The Containment of China passes through New Delhi

By Rémi CLAVET

The recent tactical agreement proposed by the Bush administration to India over civilian nuclear cooperation reveals quite clearly the strategy of containment once again deployed by the US government to protect the American interests from an imminent threat. The fight for the leadership of Asia is very likely to get with the passage of time and, once again, Washington has to support its preferred candidate. The choice of a deal over such important technology underlines two facts: first, the Bush administration takes China as a primary threat, second, the potential for the region's (world?) nuclear balance of to be profoundly altered.

The Soviet Union had never been a serious commercial competitor for the United States. It obviously tried to be so, but by refusing to develop an economy based upon freedom and capitalism this objective soon appeared unrealistic; what was about to become the European Union was already doing better. From a military point of view, Moscow thought it had a chance. But, deprived of a strong economic base, this competition was equally doomed to failure.

It now appears that China has understood the lesson. A couple of decades ago, Beijing had already broken up with its former mentor's ideology and, even if the dogma by itself remains strongly linked to the party and the capital city, the Chinese *nomenklatura* has understood and accepted the virtues of capitalism. Viewed as the new dominant super-power of this century, China is progressively building up an impressive army and, at the same time, consolidating its not less impressive economic growth. Yet, this growing power, economic or military, remains on a lower rank than the EU or US. Thus, for the Bush administration, the fear is not to face a new competitor as the EU can be but to deal with a state that could be called "rogue" if it were not that powerful; in short, a hostile nuclear country[1] that – contrary to North Korea – possesses the financial and economic ability to be not fully dependant upon foreign products. To counter this rising threat, the Bush administration has thus chosen a path in which it has a strong comparative advantage: diplomacy. It is shoring up allies to contain China, along with Japan and Taiwan. That is why on the 18th July 2005 the US President promised full cooperation with India concerning civilian nuclear technology.[2] The strategy of containment seems simple: India and China are struggling for the leadership of Asia. Both are growing powers, and India shows an ideology historically and diplomatically much less hostile to the United States. Giving a strong advantage to India on one of the most strategic official signs of power would contain China by putting it in direct opposition to a powerful neighbour, allied with other friendly countries of Asia and the United States for backup.

[1] *Cf.* the statement of a Chinese general on the 21st of July arguing China could use its nuclear weapons against the United States if the latter was interfering in the Taiwanese affair.

[2] Text of statement available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/ releases/2005/07/20050718-6.html

Nevertheless, the use of nuclear technology as a means of negotiation with India raises two difficulties. First, it is far from sure that this proposal of agreement can be lawfully accepted; such transfer has indeed always been forbidden with countries rejecting the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), as India does. Thus, the deal between the two countries must be accepted by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) that legally cannot tolerate such arrangement with countries rejecting the IAEA safeguard agreements.[3] Then, this approach consisting in using nuclear technology – even if officially civilian, this is a dual technology and there is no possibility to check the way it is used concerning India – appears quite dangerous and reveals a though that perhaps needs to be updated. According to common thinking in Washington, the US government is still thinking with its old Cold War patterns concerning its nuclear strategy. Instead of increasing its nuclear arsenal – thereby threatening the other nuclear powers that feel in return the need to increase their own one and at the end worsening the proliferation situation – Washington should on the contrary "scale back its arsenal" [4] and little by little make the world nuclear race unnecessary. Following this proposition to India, how is Pakistan supposed to react knowing its historical enemy will enjoy brand new nuclear technology?

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh can be satisfied of this arrangement. Taken between two "former" enemies it had to fight during the second half of the 20th century, India more than welcomed the proposition. New Delhi knows the need it has to improve its diplomatic influence and has been pushing for years to obtain a seat at the UN's Security Council. From this perspective, its unauthorized nuclear status is more than just a conventional means of deterrence; its makes India a member of the very exclusive club of nuclear power. Yet, following its 1962 defeat in the war with China, India was among the first to sign the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963. It was before the first Chinese nuclear test of the following year, that truly made New Delhi fear the worst in the case of another military conflict with Beijing. India chose then the way of the mutual deterrence that led it in 1998 to officially declare its nuclear status and its classical doctrine: "not-first-use".[5] Nowadays, India's military nuclear arsenal remains quite difficult to evaluate. But one thing can be taken as certain: as G. Kampani notes, "in its determination to build a credible and survivable minimum deterrent, the Indian government is transforming India's once symbolic nuclear capability into an operation nuclear force".[6] And the acquisition of a sea-based strike capability in the long term is likely to shatter the Indian nuclear posture, perhaps the broader power balance of the world.

On the other hand, and this could be a strong obstacle for its diplomatic claims, India has at several times refused to join the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty, maintaining its 1960s position that such a treaty was only a way to protect certain privileged

[3] For more information concerning the legal difficulties of this proposal of agreement, see Dennis M. Gormley and Lawrence Scheinman, *Implications of Proposed India-U.S. Civil Nuclear Cooperation*, The Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS), July 2005 (http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_67b.html)

[4] John Deutch, "A Nuclear Posture for Today", *Foreign Affairs*, January / February 2005.

[5] Some technical precisions concerning the Indian nuclear programme can be found on the Federation of American Scientist webpage (http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/india/nuke/) or on the globalsecurity.org one (http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/india/).

[6] Gaurav Kampani, « Nuclear Overview of India », *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, April 2004 (http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/India/Nuclear/index.html)

countries. It will probably have to water down its wine soon, because such a position no longer reflects the reality and could set the international nuclear community against not only the future agreement with Washington, but against India itself. This possibility of diplomatic isolation would be totally counterproductive knowing the Indian strategy.

In the end, this strong signal from Washington may eventually not be followed by any effect. The agreement may be rejected by Congress or the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Nevertheless, and whatever happens, several facts will remain: the battle for the supremacy of Asia between two powers so ideologically opposed will necessarily involve more stakeholders from outside of the region, as the search for allies may be the key to victory. And history gives rise to pessimism about the possibility of an *entente cordiale* between two ambitious growing neighbours. Finally, using nuclear technology as the showcase of an international alliance appears as a quite audacious signal in a region well known for its proliferation problems.