



Nepal: The Chinese squeeze

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The Indian foreign policy will be pragmatic, says Mr Shyam Saran, the former Indian Ambassador to Nepal and now Foreign Secretary. "India is for democracy in South Asia." So are the Western powers. France declared "in the light of the recent events in Nepal, we have decided with our European partners to recall for consultation the EU Ambassadors accredited in Kathmandu". The Indian envoy followed suit and also returned to his HQ. On the same day, Mr Jack Straw rushed to Pakistan, followed by the Indian External Affairs Minister. Obviously, everyone seems to have forgotten that Pakistan has not been a model of a democracy. Or is it what Mr Saran means by 'pragmatic policy'?

Another event which occurred a few days before the royal coup in Kathmandu has also been the victim of the collective amnesia of South Block and the Western chancelleries. It went practically unnoticed though it was a potent warning to what was in store in the Himalayan Kingdom. On January 21, the Nepali media reported that in a swift move the Office of the Dalai Lama's representative in Nepal as well as the Tibetan Refugee Welfare Office (TRWO) were shut down. Only after several days, the Office of the District Chief in Kathmandu disclosed the reason for this action: The Tibetan office was not registered under Article No 3 of Society Act 2034 and was thus functioning 'illegally'.

Wangchuk Tsering, the Dalai Lama's representative in Nepal reacted cautiously, but had no choice: "If the Government says the offices have to be shut down, then they have to be. We are law-abiding people." The TRWO, which has today lost its legitimacy, had for decades been the local partner of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Kathmandu, looking after all refugees arriving from Tibet in transit to India. Today, more than 1000 Tibetans are awaiting proper papers to leave for India. In case Nepal decides not to rescind its decision, the UNHCR would no longer have a legal partner to look after the refugees fleeing Tibet.

Sudip Pathak, the president of the Human Rights Organisation of Nepal who is working with the UNHCR is reported to have met the Nepalese Home Minister on January 27, and complained about the closure. But to no avail. Though the former Nepali Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Dr Prakash Sharan Mahat denied that the decision had been taken at China's behest, Beijing's hand can clearly be seen behind the move. The Dalai Lama's Office has been functioning for the past 45 years without any major problems (and registration). It is difficult to understand why an organisation

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More than 20 000 Tibetan refugees are today living in Nepal and over 2000 Tibetans transit annually through the Tibet-Nepal border to take refuge in India, fleeing 'religious persecution' in Tibet. Several countries immediately reacted, in particular the US to whom Nepal had given a written assurance that his Government would continue to allow Tibetans to transit through Nepal and would not deport them back to China.

Presently, Nepal does not seem ready to reconsider its decision as Beijing continues to exercise pressure on Nepal to stop the Tibetan refugees' escape towards a freer world. Sun Heping, China's ambassador to Nepal, had declared last year: "We appreciate it very much that His Majesty's Government of Nepal is committed to the one China policy, understands how sensitive the Tibet issue is to China and never allows any anti-China activities to be carried out on Nepali soil." All this did not augur well for India, but nobody reacted, probably by 'pragmatism'. It is a great pity that Delhi took so lightly this increasing sign of Beijing control over Kathmandu. After the failure of the peace talks between the Maoists and the Deuba Government in August 2004, Kathmandu certainly believed that it needed China's support in its fight against the Maoists. On their side, the Maoists have been looking for new sources of income as the scope and the extent of their movement is increasing. The racket of the local population is not enough. They have begun to use the trade of Tibetan medicine ingredients as a new source of income to purchase the badly required weapons to sustain their guerrilla warfare.

The medicinal herb trade is a traditional business both for the Nepalis and the Tibetans. The local government in Lhasa has also encouraged the collection of a caterpillar fungus, the cordyceps sinensis (a powerful tonic to increase one's vigour). The harvesting of cordyceps is a source of income for Tibetans living near the Nepalese border, but as the demand grows, China is not able to supply its own domestic market (a kilo can fetch up to 3500 \$ in Lhasa). The Nepali villagers have taken up the business and the Maoists support the trade. They have allocated 'concessions' to different villages and, once collected, the harvest is sold in Tibet. Most of the revenue is used to purchase weapons and ammunitions. The Kantipur Post estimates that the

Maoists have thus earned "millions of rupees". The Chinese have been aware of the trade and encouraged it.

Officially Beijing is on the Nepali government side in its fight against the Maoists. In 2002 already, the then Chinese ambassador to Nepal had condemned: "the misuse the name of Chairman Mao, which impairs the image of the great leader of China, and at the same time, it can serve as an excuse for the international anti-China to create troubles." However, Beijing does not mind an instable State at India's doorstep. It should not be the case for Delhi, but the fact is that once more, Delhi has been caught unaware of what was brewing in its neighbours' courtyard.

The situation is indeed full of dichotomies; Beijing tries to make the best of the complicated state of affairs. On one side, they are keen to counterbalance the privileged Indian role in Nepal; on the other they have to save their face: for a nation which speaks of its 'peaceful rise' and the social progress of its minorities, the constant flight of the Tibetans towards India does not promote their 'peaceful socialistic' image. They also try to develop the Tibetan region and the herbal medicine is the 'staple' industry, bringing important revenues. Faced with these contradictory factors, in October 2003 China decided to make a gesture towards Nepal, 4 Maoists with weapons and explosives were arrested in Tibet. Till this time, it had been widely believed that all the weapons originated from Naxalite groups in India.

In September 2004, the Nepalese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the Shigatse Intermediate Court had convicted the Nepalese: Two of them had been sentenced to death. Probably wanting a compensation for their good deed, Beijing extracted from Kathmandu, a strong warning to the Tibetans wanting to leave the 'Motherland'. This was done.

With one stone, several birds were killed: The Nepalese were pleased that Beijing was doing something to stop the Maoists' sources of income; India was forewarned about the growing Chinese interest in Nepal and the Tibetans were shown their place. This was also a 'lesson' for the UN agencies which are often accused of giving a preferential treatment to Tibetans refugees compared to others (mainly the ones from Bhutan). The morning King Gyanendra showed his Prime Minister the door and assumed all the powers, China expressed appreciation for Nepal's closure of the Dalai Lama's office in Katmandu. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman added 'Nepal made the right decision in maintaining Chinese sovereignty'. A Freudian slip probably?