

BJP faces rout in state polls

IPS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) faces an electoral rout in its stronghold of northern state of Uttar Pradesh, going by exit poll results following the first phase of a three-part election held on Thursday.

Sprawling Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state with a population of 166 million people and 22 million eligible voters, is considered the country's "political crucible" and where Vajpayee has his own parliamentary constituency.

The average of exit polls conducted by three major television channels after Thursday's first phase covering 92 of the state's 403 provincial assembly seats indicated a five per cent swing away from the BJP and a remarkable performance by its main rival, the Samajwadi (socialist) party.

Analysts said the swing could hold for elections in the remaining 311 seats scheduled for Feb 18 and Feb 21. The staggering of the voting process was done deliberately to enable the movement of police contingents to ensure maintenance of law and order in a state where crime and violence are rampant.

Also doing well was the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP), a party that supports the interests of the Dalits, or Hindu castes at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, and which has in the past switched loyalties between the BJP and the BSP.

However, Raashid Alwi, a top leader of the BSP and member of parliament, has categorically said that his party would rather sit in the opposition than join hands with the BJP, which it sees as a natural enemy representing mostly upper-caste Hindus' interests.

Uttar Pradesh is where the BJP first tasted power by running a campaign through the 90s to build a temple on the site where a mediaeval mosque

stood until 1992, when it was razed by party volunteers and their supporters.

Vajpayee has since expressed regret at the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya town only to have hardliners remind him that he owes his job to the campaign to replace it with a temple devoted to the legendary warrior god Rama, who believers say was born at the site 10,000 years ago.

In the run up to the elections, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or World Hindu Forum, which has close links with the BJP, ratcheted up the temple campaign by defying a Supreme Court order to maintain the status quo on the heavily barricaded site at Ayodhya.

Ashok Singhal, the VHP's firebrand leader, has declared that "matters of faith were not justiciable" and warned that work on the temple could begin later this month or early March with the support of volunteers.

Nervousness in the BJP camp regarding the outcome in Uttar Pradesh is discernible in Vajpayee's repeated assertion that the assembly elections are not a referendum on the performance of his BJP-led multi-party coalition government at the center.

According to exit polls, the BJP was expected to fare poorly in the northern hill state of Uttarakhand, in western Punjab state and in Manipur, a state in the extreme north-east of the country bordering Burma.

But analysts say there is no immediate danger to the Vajpayee government which is supported by powerful regional parties although most of them do not support its fundamentalism and have warned the BJP against pursuing the temple-building agenda.

Uttar Pradesh, which is noted for its deep-rooted caste and communal divisions, has India's worst social and developmental indices. It has the highest crude death rate, the highest fertility rate, the lowest number of attended births, the highest maternal mortality and the highest under-five mortality among the country's 22 major states.

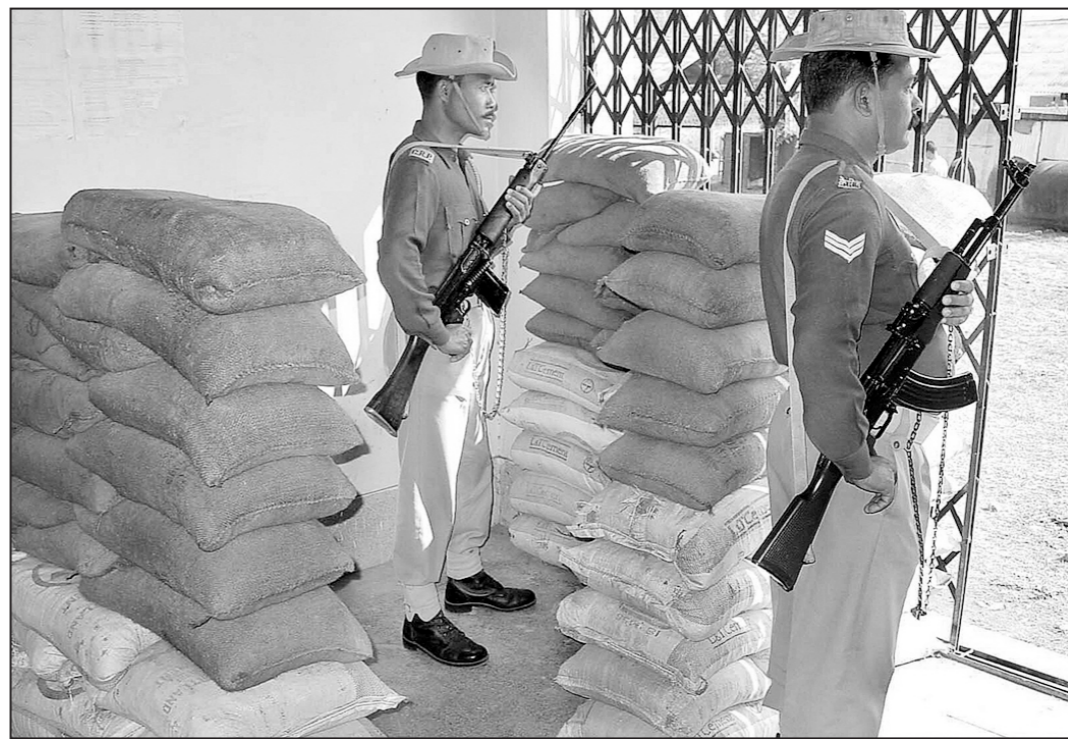


PHOTO: AFP

Security personnel protected by sandbags guard the entrance of the deputy commissioner office in Imphal on Saturday where electronic voting machines and ballot boxes are stored after the first phase of the assembly election. Counting will start on February 24 after the second phase of the voting.

Attack on Iraq certain: Question is when

AFP, Washington

The United States has signalled its determination to kick Iraqi President Saddam Hussein out of power, but it has yet to find allies or set a date for mounting an eventual military operation against Baghdad.

Alternating between war rhetoric and caution, the administration of US President George W. Bush has said it will remain prudent and patient with regard to Iraq but will nonetheless keep all of its options open, as national security adviser Condoleezza Rice noted Thursday.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said Thursday that Washington was determined to topple Saddam and will act alone if necessary to change the regime in Baghdad.

Bush, for his part, has branded Iraq part of an "axis of evil," along with Iran and North Korea, that must for all be prevented from acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

Grenade blast in Philippine market: 3 killed

AFP, Isabela

Three people were killed and at least 53 others wounded Saturday in two bomb attacks in the troubled southern Philippines, where US troops were gearing up for joint operations against Muslim Abu Sayyaf guerrillas.

In the first attack, a grenade was thrown into a crowded market on the southern island of Jolo, killing two boys and a woman and seriously injuring 48 others.

The Philippine military blamed the attack on the Abu Sayyaf, a ruthless kidnap-for-ransom group linked to the al-Qaeda terrorist network of Osama bin Laden.

The other attack came a few hours later when a grenade exploded inside a moviehouse at a busy shopping complex in southern Zamboanga city, on Mindanao island north of Jolo, injuring at least five people.

Kim's party in peril

AFP, Seoul

US President George W. Bush threw cold water on mass celebrations for Kim Jong-il's 60th birthday Saturday by insisting the North Korean leader does not represent the will of his starving people.

Bush also said the Stalinist dictator did not want dialogue with Washington and urged him to pull back troops and weapons from the tense inter-Korean frontier.

In television interviews recorded Friday ahead of his visit to Seoul next week, the US leader only made a veiled reference to his speech last month in which he labelled North Korea part of an "axis of evil" spreading weapons of mass destruction.

This time he attacked Kim Jong-il's credibility and highlighted the plight of North Korea's starving masses.

Three die of mysterious illness in India

AFP, New Delhi

A mysterious disease has claimed three lives and puzzled doctors in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, media reports said Saturday.

At least 10 cases of the mysterious disease were reported over the past week from the town of Rohru in Himachal Pradesh, the Star News channel reported.

The director of the Post Graduate Institute, a leading hospital in the area where the patients were admitted, said the disease may be plague-like, meaning it could be highly contagious and highly fatal.

"The symptoms are very much akin to pneumonia, which means that patients could be having fever, chills, breathing difficulties," the doctor, S K Sharma, told Star news.

Serbian president to consider surrender to Hague tribunal

Karadzic may also surrender

AFP, Belgrade

Serbia's incumbent President Milan Milutinovic, who along with Slobodan Milosevic and three other former officials has been indicted for war crimes, is seriously thinking about whether to surrender, the daily Danas said Saturday, quoting a government source.

"In recent days Milutinovic has been considering the possibility of turning himself in voluntarily to the Hague tribunal, because he can be released on bail pending a later trial," the source, who did not want to be named, told the daily.

"He has already been collecting documentation and is preparing a

kind of strategy" for his defence, the source added.

Milutinovic as well as Milosevic, a former Yugoslav president, Yugoslavia's deputy premier Nikola Sainovic, the head of the Yugoslav armed forces Dragoljub Ojdanic and Serb Interior Minister Vojko Stojijevic have all been indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague over alleged crimes linked to the 1999 Kosovo war.

However, the same source told Danas that the Serbian government was not in favour of Milutinovic's surrender, as this would mean early presidential elections would have to be held amid internal disputes

among the ruling coalition.

If Milutinovic surrendered, elections would have to be called within two months, the daily said.

Meanwhile, Bosnian Serb war-time leader Radovan Karadzic, who is the UN war crimes tribunal's most wanted suspect, may turn himself in, an independent daily newspaper reported Saturday.

Karadzic is very close to reaching a decision on turning himself in, since his belief that he could continue to hide is weakening, according to an anonymous source close to the international community, cited by Nezavisne Novine.

Actor who played Xena's love interest dies

REUTERS, Wellington

A New Zealand actor who played the leather-clad, bicep-bulging God of War, Ares, opposite Xena in the television series "Xena: Warrior Princess" has died in China after a fall.

Kevin Smith, 38, died in hospital late Friday from head injuries he suffered in Beijing, where he had been working on a film production, the NZ government said in a statement.

Smith played Xena's love interest in the fantasy drama based loosely on ancient mythology, which ended filming in New Zealand last year after being broadcast in more than 100 countries.

The NZ government paid tribute to Smith, saying he was "known not only for his enormous talent and amazing beauty, but also for his intelligence and self-effacing humour".

Lashkar, Jaish become agents of Jihad: Musharraf

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said Laskar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, the two militant outfits blamed by India for December 13 attack on Parliament, have become agents of Jehadi operations abroad.

At the end of his week-long tour to the US, he said groups like Lashkar and Jaish have assumed the 'Thekedari' (Agents) of Jihad in many countries and had become active participants in international politics.

Such meddling is wrong. It is because of this that Pakistan is being accused of promoting terrorism all over the world, he was quoted today in the Pakistan media as saying.

He said organisations which were founded in Pakistan have begun claiming to operate in Afghanistan and Chechnya. This could not be allowed and he had taken the necessary action.

His government earlier claimed that Lashkar and Jaish, along with other Islamic sectarian outfits, were banned for fomenting domestic turmoil but the action came after India blamed the two militant groups for their involvement in the December 13 attack on parliament.

Musharraf said Lashkar and Jaish were banned in our national interest. After my January 12th speech they (India) should have withdrawn from our borders themselves. They did not. They have their political reasons too.

Musharraf reiterated that there is

a distinction between freedom struggle and terrorism. The movement in Kashmir is a freedom struggle and not terrorism and you can quote me on it, he said.

He also said that he was not going to act on the Indian demand to extradite 20 criminals and terrorists. They have this list of 20 people now. I am not going to do their bidding.

Referring to the controversial reputation enjoyed by ISI, Musharraf said it had been manipulated by the political leadership in the past but disagreed that the intelligence agency had destabilised democratic governments in Pakistan.

He said the ISI followed government directives. It is different that the civilian governments did not give the ISI any clear direction nor did they have a transparent strategy.

India to judge Pak sincerity through its actions: Advani

AFP, New Delhi

India's Home Minister, Lal Krishna Advani, said Saturday New Delhi would judge Islamabad's sincerity in ending "terrorism in Kashmir" through its actions rather than statements, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

"Pakistani leaders have made big announcements and promises in foreign countries," Advani said, according to the Press Trust of India.

"We will not take decisions on the basis of somebody's announcements or statements... we will see on the ground whether the demands made by us have been met."

A measure of Islamabad's sincerity would be the unconditional extradition of 20 alleged criminals and terrorists wanted by New Delhi, Advani said.

Another indication would be ending "cross-border terrorism in Kashmir", he added.

India accuses Pakistan of training, arming and funding an Islamic insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Islamabad denies the charge, although it admits to extending moral, political and diplomatic support to what it terms the "right to self determination of the Kashmiri people".

Bilateral relations plunged to a new low after an attack on India's parliament in December, which New

Delhi blamed on two Pakistan based Islamic militant groups.

Both countries have massed about 800,000 troops on their common borders triggering international fears of a war between the two nuclear rivals.

Last month, Pakistan's President, Pervez Musharraf, banned two groups which New Delhi has blamed for the attack on parliament and arrested about 2,000 alleged religious extremists.

A senior Indian diplomat on Saturday described these as "steps forward but not enough for India to restart a dialogue with Pakistan or pull back troops from the border".

Court to resolve dispute on temple-mosque: PM

AFP, Lucknow

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said on Saturday it was now up to the courts to resolve a dispute over the construction of a Hindu temple on the ruins of the razed Babri Mosque.

Vajpayee acknowledged failure in his mediation efforts over the explosive row, which sparked some of India's worst communal violence 10 years ago.

"The attempts made have not succeeded," Vajpayee told a news conference in his home constituency of Lucknow.

"Both sides adopted a rigid stand. Now only the court can decide," he said.

Hindu zealots tore down the 16th

century Babri Mosque in the northern Indian town of Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh state, in 1992.

The destruction led to Hindu-Muslim violence across India in which some 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed.

Hardline Hindus believe the mosque was built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, and have been demanding that the land be handed over to them to rebuild the temple.

The disputed site is currently under the protection of the courts.

Several cabinet members of Vajpayee's Hindu-nationalist government, including Home Minister L.K. Advani, still face charges over their alleged role in inciting mobs to pull down the mosque.

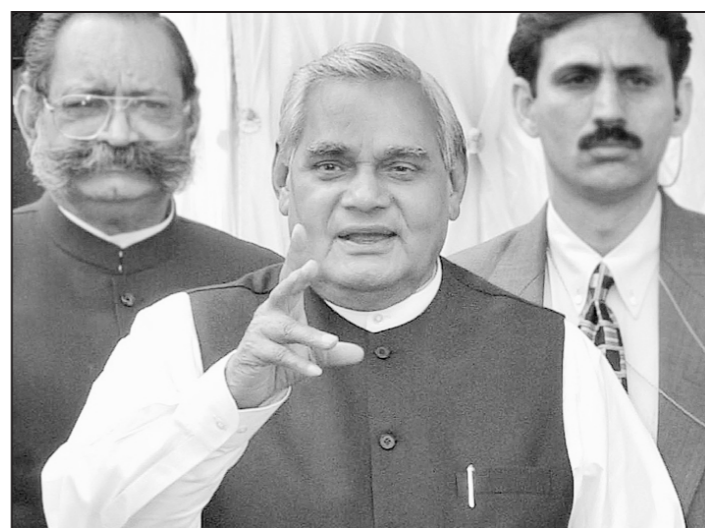


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) gestures as he arrives for a press conference at Rajbhawan in Lucknow on Saturday in Uttar Pradesh state. Vajpayee declared that talks with Hindus and Muslims to resolve a vexed dispute over the ruins of a 16th century mosque have not succeeded and now only the court can find a solution.

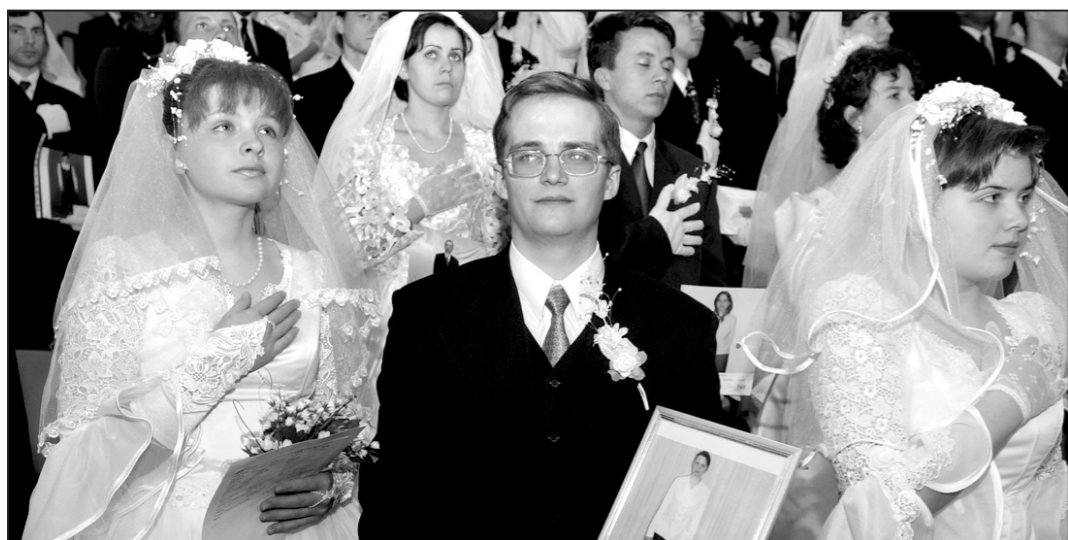


PHOTO: AFP

A groom holds a picture of his future wife standing next to him (R) after he met her for the first time during a mass wedding organised by Reverend Sun Myung Moon Unification Church on Saturday at an indoor Seoul stadium. Moon, who will turn 82 today conducted a mass wedding ceremony during which 3,500 couples got married as part of a five-day peace gathering organised by his church. The Unification Church matches couples from around the world and unites them in mass weddings without the groom and bride ever having met before the ceremony.

Mission to mend Hubble

AFP, Washington

The space shuttle Columbia is scheduled to depart late this month on an 11-day mission to upgrade the Hubble Space Telescope, NASA announced Friday.

The Columbia is to lift-off from Cape Canaveral on February 28 at 6:48 AM (1148 GMT) on the fourth space shuttle mission to the Hubble telescope since it was placed in orbit in 1990.

Astronauts will conduct five space walks to complete the work of replacing solar panels on the Hubble and the install a new camera which will increase the resolution of the telescope's images ten fold.

Astronauts will also replace Hubble's generator which is showing signs of weakness during a six-hour space walk. The repair is complex since the Hubble's electrical supply will need to be cut.

"Returning Columbia to orbit to improve the Hubble Space Telescope is a fitting start to what will be a busy and vital year in space," Space Shuttle Program manager Ron Dittmore said in a statement.

After performing other upgrades, shuttle will boost the Hubble to a higher orbit and a longer life in space.

The crew will include seven US astronauts, under the command of Scott Altman. This will be the 27th mission for Columbia, which is due to return March 11.

Columbia is one of four space shuttles. Together, they have flown 107 missions.

Israeli, Palestinians shot dead as CIA chief meets Mubarak

AFP, Jerusalem

An Israeli and two Palestinians died in separate incidents Saturday as the head of the US Central Intelligence Agency met with Egypt's president to discuss a plan for a Middle East ceasefire.

Violence had continued overnight, with the Israeli army killing a Palestinian policeman and wounding 30 other people in F-16 strikes on the northern Gaza Strip.

Those strikes came after the army was stung by the first-ever destruction of a crack battle tank in the Gaza Strip and by the death of one of its elite commanders in the West Bank.

Two Palestinians opened fire

Saturday morning on a "group of Israelis" near a roadblock close to the West Bank town of Ramallah, killing one person, Israeli public radio reported.

The gunmen then fled in a car toward Ramallah, the report said.

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction, claimed a killing in the area, saying it was in "reprisal for Zionist aggressions and incursions."

In the central Gaza Strip, Israeli forces shot dead a Palestinian teenager and wounded five others during one such incursion, into El-Bureij refugee camp, Palestinian security sources said.

Bin Laden could be in Pakistan: Vajpayee

AFP, Lucknow

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Saturday suspected September 11 mastermind Osama bin Laden could be sheltering in Pakistan.

"I will not be surprised if Osama bin Laden is hiding in Pakistan," Vajpayee told reporters in his constituency of Lucknow in northern India.

"There is a search for him in the entire world... the safest place for him is in Pakistan. There should be a thorough search for him there," Vajpayee said during a campaign stop for state elections.

The prime minister urged the world community to put pressure on Islamabad to ensure that bin Laden was not given "political asylum in

Pakistan."

Vajpayee also said that Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had lost credibility by alleging in Washington that India had conducted a nuclear test.

"He was contradicted by a US government spokesman that there is no such news," Vajpayee said.

"Earlier he had said India had a role in the abduction of the American journalist (Daniel Pearl). People take what he says with a pinch of salt."

Vajpayee dismissed the prospect of India pulling back its troops massed on the border with Pakistan, deployed after the December 13 attack on India's parliament which New Delhi blamed on Pakistani-based Islamic militants.

China is still uncertain about its global role

IPS, Washington

As China prepares to greet President George W Bush during his state visit to Beijing next week, the country's government and intellectual elite are deeply split about to deal with the world's only superpower and handle relations with the global community, experts on China-US relations say.

"A rising China will be a somewhat uncertain and perplexed China," said Shi Yinzhong, a professor of international relations at Renmin University who has written extensively about the internal debates about China's role in the world. "Consistent and clear national strategies are still missing" from the national leadership.

China's foreign policy, Shi added, is "inconsistent and fragmentary" and usually reflects the "vicissitudes of immediate world events" rather than a long-range view of the world.

The degree to which political elite differ about foreign policy is "unprecedented since the 1949 revolution" that brought the Chinese Communist Party to power, he said.

Shi, who is widely known as an expert in Sino-US relations, spoke at a forum here on China sponsored by

Japan's Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

He said China's leadership is divided into two groups, each with a distinct view of the United States. The first group, which represents a majority doubts that long-term accommodation with the United States is possible because it believes the United States "won't tolerate China as a world power, even in Asia."

"It is highly suspicious of US military strategy in East Asia and its alliance relationships, particularly with Japan," said Shi.

A second group, which is small but highly influential, hopes to reach an accommodation with Washington by 2010 and believes that, in the long run, US forces in Asia provide stability and are important in dealing with the dangers from countries holding weapons of mass destruction and supporting terrorism, he said.

This faction is also the leading voice for integrating China with multilateral organisations, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which China formally joined last year.

The contrasting voices of the Chinese political leadership were on open display this week.

On Monday, Li Peng, China's second most powerful

leader, condemned what he called foreign interference in China around human rights, a reference to the constant complaints from Washington about Beijing's human rights record.

Beijing, he said, is "firmly opposed to interfering in other countries' internal affairs by using the human rights issue." Li heads China's National People's Congress or Parliament.

A few days later, Zeng Peiyan, director of China's State Development Planning Commission and the country's top economic planner, told the official news agency Xinhua that "non-economic factors", a euphemism for human rights "won't interfere with the deep economic ties between China and the United States".

"As long as the two sides can get rid of the impact of non-economic factors," he said, "Sino-US economic cooperation will grow healthily and have bright prospects."

At present, the more moderate group appears to be ascendant. Since the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington, China has been cooperating closely with the United States in its war against terrorism.

For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet

Union in the early 1990s, US and Chinese intelligence agencies have been sharing information about Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network and radical Islamic groups in Asia.

Meanwhile, China has pledged 150 million US dollars for the reconstruction of post-war Afghanistan and may provide troops to a United Nations peacekeeping force in Afghanistan after US troops are withdrawn.

Chinese leaders have also held back criticism of the US military role in the Philippines and Japan's cooperation with US forces around Afghanistan.

All of this is a far cry from the tensions a year ago over a US spy plane that collided with a Chinese fighter jet near Hainan Island, or the near-rupture in relations when US warplanes bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, during the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-led war against Serbia two years ago.

But it is also at variance with Chinese public opinion, which Shi said is highly nationalistic and frequently anti American. "There is widespread criticism of the government softness in dealing with the United States and Japan," he said.