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Nuclear Clouds Gather Over the Asia Pacific

By Praful Bidwai

The Asia-Pacific region has not only emerged as one of the primary engines of the world economy, it has also taken global centre-stage in developments pertaining to nuclear weapons, in efforts to acquire a capability to make them, and in nuclear conflicts among regional powers as well as with the United States. At present, Iran and North Korea, two of the original U.S.-designated "axis of evil" powers are in the scope of U.S. efforts to prevent an adversary to obtain nuclear weapons, or, even to develop nuclear power capability. At the same time, the U.S. offers support for India's nuclear program and is publicly silent on Japanese steps toward acquiring nuclear weapons capacity.

From Iran and Israel in West Asia, through India and Pakistan in South Asia, to North Korea and Japan in the East, the region exhibited, in 2005, unprecedented activity in the nuclear field that can only intensify in the coming years.

In each of these countries, the United States plays a major role. Its policies of selectively favouring or opposing their nuclear activities will alter the strategic balance in some of the world's most volatile regions.

"This is a marked shift from the cold war period, where the global nuclear centre of gravity lay in the all-out confrontation between the eastern and western blocs, which was most intense in Europe," says Achin Vanaik, professor of international relations and global politics at Delhi University. He is also a member of the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace and an independent nuclear expert. "Regrettably, Asia's nuclear developments are dominated by a superpower that has set its face firmly against nuclear disarmament."

2005 witnessed two landmark nuclear developments-- an attempt by the U.S. and its allies to censure Iran and prevent it from enriching uranium, either for military or civilian purposes, and an Indo-U.S. agreement to "normalise" India's nuclear weapons status and resume civilian nuclear commerce with it.

Talks continued in 2005 between North Korea and other nations led by the U.S., which included China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and the European Union, to dissuade Pyongyang from pursuing its nuclear weapons programme. These did not resolve the issue.

Meanwhile, Japan moved closer towards revising its post-World War II commitment not to make or acquire nuclear weapons and not to build a large scale standing army. This acquires great significance in the context of what has been called a "new cold war" between Japan and China.

In September, the U.S. brought a motion in the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) holding Iran "non-compliant" with its obligations under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and paving the way for referring it to the United Nations Security Council for possible sanctions. The resolution could be passed because India broke ranks with the non-aligned movement at the IAEA and voted with Washington.

Iran rejected the resolution and reiterated its right under the NPT to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. Russia has since proposed a compromise, under which Iran can convert yellowcake (oxides of uranium) into hexafluoride gas to be sent to Russia for enrichment.

Under the compromise, Iran can burn the enriched uranium in a power reactor, being built with Russian help, but would send back the spent fuel to Russia. Iran will thus, forswear reprocessing to extract plutonium, which too, like highly enriched uranium, is used to make nuclear bombs.

Iran Nuclear Power Program

Iran has not formally rejected the proposal, but its talks with the European Union-3 (Germany, France and Britain) have not yielded results.

Tehran's nuclear posture and activities have drawn a hostile response from Israel and the U.S. President George W. Bush again returned to his "Axis of Evil" characterisation. The U.S. reportedly has drawn up plans for an armed attack on Iran.

A war of words meanwhile broke out between Iran and Israel. In October, Iran's newly elected president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be "wiped off the world's map."

Israeli leaders have vowed to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said on Dec. 1 that Israel would not allow Iran to do so. "Israel, and not only Israel, cannot accept a situation in which Iran would be in possession of nuclear weapons," Sharon said.

Former prime minister Benyamin Netanyahu has held out a scarcely veiled threat to destroy Iran's nuclear installations, approvingly citing Israel's 1981 bombing of Iraq's "Osirak" research reactor, then under construction.

On Dec. 16, Iran warned Israel that its response to an Israeli attack would be "swift, firm and destructive."

"What all this highlights is the potential for a dangerous conflict in the Middle East," says Vanaik. "The region has already become explosively volatile because of the occupation of Iraq, coming on top of the Palestinian crisis. If the U.S. and Israel persist with a hardline approach to Iran, they could create havoc. U.S. double standards -- hostility to Iran, coupled with its support to Israel's nuclear weapons programme -- are a source of great popular discontent in the region."

Washington's double standards are evident in South Asia too. It agreed to make a one-time exception in the international nuclear non-proliferation regime for India by accepting that India is a "responsible" nuclear weapons state, although it has not signed the NPT. The Bush administration offered to persuade the U.S. congress to amend non-proliferation laws and to plead for a similar exception for India in the Nuclear Suppliers' Group.

India and the U.S. are developing a "strategic partnership", including extensive military cooperation. In March, Washington offered to help India become a great world power in the 21st century.

Indian ICBM

This has rankled Pakistan, which sees the Indo-U.S. "partnership" as introducing regional strategic asymmetry. Pakistan is likely to demand similar treatment for itself in respect of nuclear technology and equipment, and is drawing up plans for new nuclear power stations.

The U.S. is doing little to defuse the Indo-Pakistan nuclear rivalry. It is embarrassed by disclosures about the clandestine activities of the Abdul Qadeer Khan network which sold uranium enrichment technology to Iran, North Korea and Libya. But Washington needs Pakistan as an ally in the "war against terrorism", in particular, the Taliban and al-Qaeda. It has resisted applying pressure on Pakistan to subject Khan to thorough interrogation to detail his nuclear transactions.

The hardline approach of the U.S. to Iran's nuclear activities contrasts with its soft approach to North Korea, despite Pyongyang's claim that it already has a nuclear weapon. It is offering inducements to North Korea, including a civilian nuclear reactor, and economic aid, although it rejects the demand that the reactor's construction should precede the dismantling of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme.

"Washington's non-proliferation criteria are selective, discriminatory and inconsistent," says Vanaik. "It uses non proliferation as a weapon when that suits its short-term interests. When it doesn't, it allows nuclear weapons technologies to proliferate."

A worrisome example of this may be Japan. The country's constitution, dictated by the U.S. during its post-war occupation, forbids the acquisition, manufacture or "bringing in" of nuclear weapons. Many conservative politicians in Japan want the statute amended.

Japan has stockpiled huge amounts of plutonium, reprocessed in western Europe, ostensibly to feed its fast breeder reactors but with the potential for quick diversion to military uses.

Should Japan acquire nuclear weapons and continue its military build up, China will react. Already, China feels threatened by Washington's ballistic missile defence programme and by growing Indo-U.S. military collaboration. If present trends continue, Asia could witness two new arms races -- one between Japan and China, and the other between China and India.

These rivalries will not be driven entirely by regional factors but will have a strong extra-regional influence, that of the U.S. As the Asia-Pacific region transits into 2006, it seems headed for turmoil and instability.

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