

India - Defence

# India asserts itself as global milita

By Anand Giridharadas

*India has begun to refashion itself as an armed power with global reach: a power willing and able to dispatch troops thousands of miles away to protect its people and interests*

The Mumbai, an Indian warship, was slicing through choppy monsoon seas one recent morning when a helicopter swooped in overhead. Commandos slithered down a rope, seizing control of the destroyer.

It was a drill, Indian soldiers taking over an Indian ship. But the purpose was to train them to seize other countries' ships in distant oceans, a sign of a new military assertiveness for the world's second-most-populous nation. India, which gave the world the idea of Gandhian nonviolence, has long derided the force-projecting ways of the great powers. It focused its own military on self-defence against two neighbours, Pakistan and China.

But in recent years, while world attention has focused on China's military, India has begun to refashion itself as an armed power with global reach: a power willing and able to dispatch troops thousands of miles from the subcontinent to protect its oil shipments and trade routes, to defend its large expatriate population in the

Middle East and to shoulder international peacekeeping duties.

"India sees itself in a different light - not looking so much inward and looking at Pakistan, but globally," said William S Cohen, a secretary of defence in the Clinton administration who in his new role as a lobbyist represents American firms seeking weapons contracts in India. "It's sending a signal that it's going to be a big player."

India is buying armaments that major powers like the United States use to operate far from home: aircraft carriers, giant C-130J transport planes and airborne refuelling tankers. Meanwhile, India has helped to build a small air base in Tajikistan that it will share with its host country. It is modern India's first military outpost on foreign soil. India also appears to be positioning itself as a caretaker and patroller of the Indian Ocean region, which stretches from Africa's coast to Australia's and from the subcontinent southward to Antarctica. "Ten years from now, India could be a real provider of security to all the ocean islands in the Indian Ocean," said Ashley J Tellis, an Indian-born scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington who has also been an adviser to the Bush administration.

"It could become a provider of

security in the Persian Gulf in collaboration with the US. I would think of the same being true with the Central Asian states." "India," he added, "is slowly maturing into a conventional great power." Middle-aged Indians remember a time when their country would watch thousands of Indians in jeopardy in a foreign land and know that there was nothing their military could do.

But in 2006, when conflict

India is buying armaments that the US use to operate far from carriers, giant C-130J transport airborne refuelling tankers. The helped to build a small air base it will share with its host country India's first military outpost on

between Israel and Hezbollah threatened Indian expatriates in Lebanon, four Indian warships happened to be in the Mediterranean. The navy rushed the vessels to Lebanon and brought more than 2,000 people on board, not only Indians, but Sri Lankans, Nepalese and Lebanese eager to escape the fighting.

Two years earlier, when a tsunami throttled Asia, including this country's

own southern coast, the Indian Navy dispatched 1,000 troops, 32 warships, a floating hospital for res- 41 planes and a medical centre, according to news cue operations. Such changes bring pride to accounts. But some also fear that many Indians may come the kind of swagger- India may have opposed since it became ing power it from Britain in 1947. independent immediately after independence. "Immediate to engage ourselves for true, we have

major powers like

ome: aircraft planes and country has in Tajikistan that It is modern foreign soil

our country - economical- ally - because we were ly, political under colonial rule for more exploited years," Pranab Mukherjee, than 200 foreign minister, said in an India's of Now, he said, things have interview. Naturally, a country of this changed. "The population of this size - we will size, a people to strengthen our security be required to modernize them, update them, forces, to get technology."

"We are ready to play a more responsible role," he added, "but we don't want to impose ourselves on others." Indian military planning is still heavily focused on China and Pakistan, against both of which the country has fought wars. China, whose own military expansion outstrips India's, has not sounded public warnings about India's military modernization. But Pakistan is more critical.

Pakistani officials "are paying attention to Indian plans to project India outside the South Asian region," said Hasan Askari Rizvi, a leading Pakistani expert on that country's military. India's buildup has several overlapping motivations. It now trades vigorously with the world, most critically in oil. It has bought oil fields or engaged in exploration in Iran, Iraq, Libya, Russia, Sudan, Syria, Vietnam and beyond. Not coincidentally, it has demonstrated a new interest in keeping the sea-lanes through which that oil and other wares sail free of pirates and militants.

A more robust military is also vital for protecting millions of Indian workers in the Persian Gulf, who are from time to time threatened by political volatility. But the most pressing motivation may be the fast-moving Chinese. China has sought to develop a powerful air force and navy that can extend far beyond its shores. It has been increas-

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ing its military budget rapidly and plans to spend \$60 billion on its armed forces in 2008, according to the government budget. The Pentagon estimates that China's actual military spending is much higher, perhaps twice the officially budgeted amount, as much as seven times India's defence outlay.

Beijing has alarmed Indian commanders by courting allies in India's neighbourhood. "There seems to be an emerging long-term competition between India and China for pre-eminence in the region," said Jacqueline Newmyer, president of the Long Term Strategy Group, a research institute in Cambridge, Mass., and a security consultant to the United States government. "India is preparing slowly to claim its place as a pre-eminent power, and in the meantime China is working to complicate that for India." India has worked to close the gap with China by spending heavily on modern arms. Analysts estimate that India could spend as much as \$40 billion on military modernization in the next five years. What is most striking is how many of the weapons are designed for operations far from home.

Among the more notable purchases are six IL-78 airborne tankers, which can refuel three jets simultaneously and allow the air force to fly as far as Alaska. Other armaments recently acquired or in

the pipeline include naval destroyers, nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers and the C-130J transport planes that are a staple of long-range conflicts. "You don't need C-130s for Pakistan," said Mr. Tellis, the Bush administration adviser. A telling sign of India's plans lies in Tajikistan, a nation between Afghanistan and China in Central Asia. Not far from Dushanbe, the capital, India has worked with Tajik authorities to build an air base and has stationed helicopters there.

Ms. Newmyer, of Long Term Strategy Group, called the arrangement "a big deal," not least because of the change of mindset it reflects. "Having overseas bases is a marker of an imperial kind of capability," she said. "India is thought of as a power that was colonized, not a power that puts its own boots on the ground in permanent bases in other countries." In a speech in India's parliament this summer, a rising political star spoke of a change in civilian thinking that helps explain the change in military strategy. "What is important," said Rahul Gandhi, the heir to the family dynasty that controls the governing Congress Party, "is that we stop worrying about how the world will impact us, we stop being scared about how the world will impact us, and we step out and worry about how we will impact the world." COURTESY THE NEW YORK TIMES