



Losing a natural ally

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One of my most vivid memories is travelling on a motorbike from Varanasi to Pokhara, in Nepal, some 20 years ago with my wife. On the way, we had stopped at Lumbini, the birth place of Gautam Buddha. This famous pilgrimage site is located just two km inside Nepalese territory. The peace around this sacred place, and especially near the peepal tree, deeply moved us.

There was also something I remember till today: The feeling that we were not in a foreign country. Nothing in the flat landscape, the food or the atmosphere showed that we had left India. Indeed, Nepal and India have never been foreign to each other; for thousands of years people moved freely across a border which did not exist. A few years later, I travelled to Tibet via Nepal. The first thing which struck me on crossing the Friendship Bridge marking the border was the change in landscape, language and atmosphere. It was a totally different environment, a different country. India and Nepal have always been 'natural' partners. Unfortunately, this seems to have recently changed. In early August, India's Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee spoke of his concern about the situation in Nepal which could "go out of hand" because the Nepalese Army's efforts to crush the Maoist rebellion "were proving ineffective". Though the suppression of democracy can certainly not be defended, it is clear that India has not whole-heartedly

supported its Himalayan neighbour in its fight against the Maoists, though this would have been 'natural' given that Delhi faces similar problems in several States.

Mr Mukherjee himself admitted to the close links between the Maoists and many Naxalites groups in India: "Many of them have the fancy idea of setting up a liberated corridor starting right from the Terai region and going through parts of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Maharashtra." But nothing is being done from the Indian side to counter this dangerous trend. After a meeting between with the Nepalese King in Jakarta in April, Prime Minister Mr Manmohan Singh agreed that the shipment of military equipment to Nepal could be resumed despite strong objections from the all-powerful Indian Communist comrades.

The Defence Minister made it clear that Indian support to Nepal is still conditional: "We are trying to impress upon the Nepalese Government to tackle the Maoists. But, unfortunately, certain recent developments in that country, like the suppression of its constitution and the multi-party system, had set back anti-Maoist initiatives." The bad will is two-sided: Recently, Kathmandu refused its airspace usage to an IAF helicopter to airlift a Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrim who had fallen ill on the Chinese side of the yatra. The Nepal Government also declined to lend a Royal Nepali Army chopper for the operation. Finally, it was Beijing which allowed an Indian chopper to fly from UP to Taklakot in Tibet to airlift the lady patient to Bareilly.

Of course, the first reaction of South Block was to 'think afresh' about its relations with Nepal and it did not rule out applying further pressure on the King's regime. Sadly, it will mean further deterioration in the relations. Worse, the Nepalese Army accused a state-run Indian arms manufacturer of having supplied faulty assault rifles to the kingdom;

which resulted in heavy human loss in a gun battle with the Maoists earlier this month.

The Nepalese soldiers, who had taken part in the 10-hour encounter with the Maoists, declared that the Indian rifle frequently grew too hot and the soldiers had no alternative but to wait for it to cool before using it again. Though the officials of the rifle factory in West Bengal denied the poor quality of the guns, blaming poor maintenance of the weapons instead, the fact remains that 43 Nepalese soldiers lost their lives and 75 other are still missing.

Delhi is stuck on its one-point programme: The immediate restoration of democracy. When the National Security Council met on August 11 to review Indo-Nepal relations, the Indian Prime Minister could only declare that he hoped "King Gyanendra would adhere to his commitments to restore the political process". During this time, the relations between Nepal and China have reached new zenith; one could even speak of a 'honeymoon'.

In mid-August, Nepal's Minister for Foreign Affairs Ramesh Nath Pandey left Kathmandu for Beijing on an 11-day official visit to the People's Republic of China on the invitation of his counterpart. Mr Pandey's objective was to take "the age-old good relations between Nepal and China to a new height". During his scheduled meetings with President Hu Jintao and other Chinese officials, he hoped "to strengthen the affable ties between the close neighbours and make (them) more fruitful".

The Nepalese Foreign Minister's first stop in Lhasa will have an immediate consequence: The Kathmandu-Lhasa bus service which had stopped two months ago due to a complicated visa procedure will be reopened. It was decided to hand over the task of processing travel documents to a Kathmandu-based private travel agency which will be

fully responsible for processing permits required by passengers travelling from Nepal to the Tibetan capital. A steady flow of Nepalese can now be expected to visit the Tibetan capital for trade or tourism. During Mr Pandey's visit to China (the third high official to visit the country during the last two months) several bilateral agreements on trade, commerce and culture will be signed. Furthermore, Beijing has offered \$12 million aid to the kingdom. While most of Nepal's donor countries stopped aid and halted military cooperation to pressurise Kathmandu to return to democracy, Beijing never criticised Kathmandu and, on the contrary, has greatly increased its assistance to Nepal in fields such as telecommunication, road construction, health or economic development.

During a seminar in Kathmandu earlier this month, 'Nepal-China Relations: Future Prospects', marking the golden jubilee of Nepal-China diplomatic relations, the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Sun Heping spoke of the extent of coziness between the two countries: "Many Nepalese friends often appreciate both political and economic help given by China... China is also grateful to Nepal for its firm and strong support in the issues of Taiwan, Tibet and human rights."

Another development, which seemed innocuous at first, was the dialogue between China and Nepal on making the Himalayan kingdom the trade corridor between India and China. Beijing expressed its support to the "project which could be beneficial" (to China?). With Delhi and Kathmandu making the stand-off an ego issue, the situation is far from healthy. But for India, the loss of a second buffer zone, 55 years after the loss of Tibet, could have catastrophic repercussions on its security.

Recently, I came across one of the scariest books I have ever read. Unrestricted Warfare, written by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, two

brilliant senior colonels of the People's Liberation Army, is a war manual detailing how a nation such as China can conduct asymmetric warfare. One chapter speaks of "Ten Thousand Methods Combined that Transcend Boundaries". One of these methods is to enlarge one's circle of influence without conducting war.

The two Chinese colonels had certainly read The Art of War written some 2,000 years ago by Sun Tzu. According to this war manual, which influenced Napoleon and Mao Zedong in their military campaigns, the ultimate art is to win a war without going to war. Is this not what we are witnessing in Nepal today? When will Delhi wake up to the threat of losing a natural ally and a buffer zone, especially at a time when the Maoist movement is becoming bolder in North and Central India?