

Myanmar's Geo-political importance

BRIG GEN JAHANGIR KABIR *ndc, psc (Retd)*

LIKE Pakistan on the northwestern fringe of the peninsular South Asia, Myanmar constitutes a strategic hub linking East and West Asia, along the shipping lifeline of the Malacca Strait. She forms the underbelly of the landlocked Yunnan Province of China, which is politically restive, and economically less developed. She has a wild border with the fiercely centrifugal Indian provinces of Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. After China, she has the longest border with the west friendly Thailand, extending close to the crammed Malacca Strait. Her boundary with Laos, along the Salween River, connects to the notorious 'Golden Triangle'. On the western backyard, 176 miles of Bangladesh-Myanmar boundary is fully demarcated starting from Mizoram (India) Bangladesh Myanmar triangle, following the watersheds on the green hills, gorges and river courses, all the way up to the mouth of river Naaf and beyond, into the Bay. History has hinged Bangladesh with the spirals of South Asian subcontinent. East looking Myanmar is the western frontier of South East Asia and a member of ASEAN. While the people of Myanmar identify with the Mongoloids, we are a racial admixture. Myanmar's resources, long borders with two Asian giants and proximity to the Malacca Strait, make her strategically comparable to Pakistan.

With 678,000 square kilometers of mostly hilly terrain, she is more than four times the size of Bangladesh with a population of 46 million. Bhaman the plains people, inhabit the trawaddy plateau, and seven nationalities, namely Rakhine (Arakanese), Chin, Kachin, Shan, Mon, Karen and Kyat have their own states, bordering five countries. Besides, Myanmar has a colorful demographic mosaic of hundreds of sub-nationalities and tribal cultures, spread over the hilly terrain. She has a long coastal area of over 1500 kilometers, starting from the mouth of river Naaf to Victoria Point on the Gulf of Andaman bordering Thailand. Myanmar has developed in recent years but still lacks the maritime resources for effective control of her territorial waters. Over four hundred thousand strong military was purely a counter insurgency force, but since the early 90s she has been adding conventional teeth with generous assistance from China.

After the crackdown on the demo-

cratic forces in 1988 and economic sanctions, China conspicuously moved in to rescue the present military regime. With the enhanced economic, political, diplomatic and military support, in many ways the present military regime owes its survival to China. Myanmar has more than a billion-dollar yearly trade with China, besides huge, unrecorded border trade. China has come in a big way in the development of Myanmar's infrastructure and plans to link up the

from interior China and strategic choke points of the Malacca Strait. Myanmar-China friendship today has reached a strategic level posing a serious concern to the West and India alike. There are strong rumours that China is acquiring naval and air base facilities in Rumree and Coco Islands on the Arakan coast. China will need permanent base facilities if she ever wants to emerge in the Indian Ocean waters as a power broker. China provides a common cause for

Australia as the lake of littoral countries, thereby denying legitimacy of China on the vast Indian Ocean as East Asian power and USA as outsider.

No wonder, emerging India has a shopping list for more aircraft carriers, jump jets and nuclear submarines. Any move by Myanmar to offer base facilities to China in the Bay of Bengal will invite hostility of both the west and India. USA is constrained between economic sanction, UN resolution in favor of democracy with little effect and fear of another Vietnam in case of direct intervention. But on the waves, she is the ruler.

The possibility of Myanmar being within the zone of influence of expanding China will not be acceptable to the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal. There appears to be a storm brewing in the Bay. While ASEAN is working as a moderator, Aung Sun Su Kyi is the only viable hope for democracy and west friendly Myanmar.

India's Myanmar policy had been guided by three factors. (A) Sensitive border areas and trans-frontier activities of insurgent armies. (B) Support to the democratic forces under Noble Laureate Aung Sun Su Kyi. (C) Consolidation and expansion of China-Myanmar friendship at strategic level. By 1992 India had realized that her unqualified support to the democratic forces pushed Myanmar too far towards China and has been trying ever since to cajole her way with the present military regime. India has built a highway between Imphal (Manipur) and Myanmar through Shagun Division via the border town of Thamu and is trying to push both the Asian highway and railway through that corridor, bypassing Bangladesh. If China ever gets trade-transit facility through the Arakan coast, India will surely ask for the same for her eastern states. Torn between democratic values and geo-strategy, India suffers from hesitation and inconsistent foreign policy maneuvers in Myanmar.

Bangla-Myanmar relationship resembles that of two passengers travelling in a Myanmar pedicab known as 'Chaya'. While the couple moves in the same direction, they sit back to back, only occasionally exchanging views in a barely audible voice. Both our countries are poor and unfortunate members of the 'least developed countries'. We live in the same tropical climate with partially shared history and culture. Yet we have been offering very little to one another

and many a times give the look of strangers. In many ways river Naaf, that defines much of the common boundary, is an ocean across.

Fear of undesirable immigrants is one of the major apprehensions that inhibit Myanmar's attitude towards densely populated Bangladesh. Historically independent nature of the Rakhines and concentration of the people of Indian origin, commonly known as Rohingyas, on Bangladesh-Myanmar border, are the twin headaches of Myanmar since independence. Rohingyas is their problem as they are the citizens of Myanmar by birth. In a situation of mass exodus, poor Bangladesh bears much of the brunt at tremendous social and economic costs, purely on humanitarian ground. Twice in the past we have witnessed mass exodus and consequent retardation of friendly relationship.

Tension on the border must not take our initiatives elsewhere hostage. A thriving border trade is already on. As Myanmar is endowed with agricultural, forestry, fisheries surplus and mineral resources, Bangladesh has a long list of imports from her. Rice, fish, spices, timber, bamboo, limestone, cattle and many other products cross the border at a competitive price. Bangladesh sells fertilizer, medicine and biscuits in limited quantity only, which cannot offset the trade imbalance.

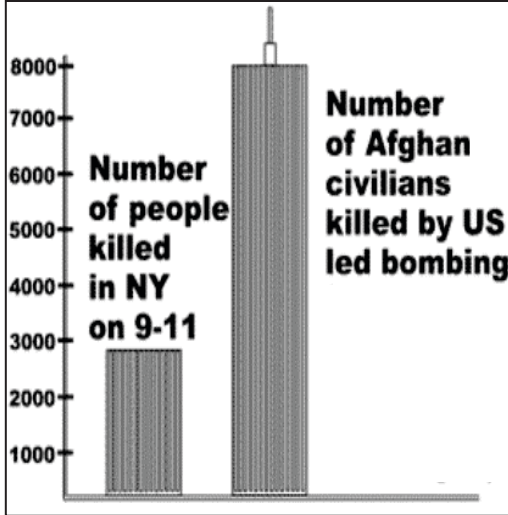
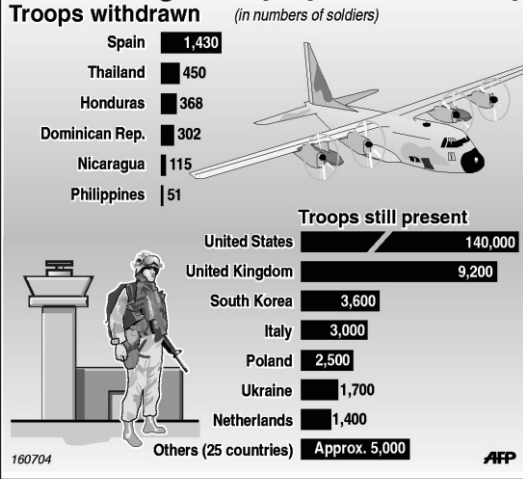
History has taught Myanmar to move slowly and cautiously. Bangladesh is at their backyard. China, India and Thailand are important bordering countries for geopolitical, military and economic reasons. Besides, entry in the ASEAN, investment by the member countries, Taiwan, China, Korea and Japan has allured Myanmar to look east. Bangladesh, a sleeping neighbor on the Salween River, is occasionally irritated by the Rohingyas refugees.

Legacies of history and culture and west-friendly diplomacy add suspicion to call for cooperation by Bangladesh with lukewarm response. It is time for Bangladesh to work on a proactive diplomacy with ASEAN and show interest for its membership. That may give Bangladesh more agreeable cloak and better credentials. Once ASEAN is identified, as a shared platform of mutual gain, trade and friendship will naturally trickle down. We can gradually draw SAARC and ASEAN together for a bridge over an immensely wide river Naaf.

The author is a writer on strategic issues.

SNIPPETS

More foreign troops pull out of Iraq



SOURCE: INTERNET

NEPAL: Between democracy deficits and insecurity

DR. ABDUR ROB KHAN

NEPAL is caught between democracy deficits and insecurity arising from persistent Maoist insurgency. At this point of time, it may be a little bit academic to ask: which is the cause or which is the effect? It remains a puzzle why Maoist insurgency is besieging Nepal at this vantage point of time when globalization, market forces and liberal multi-party democracy are the order of the day. The insurgency is doubly puzzling when it is by and large homegrown and its links with the outside world are tenuous at best. When Maoists struck security outposts in western Nepal in 1996, skeptic observers asked the question: can such insurgency survive? But the insurgency has by now spread into 73 out of 75 districts of Nepal, capable of engaging the armed forces in the heart of Katmandu and declaring unilateral cease-fire to suit the need for regrouping and consolidating their position.

Democracy deficits in Nepal arise basically from some structural factors. Since multi-party democracy was restored in Nepal, regime stabil-

position by expressing their preference for the monarchy and suggesting an interim all party government.

However, the Maoists are reported to be suffering from internal splits. Very recently, two sister organizations of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) - the Kirant Workers Party (KWP) and Madhesi National Liberation Front (MNLF) - announced their decision to sever their association with the Maoists and steer an independent course. After this split, the ongoing Maoist insurgency is believed to have entered a new phase.

Last month, newspapers had reported the killing of half a dozen Maoists in far-western region after an internal dispute broke out among them. Following the amnesty offered by the previous government, over 800 Maoist cadres deserted the insurgent group and surrendered to the security forces.

The impact of these developments on the Maoists' operational and organisational capacities, however, remains an open question. They have nationwide network and ideologically indoctrinated workers.

Meanwhile, the Government

Government might now have to deal separately with multiple forces pulling in different directions. Although the CPN-M is still by far the most powerful organization, the Government cannot ignore the two other groups in case peace negotiations commence.

The prospects for such negotiations, however, are receding after the initial euphoria following the appointment of a new government on June 2, 2004. The Sher Bahadur Deuba Government had promised to end the conflict through talks. Unfortunately, subsequent developments do not bear such optimism, and in a statement released on July 20, 2004, Maoist 'Chairman' Pushpa Kamal Dahal alias Prachanda explicitly ruled out the possibility of an immediate cease-fire, criticizing the Government for stating that it cannot negotiate beyond the country's current Constitution. Prime Minister Deuba has also recently rejected the option of declaring a unilateral ceasefire.

Leaders of the Alliance that constitutes the Deuba Government, however, continue to pressure the Prime Minister to take 'bold initiatives' to bring the Maoists to the negotiating

US-DPRK tangle: Prospective disaster

BRIG GEN M. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN *ndc psc (retid)*

FOR more than a decade the Korean peninsula has been in a flux. The tension in the region took a new dimension after President George W. Bush termed North Korea, the last outpost of the Iron Curtain, a member of 'Axis of Evil.' The US, for the first time since the end of the Korean War in 1953, adopted a confrontational posture in the peninsula, blaming Pyongyang for nuclear proliferation. Bush tightened the decade-old sanction imposed on North Korea for flouting the Non-Proliferation Treaty, (NPT) and accused it of trying secretly to build nuclear weapons and delivery system.

North Korea is also accused of supplying missile technology to many anti-West Middle East countries including Iraq under Saddam Hussain. Pyongyang is charged with supplying similar technology to Pakistan in exchange for advance nuclear know how. Tension further accentuated since USA's unilateral military action against Iraq almost under similar accusation.

North Korea has always felt threatened from the time when the US concentrated her Far Eastern military strength within the striking distance of Pyongyang. The US presence did not make Moscow or Beijing comfortable either.

Tension between North Korea and USA grew since the death of Kim IL Sung. Washington thought, like the Berlin wall crash and the Soviet collapse, North Korea, with its nuclear capability, would crumble within, and the reunification would then be automatic. That did not happen, though the collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated an acute crisis in North Korea. Kim realized that he had lost the Soviet patronage with the end of the Cold War.

Pyeongyang has already pulled out of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and expelled the international weapons inspectors. In 1996 North Korea accused Washington of military belligerency and of amassing theater nuclear weapons (TNW) too close to the border and of conducting provocative naval exercises close to her coast.

Apart from Washington, Pyongyang accuses Japan of developing its nuclear capability and launching spy satellite,

allegedly for surveillance over North Korean nuclear and military facilities.

Many analysts suggest that the US security overtures, perceived Japanese belligerence, isolation in post Cold War period, and South Korean bid to push reunification, might have pushed North Korea to adopt the nuclear path. The IAEA also suspects Pyongyang's nuclear ambition though North Korea is yet to carryout any ground test of weapons.

Whether North Korean periodical admission of possession of nuclear weapons is a hoax or not is difficult to judge, but Pyongyang's rhetoric has not ceased. Many experts opine that it

designed to reach the U.S. West Coast.

Japan's reaction and Pyongyang's admission turned the region into a tinderbox. For the first time Japan found reason to enhance its defence. According to the Time magazine report in its February 2003 issue, "Constitutionally passive Japan drew a shocking line in the sand: Defense Agency director Shigeru Ishiba told a news agency that if Tokyo were to receive intelligence that North Korea was preparing a missile attack, Japan would have the legal right to launch a strike in self-defence".

The security situation deteriorated after Bush decided to tighten the noose

negotiated settlement. North Korea wants guarantee of non-aggression and removal of nuclear weapons from the region, as minimum guarantee to lower its guard, but Washington does not seem to be in a reconciliatory mood as yet.

Kim Jong IL is well aware that it is not only the Iraqi quagmire that forced US to tone down its rhetoric but the possibility of a wider strategic ramification that tied the hand's of USA. Both in Japan and South Korea public opinion against US presence on their soil is mounting as days pass by, especially after the Iraq invasion and their governments' support of the US war in Iraq.



SOURCE: INTERNET

North Korean missiles on parade

could simply be a bid to blackmail to extract the maximum from the US. Many suggest that the dramatic end of the much heralded Six-Nation talk in Beijing last year could not initiate any road map because of Pyongyang's demand of the USA to guarantee 'no aggression'. US termed that a bid to blackmail.

Prior to the first Six Nation talk, Time magazine quoting U.S. intelligence sources, revealed that 'North Korea had activated a coal-fired steam plan. In a statement before House intelligence committee the outgoing CIA director, George Tenet stated that North Korea had a missile, untested as yet, but

around North Korea concurrently with the invasion of Iraq. The Korean peninsula in particular and the region in general seemed to have moved much closer to everyone's worst-case scenario: war in South East Asia. But that would be a total nuclear/chemical shoot out with allegedly nuclear-armed North Korea on one side and Japan and the U.S on the other, and South Korea perilously trapped in the middle. Such a scenario, however, do not preclude China and Russia from the tangle.

Defence analysts however think that Pentagon was capable of a double pronged attack but for the Iraqi debacle that made the US tone down for a

For the past few years Japan has been enhancing its defence budget and perhaps looking for energizing its missile programme for producing nuclear warheads. Experts believe Japan is capable of producing nuclear weapons within weeks and delivery system is at hand. Japan's posture has astonished many who took Tokyo to be a pacifist state. It is interesting to note Japan's strategic shift from purely economic concern to military. Its participation in Iraq indicates Japan's desire to play a bigger role in the strategic affairs, however narrow that base may be.

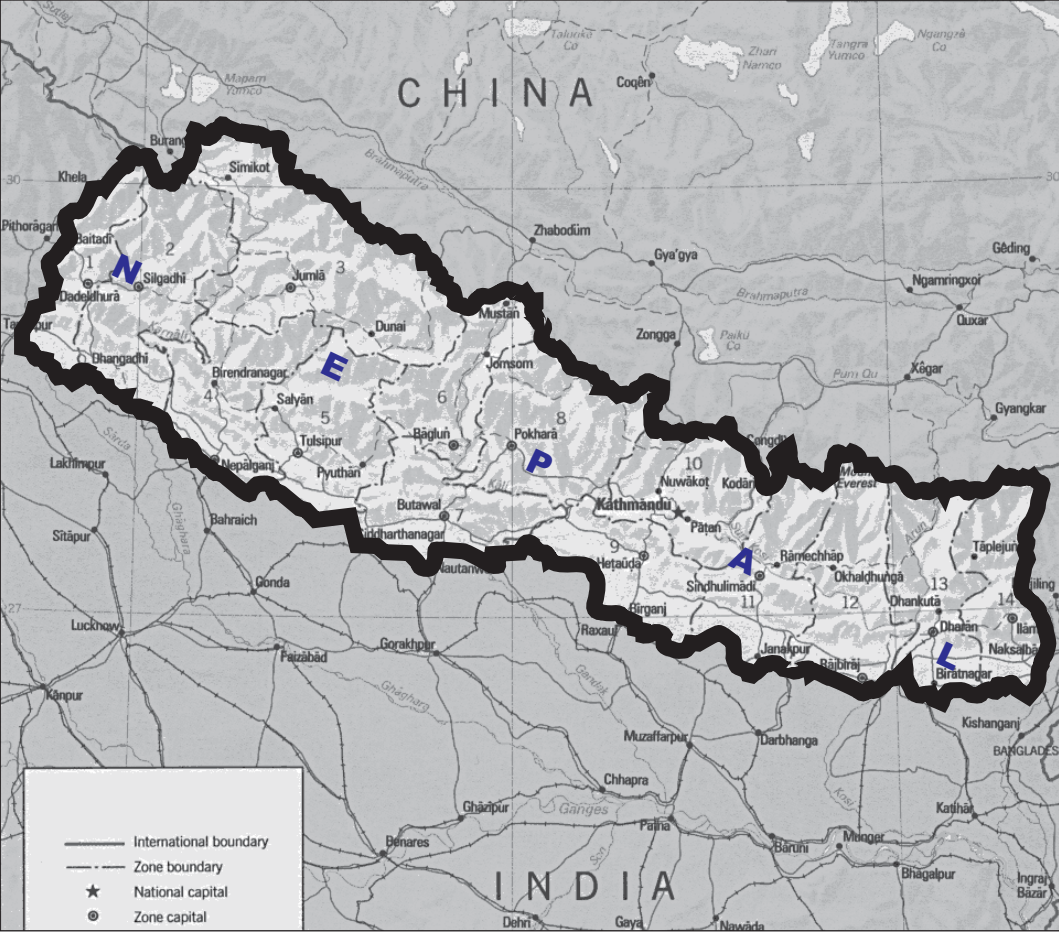
The country most concerned at these developments is South Korea, both in terms of military and economy. South Korea, a Washington ally, condemns the idea of a nuclear North but has not abandoned the path of peaceful reunification. South Koreans, the younger generation more so, believe that unless provoked, North Korea would not attack the South. What these new-generation analysts perceive is that the US is not helping the bid for peaceful reunification, rather it is creating hurdles to the transition. South Koreans are suspicious of the growing Japan-US military axis in the region that brings back the bitter memory of Japanese occupation that ended only six decades back.

China is the major regional country that has more at stake in the tangle. Beijing, more than once, reminded Washington of the consequences the region might face if Taiwan moves to declare independence. China would not like to see North Korea collapse. That would induce multiple problems for the region especially for China - a tide of refugees, a powerful, unified neighbor, and the possibility of U.S. troops marching back toward the Yalu River. Moreover, China is fearful of the aftermath in case a peaceful unification is not achieved and US forces do not leave the peninsula. But it also shudders at the possibility of a nuclear North, which has triggered an arms race in Beijing's backyard, especially the future contending power, Japan.

The situation in South East Asia had never been as complex as it is now. At the strategic plain, the region has become a boiling pot with impetus added by rhetoric emanating from Washington.

Washington has realized the potentially dangerous situation it may create in the light of the Middle East quagmire it is in. It also realises that Asia Pacific is no longer its exclusive backyard and is in need of help from North Korea's neighbors, especially China and South Korea, to settle the tangle amicably, so as to have the option of being bailed out from a crisis that could well be too complex to handle.

The author is a defence analyst.



SOURCE: INTERNET

ity has been precarious as the political parties soon got engrossed in unhealthy rivalry. The first structural factor has been the deeply entrenched monarchy, which only unwillingly conceded to reduce its role to one of constitutional monarchy. The process got a rude shock following the massacre of the royal family and assumption of the mantle of monarchy by the brother of the assassinated king, Gyanendra. A further setback was when the King dismissed the Prime Minister and assumed executive powers. Since then, the political parties have failed to realize their demand for restoration of democratically elected government. A second structural factor has been caste and ethnic differentiations, which continue to lend a feudalistic social order to the Nepali society. The benefits of development activities have hardly percolated to the lower caste and other ethnic groups. Political wranglings in Nepal continue divided even on tactical issues as far as peace talks with the Maoists are concerned.

Of course, in the twists and turns in Nepali politics, the Maoists are also changing tactics. Their original demands were abolition of the monarchy and election of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution for a Nepali republic. With the Nepali King Gyanendra, assuming executive power, the Maoists seem to shift their

claims that it has also somewhat blunted the Maoists' military capabilities. 'Over the past few months, the Royal Nepalese Army has weakened the Maoists' military strength,' claims Satchit Sumsher Rana, former chief of the Royal Nepalese Army.

Nevertheless, the Maoists continue to demonstrate their prowess. On July 27, they injured 22 civilians with a landmine in the heart of Nepalguni city, 450 miles west of the capital. Despite the split, evidently, the Maoists continue to hold and demonstrate their influence in the Terai. Moreover, The Maoists also declared a three day *bandh* in the Dhading, Nuwakot and Rasuwa districts on July 28, 29 and 30. Three trucks of food grains belonging to the World Food Programme were looted in Achham district, on July 3. On July 5, twelve police personnel and a civilian died in a roadside ambush by the Maoists on a police vehicle in Parsa district, which borders India. A clash between the Maoists and the security forces in Kache area of Salyan District - 350 miles west of the capital - resulted in the death of 11 security personnel and 11 Maoists on July 6.

With the split in the CPN-M, the prospects of the peace process could also suffer further. The split has come at a time when the Government and leaders of major political parties are reviving efforts to restore negotiations with the Maoists. The split in the Maoist Front could mean that the

table. "The Government must declare unilateral cease-fire," demanded Madhav Kumar Nepal, General Secretary of Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist (CPN- UML), "The Government needs to initiate the efforts."

Leaders of other major parties have echoed similar views. "You cannot judge the Maoist leaders on the basis of their press statements. They will sit on the negotiating table in case we provide credible security to them," said former Prime Minister and Nepali Congress leader, Girija Prasad Koirala,

Other leaders also remain strongly optimistic about such an eventuality. "The efforts made by us to restore peace are going on. There will be a major breakthrough in this regard soon," declared Deputy Prime Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari. Civil society representatives and human rights activists continue to press the Government and the Maoists to immediately announce a cease-fire and re-engage in a peace process. "If the Government and Maoists both exhibit due seriousness, fruitful talks are likely," says Padma Ratna Tuladhar, a former facilitator of the talks between the state and the rebels.

At this stage, bringing the Maoists to the negotiating table appears to be a far from easy task.

The author is Director, BI/ISS, Dhaka