

INS Arihant and India's Geopolitical Role

by Dr. K. R. Bolton

India's first domestically constructed nuclear submarine capable of firing ballistic missiles is about to be launched. INS Arihant is the first in its class with four more to follow shortly. It is part of a program to make India a major military power in a region that is fraught with potential crises.

India's Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Nirmal Verma, has declared that INS Arihant is now in its "last stage of testing," and is elected to join the Indian navy "within the next 18 months." "The advent of INS Arihant into the fleet will complete the crucial link in India's nuclear triad—the ability to fire nuclear weapons from land, air and sea," according to Indian news sources.¹ Indian's defense research organization last month announced the development of the missiles that are likely to be carried by the Arihant:

The Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) announced last month that it has successfully developed nuclear-tipped submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Long shrouded in secrecy, unlike surface-to-surface nuclear missiles like Agni, the SLBM was a closely-guarded secret while in development and was called the "Sagarika Project." In all probability, the INS Arihant will take this missile on board. So far, countries like the US, Russia, France, China and the UK have the capability to launch a submarine-based ballistic missile.²

The SLBM (K-15) only has a range of 750-km. However the INS Arihant can also carry 3,500-km range K-4 missile.³

Indian's conventional navy is, however, in a state of disrepair and obsolescence. The Indian navy has asked the Government whether it can construct submarines at a foreign shipyard;⁴ that is, in Russia. Indo-Russian co-operation in defense development is of long duration.

In regard to the INS Arihant, Ranjit Pandit writes that Russia helped with the submarine's secret nuclear reactor. The reactor was "designed, fabricated and executed in India," by Indian industry and under the direction of Indian scientists, the Chairman of India's Atomic Energy Commission, Dr Anil Kakodkar, stated. Of the important Russian input, Dr Kakodkar stated back in 2009:

I would also like to thank our Russian colleagues.... [T]hey have played a very important role as consultants, they have a lot of experience in this so their consultancy has been of great help so that I think we should acknowledge.⁵

However, Dr Kakodkar emphasized that the reactor was of Indian design.⁶

Despite drawbacks, India is pursuing a vigorous naval construction program to redress the obsolescence of much of its fleet. A *Times of India* report states:

With 46 warships and submarines being constructed, and another 49 in the pipeline under overall plans worth Rs 2.73 lakh crore, Admiral Verma said, "Today, I am confident we do not suffer asymmetries with anyone. We have the wherewithal to defend our maritime interests."⁷

There is no doubt about the reason for India's determination to add nuclear-armed submarines to their military: China, although India has been elusive when questioned on this.⁸ After all, there is supposed to be a magical new entity called BRIC which places India and China together in alliance with Brazil and Russia, and is supposedly conjuring a grand new bloc between states that not only have nothing in common but which include historical enemies. However, it has been reported that India's development of nuclear-armed submarines is aimed at Pakistan and China.

In connection with the vast current naval construction program and the INS Arihant, Admiral Verma has insisted that India will not deploy its naval forces in the South China Sea.⁹ However, this does not accord with his franker statements in previous interviews. Suman Sharma reporting for *The Sunday Guardian*, wrote of this in 2011:

With an eye on the strategic South China Sea, the Indian Navy is preparing to base some of its important assets on the eastern seaboard at the Vishakhapatnam-based Eastern Naval Command. It has outlined massive expansion plans for the same.

After former President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam officially endorsed India's Look East policy in 2006, the Navy, which is considered the strategic force among the three armed forces, has been building a strong base on the eastern front.

The Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Nirmal Verma, on the eve of Navy Day on 4 December, Sunday, outlined an ambitious expansion plan for the service, which is eyeing a greater role in the South China Sea. Militarily, India will have a greater footprint in the South China Sea. By 2027 the Indian Navy would have 500 aircraft, of all varieties, and 150 ships, in its inventory, with five ships every year being manufactured, after five years from now.

With Project Varsha underway, which is a special berthing base for India's indigenous SSBN INS Arihant class nuclear-powered submarines, the Naval Chief, Admiral Nirmal Verma told *The Sunday Guardian* that the first indigenous aircraft carrier too would be based in the Eastern Command. Right now the Eastern Naval Command has 45 ships and six submarines.¹⁰

Lack of "Asia's" Synergy

Unsurprisingly, Admiral Verma is emphasizing the need for peaceful solutions for the region. China has so far achieved its ends through diplomacy and economic relations, extending its influence while appearing to compromise. Meanwhile the regional powers talk peace but prepare for war. There are many unresolved territorial issues involving China. These include:

- Aksai Chin in the disputed territory of Kashmir, at the junction of Pakistan, Tibet, and India. India claims the 38,000-square-kilometre territory, currently administered by China.
- Arunachal Pradesh, a state of India, bordering on Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China. China calls the 90,000-square-kilometre area South Tibet.
- The Senkaku Islands, five unpopulated islands in the East China Sea, which are under Japanese control. China and Taiwan both claim them, calling them the Diaoyutai Islands and Diaoyu Islands, respectively.

- Portions of China's western border with Tajikistan.
- A section of the boundary between China and North Korea in the Baitou Mountain area.
- The Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, administered by China, but claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan.
- Rich fishing rights and oil reserves of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, claimed by China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam.¹¹

Russia's dispute with China centered around the control of Zhenbao Island (Damansky in Russian) on the Ussuri River and islands on the Amur and Argun rivers. These disputes led to shooting conflicts during the 1960s,¹² despite the friendship treaty and "fraternal relations" supposedly existing between the two major Communist powers. The compromise included Russia handing over half of Heixiazi Island (Bolshoy Ussurysky Island), at the confluence of the Amur and Ussurui rivers, to China in 2004.¹³

China has increasingly eased Russia out of Mongolia. In 2006, Russia and China offered to build railways, using different tracks running in opposite directions, running from the Tavan Tolgoi mine, one of the world's largest unexploited coal deposits,¹⁴ indicating the rivalry that continues between the two regardless of the smiles and handshakes, and use of terms such as "BRIC." Border disputes between China and Kazakhstan from the Soviet era have been replaced by the two coming closer together, again with Russia being sidelined from this oil- and gas-rich state.¹⁵ Russia's traditional sphere of influence in Afghanistan was dislodged by an alliance between the USA and what are now referred by the neo-cons as "Islamists." However, while Russia was eliminated, under the US occupation regime China has moved in to gain vast oil and gas concessions in northeast Afghanistan. Bhutan is regarded as a buffer between India and China and while aligned with India, diplomatic accord with China has not been extended, nor has a disputed 495 square km been resolved.¹⁶

What should be clear is that there is no "Rise of Asia," despite the rhetoric from media and academe, and the friendly gestures among sundry states, because there is not, has never been, nor ever will be any such entity as "Asia" in a geopolitical, ethnographic, or any other significant sense that can define a power bloc. Despite whatever trade, diplomatic relations, and even some border concessions that might be gained, "Asia" faces a future that will become ever more uncertain in regard to conflict.¹⁷ The "Asian Century" thesis revolves around the rise of China and India in conjunction, but the two remain in rivalry.¹⁸

What will emerge within "Asia" is the broadening or delineation of alliances that are based on geopolitics and *realpolitik*. The USA and China will both seek hegemonic status within Asia. Those states that reject Chinese or American hegemony will align in a Russo-Indic bloc. Russia's role in Asia is already well established and historically contra that of China, even during the era where both were "Communist" states supposedly in accord.¹⁹ The grinning façade of Chinese diplomacy will drop and the true character of the regime will again become evident, as it did during the 1960s with Russia, in 1979 with the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, and the war with India in 1962.

USA and China

It is naïve to think that the USA will act decisively against China when the two powers exist in economic symbiosis and do not have significant geopolitical conflicts of interest that will necessitate American military intervention. Rather, despite the occasional American posturing on

the world stage about “human rights” in China, the USA has not used this as a subversive tool in the manner by which it is used to subvert and overthrow states that are a genuine annoyance to the USA, as per the contrived “Arab Spring,” the noises that are made against states marked for “regime change,” such as Myanmar, Syria, Iran, and Venezuela, or, most significantly, the campaign against Russia for being insufficiently “democratic,”²⁰ a euphemism for plutocracy.

Indeed, not only has the USA failed to act in any decisive manner against its supposed rival, but Sino-American military cooperation is of long duration. Given the Sino-American economic symbiosis,²¹ a military alliance, under some pretext such as the “war on terrorism,” a catchphrase used to rationalize a multiplicity of US global ambitions, is a natural development. Certainly, while neocons hold much power over American foreign policy and some are critical of China, they are not the only wire-pullers in Washington, nor necessarily the dominant faction, and plutocratic interests such as those centered around Goldman Sachs, Rockefeller, and Soros, et al, are Sinophiles. A report by the Congressional Research Service prepared for “members and committees of Congress,” outlines the historical relations between the USA and China since the Cold War, when the states were in accord vis-à-vis the USSR. This relationship laid the basis for ongoing Sino-American cooperation in terms of “strategic dialogue, reciprocal exchanges in functional areas, and arms sales.”

In 1984, U.S. policymakers worked to advance discussions on military technological cooperation with China. There were commercial sales to the PLA that included Sikorsky Aircraft’s sale of 24 S-70C transport helicopters (an unarmed version of the Black Hawk helicopter) and General Electric’s sale of five gas turbine engines for two naval destroyers. Between 1985 and 1987, the United States also agreed to four programs of government-to-government Foreign Military Sales (FMS): modernization of artillery ammunition production facilities; modernization of avionics in F-8 fighters; sale of four Mark-46 antisubmarine torpedoes; and sale of four AN/TPQ-37 artillery-locating radars.²²

From 1989 to 1993 there was a disruption of military and trade relations between the two as the USA’s response to the “Tiananmen Square” massacre.²³ Repressions of this type in almost any other state would have resulted in major consequences, including calls for “regime change” and the fomenting of a “colored revolution,” but the relationship between the two was quickly resumed, with some sporadic fluctuations during the 1990s and since. In 2001, the Bush Administration expanded cooperation, including Pentagon “mil-to-mil” (military to military) exchanges.²⁴ Another hiccup occurred when there was a collision of US and Chinese aircraft over the South China Sea in 2001, but top level military consultation and exchanges were soon back on track.²⁵ In other words, while the road has had a few rocks in the way, and perhaps even nothing more than staged shadow boxing as in the Cold War, it is nonetheless a forward movement, or what Mao would have referred to dialectally as “one step forward, two steps back.” The caution on “mil to mil” contacts comes more from China than the USA, as in 2005.²⁶ From 2007 to 2010,²⁷ China acted in a provocative manner towards the USA, perhaps on the basis that shadow boxing looks good on the world stage and any low level actions in regard to the USA will not result in any significant consequences. During the same period, Sino-American cooperation and dialogue in regional and international forums and dealing with piracy continued unchanged. The shadow boxing serves US interests in the region well enough, since, as in the Cold War era and the “Russian menace,” the USA can maintain its big brother persona throughout the Pacific region while not undertaking anything that will seriously challenge China’s interests.

In 1994, the U.S.-China Joint Defense Conversion Commission (JDCC) was established “to facilitate economic cooperation and technical exchanges and cooperation in the area of defense

conversion, but this had to be terminated due to pressure from Congress.”²⁸ This indicates that the US administration must tread a path of caution in dealing with China in cognizance of domestic pressure, but that at the highest echelons of the U.S., a quite different policy is advocated. It seems, however, that cooperation has been taking place in a manner that is planned to bypass public concerns:

In early 1999, under the Clinton Administration, the *Washington Times* disclosed the existence of a “Gameplan for 1999 U.S.-Sino Defense Exchanges,” and Pentagon spokesperson Kenneth Bacon confirmed that an exchange program had been under way for years.¹⁷ Representative Dana Rohrabacher wrote a letter to Secretary of Defense William Cohen, saying that “after reviewing the ‘Game Plan,’ it appears evident that a number of events involving PLA logistics, acquisitions, quartermaster and chemical corps representatives may benefit PLA modernization to the detriment of our allies in the Pacific region and, ultimately, the lives of own service members.” He requested a detailed written description of various exchanges.²⁹

The bypassing of US laws by the Clinton Administration continued under Bush.³⁰ In the Defense Department’s 2008 report to Congress, Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England defined one of the primary aims of U.S. China policy as being to “encourage China to play a constructive and peaceful role in the Asia-Pacific region; to act as a partner in addressing common security challenges; and to emerge as a responsible stakeholder in the world.”³¹ While this might be regarded as well-meaning diplomacy to assure world peace, at face value it is America’s statement of intent that China should become a U.S. partner, an attitude that is far from U.S. intentions towards Russia. It is a statement in accord with the advice of veteran foreign policy globalists such as Kissinger and Brzezinski and plutocrats such as David Rockefeller and George Soros, who see China in partnership with the USA and primarily against Russia, as in the Cold War era.³² The common objectives of the USA and China in the Brave New World have recently been clarified:

Secretary of State Clinton gave a speech on April 10, 2012, stressing that “China is not the Soviet Union,” “we are not on the brink of a new Cold War in Asia,” and “this is not 1912 when friction between a declining Britain and a rising Germany set the stage for global conflict.” Apparently responding positively at the S&ED on May 3 in Beijing, PRC leader Hu Jintao called for a “new type of great power relationship” that is reassuring to both countries and to others. Hu promptly dispatched General Liang Guanglie as the Defense Minister to visit the United States on May 4-10, where he echoed Hu by saying that “China and the United States should build a new type of state-to-state relationship that is not in the stereotype that the two major powers are predestined to engage into confrontation or conflict.” The PLA supports a positive tone for U.S.-PRC ties.³³

Indo-Russian Relations

Despite the USA’s best effort, India is aware of her true friends. Admiral Verma stated that regional co-operation is needed to reduce conflicts, but India continues to rebuff the USA’s interests. India is aiming for the so-called “1000-ship concept” for the region mooted by the USA, whereby there would be naval co-operation between allies in the region, with the important difference that India does not see a role for the USA as part (i.e. that dominant part) of such a regional security arrangement.³⁴

In June Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta went to India to secure military cooperation and geopolitical alignment, but was rebuffed. There was no customary joint press conference with Indian officials, and India made it plain that she would continue to pursue an independent policy. Even the enticement of arms purchases from the USA did not succeed: “India is the world’s largest arms importer. Washington was disappointed last year when U.S. companies lost out on a \$12-billion deal to sell 126 fighter jets to New Delhi,” states a report in *The Los Angeles Times*.

India maintains that the U.S. offered older aircraft technology. Officials also bridle at what they see as U.S. reluctance to transfer other sensitive technology, and Washington’s insistence on after-sales, on-site inspections of equipment, part of U.S. policy to ensure sophisticated weapons aren’t diverted to rogue states.³⁵

India learns that with American aid and trade comes subservience to American interests.

One might get the impression that American relationships with China have long been more cordial than with India. Arms deals with India, “in the pipeline,” worth \$8 billion,³⁶ are seen as one of the few or only advances of American interests. However, as for any geopolitical alignment, such a prospect does not seem to be even on a faraway horizon, despite some news media touting of the Panetta trip and the arms deal as a great breakthrough in Indo-U.S. relations. Indian Defense Minister A. K. Antony “told Panetta politely but firmly that India doesn’t wish to be seen as a U.S. alliance partner as it embarks on its Asia-Pacific strategy.”

...[W]hile New Delhi has been open to increasing bilateral engagement with Washington—and does in fact undertake a number of joint exercises across the three defense services—the establishment in India is still wary of any military alliance, or even a formal partnership with the United States.³⁷

Panetta, according to media pundits, seems to have tried to sell an alliance with the USA across South East Asia on the implied basis of protection from China. The China bogeyman thus serves the U.S. well when necessary, like the old “Soviet menace,” but India is having none of it; or at least very little: “Indian lawmakers and politicians continue to have reservations over the United States itself, doubts born largely from India’s perception of the past half a century that Washington has tended to side with India’s arch rival, Pakistan.”³⁸

Antony, who last month became India’s longest serving defense minister, has been especially careful not to publicly cozy up to Washington. Indeed, he has often instructed ministry officials to downplay joint bilateral exercises with the United States, resisted signing deals tied to weapons systems weapons, and he has consistently told officials that India believes any U.S. disputes should be dealt with bilaterally.³⁹

Despite the USA playing the China card to scare small states, on the one hand, while at a higher level, pursuing a decade’s long policy to integrate China as a partner in a New World Order, already manifested in the economic symbiosis between the two, India is not succumbing. Gokhale writes that while being wary of China’s expansion in the region, India prefers alignment with the small states such as Vietnam.⁴⁰

Indo-Russian Relations and the China Threat

On the other hand, as with previous recent Indian ventures which are focused on Russia, despite U.S. overtures, in addition to Russian consultancy for the INS Arihant nuclear reactor, India's ambitious naval construction program will proceed with Russian assistance. Sharma reports:

Inductions planned for 2012 are three survey vessels, one anti-submarine warfare corvette, one off-shore patrol vessel, 25 fast interceptor crafts, one aircraft carrier being refitted in Russia and two Talwar-class destroyers, again from Russia.⁴¹

Russian MIGs will fly from aircraft carriers constructed in India:

The new indigenous aircraft carrier (IAC) will be based at the Indian Navy's Vishakhapatnam-based Eastern Command. The IAC is expected to launch in early 2012. Right now, the 37,000-tonne ship is under construction at the Cochin shipyard. The Russian fighters MiG-29K would operate from the IAC. An additional contract for 29 of these fighters was signed recently.⁴²

Moreover despite historically meaningless concepts such as of "BRIC" and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia and India are just as cognizant as ever that the threat is from China. A recent joint military exercise between Russia and India was aimed surreptitiously at China, and was reported as such by Chinese and Russian analysts:

Russia and India see China as their major rival, making the joint military exercise near Lake Baikal quite meaningful, said a Russian military analyst. Russia and India started their sixth joint anti-terrorism military exercises Indra-2012 Tuesday in the Republic of Buryatia in southern Siberia, a place near both China and Lake Baikal. "To some extent, the exercise is targeted at China surreptitiously. At least in part of it, China is likely to be an imaginary enemy," the military analyst said. ...Although both Russia and India stressed the joint exercises were aimed to crack down on terrorism, the Russian analyst said it was a meaningless title as most military drills today, including those involves nuclear weapons. According to the Russian government, the drill was part of the 2011-2012 military technology cooperation program between Russia and India.⁴³

U.S. global hegemony in the aftermath of the Cold War era lasted no longer than the presence of Yeltsin's buffoonery. Instead, a multi-polar world is shaping up. Alliances will re-form on the basis of *realpolitik*, rather than on nebulous concepts such as "Asia" or the "New World Order." An Indo-Russian axis will emerge to which will gravitate states that do not wish to succumb to American or Chinese hegemony. Many scenarios of crisis, such as conflicts over water resources, will push realignments, and what the Russian geopolitical theorist Professor Alexander Dugin refers to as "vectors" will form under the impress of such regional crises. Such events as the launching of the INS Arihant and the naval reconstruction program, with Russian assistance, are indicators of how the future is already shaping up.

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