

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

India looks West for defensive arms

Defense modernization is a priority concern, as the groundbreaking deal with Italy shows.

May Day was celebrated here with, among other things, the signing of a significant defense agreement between India and Italy. Dr. V. S. Arunachalam, scientific advisor to the Indian Defense Ministry, and General G. Piovano, defense secretary of Italy, signed a five-year accord providing for cooperation in research and development of sophisticated defense systems in highly specialized fields like avionics, electronics, lasers, and other interrelated scientific spheres.

The agreement has no provision for purchase of arms, or for establishment of joint research facilities. According to Dr. Arunachalam, Indian defense scientists will be sent to Italy to identify specific areas in which the two countries can coordinate to mutual advantage via information exchange, R&D cooperation, or offering each other components and designs of subsystems that could be integrated into the bigger weapon systems each is developing.

Although an intergovernmental Memorandum of Understanding was signed several years ago with France, and negotiations have been going on with both Britain and West Germany for similar agreements on long-term cooperation, the Italian agreement is the first such accord signed with any Western country for cooperation in the R&D of the latest weapons systems. The agreement was outlined by the two governments during a visit by the Italian defense minister several months ago.

The quickened defense diplomacy is certainly related to India's determination to get the best from the two

superpowers, contending as they are for the Rajiv Gandhi government's nod.

But since at least 1980, when Mrs. Indira Gandhi returned to power in Delhi, India has sought to move away from virtually total dependence on the Soviet Union for defense supplies and systems. The purchase of Mirage-4000 planes from France and submarines from West Germany was the result of this shift, but efforts to get help from the United States were frustrated.

Defense contracts signed during 1984 amount to \$1 billion in arms imports, with 75% of that from the U.S.S.R. in the form of MiG-29s, transport helicopters, and a variety of equipment for the army.

In recent years, the policy of "diversification" has been given a boost by virtue of India's particular quest for high technology in the defense area, something the Soviets have been as reluctant as any "imperialist" to part with.

During Indian Defense Minister Narasimha Rao's early-April visit to Moscow, to prepare for Rajiv's May state visit, it was reported in a section of the press here that India and the Soviet Union had discussed an unprecedented defense deal including technology transfer for nuclear submarines, a new and total "radar cover" for the land and sea frontiers, new technologies to be adapted to laser developments, and exchange and collaboration in spy satellites.

The report was promptly denied in New Delhi. Although the Indian defense minister was apparently given a red-carpet tour of the Soviets' most

advanced facilities, it remains to be seen what is for "show" and what is for "share."

India has simultaneously renewed efforts to open a defense relationship with the United States. U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Fred Iklé arrived on May 1 for talks with defense and foreign affairs ministry officials on the subject, prior to the visit of U.S. Airforce Secretary Verne Orr.

Reports from Washington indicate that from the U.S. side, these moves are backed by a powerful grouping of Republicans who have the President's sympathetic ear. Thus the talks, which now center on purchase of C-130 transport planes, aircraft engines, and several other items, may not suffer the fate of 1979 efforts to acquire Howitzers and TOW anti-tank missiles. Those talks were sabotaged at the eleventh hour by arbitrary U.S. conditions.

If the Iklé-Orr mission succeeds, U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger may pay a visit to India, and, according to Indian sources in Washington, an agreement on arms supplies might be a "highpoint" of Rajiv's June visit.

If either of the superpowers plan to try to take India for granted, they ought to consult the British. A major British airshow and defense minister's visit was summarily canceled following Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, as a direct result of Her Majesty's government's protection of the separatist cults who produced the murderers. Public apologies, vows to crack down on Sikh extremists in England, and a quick visit to Delhi by Maggie Thatcher have barely managed to keep a British helicopter deal alive. At the end of April, it may have been irrevocably buried by India's reaction to a UK official's threat to slash aid if the copters weren't purchased pronto.