

Eurasian Nations Working Hard To Create a Multipolar World

by Mary Burdman

The nations which opposed Washington and London's war against Iraq—especially China, India, France, and Russia—have not abandoned efforts to move the international situation towards real multipolar cooperation. Intersecting diplomacy among these nations in late April, has again put Eurasian cooperation on the agenda, in preparation for several big international summits to be held between May 29 and June 3.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—will hold a summit in Moscow May 28-29. Immediately afterwards, Russia will host heads of state and government at the 300th anniversary celebration of the founding of St. Petersburg, May 30-31. Then, June 1-3, France will host the "Group of Eight" nations at Evian-les-Bains, and has already invited China and other developing sector nations to an unprecedented "North-South dialogue" before the summit opens, to discuss economic development.

Perhaps the most interesting recent diplomacy was the week-long visit of Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes to China, which ended April 28. The trip was an event in itself, because the outspoken Fernandes had, in April 1998—just a month before India's nuclear tests—said that China was as much a threat to India as Pakistan. Four years later, Fernandes was received with notable warmth in Beijing and Shanghai.

The leading task of his trip was to arrange for the long-planned visit of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to China later this year, which will reciprocate the trip of then-Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji to India in January 2002. It is most likely that the leaders of China and India will meet even before this visit. Vajpayee has already accepted the invitation to the St. Petersburg tricentennial, and the new President of China, Hu Jintao, who took office in March, will also be there.

Fernandes is the first Indian Defense Minister to visit China since 1992, and the first Indian leader to meet the new President and Prime Minister of China. More important, his trip marks the quiet but steady recognition of mutual strategic and economic interests, and development of mutual trust, between these two Asian giants since 1998—that pivotal year in world financial and strategic affairs.

2,200 Years of Friendship

Fernandes met China's new Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, April 21. "Our two big countries should always be friendly with each other from generation to generation," Wen said. "I think during the past 2,200 years, about 99.9% of that time we have devoted to friendly cooperation between our two countries." China and India are the two ancient world civilizations, whose populations now combine to make more than one-third of mankind. "The two countries have had a long history of interaction," but misunderstandings "only 0.1% of the time."

Fernandes held official talks with his Chinese counterpart, Gen. Cao Gangchuan, on the increased trust between the two armed forces and the continuing stability on still-disputed sections of their joint border. "With similar national situations, the two countries share a wide range of interests in the world and have identical and similar views on many international issues," Cao stated during the talks. "China is willing to work with India for regional peace and stability" and for "a long-term stable and friendly cooperative relationship based on mutual trust." Fernandes also met with Gen. Guo Boxiong, a Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing. His Indian delegation included Defense Secretary Subir Dutta, Secretary of Defense Production N.S. Sisodia, Vice Chief of Army Staff Lt. Gen. Shantanu Choudhary, Deputy Chief of Naval Staff

Vice Adm. R. Gopalachary, Indian ambassador to China Shivshankar Menon, and senior defense and foreign ministry officials.

Fernandes visited military facilities of the People's Liberation Army in Tianjin and Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province, to review the PLA's modernization program, and Navy facilities in Shanghai. The Indian media praised the reception Fernandes was accorded. The "top Chinese leadership held talks with him in a 'candid' manner and called for strengthening of bilateral ties," Press Trust of India (PTI) reported April 25. On April 23, he became the first Indian defense minister to address military leaders at the PLA's National Defense University in Beijing. There, he discussed why India had developed its nuclear capability, and called for increased cooperation. "I hope that we can evolve a framework whereby there will be much greater contact, confidence-building, and cooperation between our two armed forces," Fernandes said. "China's national interest is better served by fostering this spirit of amity and friendship among us. . . . The scope for mutually beneficial opportunities is immense." He described dealing with terrorism "stoked by religious radicalism and deviant state support for such activities" as an important joint interest, and emphasized that there could be no "selective interpretation" of terrorism.

The United States, while invading Iraq, lectured India on the importance of "dialogue" with Pakistan. But the continued strong relationship between China and Pakistan, did not appear to be a contentious issue during Fernandes' visit. As the Indian daily, *The Hindu*, noted in an editorial May 1, whatever the effects of "the Pakistan factor," the "emerging strategic situation in the region" resulting from the unending crisis in Afghanistan and other areas, "demands greater interaction between the two countries."

Meeting With Jiang Zemin

The highlight of Fernandes' trip was his reception in Shanghai by former President Jiang Zemin, in Jiang's capacity as Chairman of the Central Military Commission—also the senior leadership position held by Deng Xiaoping earlier, after his retirement. Shanghai is not only the political base of Jiang Zemin, but also China's biggest industrial city, and plays a leading role in the country's international relations. Jiang Zemin again invited Prime Minister Vajpayee to visit this year. According to a senior Indian official, the private meeting "was held in a warm and very friendly atmosphere." Jiang called for bringing their ties, including military ones, to a new level. Fernandes later told PTI, that Jiang described his own visit to India in 1996, when the two nations had decided to develop a "21st Century-oriented constructive and cooperative relationship." Jiang said that, because China and India are the biggest developing nations in the world, and neighbors, "to develop bilateral relations is in the fundamental interest of the two countries." The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, put forward by the two countries' great states-

men, Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai, should be the basis of their relations now.

Just before his departure from Shanghai April 27, Fernandes told PTI, that his meetings in China "[have] enabled us to appreciate each other's concerns and also each other's sensitivities and take the forward steps. I found that there is [in China] tremendous love for India. . . . I noticed a genuine desire to build greater friendship with India, and also to remove whatever obstructs such friendship, with the acknowledgment that resolving some of the issues will take a little time." Overall, Fernandes said, expanding economic and cultural relations, and interaction between their armed forces, "is going to be the route to resolving our problems. . . . So, we are going back [to India] with a deep sense of satisfaction and the conviction that this visit will be the beginning of drawing a road map for the near future."

One thing that particularly impressed Fernandes' Chinese hosts, was his willingness to come to their country, and travel around for a week, despite the epidemic of "severe acute respiratory syndrome," or SARS. Jiang told Fernandes that SARS poses a serious health threat, but that China has made "notable achievements" to contain the disease. As soon as Fernandes arrived at the airport in New Delhi, he told the press, he and his delegation had all been checked for SARS several times, indicating how seriously he takes the problem. Yet, he stated, he considered the international media's reporting on SARS sensationalist, and added, there might well be a "hidden" agenda behind the "news noise of SARS."

France to Host 'North-South Dialogue'

Another national leader willing to brave the epidemic was French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who arrived in Beijing for a two-day official visit on April 25 to discuss strengthening joint relations and European Union-Chinese ties. Prime Minister Wen Jiabao greeted Raffarin by saying that his visit "at this critical juncture in China's fight against SARS, will greatly advance bilateral relations," and said that China considers France a priority in its foreign relations.

With "global instability and uncertainty . . . definitely more evident," and peace and development "being challenged by war and by unbalanced development," French-Chinese exchanges are all the more important, Wen said. Raffarin responded that France thinks that "China is playing an increasingly important role in today's world affairs." The French and Chinese Presidents consulted each other regularly in the international effort to stop the U.S.-led war on Iraq.

Wen and Raffarin also discussed improving economic cooperation on nuclear energy, electricity, transportation, and finance. Wen suggested that, in addition to existing cooperation among big corporations on major projects, smaller enterprises also expand ties. After the Prime Ministers' talks, Chinese and French companies signed contracts on the purchase of 30 Airbus passenger jets, worth about 1.7 billion euros, and on the purchase and transfer of power plant equipment.

Raffarin also met President Hu Jintao, and gave him an unprecedented invitation from French President Jacques Chirac, for Hu to attend the summit of the G-8—which now also includes Russia—in France June 1-3. Raffarin announced the invitation to the international press in Beijing on April 25. “The President sincerely desires your presence at this major international rendezvous,” he told Hu Jintao. “He told me to send you his best regards for the quality of the contacts you regularly had with each other during the Iraq crisis. France and its partners have decided that the Evian meeting would be one discussing development. Therefore, we have expressed a wish that China be present given the theme of our discussions.” Hu Jintao responded that China wants to develop its relations with France from a strategic viewpoint. The two nations concur on the importance of developing a multipolar world, and of meeting the “challenge” of a globalized economy, and maintaining world peace.

A few days later, the Chinese Foreign Ministry confirmed that China supports the proposed “North-South leaders dialogue” meeting, and that Hu Jintao would give “positive consideration” to the invitation to the G-8. “The Chinese side thinks that the dialogue meeting is very important,” Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said.

African leaders have also been invited.

It should be noted, that the day the Indian Defense Minister returned to New Delhi, he met France’s Defense Minister

Michèle Alliot-Marie, who had arrived in India with a high-level military and armaments industry delegation, fresh from joint talks in Russia April 25-27. Alliot-Marie made clear that she had not come to India only to sign defense contracts, but also to demonstrate that France wants to develop its strategic partnership with India. She added that Paris wants the “deepening of the intensity of its defense relations with New Delhi.” Alliot-Marie and Fernandes discussed international security issues, Afghanistan and Iraq, and bilateral relations. The world must become multipolar, especially after the Iraq war, she emphasized; only countries which had a credible defense deterrent would be heard. France was one of the few nations which had not imposed arms sanctions on India after its May 1998 nuclear tests.

France is offering India long-term military-to-military cooperation on joint development, technology transfer, and sale of high-technology weapons, including Scorpion submarines and an unspecified number of Mirage jets. Alliot-Marie also met Vice Prime Minister L.K. Advani and the chiefs of the three Indian services, Adm. Madhavendra Singh, Air Chief Marshal S. Krishnaswamy, and Gen. N.C. Vij.

Potential of the SCO

The next forum for Eurasian leaders will be the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting in Moscow at the end of May. Chinese President Hu Jintao will make his first visit to Russia for the SCO summit, and will also attend the St. Petersburg celebrations. While India is not now a member of the SCO, Prime Minister Vajpayee has long been invited to attend the St. Petersburg meeting, along with heads of state and government from around the world. The SCO nations are taking steps to make this association, initiated as a forum for security discussion in 1996, and only formally founded in 2001, a permanent and influential international organization by early next year.

The SCO nations’ foreign ministers met at Almaty, Kazakhstan on April 29 to plan the Moscow summit. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said a permanent SCO “is in the interests not only of the countries concerned, but of other states interested in the security of the region and the wider sphere.” The never-ended civil war among the drug- and war-lords of Afghanistan, and the skyrocketing drug traffic since the U.S. war imposed a weak regime in Kabul in 2001, is an enormous problem for all the surrounding nations in Eurasia. Now, the invasion of Iraq has made the problem worse. “Some forces have been tempted to destabilize the situation in Afghanistan . . . as a result of the changed situation arising from events in Iraq,” Tajikistan’s Foreign Minister Talbak Nazarov said at Almaty.

Eurasian leaders are recognizing that they must take fundamental responsibility for resolving these critical security issues, including necessary economic reconstruction. This is now demanded of the international cooperation which went into opposing the war against Iraq.

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