaper, the *Khaleej Times*, threatening retribution against any country that voted against Iran.

A few days later, the Iranians reversed themselves, claiming that their President had never actually talked with the *Khaleej Times*, and the Indians quickly announced that the gas and pipeline deal was still on. New Delhi also began hinting that it might change its vote come Nov. 25 (one suspects from “yes” to “abstain”). So either the Indians give Teheran a wink and a nod following their “yes” vote, or Iran’s shot across their bow had an effect.

The Sept. 24 vote was 22 “yes,” 1 “no,” and 12 abstentions. China and Russia abstained but have publicly said that they are opposed to sending Iran to the Security Council. Two of the “yes” votes are rotating off the 35-member IAEA board to be replaced by Cuba and Belarus. And much to the annoyance of the United States, Britain, France, and Germany met

earlier this month to discuss restarting direct talks with Teheran. In short, it is unlikely that Iran will end up being referred to the Security Council.

Will an “abstain” vote by India be enough to open the gates for U.S. technology to ramp up New Delhi’s nuclear weapons programs? Probably, but that depends on whether the administration can get it by Congress and people like Lantos.

Does this mean India joins the U.S. alliance against China? The answer to that question is a good deal more complex.

In April of this year India and China signed a “Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity,” and trade between the two up-and-coming Asian giants is projected to reach \$20 billion by 2008.

Following the July agreement with the United States, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reported to Parliament that “we see new horizons in our relationship with China,” and that the pact “is not at the cost of China.”

In fact, in the end the United States may just end up getting snookered. The Indians feel they need to modernize their military in order to become more than a regional power. If the Americans will help them do it, fine. But that doesn’t mean signing on for the whole program.

As analyst Lora Saalman writes in *Japan Focus*, “The technical and military hardware provided by the United States promises to expand India’s political, strategic, and military footprint even beyond China,” but that rather than pitting the two huge Asian powers against one another, “the United States may be setting up India to instead serve as a future strategic counterweight to U.S. interests in Asia and abroad.”

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