

India all at sea over US defence ties

India Defence

By Siddharth Srivastava

Controversy over the India-US civil nuclear deal may have an impact on defence relations between the two countries

IN the wake of the all-but-derailed India-US civilian nuclear deal, controversy is now beginning to dog defence relations between the two countries.

Last week, the Indian Navy was severely censured by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), an independent financial watchdog set up under the aegis of the Indian constitution, over the purchase of the 36-year-old warship USS Trenton (to be re-christened the INS Jalashwa) for US\$50 million.

Even though the value of the deal is relatively small, it does not set a healthy precedent, given the nascent stage of Indo-US defence relations. The CAG works independently of executive influence and its findings are damning.

According to the CAG, the warship was purchased without undertaking a proper physical assessment, but with only a "visual inspection" and an "over-reliance" on information supplied by the US Navy.

Condemning the Landing Ship Dock (LSD) purchase in a report tabled in Parliament, the CAG said that the ship was only delivered in a "safe to steam" condition and would require upgrades and modifications, aspects which the navy kept hidden from competent financial authority.

The Jalashwa is the first-ever warship acquired by the Indian navy from the US and the second-biggest that India now possesses after the aircraft carrier INS Viraat.

However, the US ship, as it turns out, seems to be inadequate.

"The decision for the acquisition of the warship does not appear to be prudent", the report said, because the Trenton (Jalashwa) has already outlived the major part of its service life before being commissioned into the Indian navy.

"The ship was purchased in a hasty manner without undertaking any physical assessment. By...

cabinet to read the fine print before inking such deals.

The CAG indictment will also raise the usual questions that have racked several Indian defence deals relating to corruption and kickbacks.

A report this week in the Daily News & Analysis newspaper quotes unnamed navy sources as saying external pressure, especially from the political establishment, including the Prime Minister's Office, diplomats and the Ministry of Defence, played a crucial role in the decision to acquire the INS Jalashwa.

Indeed, the controversy over the warship does not augur well for incipient Indo-US defence relations, given many jingoistic voices against the "imperialist US" in India.

The anti-American left parties have asked the government to order an investigation into the purchase. "The government should order an inquiry and come out with a statement in Parliament. It should assure the country that such dubi-

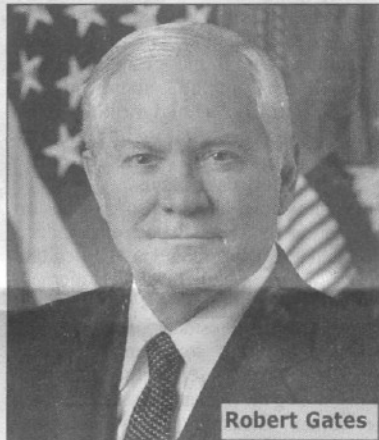
Agreement that blueprints progress in the next 10 years.

Indeed, unlike in the nuclear pact, there has been progress on the defence front, though the US is still far behind India's defence purchases from Russia or Israel.

Gates expressed happiness at India's decision to purchase six C-130J Hercules military transport aircraft from US juggernaut Lockheed Martin (LM) and said the "deal marks a major policy change in India's armament procurement".

This week, the deal was culminated when New Delhi signed a letter of offer and acceptance for India's biggest-ever aircraft deal with the US. According to Antony, the purchase is valued at nearly \$1 billion and delivery of the aircraft is to be completed by December 2011.

Defence experts say the Hercules deal opens the possibility of an Indo-US joint missile defence system, which will be a significant engagement should it work out. Gates said talks were at an



Robert Gates



AK Antony

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being commissioned into the Indian navy.

"The ship was purchased in a hasty manner without undertaking any physical assessment. By Indian navy standards, the service life of an aircraft carrier was 40 years and that of an LSD 21 years."

Some of the CAG's findings have been borne out in the time that the ship has been in India's possession. A month ago, six Indian navy sailors died aboard the Jalashwa following a toxic gas leak. It was later revealed that these classes of ships suffer this problem and three US Navy sailors had been killed in a similar accident.

In more alarming revelations, the CAG says that New Delhi has signed restrictive clauses assuring Washington that it would not deploy the INS Jalashwa for offensive purposes and will allow regular American inspection of the ship.

Observers say this is against established policy and bound to raise a political stink and accusations of New Delhi buckling under US pressure and possibly financial muscle.

"There is no way that you would purchase a weapon system if you cannot use it for offensive action", former Navy Chief Admiral (retired) Arun Prakash, was quoted as saying this week in the Pakistani newspaper the Daily Times.

Though it was during his tenure (2005-06) that the deal was inked, Prakash said, "ultimately it is not the navy chief or naval headquarters that takes these decisions". Presumably, it is therefore the responsibility of the federal

defence purchases will not be resorted to in the future", read a statement from the left parties.

US looking for defence deals:

India's defence purchases are expected to be in the range of \$30 billion over the next four years, even as the country embarks on a massive defence modernisation exercise.

New Delhi is keen to diversify the stable of countries from which it buys arms and wants to move away from over-dependence on traditional supplier Russia, which has increased its defence hardware exports to China. Indian officials say that Washington is looking to supply a quarter of India's military hardware over the next decade.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates visited India last month and made it apparent that given India's status as the US's strategic partner in the Asian region, Washington was looking to expand military-to-military relationships independent and irrespective of the fate of the stalled civilian nuclear agreement.

Stung by Indian political opposition to the nuclear pact, Gates said that the US was not looking for "quick results" or "big leaps forward", but rather a steady expansion of the relationship, in a pace comfortable to both the countries.

Both Gates and Indian Defence Minister AK Antony expressed satisfaction in Indo-US defence ties since the signing of the 2005 Defence Framework

early stage involving a joint analysis of India's needs.

India has been focusing on indigenous development of its missile shield to guard against perceived threats from Pakistan. This has closed a potential multi-billion dollar market to American manufacturers such as LM, Boeing, Raytheon and Northrop Grumman.

Officials say another US biggie - Boeing and its P-8i Poseidon long-range maritime reconnaissance (LRMR) aircraft - is the frontrunner for the Indian navy's order for eight maritime patrol aircraft. The \$2 billion "direct foreign military sale" contract should be inked shortly. A high-level delegation from Boeing is due to visit India by the end of March.

India's state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited is upbeat about export opportunities following a deal with Boeing in December last year, for the development of sub-systems for Boeing fighter planes. Both LM and Boeing are principal bidders in the estimated \$11 billion deal for India's procurement of 126 medium fighter jet aircraft.

US defence firms are also eyeing the 312 light helicopter tender worth \$1 billion recently floated by India.

So, considering the number of arms deals in the works and the evolving state of defence relations, the CAG censure of the INS Jalashwa purchase is a setback to the US-India strategic partnership. COURTESY ASIA TIMES