

# Washington expands dialogue with India

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan B. Maitra

Recent visits by a number of senior U.S. officials, including the team led by the U.S. Representative to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, have signalled the acceleration of a broader strategic dialogue between India and the United States. Richardson also visited Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka, preparing for President Clinton's visit to South Asia this fall.

The Richardson team included U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Karl Inderfurth, and Bruce Riedel, Senior Director for Near-East and South Asian Affairs in the National Security Council. U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Dennis J. Reimer and Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson, who heads the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, were also in India. While General Reimer visited the northern areas bordering China and Pakistan, Dr. Jackson was on a mission to renew nuclear cooperation in the civilian sector.

Beside some specific successes that these trips achieved, it is important to note that the United States, for the first time since the Cold War ended, is putting in place a South Asia policy. No matter who is in power in New Delhi, it is evident that the new policy will have India at the center, but will include all the South Asian nations, with the purpose of engaging them in commerce, while resolving disputes through bilateral negotiations.

Decades of biased and partisan policies adopted during the Cold War by both Washington and New Delhi have left a deep scar of mistrust in their bilateral relations. Washington's closeness to a hostile Pakistan and opposition to India's nuclear policy, and India's close arms relationship with the Soviet Union and suspicions about Washington's strategic interests in the region, were a few of the areas of mistrust.

The Richardson team was sensitive of the past and keen to remove some of the mistrust. To begin with, Washington, for the first time, acknowledged that India has a broader security requirement. Inderfurth said that Washington understands "the China Factor to India's security," adding that Washington would like the security issues in this region to be discussed "among the affected countries in a constructive manner." He also praised India for not allowing proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region, and thus set the stage for a renewal of U.S.-India civilian nuclear cooperation. "We admire the tremendous restraint shown by India in the area of nuclear proliferation," he said. "We hope that this restraint is

continued. Of course, we have been reading about the BJP government's promise of exercising the nuclear option. But what is important is the action taken."

Dr. Jackson, whose visit followed that of the Richardson delegation, confirmed to an English daily in New Delhi that she has helped to finalize an agreement between the two sides to cooperate on three research projects relating to fire safety in nuclear power plants, power plant emergency procedures, and design modification on the basis of operating experience. She also said that the first meeting of the technical experts from both sides would be in the United States in early fall, and would be followed by the visit of an American team to India.

## Indian reactions

The admission by the U.S. delegation that India's security concerns cannot be equated only with the threat posed by Pakistan, was welcomed most heartily in Delhi. Some analysts went overboard, interpreting Inderfurth's certification that India has not allowed nuclear proliferation in the region as a rebuke to China. According to some Indian policymakers, China had been less than cautious on the nuclear issue, and has helped Pakistan to become a nuclear weapons nation.

What also drew praise from the recently installed Vajpayee government in New Delhi, was the underplaying of the Kashmir issue by the U.S. team. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told the U.S. delegation that Pakistan is not central to India's foreign policy, and the country wants to have good relations with all its neighbors. Richardson, on his part, showed no interest in reiterating Washington's views on the Kashmir issue per se, and instead made clear U.S. concern about cross-border terrorism in Kashmir.

It is, however, the possibility of renewal of cooperation on the peaceful use of nuclear power which holds the most promise. Till the mid-1970s, U.S.-India nuclear cooperation benefitted India tremendously. With India's nuclear explosion in 1974 and the advent of the Carter administration in Washington, the ties were strained. In 1980, two years after American legislators passed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), nuclear cooperation was cut off altogether.

Full-fledged cooperation, as took place prior to the mid-1970s, will be hard to come by, unless both India and the United States shift their respective positions on the NPT. But in the interim, as Dr. Jackson pointed out, the cooperation on nuclear safety "will allow the two sides to build trust and confidence."

The only fly in the ointment during the trip, was the testing of the Pakistani missile, the Ghauri. Since Pakistan is a non-signatory of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), as is India, the test was a bit of an embarrassment for the visiting U.S. team. Washington claims that the technology for the missile was provided by North Korea, and has subsequently shown concern about this development.