

Bangladesh: In search of strategic relationship

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

WHEN Bangladesh became independent, the world was bipolar. Conducting foreign affairs was then relatively easy. One had to choose between the two super powers to assist small nations achieve their interests in international politics and more often than not, they obliged. At the time of liberation, Bangladesh joined the Soviet Camp to which India was aligned. They helped Bangladesh in many ways in its needs in the international relations and were thus its strategic partners. When Bangladesh switched sides, and moved away from the Soviet camp after 1975, it was helped in international affairs by the other super power, the USA and its regional ally China. Bangladesh did not thus feel that its interests could be by-passed. It may not have had the muscle but it had the strategic partners with powers to help it at times of need.

Bangladesh also had the support of many powerful countries who became its friends because they were inspired by the way it fought oppression and liberated the country. Japan to a major extent and European countries and Australia to a large extent helped Bangladesh to rebuild a war-devastated country. These countries still assist Bangladesh to achieve economic development. Unfortunately the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991 has taken away by default the comfort zone for countries like Bangladesh, leaving it to fend for itself when faced with strategic issues. The comfort of a bipolar world is no longer there.

The international goodwill Bangladesh earned from its liberation has also gone. The United States as the world's only super power is too involved with other major issues to have time for Bangladesh. In the meantime India, which was a not a major power when Bangladesh became independent, is today aspiring to become a world power. Unfortunately, Bangladesh-India relations have, meanwhile, lost the close-

ness that had brought them together in 1971 because both the countries were at fault. In the deterioration of relations, India has also stepped into areas that are critical for Bangladesh's viability as a nation. Water of the rivers that flow from India, which gives life and livelihood to Bangladesh, are now at India's mercy and it has interfered with the flow of a major river, namely the Ganges, by the Farakka barrage that started the process of desertification in Bangladesh's north-west and is going ahead with building a dam at Tipaimukh on another international river that could do to Bangladesh's northeast what Farakka has done to the northwest.

India's interpretation of the laws relating to demarcation of maritime boundary risks closing Bangladesh's access to the sea where there are rich marine and hydrocarbon resources. Myanmar has taken the cue from India and has used the same interpretation on demarcating maritime boundary that, if these countries have their way, will take away from Bangladesh a major portion of its claim in the Bay of Bengal. These are therefore difficult times for Bangladesh because its attempts to negotiate with India and Myanmar on the maritime issue have borne no result and neither country has shown the inclination of accepting Bangladesh's position. According to the Convention on UN Law of the Seas, Bangladesh must demarcate its maritime boundary by July 2011; India by June, 2009 and Myanmar by May, 2009. India has submitted their claims to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. The Commission will hold hearing on Indian submission by March of next year. The process for ultimate demarcation of Bangladesh's maritime boundary with India and Myanmar is likely to be protracted and complicated where it is up against two countries holding similar positions. Bangladesh feels it has a good case to convince the Commission in its favour but it cannot be certain and must wait for the Commission's ruling on the



The country's future stands on the strategic choices it makes.

issue. The future of Bangladesh being able to exploit the rich resources of the Bay of Bengal unhindered is therefore uncertain. In fact, Bangladesh and Myanmar faced off over the issue last year but the danger lingers.

Bangladesh is therefore in desperate need of a strategic friend with the clout for providing it the support for negotiating a fair deal with India and Myanmar on the maritime issue. Bangladesh's

two moved forward and built up a strategic relationship where all the conceivable areas of cooperation: economic, political, social, cultural and defense were brought into their bilateral relations. Exchange of large number of high level visits has been an important instrument in building excellent bilateral relations.

The incumbent government in Bangladesh has been in office over eight months now. Yet there has been no move for a visit of Sheikh Hasina to China. Last time around, she went to Beijing within two months of assuming office. There has also not been any visit at the Ministerial level. The result of the Joint Commission that has been held recently has not been promising either. In that meeting, Bangladesh had sought over US\$ 5 billion in assistance for 28 projects. The Chinese agreed to offer a little over US\$ 1 billion in five projects in suppliers' credit and also noted serious dissatisfaction at Bangladesh's handling of Chinese assistance.

There appears to be a cooling of Bangladesh-China strategic relations. One reason for this could be the permission given to Taiwan by the last BNP Government to open a Trade Office in Dhaka. The permission was given at a most inappropriate time for China and embarrassed it very much. Bangladesh also did not follow the cardinal principle in strategic relationships: the need to keep the partner informed before taking a decision affecting the partner. Bangladesh's expectation that Taiwan would bring billions of dollars in trade and investment also did not occur. It has only harmed Bangladesh's relations with China on the issue of dependability. Before the Taiwan Trade Office fiasco, Bangladesh could have requested China for support to negotiate a fair deal with Myanmar on the maritime boundary, given its undoubted influence with the military rulers of Myanmar. China will not be inclined to come forward now because in the meantime, China has

extended its strategic relationship with Myanmar further. One major reason of China's interest in Bangladesh is its access to the Bay of Bengal, an access that Myanmar is now providing China as a dependable ally.

At a time when Bangladesh needs friends with clout for achieving its interests in foreign affairs and foreign relations, it thus finds itself standing alone. Bangladesh has become marginalized in international politics. In its best interests, Bangladesh should now try its utmost to settle problems with India and cash upon the historical friendship between the AL and the Congress. While speaking on Tipaimukh, Sheikh Hasina has recently stressed the need for unity. She should now do her best for bipartisanship in dealing with India that will not just strengthen her hands but also enhance her standing with India tremendously. Simultaneously, Bangladesh must also seek for strategic relationships with powerful countries that value its geopolitical location.

Bangladesh must also warm up its relations with China and that will not be easy because China has tilted towards Myanmar, which can satisfy China's strategic interests in place of Bangladesh. Views emanating from USA recently suggest that the world's only super power has not lost its interest in the Bay of Bengal where, the problems with maritime demarcation notwithstanding, Bangladesh holds a crucial geopolitical location. Meanwhile, USA and India have moved ahead in their strategic relations and hence building strategic relations with USA will be a very difficult task. The strategic choices nevertheless are there; the necessity to go forward with these choices is crucial to Bangladesh's future. The task of achieving these strategic choices will be a test of Bangladesh's diplomatic ability and capability. Unfortunately, this is its weakest link.

The writer is a Director, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies and a former Ambassador to Japan.

China Myanmar border tension

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE border clashes between Myanmar government forces and rebels on the Chinese border have demonstrated that Myanmar has to fight with the ethnic rebels in the border areas and China is not comfortable with such events.

The situation erupted on 27th August when the Myanmar army sent troops to occupy the Kokang territory following the refusal of several ethnic militias to convert into border security forces under the authority of the Myanmar military.

After several days of clashes between Myanmar ethnic groups and government forces, 30,000 refugees crossed into China's border in the Yunnan province, some of whom were rebels. They handed over their guns and uniforms to Chinese authorities.

The United Nations and Chinese officials say that civilian refugees have streamed into China to escape the fighting, after hundreds of Myanmar soldiers moved into Kokang, a mostly ethnic Chinese region run by a local militia. The rebels constitute about 150,000 in the Kokang territory and until last August

27th August and ended on 29th August. TV news showed still photographs of police corpses and Kokang people fleeing.

China's official news service, Xinhua, has reported that a number of refugees have begun returning to their homes in Myanmar now that the fighting has stopped. Chinese officials assisted a number of refugees by providing tents, food, and medical aid.

In a rare move by China, an ally of the Myanmar government, the country's foreign ministry spoke out urging Myanmar to "properly handle domestic problems and maintain stability in the China-Myanmar border region" and to "protect the security and legal rights" of its citizens in the country, reports The Financial Times of London.

Meanwhile, the Chinese media reports that Myanmar officials have apologized for any Chinese casualties and thanked its neighbour for assisting refugees.

Some observers said that top senior General Than Shwe's decision to send troops into Kokang territory despite China's concerns showed his determination to demonstrate that his government wanted to send a clear message to

minorities in Myanmar are armed and resist pressure from the government to join with the military and become border guards.

There will be more fighting, more tension and more conflict because the Myanmar regime will continue to try to force these groups to surrender their arms ahead of the elections.

Despite international criticisms, the Myanmar government is determined to move forward with the 2010 general election. Foreign observers say that under the guidelines of the 2008 constitution, it is by and large a forgone conclusion that the military will hold on to power after election. It will be the first time the country has had elections in nearly 20 years.

China and Myanmar have very close cooperative relations. These days Myanmar is awash with infrastructure projects, highways are being cut through jungles and a few dams are also being planned on the Salween River for hydro-electricity.

China reportedly controls many of the commercial banks in Myanmar today. Chinese nationals are seen in the country in large numbers, particularly in the north. The country's second-largest centre, Mandalay, is believed to have at least 20 per cent Chinese of its total population.

The recent clashes with Myanmar rebels in the north have made China worried because it needs stability around its borders. Both China and the ruling military government in Myanmar have a particular interest in the return of stability to the region, as China has plans to build oil and gas pipelines through Myanmar. There are also nearly 10,000 Chinese business people in the fractious area of Northern Myanmar.

At one time there has been an understanding that China will not come west of Irrawaddy basin but currently the presence of China is everywhere. India has been alarmed by the strong presence of China in Myanmar.

The close relations between China and Myanmar have changed the policy of India toward Myanmar. India now is keen to develop good relations with the military government for its strategic reasons. It is reported that India is connecting a road link from northeastern states to the seaport Sittwe (Akyab).

While it remains uncertain if the relative calm will remain, the Myanmar government may have done considerable damage to its relationship with China, reports The Irrawaddy, a magazine published in Thailand by Myanmar exiles. However, many analysts say that the bilateral relations between China and Myanmar are so strong and mutually beneficial, no permanent damage will occur because of the border clashes.

The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Between China and India: Is Tibet the wedge or link?

GEORGE YEO

THE encounter of China and India in this century will change the world. For thousands of years, the high mountains of Tibet separated the two civilizations. Except for a brief war in 1962, there were no major conflicts between them.

Together, they make up more than a third of the world's population and will supply much of the talent for global development in this century. The concentration of Chinese and Indian talent in Silicon Valley foreshadows what is coming. How China and India relate to each other in the coming decades will affect everyone.

Tibet is changing from being a barrier to a region linking China and India together. Today, there are good roads connecting Tibet to Xinjiang, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan. Three years ago, an amazing thousand-kilometer railroad from Golmud in Qinghai to Lhasa in Tibet was opened. Eighty per cent of it is over 4000 meters in altitude; 50 per cent on permafrost. When first proposed, many foreign engineers said that it could not be built.

Economically, there is much to be gained by improving road and rail links between Tibet and South Asia. Indeed, the Chinese have suggested that Lhasa and Calcutta be linked by rail. The Indian government is understandably apprehensive about moving too quickly. Scars of the 1962 War are still raw in India. When the Indian Army moved to liberate Bangladesh in December 1971, an important factor it considered was the winter snow preventing the Chinese Army from interfering through the mountain passes. Thus, the reopening of the 4400 meter-high Nathu La Pass in July 2006 was politically significant.

As part of it, China recognized India's ownership of Sikkim. Hundreds of kilometers of fiber optic cables have been laid in the past year from Yadong in Tibet to Siliguri in West Bengal with an initial capacity of 20 gigabytes per second.

Trade between China and India has grown rapidly in the last ten years. China has already become India's biggest trading partner. And this is only the beginning. Common economic interests are driving the two countries into closer political cooperation both bilaterally and internationally.

Tibet is both an opportunity and an issue. The economic opportunity is obvious, but rapid development has brought about great stress to the Tibetan way of life. This complicates bilateral relations between China and India.

Over long years, Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism evolved in response to the challenges of extreme physical conditions at high altitudes, developing in the process a deep spirituality. However, old Tibet should not be romanticized. It was not Shangri-La. The political economy was based on the feudal domination of monasteries over rural serfs. In 1951, Mao Zedong's Government negotiated the

'peaceful liberation' of Tibet with the local Tibetan Government, guaranteeing that Beijing would not force changes to the feudal political economy of Tibet. But the Chinese revolution had its own internal dynamic. By the mid-1950s, land reforms had begun in Tibetan-inhabited areas outside Tibet. Monastic lands were seized and redistributed to peasants. These contributed to the Tibetan rebellion of 1959. While the Dalai Lama fled to India, the Panchen Lama remained in China and worked within the system, but not always effectively. In 1962, he sent a letter to Beijing expressing Tibetan grievances. During the Cultural Revolution, Tibetan youths, following Chinese youths in other parts of the country, engaged in an orgy of destruction. Since then, as in the rest of China, monasteries and temples have been restored or rebuilt, often to a state better than what they were before, although some precious artifacts were lost forever. Without land and serfs, these places can only be sustained with the patronage of the Chinese state.

The marriage of Tang Princess Wencheng to Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century began a complex

Han Chinese, Tibetans lag behind especially in economic performance. This should not be surprising because an entrenched way of life cannot change quickly within a few decades. As in Singapore, the tensions which naturally arise when different ethnic and religious groups living side by side respond at different speeds to globalization cannot be wished away; they simply have to be recognized and managed.

Education is clearly the key to the future. Pole-vaulting a medieval society to the 21st century is however never easy. At the Norbulinka Palace, the summer residence of the Dalai Lama, devotees still prostrate themselves before objects once used by him like his bed and sofa.

The 14th Dalai Lama is now 74 years old. In a recent TV interview, he said that he was born to accomplish certain tasks, and as those tasks were not completed, it was 'logical' that he would be reincarnated outside China. Many believe that 'outside China' means Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh where the 6th Dalai Lama came from, a Tibetan area controlled by India but claimed by China. This would greatly com-

Trade between China and India has grown rapidly in the last ten years. China has already become India's biggest trading partner. And this is only the beginning. Common economic interests are driving the two countries into closer political cooperation both bilaterally and internationally.

relationship between Tibet and Imperial China which ebbed and flowed with the rise and fall of Chinese dynasties. Mongol princes during the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty intervened on behalf of the Yellow Hat Gelugpa (the order of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama), making it the dominant sect in Tibet.

Because religious and political leadership was fused from the time of the 5th Dalai Lama, the appointment of high lamas often required the approval of the Emperor. This was certainly so during the Qing Dynasty. It was a practice carried into Republican and Communist China. Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang Government approved the appointment of the 14th (present) Dalai Lama in 1940 and the 10th Panchen Lama in 1949. At the Forbidden City in Beijing today, the old buildings still carry inscriptions in the four main languages of the Qing Dynasty - Han, Manchu, Mongolian and Tibetan.

In the last 50 years, China devoted huge resources to the development of Tibet because of its strategic importance. Economic growth has been in the double digits in the last fifteen years. Social indicators like average life spans have shown remarkable improvement. But, relative to

plicate the border demarcation between China and India. Beijing, of course, insists on the old rule that the appointment of high lamas must have its approval.

The 11th Panchen Lama is coming of age. When chosen as the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama, Beijing gave its approval but not the Dalai Lama. Six months ago, at the Second World Buddhist Forum in Wuxi, he surprised many people by giving his speech in English.

It may seem strange that the reincarnation of high lamas should be a subject of such intense interest today. That perhaps is a reflection of the past in the present and the importance of the China-India relationship. Looking ahead, however, Buddhism in Tibet will have to adjust to change as it has in other parts of Asia where it is enjoying a huge revival in many countries. Tibet is part of a much larger Asian drama that is changing the world.

George Yeo is the foreign minister of Singapore. He visited Tibet in August this year, the first foreign minister to do so after the March 14 riots last year.

© Yale Center for the Study of Globalization. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.



A Myanmar soldier standing guard at the Myanmar-China border town of Laukkai.

they had truce with the Myanmar government.

The conflict area is on the fringe of the drug-producing Golden Triangle region where China, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos meet. Many of the ethnic armies there have used the drug trade to finance their operations. The Kokang and neighbouring Wa regions, both isolated by mountainous terrain and a lack of roads, were traditionally Myanmar's main poppy growing areas.

The government announcement on state-run TV news broadcasts in Myanmar said the fighting was over but had killed twenty-six soldiers and police and left forty-seven wounded. It said eight bodies of Kokang rebels were found and 600 pieces of weapons seized. The announcement said fighting had started

rebels in Kokang territory.

The Los Angeles Times reports that the Myanmar government will move an additional 3,000 troops to the northern area of the country. Regional analysts say the government's apparent objective is to rout out the ethnic militants before the elections.

Meanwhile, The China Post reports that clashes between Myanmar ethnic groups and government forces are likely to continue, because none of the ethnic groups' concerns have been addressed and the military government is working to strengthen its grasp on power before the country's national elections.

Unless the Myanmar government can persuade the different ceasefire groups to accept its terms, it is likely that similar confrontations will occur. Several ethnic