

The Festive Season

October, 19, 2003

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee went to China in June. Everyone clapped. Pandit Nehru's old dream, a true prevalence of Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai days, could finally begin to manifest. The ancient ideologues of the Long March were dead and gone, a fourth generation of young, pragmatic and dynamic leaders had taken over. The Prime Minister went to Bali. Again the MEA is jubilant: Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal proudly announced that China has deleted Sikkim from the list of independent states.

But when questioned whether India had raised the issue of a Chinese patrol intruding into Arunachal Pradesh in June, Mr Sibal replied in the negative. Why to spoil the festive season? One remembers the news of Chinese intrusions on Indian soil being flashed in the Indian press as the Prime Minister was just returning from China. It was such an embarrassment for the MEA's officers who had worked for months to draft a Panchsheel type of declaration!

The MEA could still have "diplomatically" handled the situation, but the unfortunate happened. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman declared: "China does not recognise the so-called Arunachal Pradesh mentioned by the Indian newspaper report." At that time, a weak Indian External Affairs Ministry could only feebly respond that the Government of India was aware of the "transgression" of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) by a Chinese patrol.

This raises an important question: Why did Beijing choose this particular hour to kindle the most sensitive issue in the Sino-Indian relationship? Why stir up this question when the sky was so blue? In all probability, China decided to reiterate its claim on Arunachal Pradesh (with all the foreseeable political consequences for Beijing) with the only purpose of hiding a larger issue.

This might be confirmed by two small press communique which passed unnoticed during the same period. On July 5, Xinhua News wrote: *"Construction on a railway station in Lhasa, capital of southwest China's Tibet Autonomous Region, began Saturday, ushering in full-swing work on the line linking Lhasa and Xining, capital of neighboring Qinghai*

Province. More than 12 million US dollars will be invested in building the station, which will have a total of seven lines and three platforms upon its completion, expected in 2007. The Qinghai-Tibet railway, with a length of 1,956 kilometres, will be the longest plateau railway with the highest elevation in the world... the entire project is expected to take six years to complete."

The implications of a railway station reaching the Tibetan capital are strategically far more serious for India than the crossing of the McMahon Line. It is often forgotten that the reason why the Chinese Army withdrew so quickly in November 1962 was that China did not have the logistical means to hold on to the Indian territory (especially during the coming winter). Their lines of communications and supply originated at Chengdu (Sichuan province) and were too long to be sustained. Furthermore, these lines were crossing a territory in revolt.

Today, the situation has changed dramatically. The Tibetans, though very unhappy, are by and large subdued and the rail line to Lhasa brings the possibility of reinforcements for the border areas closer. Time and again, the Chinese leaders have demonstrated they can plan years and decades ahead. It is not always the case in India where the only future politicians ever think of is the next elections.

The "Arunachal" announcement was further hiding a second issue - even more serious than the Lhasa railway station. On July 17 this year, People's Daily published a small report, 'China to Conduct Feasibility Study on Hydropower Project in Tibet'. It ran thus:

"China plans to conduct a feasibility study in October on the construction of a major hydropower project on the Yarlung Zangbo River, in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

"...an expert team (was sent) to the area for preliminary work between late June and early July. The Chinese section of the river, 2,057 kilometres long, boasts a water energy reserve of about 100 million kilowatts, or one-sixth of the country's total, ranking second behind the Yangtze River." The location for the possible hydropower plant is the u-shaped turn of the river in the south-eastern part of Tibet. The river drops by 2,755 metres in the 500 kilometre-long "u" section." Then, what is this Yarlung Zangbo? It is the Sinisized name of the Tibetan portion of the Brahmaputra which brings life (and sometimes floods) to North India and Bangladesh.

Taming of the Brahmaputra is not a new scheme. Already in 1996, the Scientific American published an article informing the public of the Chinese plans of using small nuclear devices to divert the Brahmaputra towards the North, to open the way of the waters towards the arid Gobi desert.

It is not clear if this dam project on one of the last virgin regions of the world, (the first explorers reached there only at the end of the 90s) is for power generation or a first step to divert the Brahmaputra towards the north. A diversion or even a large dam on the Brahmaputra will have disastrous consequences not only for the environment of the Tibetan high plateau, but also for all the areas downstream which could ultimately be starved of the mighty flow of the river.

While every great Indian politician dreams of leaving his name in history as the architect of a peace treaty with Pakistan or China, all important Chinese leaders want to be remembered as the initiator of a pharaonic project (the latest was Li Peng's Three-Gorges dam). The present new emperors of China are no different.

There is no doubt that the "border incident" in Arunachal was "planned". Beijing's intention was not to score a point on the unresolved border issue, but to hide far more serious matters. Knowing well the Indian diplomats, Beijing would have calculated that the intrusion and subsequent Chinese claim would keep South Block busy on another track. And today Indian diplomacy has gone one step further: It is "celebrating" because China has dropped Sikkim from its "country list"! Time passes by and nobody is interested in raising the more vital issues for India's security.