

India

The Titan Retires

By Harun ur Rashid

West Bengal's 87-year-old Chief Minister Jyoti Basu worked his last day in his office on 3rd November at the Writer's Building in Calcutta. He had been in the job since 1977. He headed the world's longest-running elected communist government for 23 years in multi-party political system. He was almost being nominated for the high office of the Prime Minister of India. Basu played a key role in the conclusion of the 1996 Indo-Bangladesh Ganges Water Agreement for 30 years.

One can argue that integrity, efficiency and moderation were the hallmark of his government. His political antenna was perceptive and he had been in constant touch with the mood and pulse of the electorate. Although he was a Barrister (1939) by profession, he hardly practised as a lawyer. His passion for politics was total and his left-wing views had to go through a number of adjustments over the years.

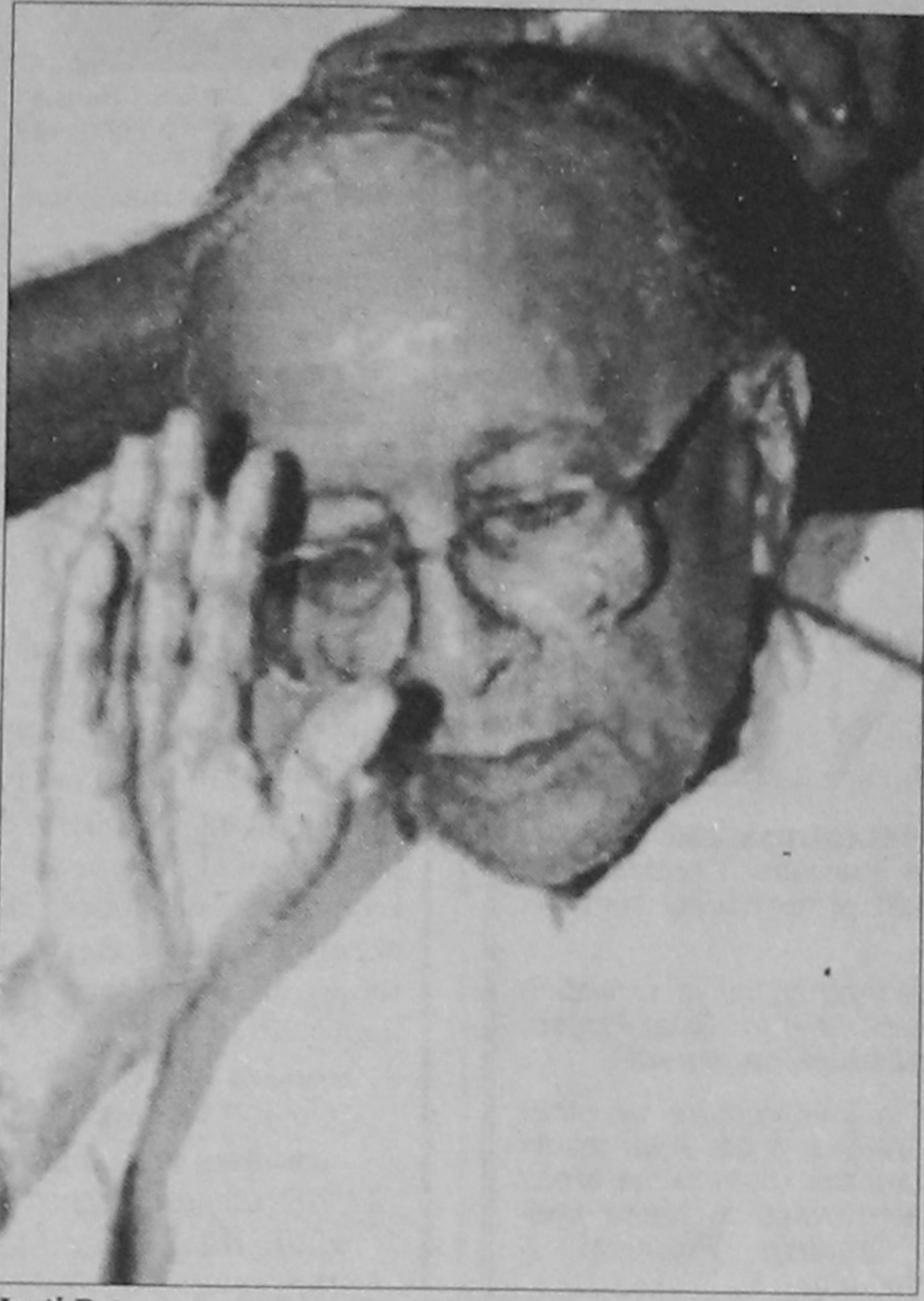
He was able to re-define the communist party (Marxist) and gave it a new direction and meaning. He had the foresight to see the need of private industrial enterprises in the communist state to revive the growth of the economy and his government provided incentives to many non-Bengali industrialists. Heavy engineering and shipbuilding, electronics and other lighter consumer industries replaced old jute and tea industries.

His leadership was responsible in bringing about land reforms in rural areas. One of the principal changes has been the abolition of absentee landlordism. This had a considerable positive impact on the landless farmers in West Bengal. The reforms resulted in consolidating his government's firm base with the rural people.

I had had the privilege of knowing Jyoti Basu while I was posted as Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner in Calcutta (1979-81). He always made time for me despite his busy schedule. He had a soft corner for Bangladesh people (he hailed from Narayanjan district).

Basu has always been a well-groomed person and has many social graces. He always presented as a person with plenty of reserve. I hardly saw his feathers ruffled. He was a diplomat par excellence. Whenever I raised bilateral issues such as the diversion of the Ganges waters and the Farakka Barrage, he avoided with a gentle smile discussing the issues saying that they were essentially within the domain of the Union government in New Delhi. His lifestyle was modest and when I was invited to his residence I was surprised at the austerity of the furnishings of his lounge and visiting room. The last time I (as Additional Foreign Secretary) met with Basu in 1987 while he paid a visit to Bangladesh.

Basu's departure coincides with the gradual decline of communism in the world. Many have stressed that in communist countries there



Jyoti Basu

was a gulf between theory and practice. Many believe that the uprising in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 demonstrated that communism was impervious to popular demands. The brutal suppression destroyed the lingering sympathies of many leftists and ruined the future of communist parties in the non-communist countries.

Central command planning to mobilise human and material resources in the communist states appeared to have failed, as it could not support the basic needs of the population. Communism in Europe collapsed in 1989. Even communist China has to accept the membership of the World Trade Organisation - a symbol of western capitalism and free trade. North Korea is open to reforms and capitalist South Korean conglomerates have slowly established their roots in North Korea.

It is admitted that high-tech globalisation is a distinctive and significant feature of recent history. Global economics is different from international economics. Internationality is embedded in territorial space while globality transcends that geography. Moreover the dynamics of globalisation involve several of the core forces of modern society, one of which appears to be the capitalist production. The growth of the trans-world communication has encouraged several areas of capitalist activity, including information industries and consumerism.

There is a view that the contemporary globalisation has propelled several important shifts in primary social structures. It has encouraged the emergence of new forms of capitalist production, greater demands of pluralism by the community and increased questioning of decisions of authority.

A view prevails that Basu may have realised that the relevance of communism in the 21st century is at an end. He reportedly said that he would devote his time for the formation of a "third front" to challenge India's two dominant parties - the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the main opposition Congress Party. It may be noted that British Prime Minister Tony Blair has been a proponent of "third way" politics in recent years. Much of the inspiration has come from the realisation that neither capitalism nor communism succeeds to satisfy the human needs.

There is a view that despite many successes by Basu's communist government, West Bengal happens to be one of the poorest states in India. Critics say that communism is an out-dated ideology because it is based on class conflict. In place of class conflict the people in West Bengal are interested in income distribution and the quality of education, health, environment and home life. There is a view that when the state election takes place next year, the rule of the communist party (Marxist) may disappear. Political analysts believe that Basu is an astute politician and departed at the right time.

The author, a Barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva

Sri Lanka

Dialogues and Hopes

By Zaglul A. Chowdhury

A flicker of hope has once again emerged for a negotiated settlement of the 18-year civil war in the island state of Sri Lanka. Norwegian peace efforts have taken a new impetus to bring the warring sides to the dialogue table for ending the strife. LTTE chief Vellupillai Prabhakaran has said that his militants, fighting for a separate independent state for the minority Tamils, are not averse to talks but only after cessation of hostilities. He told Norwegian peace envoy Erik Solheim the other day that he is not opposed to dialogue with the Lankan government on exploring the chances of a settlement of the long running internecine war but such discussions can take place only after cessation of hostilities.

Prabhakaran was known to be rabidly opposed to any dialogue till a few months ago when his ranks accomplished stunning success in the battlefronts. But later there has been a standoff in the war situation and in recent days the government troops have launched counter attacks against the Tigers. This might have softened the stance of the Tamil Tiger chief and in the process a glimmer of hope can now again be seen for a possible resolution of the conflict through talks although the tangle is too complex.

This development has come after a new government took power recently. Ratnasiri Wickramanayake was sworn in as the prime minister of the new administration not long ago after the Peoples Alliance (PA) of President Chandrika Kumaratunga secured enough support to form a new coalition in Sri Lanka following the October 10 parliamentary elections. The polls were seen as important by the ruling PA and all the opposition parties although they gave varying interpretations to the significance of the voting. The country has a presidential system where the chief executive is the presidency but the parliament plays an important role in certain areas and a comfortable majority is of great advantage to the ruling circles.

The PA and the UNP were the main contenders for the elections but there were other smaller opposition parties which in some ways differ from both the ruling and main opposition groups. The PA enjoyed majority in the earlier parliament but failed to muster two-thirds support as the government wanted to push an amendment to the constitution to give autonomy to the Tamils but the plan collapsed on August 3 as the ruling circles were seriously embarrassed failing to garner the required majority. The opposition had alleged that the government resorted to "horse trading" and other tactics to lure the opposition members to change sides for the amendments. It did not finally click and the parliament was

instead dissolved facilitating fresh polls.

The rivalry for political ascendancy in one hand and the unending civil war on the other has put the small but otherwise relatively prosperous nation in the South Asian region at a crossroad where it is fighting to maintain country's integrity and also political stability. President Chandrika Kumaratunga won a second mandate not too long ago and this time her difference in the voting with main opposition challenger Ranil Wickramasinghe was narrower and this raised questions about a stable government. The ruling PA wanted to amend to the constitution to grant autonomy to the north as a part of an effort to placate Tamil militants towards a negotiated settlement of the civil war. It has managed the support of two smaller parties including the Sri Lankan Muslim League to form the new government. But the Muslims have given a timeframe for intensifying efforts for a settlement for the Tamil problem.

Interestingly, the October 10 elections became a kind of referendum on President Chandrika Kumaratunga's controversial power-sharing plan to appease the country's Tamil separatists, who, however, seem more keen to settle the scores in the battlefield rather than finding a solution through discussions or peaceful method like constitution giving them enough authority in the form of autonomy. The president has said she will turn the country into a de facto federal state within two months of re-election of the parliamentary polls.

The government is seeking to wipe out the Tamil terrorism in one hand and address the problems of the minority on the other so that no groups felt isolated or harassed. But the militants have so far shown little interest to any settlement but later said nothing short of independence would satisfy them. However, the situation in the war is clearly weighing heavily towards any solution, even through discussions. Now that LTTE supreme has indicated his readiness for talks - although conditional - chances for a dialogue appears a possibility even if not bright. The war has claimed 63,000 lives and internally displaced one million people. President Chandrika Kumaratunga has spoken to Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on telephone on the Norwegian brokered peace endeavour and she is consulting other countries as well. Because of the complexities, the civil war in the country defies a solution and this may remain so for quite some time. Yet, a scope for discussions is now emerging as both sides are showing olive branch for a dialogue. However, the indication for talks is still not firm and can run into trouble. Both sides must exploit the situation for a settlement since none has upper hand in the war.

Bhutan

Opening up of the Shangri La

By Mansoor Mamoon

THE Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan (Druk Yul) is striving gradually to open up its pace keep pace with the current trend of globalisation shaking off its age-old isolation and xenophobia. But the vexing problem of insurgencies in the neighbouring north-eastern states of India, particularly those in Assam appear to be spilling over in its territory. Guerrillas belonging to the underground secessionist groups ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) and the Bodo Liberation Front were believed to be using the bordering areas and rugged and hilly terrain as well as the dense forests in the south of the Himalayan in Bhutan as their safe sanctuaries by setting up camps. New Delhi was pressurising Bhutan for long for flushing them out and ensure that the rebels no longer get shelter and operate from their sanctuaries there. According to reports the Bhutanese Home Minister divulged that he had talks with

the leaders of ULFA and Bodo insurgents recently and asked them not to use the territory of his country for any guerrilla activities.

They have been asked to dismantle their camps immediately and leave Bhutan alone in their rebellion against Indian authority. Otherwise Bhutan would be compelled to take military action to hoot them out - the Bhutanese Home Minister reported to have warned. Earlier this year the Indian troops started training the Bhutanese military and paramilitary forces in jungle warfare and combating guerrilla activities. Bhutan was so long hesitant to go for action against the Indian insurgents apprehending backlash from them. Bhutan has also not enough logistic capabilities to effectively deal with Assamese guerrilla groups. If the country is to really start taking military action against the ULFA and other insurgents it might mean increasing armed encounters and clashes with all their accompanying evils which the Kingdom was so long trying to evl.

Sandwiched between two big neighbours - India and China - Bhutan is trying to strictly maintain its neutral posture and not to

annoy any of them. Landlocked Bhutan has no outlet to the sea and hence depends heavily on India for its economic sustenance. This has naturally made it lean towards India.

Austria and Switzerland, in Europe, are both landlocked. But this did not prevent them from having transhipment and port facilities in the neighbouring countries. But for Nepal and Bhutan, the case is completely different. For its strategic reasons India is not that much liberal to both Nepal and Bhutan. India takes advantage of the geographical locations of Bhutan and Nepal so as to keep the two countries subservient to its interest and dictate its terms over them. New Delhi is continually urging Bangladesh for transit and corridor facilities for its northeastern region. But on its part is not as yet agreeable to give the same facilities to its two neighbours for their trade with Bangladesh. Neither the formation of 7-member Saarc nor the proposed sub-regional grouping comprising Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan could in any improve the situation. Saarc is in limbo because of tense relations between India and Pakistan and

the sub-regional grouping is yet to formally take off. Mentionably both Nepal and Bhutan took great interest in Saarc and sub-regional grouping. The Saarc headquarter is located at Kathmandu - the capital of Nepal.

Bhutan with a population of 6,18,557 (in 1997) and GNP per capita of \$829 (1999) posted a growth rate of 5.5 per cent in 1998 much higher than its three immediate neighbours did. Human Development Index wide its position is also better than Bangladesh. Had Bhutan been given transit facilities to Bangladesh and if India would have taken a genuinely cooperative attitude, it could have achieved much higher growth rate. The Himalayan Buddhist Kingdom is keen to use the Mongla Port via the proposed Rupsha Bridge. The Calcutta Port, which it is now using, has virtually choked up and is causing congestion to the great detriment of Bhutan's exports and import trade. It has let it be known that it will rather opt for Chittagong Port till the construction of the Rupsha Bridge and the modernisation and expansion of Mongla port.

Bhutan has recently renewed its trade treaty with Bangladesh.

Dhaka-Thimpu Transport Agreement is likely to be signed by the first quarter of next year and with this end in view Bangladesh Prime Minister will be undertaking a visit to Bhutan by March-May 2001. PSI and the duties-related problems would be discussed for removing all impediments and barriers to free trade between the two countries. A delegate of Bangladesh Federal Chamber body undertook a visit to Bhutan and explored the possibilities of increasing trade and investment cooperation between the two countries for their mutual benefit. In this age of globalisation the region should take the advantage of increasing intra- and inter-regional trade - this was the general feeling among the chamber leaders of the two countries. The chief of the Bhutan Chamber Upen Dorji maintained that India would have to be made agreeable to allow transportation of goods between the two countries. If India allows transit facilities to the two countries for the transportation of goods land based trade route between the two countries will be greatly reduced. Bhutan is providing Bangladesh

products duty-free access. Location of PSI office in Calcutta is causing much delay for the Bhutanese exporters. If PSI problem could be solved, the volume of trade between the two countries would increase manifold. Bangladesh exports to Bhutan fluctuated over the last six years in the range of \$0.14 million to \$0.02 million while imports ranged from between \$8.19 million and \$4.11 million. Bangladesh exported goods worth \$0.03 million in 1998 while imports from Bhutan was \$4.41 million. Bangladesh imports from Bhutan mainly fruit juices, fruits, jam, pickles etc., and exports toothbrush, soap, melamine, biscuits etc.

This shows how negligible is intra-regional trade among South Asian countries. Saarc was meant for increasing intra-regional trade. But though much expectation was raised it was not made effective. With cooperation in fighting insurgencies and cross border terrorism it is also expected that there should be equal cooperation in trade and investment for the common good of the countries to avoid further marginalisation.

South Asia, Not India, is the New Buzzword in US

By Karl F. Inderfurth

The visit to the US in September by Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee highlights the fundamental change under way in the ties between the two countries. More broadly, it also points to the growing importance of South Asia as a whole in American foreign policy.

This change is a significant part of redefining US foreign policy for the 21st century post-Cold War world. It is underscored again by the return visit to Washington this month of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. And because this change is so much in line with larger US national interests, and enjoys such broad support across the political spectrum, I am confident that it will endure long beyond the current Administration.

In fact, the countries of South Asia are increasingly important potential partners for the US on a whole range of crucial emerging issues: From global peace to global climate change, from cutting-edge technological cooperation to common cause against

the age-old ills of disease and poverty or the new scourges of international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. As part of this broader engagement, to highlight some recent examples from Prime Minister Vajpayee's recent visit, our economic officials are working together to create better global regimes for e-commerce and biotechnology, while our technicians explore clean energy options to preserve our shared environment. Our doctors and scientists are collaborating in government-supported projects to fight HIV/AIDS and other killer diseases, with public health programmes and research on new preventive vaccines. Our diplomats are working to narrow our differences on non-proliferation issues, which will help make the whole world safer. And our experts are discussing greater cooperation in international peacekeeping, to keep today's trouble spots from becoming tomorrow's crises.

How could anyone object to

this kind of cooperation? Unfortunately, some have misinterpreted our expanding ties to India as a "tilt" away from other countries, as if the US could have but a single partner. But nations, rather like people, can have more than one friend at a time. This notion of "tilt" has had no real application to our policy in Asia at least since the end of the Cold War.

Our relations with India are not determined by our relations with China, or Pakistan, or any other country and vice versa. So, as we deepen our engagement with India, and enhance our ties with Bangladesh, we have not forgotten our other friends in South Asia, including Pakistan.

There is, however, one kind of tilt which really is a new feature of our foreign policy - namely, an American tilt toward the South Asian region as a whole, according to its higher prominence and priority in the overall US approach to the world. The fact is that during the second Clinton Administration, there has been

an unprecedented series of high-level American visits to the region, and of return visits by South Asian leaders. The list includes not just Presidents and Prime Ministers, but also foreign ministers and ministers of commerce, finance, energy and senior officials dealing with public health, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and many other common concerns.

What explains this new American tilt toward South Asia? The answer is simple. We recognise that, as an increasingly dynamic region that is home to more than one-fifth of humanity, the futures of South Asia and of the US are inevitably linked. This is already true in more areas than ever before, from trade and commerce, to science and technology, to global environmental and medical progress - and also, to an ever greater extent, in terms of people-to-people ties of kinship and culture between our proudly diverse societies. Looking ahead, we also recognise the enormous potential of the vast South Asian

region, especially if it can forge a future free of the tragic elements of its past. I have in mind particularly the regional, ethnic, or religious conflicts that have cost far too many precious lives and resources.

We can also imagine a future in which the peoples and nations of this region move toward greater cooperation and better integration into the global political and economic mainstream, and are able as a result to focus more sharply on their own social and human needs. Part of this process, we believe, could be advanced through regional organisations, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Other promising prospects are offered by more specialised cooperative ventures like the South Asian Regional Initiative on Energy (SARIE), which could help in harnessing the region's huge but untapped cross-border markets for hydropower, natural gas, and other resources highlighted

during President Clinton's visit. And another crucial part of South Asia's upward trajectory, we are convinced, will be a stronger engagement and wherever possible, a closer partnership with the US.

With all this in mind, the US will be looking for new opportunities to strengthen our ties with every nation in the region, each on its own merits - from Nepal in the north to Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the south, and every thing in between. It used to be said that South Asia was on the backside of the US diplomatic globe. No longer. That globe is beginning to turn. From here forward, we hope to have strong and growing relationships across South Asia, which promises to take its rightful place higher on the scale of American foreign policy priorities in the years ahead.

Courtesy Times of India. The author is US Assistant Secretary of State, South Asian Affairs

Chandrika phones Vajpayee

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has discussed efforts to resolve the conflict between the government and the LTTE with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. The two leaders discussed a wide range of issues by telephone, an Indian high commission press release here said. Official sources said the conversation included recent moves to resolve the conflict. India mediated between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE in 1987, but failed to bring about a settlement.

Eight killed in Assam attack

At least eight villagers have been killed in an attack by separatist rebels in the north-east Indian state of Assam. It is not clear who carried out the attack but intelligence officials say two rebel groups were active in the area. Five Bengali Muslims and three Hindi-speaking villagers from Bihar were shot dead when the heavily armed rebels stormed the village in the western district of Barpeta.

WB approves credits for India

The World Bank has approved two credits for India worth nearly one-hundred-and-seventy-six million dollars as part of its anti-poverty initiatives. The bank said that the funds would be used to boost access to clean water and to increase support for health and educational services in poor areas in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Kerala.

The Region This Week

Uttaranchal is born

Uttaranchal, with a population of nearly ten million, officially came into existence at midnight 1830 G on Wednesday when, in a colourful celebration, it emerged from Uttar Pradesh to become the country's twenty-seventh state. A senior Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party leader, Nityanand Swami, was sworn in as the state's first chief minister and the veteran Akali Dal leader, Surjeet Singh Barnala, became its first governor.

Pak newspaper building bombed

Three people have been killed and at least three others wounded by a bomb blast in the Pakistani city of Karachi. The explosion occurred inside a building owned by a newspaper group, which publishes the Urdu-language 'Nawa-i-Waqt' and the Nation publications. The building was used by advertising staff, as journalists had moved to another location after a previous attack on the building.

Flights restored

The Sri Lankan authorities have announced that civilian flights to the northern Jaffna peninsula will resume after an eight-month suspension. The army says that a Ukrainian passenger aircraft will begin a service to Jaffna in two weeks' time. Because the land route to the peninsula is controlled by Tamil Tiger rebels, it is only accessible to the rest of government controlled areas of Sri Lanka by air and sea.

Koirala hints revival of Panchayat

Nepali Prime Minister Jijra Prasad Koirala Saturday stressed the need to revive zonal administrative structure, which was annulled after the restoration of democracy in 1990. "The zonal administrative structure should be revived to make efficient the civil administration which is eroding," PM Koirala said, adding "if this structure was in

Lanka seeks help

With no visible change in its military disposition, Sri Lanka sought India's assistance in specific areas to counter the threat of secession from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Sri Lanka's visiting naval chief, Vice-Admiral Cecil Tissera, today held detailed discussions with senior representatives of the Indian Navy, Army and Air Force.

-- Compiled by Ekram Kabir