

India's National Security under the BJP: "Strong at Home, Engaged Abroad"

General Discussion

by John Quigley

Dr Apurba Kundu delivered a version of the paper "India's national security under the BJP: Strong at home, engaged abroad" to a meeting of the European Institute for Asian Studies on 18th March. Dr Kundu's presentation was followed by questions and answers.

Hasan Kazmi, Treasurer, EIAS, elaborated on the enormous amount of financial resources spent on defence by both India and Pakistan. In light of the recent warming of relations between New Delhi and Islamabad, would it be foreseen that such expenditure would fall? Dr Axel Berkofsky, Research Fellow, EIAS, wondered, given the India defence budget of some US\$30bn, how did the general public view the military, particularly given the widespread poverty to be found in India? Antti Turunen, Council of the EU, asked for clarification on what command and control systems either India or Pakistan had in place to prevent nuclear war. David Fouquet, Asia-Europe Project, said that India's desire to have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council might offer some leverage for scaling down deployment of nuclear weapons. Helmert recalled border disputes between India and China and wondered whether territorial disputes would soon encompass naval activities.

In reply, Dr Kundu said it is unlikely that any improvement in relations between India and Pakistan would lead to any short term reduction in defence related expenditure. The figures on expenditure by country may seem skewed, as in percentage terms, India's proportion is declining as the economy expands. But in Pakistan, the expenditure as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product is probably as high as the economy can bear.

The Indian armed forces have a very high reputation amongst the public; the Telhelka scandal notwithstanding, in general the military is not seen as corrupt. However, public discourse on defence issues or the national interest is low. In terms of nuclear arms control, neither India nor Pakistan are signed up to the Non-proliferation Treaty. This prevents the West selling technology that would actually help regulate access to nuclear weapons and reduce the chances of a mistaken launch.

Even though the navies of India and China have held joint exercises, India has also held exercises with Japan and South Korea off the Chinese coast. The momentum in Indo-China defence expenditure is occurring outside of concerns about Kashmir. With both countries seeking greater ties to countries in South-East Asia, the potential for a naval clash exists but this may be offset by growing links between their economies. ■

See also:

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“EU-India development policy: thinking again”

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