

US to sell military goodies to India

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WASHINGTON - India's own and longer war on terrorism is about to get a sharp edge. The United States has agreed to sell India cutting-edge equipment for its special forces, including technology to pinpoint the location of a target within meters and sensors to detect bomb-laden intruders walking across the mountains.

The stealth forces may soon be carrying receivers for the Global Positioning System (GPS), a constellation of 24 satellites controlled by the US Defense Department, which can pinpoint people and places with remarkable accuracy. Also on the way are sniper rifles, night-vision goggles, special body armor and thermal-imaging equipment that Washington sells only to its closest allies. It has also agreed in principle to sell "unmanned aerial vehicles" that can loiter and reconnoiter, giving military forces a very good idea of what's out there. Operating behind enemy lines could become easier for Indian special forces with the new range of light, bright, mobile but lethal toys.

Besides the weapons, the two sides set the schedule for yet another round of joint military exercises of "greater complexity and sophistication" than done over the past two years - something that gives Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf real cause to worry. An Indian statement rubbed it in with these words: "These exercises have been providing insights into concepts, doctrines, technologies and operating procedures that have been valuable for the Indian armed forces." Since Pakistan's top-rung armor is American, joint exercises between India and the United States allow New Delhi a penetration into the Pakistani war machine in peacetime. There are reports that the US wants to field its top air-to-air fighter, the F-15C, against the Russian Su-30, which is India's best fighter jet.

US officials also approved all other items on India's wish list this week in a clear sign of a tectonic shift. India is seriously looking at the United States as a weapons supplier and Uncle Sam, in turn, is willing to "protect" Mother India. Overcoming decades of suspicion, ideological objections and bureaucratic cussedness on both sides, a "real" defense relationship was flagged off after week-long meetings between senior officials ending with the crowning two-day encounter of the Defense Policy Group (DPG). That the successes came shortly after India's decision to deny a US request to send troops to Iraq made them even more significant. Reports of a possible "backlash" had made New Delhi a little nervous, but things seem on track.

There was so much good news that the Indian delegation left Washington feeling upbeat and optimistic. Here is how one official described it: "The procurement part went off very well and the overall talks were extremely positive. There was no serious downside. The bottlenecks have been cleared [and] we will continue to build on the relationship."

Efforts are under way to set up a real weapons pipeline with Washington, and move away from near-total dependence on Russia. While it may take time, Indian officials say they simply must diversify,

since Russian supplies are increasingly erratic, with no hope of improvement. Indian armed forces are seriously suffering now for an arsenal developed and collected in the days of the Soviet Union and non-alignment. Spare parts are dangerously long in coming, if delivered at all by the cash-strapped Russian arms industry.

And the US response to Indian overtures is positive, if the latest DPG meeting is any indication. Apart from the James Bond-type gear for special forces, the United States is also willing to fulfill other demands. Douglas Feith, US under secretary for defense and a leading voice in the administration of President George W Bush, gave the green signal for the P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft and a "deep submarine rescue vehicle" for the Indian Navy - a longtime request finally seeing signs of fruition. A US team will soon fly to India to assess the needs.

With a wave of a hand, Feith also cleared export licenses pending with the Defense Department on old Indian requests. The licensing process is a complicated bureaucratic procedure where approval is required from the Commerce, Defense and State departments and where mid-level officials can sit on requests for months if they choose. Licenses were being denied left and right after India's 1998 nuclear tests, which sent relations plummeting for a while. The recovery seems finally complete with an evident new level of trust and confidence.

If India needs the United States, the Americans are equally keen to court India, for both monetary and strategic reasons. Developing a new "friend" keeps the weapons manufacturers happy, pumping sales while slowly bolstering a partner in Asia to share burdens of patrolling sea lanes and securing trade routes.

"We are trying to convince India to buy more American stuff, but they are always nervous that we might slap [on] sanctions in the future. There is a great fear," said a US official. In the past, India has considered the United States an "unreliable" supplier because of its tendency to impose sanctions if a country runs afoul of a particular US policy. Americans have also denied dual-use technology to India because of its nuclear and missile programs. Slowly, both fears are being laid to rest as Indian officials develop more confidence in the Americans and Washington grudgingly accepts India's status as a de facto nuclear power.

The latest approvals for high-end weapons sales come after the recent delivery of four "Firefinder" radars from the United States to India, with another four on the way. The deal is worth US\$180 million, sources said.

"The US technology is raising the standard of Indian intelligence and border surveillance. American officials have been very sensitive to Indian needs after the Kargil war," said Anupam Srivastava, executive director of the South Asia program at the University of Georgia, who closely monitors US-India military ties. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, US officials who clearly saw Pakistani complicity in terrorism became more sympathetic to India's needs. "They couldn't criticize Pakistan openly because it was a partner in their 'war on terrorism', but they decided to help India with the radar system," Srivastava said.

The special gear now on the way to fight back terrorists creeping into Kashmir bolsters the same line of thinking along with the larger vision articulated by Bush and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee of a broader, deeper and wider strategic relationship. It was the fifth meeting of the DPG but the most successful so far. How far and how quickly things move will now depend on the

innovativeness of bureaucrats from both sides who manage the subsets of the DPG spanning all three arms of the defense forces and a high-technology cooperation group.

For the first time, there is also an interest in joint manufacturing of some military equipment by private companies on both sides. India allows 26 percent foreign collaboration in military production by private companies but so far there are few takers. But if US companies show an interest in joint production, they would be a major source of momentum in the relationship to say nothing of a lobbying force.

Apart from weapons, the two sides also set the schedule for another year of joint military exercises but this time they will be at "a qualitatively higher level", officials said. Last year, Indian forces practiced parachute jumps with US troops in cold Alaska, conducted airlift operations in steaming Agra, and completed a special counter-insurgency exercise in India's northeast, and the two navies conducted a four-day exercise in the Indian Ocean that included anti-submarine training. All this is about to acquire a "combat" content and grow from mere "joint operations" to real test of skills and equipment.

Musharraf reportedly expressed his displeasure at all this exercising to Bush at Camp David in June. He is worried that India will know all his secrets as it grows familiar with US doctrines, equipment and technology since Pakistan's arsenal is mainly American.

In the eternal triangle, this week the US-India arm was certainly stronger.

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