

China in the neighbourhood

EKRAM KABIR

THEY were in Pakistan almost at the same time. Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji came to visit Pakistan. So came Rear Admiral Zhang Yan, the deputy commander of North Sea Fleet China with two Chinese naval ships. Zhu Rongji's visit to Pakistan, including three other South Asian countries has multifarious significance. Zhu also visited Nepal, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and an South-east Asian country Thailand.

The visit of the Chinese prime minister to Pakistan took place at a time when India has taken a stand on US President Bush's policy of national missile defence (NMD) to which China is opposing. Though there was a gap of twelve years between prime minister-level visits from China to Pakistan, that may not mean that Sino-Pak time-tested relationship had lost its importance, which many analysts these days would like to think. China's two top leaders had visited Pakistan during the '90s: President Jiang Zemin in 1996, and National People's Congress chairman Li Peng in 1999. However, not only did Zhu Rongji's visit mark the golden jubilee of diplomatic relations, its timing assumed great significance in the context of developments at the regional and global level.

The identification of new directions in the building up of future co-operation that would also contribute to peace and development in South Asia was also very significant. Speaking at a seminar held to discuss Pakistan-China relations in the 21st Century at the Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad on May 15, Chief Executive Parvez Musharraf emphasised that China had a key role to play in keeping regional balance in South Asia and in maintaining peace and stability in the region. This role, he stated, "will remain vital, in the changing geostrategic realities". He pointed to the emergence of regional hegemonies in the post-cold war world, and stated that South Asia was a victim of such hegemonism, which was creating regional imbalance, which in turn was a threat to peace.

That was the Pakistan chapter of Zhu Rongji's visit. Then in Nepal, Nepali authorities heaved a huge sigh of relief, as he was there on a three-day official visit. The visit has been declared a success, and not just by the government but also by the Nepal's strongly anti-government private press. There was also relief that Tibetan exile groups observed a

government ban on demonstrations during Zhu's three-day visit.

China's continued apprehension about Tibetan exiles and the sensitivity of Nepal to such Chinese concerns, have for long been the cornerstone of ties between the two neighbours. This confluence of interests were demonstrated amply during Zhu's trip to the impoverished Himalayan kingdom. To be sure, the visit dwell for the most part on economic cooperation. Six economic cooperation agreements were signed, aiming to boost Nepal's dismal economic performance. Zhu left Kathmandu as a "satisfied Chinese" when Prime Minister Koirala reaffirmed his continued support for the official "One China" policy. "Nepal has always supported and will continue to support the One China policy vis-a-vis Taiwan and Tibet," Koirala was to quoted to have declared.

Sri Lanka-- that also upholds the "One China" policy and has no official contacts with Taiwan-- was the next destination of Zhu's South Asia tour. Colombo has also supported China in several times in defeating the anti-China drafts at the UN conference. Meanwhile, China has been the leading supplier of arms and weaponry to Sri Lanka in its fight against the LTTE.

Now, Zhu's South Asia trip raises many questions as far as strategic importance of this region is concerned, especially after a blooming Indo-US ties that began after the Clinton visit. Equally noteworthy is the fact that Zhu didn't come to Dhaka (which is a major player in South Asian strategic matters; and Bangladeshi officials posted in Beijing should find out the reason why Zhu avoided Dhaka). But on the other hand, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh and Communist Party of China (CPC) Politburo Member Li Changchun were discussing their conflicting positions on the issue of NMD, Premier Zhu Rongji had in Pakistan. Li Chang Chun advocated that "pragmatism" should transcend the strategic and political differences between the two countries. New Delhi harped on the need for "sensitivity" by the two sides towards their respective "concerns". Apart from the niceties, the reality is that New Delhi's latest honeymoon with Washington has induced Beijing and Islamabad to reinforce their equation. China, according to an editorial in *The Hindu* of India, "has not signalled any intention now to encircle or contain India in a strategic sense. Yet, two questions will need to be sorted out in India's national interest in this specific context. To be addressed are the issues arising out of Washington's new calculus of 'friends and allies"

as also post-Soviet Russia's eventual response to it. Moreover, New Delhi should, in time for Zhu's planned visit to India later in 2001, reconcile the pros and cons of coexistence with China in the strategic sphere."

Traditionally, China has perceived India as a South Asian power rather than one with a global voice. In fact, China has devoted its diplomatic efforts to restrain India within the limits of South Asia. China is not too happy with India's status of a rising great-power in the post-Cold War period, and refuses to accept that India would constitute a pole in the evolving multipolar world.

So, what is China up to? China seems to have embarked on a path of radical change to both its military strategy and capabilities. The realisation in the 1980s that the Soviet Union was no longer a threat for major conflict and the Gulf War have had a profound effect on Chinese military thinking. The strategic focus has now shifted to the offensive. The main theme is power projection and the ability to fight a modern war with advanced technology. China is also using its economy and change in military strategy to commence an ambitious military modernisation programme. In its effort to emerge as a great power, China has changed its security strategy from defensive to offensive. If China wants to be a dominant world power, and chooses to act based on the example of the former Soviet Union, it would seek to have the potential to seriously undermine the current world order. The economic and military transformation of China in this regard is well under way.

However, as analysts assume, it is too early to foresee with absolute certainty whether the present Bush administration in Washington will risk a full-scale Cold War-style antagonism with China. Unlike during the earlier Cold War between the US and the former Soviet Union, the Chinese leadership is in no position now to count on a bloc of its own, comprising a plurality of 'satellite-states', in a manner the old Kremlin did for a number of decades.

Viewed in the perspective about Beijing's overall strategic abilities and disabilities, can Dhaka afford to sit idle in a 'multi-polar' politics on the global stage? With its new-found strategic importance in South Asia, Bangladesh should start doing its homework for better ties with this possible Great Power. The world is witnessing a gradual shift of power from Europe to Asia. And it is China which would play the most important role in accelerating this power shift.

WEST BENGAL

Amartya Sen to the rescue

NORA CHOPRA

NOBEL laureate Amartya Sen will reportedly be advising the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)-led Left government in West Bengal on economic issues, along with methods to combat the impact of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in India. West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya has asked Sen to prepare the blueprint of the state's economic policies.

In its new avatar, the Buddhadeb Bhattacharya-led Left Front government has started exploring ways and means of providing its government and the state with a new look. The chief minister appears determined to fulfil his electoral promise of development in the state, and give a new impetus to its stagnating economic policy. Bhattacharya has already spoken to Sen, who would be arriving in Kolkata soon to discuss the issue.

The West Bengal government is faced with the dilemma: how to open up the economy without compromising on the left's basic anti-liberalisation and anti-privatisation

ideology. Buckling up to mounting pressures from within the urban middle classes who have rather grudgingly given them another chance at the Writer's Building, the Left has now agreed to give the new economic reforms being implemented in the rest of the country a human face.

But their main area of concern still centres round their main support base - the rural poor and the down-trodden. In a bid to keep their own support base happy, the left regime will now provide their economic policy with a facelift; but they also intend to see to it that benefits of the new policy reach the poor, and not remain restricted to the urban rich. It is in view of this that the chief minister has decided to concentrate on sectors like health, education and development in rural areas.

The main concern of the left government in the state is combating the ill effects of the WTO. Tea and rice form the main produce of the agriculture-based economy of West Bengal. With WTO's entry, the state's economy is bound to suffer. To neutralise this loss, the government is planning to produce cash crops

like oil seeds, vegetables, flowers and fruits. The government is also planning to concentrate on Agro-based industries in a large way. In their first round of power in the state, the Marxists had introduced land reforms benefiting the rural poor.

Now the CPM leadership feels that land reforms have reached a saturation point and can yield no further benefits to the rural poor. This time, the CPI-M plans to introduce second generation 'Agro based reforms.' "The benefits of this," according to Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, "would again reach all classes, including the poorest of the poor." He claims this would generate employment in rural areas and supplement the loss of tea and rice produce.

Since establishing a big industry is time consuming, the West Bengal government is planning an alternative strategy. They have decided to introduce self-employment cooperative schemes to generate employment for the urban and rural youth. Again, their emphasis would be on raising the living standards of the poor.

Cooperatives will be formed, and the government would provide them with loans for self-employment schemes like weaving, shoemaking and other crafts. These cooperatives will comprise of people from the weaker sections of society. The government would help them by marketing their products.

In his electoral speeches, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya had promised to concentrate mainly on health and education, as these sectors need immediate attention. To improve primary education in the state, Bhattacharya plans to set up Guardian Committees comprising of parents and panchayat members.

These committees would monitor the entire rural education system, including the performance of teachers. Promotions of teachers in these government schools would depend on the reports of these committees. The chief minister believes this can help in improving the rural education system.

Improving the health sector is also on their immediate agenda. According to the chief minister, the immediate need is to establish

discipline in hospitals and improve health service, besides equipping the hospitals with new and finer technology.

The left government is also dissatisfied with the central policy on PDS, where prices of food grains in BPL ration shops is hardly different from that in the open market. The West Bengal government plans to provide substantial subsidies for food grains in these shops.

The government is also planning to invite investments to set up big industries. But according to CPI-M leaders, "this would take time." The government has already started working on introducing Information Technology (IT) industries for the urban youth. The state would concentrate on software development and exports. "This would provide employment opportunities to the urban youth," the chief minister has claimed.

Courtesy: tehelka.com

SAARC

Yet there's hope

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE foreign secretaries of the seven member-nations of the SAARC will meet in Colombo on June 8 and 9 for the first time in nearly two years to take stock of the activities of the South Asian economic forum which is believed to be going through a bad time because of not holding of the next summit which was to take place in November, 1999.

Indeed, the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) that came into being in 1985 was not showing much great but certainly quite hopeful promise in accomplishing its task over the years except the current situation when it got embroiled in most serious stalemate. Going by the SAARC charter, the conference of the heads of the government of the member-nations is an annual event but the next summit is hanging in the balance for an unusually long time since the leaders have not met for two-and-half-years.

True, the SAARC summits were postponed earlier too due to certain differences about staging the occasion at a particular time but it never took such a long time to overcome such crises. The stalemate surrounding the oncoming summit casts adversely on the overall activities of the forum although the secretariat is functioning normally at Nepal's capital Kathmandu and routine works of the organisation apparently remain unhindered. But the fact remains that the summit was to take a number of decisions in the economic and commercial fields which would have gone a long way in bolstering the co-operation among the members countries and especially benefit the smaller nations in the forum.

But the meeting of the heads of the government was called off mainly because of the political differences between the two main countries in the forum - India and Pakistan. Efforts made so far to settle the differences to the extent to facilitate the holding of the summit bore little fruits. This scenario obviously affects the SAARC functioning in an effective manner since a kind of frustration coupled with inertia crept into the forum which, needless to say, cannot move much when disputes rage on holding the meeting at the highest level. The sceptics feel that this unfortunate situation has dealt a body-blow to the forum, while the optimists cannot deny the fact that this condition has to be settled and the summit needs to be held.

It is in this scenario that the SAARC "Standing Committee" made up by the foreign secretaries of the member-countries is going to meet in Sri Lankan capital Colombo for two days in a bid to come out of this deadlock. The discussions of the foreign secretaries will be important even though the top officials cannot take any political decisions about the summit which has to be agreed upon first by the foreign ministers and then clearly the leaders have to give their consent to the decision of the ministers. But the "Standing Committee" will create the ground for the meeting of the SAARC "Council of Minister" which comprises the foreign ministers.

Once the foreign secretaries succeed in deciding the meeting of their ministers, this may indicate that things are moving in the right direction albeit slowly. The holding of the ministers meeting itself may be

taken as a strong signal that the summit is now going to take place although not known when. But the foreign ministers would not at all meet unless the ground is conducive for heads of government's conference.

The next summit was unexpectedly postponed after tensions flared up between two rival neighbours - India and Pakistan in mid-1999 over the Kargil. Fortunately, the belligerence finally did not turn into a war but the SAARC could not escape the fallout as the scheduled conference was called off due to Indian request. Another matter that also contributed to this Indian decision was the military coup in Pakistan.

Despite differences, India maintained a good relation with its neighbour under a democratic set-up which worsened with the military taking over in that country. However, New Delhi did not officially say that the internal change in Pakistan was responsible for the postponement, only describing the timing as not congenial for the summit. The nature of governance in a country was never a factor in the SAARC as both military and democratic government leaders in the past attended the summits. There has been no improvement as such in the ties between India and Pakistan since the Kargil but certain indications provide some hope for betterment of the relationship. During the devastating earthquakes in Indian state of Gujarat, a few months ago, Pakistan sent sympathy and relief materials which created a sense of goodwill in stark contrast with the atmosphere that marked their bilateral ties in the aftermath of Kargil conflict.

However, it would be naive to think that this would lead to any marked improvement in the relations because their problems are too old and too complex and consequently, intractable to tackle. Nonetheless, the situation now appears better and it is assumed that Indian prime minister will not be averse to meeting Pakistan military ruler in the SAARC summit in the coming days. But once again it is only the impression and remains to be seen whether executed in the ground. In any case, the summit even if agreed upon, is unlikely in the near future and could be called by the end of the year. Much will depend on the meeting of the foreign secretaries of two countries - India's Ms. Chokila Iyer and her Pakistani counterpart Inamul Haq, who are expected to discuss bilateral matters on the sidelines of the meeting of the "SAARC Standing Committee" meet in Colombo.

The very holding of the meeting of the foreign secretaries is a step in the right direction although it came quite late as far as the interest of the SAARC is concerned. Bangladesh is an ardent promoter of the forum and has been a driving force all along. Foreign secretary Syed Muazzem Ali, an experienced and astute diplomat, who will lead the Bangladesh delegation to the Colombo meeting, foresees that obstacles on the way of the holding of the SAARC summit and flourishing of the organisation would disappear because all the members are committed to the regional forum. Well-wishers of the SAARC feel in the same way. Let us hope that the such hopes are not misplaced and SAARC can live up to its expectations.

OPINION

Let Baraibari not happen again

Z A KHAN

THE South Asian subcontinent has once again suffered a blow in its quest for peace when India and Bangladesh found themselves locked in a border clash in which 16 Indian Border Security Force (BSF) personnel were shot dead by Bangladesh Rifles as the former launched an unprovoked attack on the latter's border outpost. Three lives of BDR were also lost.

Although both India and Bangladesh are separated by a wall of prejudices, a kind of peace prevailed despite frequent violations by BSF. Over a thousand attracts by Indian BSF have so far been recorded in last 5 years in which more than 415 civilians and 10 BDR personnels were killed. It is thought that Bangladesh's big and mighty neighbour, emboldened by recent US patronization has been up and about to armtwist her small neighbours. While India was successful to browbeat a couple of her small neighbours, she had to powder her nose every time she resorted to such an exercise involving Bangladesh.

moment a fragile peace is prevailing in the Roumari area but India is instigating to create a situation for another round of clash to vindicate their defeat. Will the dust settle? Or should an effort be made to work out essential equivalence of power to ensure peace with honour? This calls for an indepth search for a *modus operandi* to ensure peace in our region.

It is about time we refrained from trying to catch a glimpse of a snowfall in the middle of a blizzard. We should expressly get down to examining the core reasons for this let off. Once our 30-year history of being in the neighbourhood of high and mighty India is retracted, it will be revealed that our mighty neighbour never stopped short of thinking that Bangladesh is a non-important geographical entity only and therefore should not find a mention in India's foreign policy formulations. In other words, India relegated our position to a vassal state and therefore it must be hegemonised for political or economic advantages. India believes that her military power has liberated Bangladesh from Pakistan occupation, therefore, Bangladesh is bound to toe the Indian line.

Why did the Indian government allow this incident happen? One section of analysts think that India wanted to vindicate BSF's forced withdrawal from Padua, a Bangladesh enclave under forced occupation of India. BSF was driven out of Padua by BDR when they were providing protection to the rank and file of the Border Road Organization (BRO) who were illegally constructing a road without our govt's concurrence. There have been some loud thinking that perhaps AL govt organized BDR action on Padua with

Indian connivance to convince the nation that AL was not pro-Indian political party while common believe has that this party is India inclined for a variety of reasons.

Whatever be the reason that led India to conduct this unprovoked BSF action at Baraibari BOP, it has done our valient BDR personnel and the nation proud. It has renewed our confidence in our ability to protect ourselves.

It is learnt that New Delhi has invited Bangladesh for a comprehensive and substantive dialogue with her which is a prudent signal towards formulating a policy of peaceful co-existence without any mindset. AB Vajpayee who is known to be a soft-peddler and an erudite analyst, is learnt to be focussed on solving this lasting problem once and for all. We, on our part, should respond positively provided that we obtain assurance of accommodation and cooperation in solving the tangles that afflict our bilateral relations. A few problems that warrant resolution are: return of the enclaves as per Mujib Indira Agreement of 1974, delimitation of border and territorial water, cessation of push-in exercise and assurance of an end to meddling in our internal affairs through proxy.

SAARC can be rejuvenated to create a condition of confidence among member countries so that harmony and amity replace suspicion and animosity. This will be possible only if all countries big or small are treated as equal partners of peace and progress.

ZAKhan is a retired Major General of Bangladesh Army



His Majesty the King with ARSP delegates

BHUTAN-INDIA

Strengthening people to people contact

BHUTAN was able to concentrate on development for the last 40 years and could achieve what other developing countries in this part of the world couldn't because of a stable government, said the Secretary General of Antar-Rashtriya Sahayog Parishad (Indian Council for International Cooperation), Mr. Balেশwar Agrawal, who led an eight-member ARSP delegation to the kingdom.

"We see the results now," he said. Mr. Agrawal commended the decentralisation process in the country and the way the people were responding to the devolution of planning and decision making authority.

Mr. Agrawal said that the delegation appreciated, especially, their

meeting with His Majesty the King and His Majesty's openness. "He spoke freely and answered all our questions, unlike politicians in many other countries," he told Kuensel.

On Indo-Bhutan friendship, Mr. Agrawal said that the two countries should be proud of their commonalities, not only in bilateral matters but their unity at international fora. He referred to the major power projects in Bhutan as examples of mutual cooperation and inter-dependence.

"When we visit Bhutan, we have no agenda because there are no problems, no gray areas, no doubts or suspicions and there is the highest level of trust and confidence between the two leaders, His Majesty the King and the Prime Minister of India," he said. "Having met the

Indian Prime Minister before we came to Bhutan, he told us that we have got the best of trust and confidence in each other and that there is no doubt about it."

The ARSP delegates met a wide cross section of Bhutanese people and visited cultural sites in Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha as well as the Chukha Hydro Power Corporation during their week-long visit which ended on Sunday.

The chairman of the national commission for cultural affairs, Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho, said that while Bhutan and India enjoyed very strong ties at the official level, it was important to keep strengthening people to people contact. The ARSP's visits to Bhutan, he said, went a long way in allowing people

from all walks of life in India and Bhutan to get to know each other.

Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho also briefed the ARSP delegation on the development process in Bhutan and issues related to Indo-Bhutan relations.

The ARSP was established 23 years ago as a non-government organisation with the objective of strengthening cultural and social ties with the people in neighbouring countries. Its delegates have visited more than 20 countries.

The members of the ARSP include a wide range of professionals from all sections of Indian society.

Courtesy: The Kuensel of Thimphu