

Serial arms' purchases by the New Delhi government

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On December the 20th and 21st last, Russia's President Medvedev paid a two day visit to New Delhi. On this occasion, he signed a large number of contracts with India's government of Manmohan Singh. The most prominent agreements, as reported in the world press, related to arms' sales and to construction of nuclear reactors. One mega-order focused on the supply of three hundred advanced fighter planes. Spread over a period of ten years, Russia is set to sell 'fifth generation' military aircraft to India. The order is presently valued at more than 25 Billion Euros. Under another agreement, Russia will help India construct two more nuclear reactors, on top of the two reactors it is already building in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. At first sight, these deals may not seem very sensational. Russia's military and nuclear relations with India have a long history, dating back to the era of the former Soviet Union. Until the early nineties, roughly eighty percent of the military hardware used by India's armed forces was of Soviet origin. Subsequently, in the first post-Soviet period, relations temporarily 'dipped', as both sides quarreled over India's outstanding debt which Russian sources have estimated at 16 Billion Dollars. Yet in the later part of the 1990s, military-commercial relations between the two powers were reconsolidated. Today, the majority of the armaments used by the Indian military still hails from Russia.

Thus, the outcome of Medvedev's Delhi visit may seem unexceptional. Yet President Medvedev is not the only leader of a world power who recently prioritized visiting the Indian capital. In fact, his visit was closely, very closely preceded - by visits of US President Obama, in November, of French President Sarkozy in the beginning of December, and of the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. The latter statesman happened to be in Delhi just before Medvedev arrived, on December the 19th. Of these three Delhi state events, the ones featuring Obama and Sarkozy are especially noteworthy, if one is to assess India's current policy regarding foreign military and nuclear purchases. Thus, the American president-salesman when in New Delhi succeeded in finalizing two defense deals. The most important of these two covers the sale of ten military transport planes, i.e. specimen of the C-17 Globemaster III airlift aircraft, manufactured by the US's Boeing Corporation. The plane reportedly can carry tanks and combat troops over 2,500 nautical miles. Again, the French president-salesman brought home to his capital contracts for French and European corporations that are equally lucrative. According to the French daily Le Monde, these include: a contract for Thales and Dassault towards updating 51 Mirage fighter planes, worth a rosy 1.5 Billion Euro; a contract for Europe's main missile manufacturer MBDA, towards construction of ground-to-air missiles; plus a contract for the building of two civilian nuclear reactors near the densely populated city of Bombay (..), by French's well known nuclear company Areva [[1](#)].

Delhi's season of foreign military and nuclear orders even at first glance appears quite unprecedented. Yet it would be patently wrong to leave it at this, and fail to notice other peculiar coincidences. Historically, as stated above, the Indian state maintained intimate relations with Russia's precursor, the USSR. Yet the above-described military and nuclear deals, both with Russia and with Russia's former adversaries, the US and France, are best understood against the background of changed relationships between India ... and the United States! In July of 2005, the then US President George W. Bush and India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signed a

framework-agreement for nuclear cooperation. The deal brought to an end the West's previous attempts to stem India's rise as an atomic world power. Officially, the aim of the new deal was to help India expand its production of nuclear energy, through promotion of the country's access to uranium and to international civilian nuclear technology. Indian newspapers in 2008 speculated that the size of business to be generated through the deal for Indian and foreign enterprises totaled 40 Billion Dollars. Yet when the nuclear deal was being prepared, it was severely criticized by the Indian government's Leftwing allies and by leading Indian peace activists. They emphasized that the controversial deal would legitimize India's status as nuclear weapons' state, and that not all of India's 'civilian' reactors would be put under an international inspection regime. India, Indian critics argued, will be able to manufacture an extra one hundred nuclear bombs at least.

Yet while public controversies in India have rightly highlighted the dubious implications of the deal for India's status as military-nuclear world power, - Indian newspapers in the wake of the signing of the deal also pinpointed other, equally dramatic implications of the agreement. Coincidentally, I happened to be teaching at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi in September of 2008. At the time, outstanding issues towards consolidation of the nuclear deal had just been cleared by the American and Indian governments. Reading leading Indian dailies, I was stunned by speculation about expansion in exports of US armaments to India thanks to the nuclear agreement. In an article that appeared in The Times of India for instance, figures were cited for the size of money India had spent on international arms' orders since the Kargil conflict (25 Billion Dollars), and was 'poised' to spend on arms' purchases over the next five to six years (another 30 Billion). Arms' exports, it was argued, were the US's added objective [2]. One deal for the sale of weaponry that had already been clinched - described as India's biggest ever with the US - was one whereby US giant Boeing would supply the Indian air force with eight reconnaissance aircraft. When Obama visited Delhi in November last, further defense contracts were mentioned as having meanwhile been concluded, - with three US corporations, i.e. Boeing, Lockheed Martin and GE Aviation. According to American sources cited in the Delhi press, US companies had 'bagged' forty percent of military-commercial contracts signed by India recently!

Clearly, the deals that have been clinched with the American, French and Russian salesmen-presidents who were in Delhi in November and December - read conjointly - do confirm that the US-India nuclear deal had a reverse side. It did not just target expansion of India's production of nuclear energy. In fact, the deal has both legitimized India's status as a nuclear weapons' state, threatening to enhance the danger of nuclear conflagration in the Indo-Pak subcontinent, - and has legitimized a new approach of the Delhi government towards handling its international military-commercial relationships. In the era of the Cold War, the Indian government needed to walk a tightrope whenever it bought foreign arms. It had to ever weight and balance, eager as it was to maintain privileged military relations with the Soviet Union, and desirous as it also was to buy weaponry from the West, i.e. from European arms' suppliers. Now, after conclusion of the controversial nuclear deal with the US, India has to continue its balancing act between competing sales' interests of foreign suppliers, to an extent. Yet the nuclear deal, as the state-visits amply testify, has allowed India to re-strategize its military relations with other world powers. The deal not only legitimizes India's status as atomic weapons' state. It also gives it a free hand towards buying from or co-constructing advanced weaponry with the US. Thanks to the US-India nuclear deal, and, one may add, Obama's loyal follow-up to Bush jr 's policymaking, India has become a full-fledged, a truly adult participant in the militarization of the world economy.

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Footnotes

[1] For the report on President Sarkozy's visit to Delhi and for further details on the deals signed between India and France, see Le Monde, December 7, 2010, p.6: 'La France Annonce Une Serie d'Accords en Inde'.

[2] For Custers' analysis of the US-India deal, see for instance Peter Custers, 'A Different Perspective on the US-India Nuclear Deal', Monthly Review, New York., USA, Vol.61, No.4, September 2009, p.19