

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 two 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 dwelt 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 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 Changchun 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."

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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 'multipolar' 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.

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