

ERIC MARGOLIS



Rush to arms

Shortly after the death of Yuri Andropov, Soviet Defence Minister Dmitri Ustinov led a high-level military delegation to India.

Ustinov's mission to New Delhi had been planned before the demise of Andropov. Nevertheless, the powerful defence minister's absence from Moscow during the struggle for succession in the Kremlin was, to say the least, remarkable.

He was greeted with great fanfare, including a 21-gun salute normally accorded only to heads of state. After a series of long, cordial meetings, a joint communique was issued: Russia would begin delivering to India large quantities of new, high-tech weapons — and, "on an urgent basis."

The Western media largely ignored this curious announcement. To me, it is intriguing. Why does India, today one of the world's leading military powers, require more Soviet arms? And why on "an urgent basis?"

India, a nation of 723 million, has 1,120,000 men under arms. The 960,000-strong army has 2,100 tanks, among them the excellent Russian T-72s. The Indian Air Force of 727 combat planes flies late-model Soviet MiG-23s and MiG-25s. The rapidly growing Indian Navy has one aircraft carrier, eight submarines and 43 major surface combatants.

As a world military power, India today is only surpassed by Russia and the U.S.; it is tied for third place with China and Israel. In spite of its great strength, India has clearly embarked on a massive new armament program that, according to many military analysts with whom I have spoken, far exceeds its requirements for defence.

India will shortly be receiving Mirage-2000 fighters, Jaguar strike aircraft and Hawk trainers from Europe. State-of-the-art artillery and military electronics from Europe are also on order.

New Soviet weapons

Of even greater significance, the Indian armed forces will soon receive Soviet arms so new that many are not yet fully deployed within the Warsaw Pact. These include the T-80 tank, said to be superior to anything in the NATO inventory; Mi-24 Hind helicopter gunships; the new MiG-29 fighter; three-dimensional radars and an armada of Soviet missile-armed cruisers, frigates and submarines.

Soviet technicians are rapidly establishing manufacturing, maintenance and training facilities to support these new weapons systems. India is scheduled to begin local production of the T-80, MiGs and warships in the near future. Of particular note is the fact that India pays for all of these weapons with barter commodities or rupees. India is the only non-Warsaw Pact recipient of Russian arms that is allowed to pay in soft currency — all of the rest must remit dollars to Moscow.

Why is India, a poor nation, pouring billions into this intense armament program? The threat of attack by one or more of India's neighbors would provide a justification. But this is simply not the case.

Only two of India's neighbors, China and Pakistan, have any military power. Relations between India and China are correct; there appears almost no possibility of a clash between these two powers. If India did expect an attack from China, which would come across the high Himalayas, it would be forming more mountain divisions — instead, India is creating armored formations.

Pakistan, India's traditional foe, has total armed forces of 479,000, only 259 combat aircraft, most of which are obsolescent, and a tiny navy. India has made great fuss over U.S. plans to supply Pakistan with 34 F-16 fighters, a puny force that will in no way alter India's overwhelming military superiority over Pakistan. Once India receives its new Russian, British and French arms, it will outnumber Pakistan in aircraft, tanks and guns by 5 to 1.

India's neighbors worried

India's arms buildup has its neighbors extremely worried. Many political and military leaders in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh fear that New Delhi has expansionist designs. India's annexation of Bhutan, its current support for Hindu Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka, border skirmishes with Bangladesh and failure to conclude a non-aggression pact with Pakistan are examples of India's increasingly aggressive policy.

These events, along with the flourishing alliance between India and Russia suggest strongly that New Delhi and Moscow may already have agreed on a sweeping strategic plan for the region. Indira Gandhi, who has never much protested the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, appears content to allow Russia to absorb it. Once this is done, will Russia and India invade and partition Pakistan?

By doing so, India could gain all of Kashmir and eastern Pakistan while Russia receives as a prize the western province of Baluchistan — where KGB agents are already active. Baluchistan would give Russia direct access to the Persian Gulf.

Here, then, may be the reason for urgent shipments of Soviet arms to India. Mrs. Gandhi may want to ensure the fruition of her imperial ambitions of re-creating pre-1984 Greater India by seizing Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. She may want to move swiftly to accomplish this goal, and pass on Greater India to her son Rajiv, before age, illness or electoral reverses end her tenure in office.

The accelerating tempo of Russian economic and military aid to New Delhi suggests to me that Moscow sees a forceful, expansionist India as the best means of promoting its own growing ambitions in Southwest Asia.

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