



Brothers or competitors?

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It is customary to start the year with good wishes and hope that the New Year will be more harmonious than the previous one. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh followed this tradition when he wrote to his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao: "The fast developing relationship (between India and China) transcends the bilateral dimension and is an important determinant for the peace and stability, as well as development and prosperity of Asia and the world

Mr Manmohan Singh added that friendship and cooperation between India and China "is our shared aspiration, which is also in consonance with our common long-term and strategic vision of the relationship." He even agreed to elevate the Sino-Indian dialogue to a "Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity".

A few weeks earlier at the ASEAN Conference, Mr Manmohan Singh had taken the old Nehruvian stand; when asked if China and India were competitors, he replied: "We are brothers." History has shown that since India's independence and the advent of Communism in China, the two nations have not really been 'brothers'. Nevertheless Indian leaders like to continue the old litany. A look at a few hard facts does not paint such a rosy picture. One could even say that dark clouds seem to loom over the relations.

Take the situation in Nepal: India has reluctantly extended the Transit Treaty with Nepal by three months and this after two difficult rounds of negotiations. Nepal was taken by surprise as it had expected an

automatic renewal. The short extension was justified by the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs as giving time to both governments for a complete review of certain clauses in the treaty. New Delhi wanted to look at the "modalities, routes, conditions of transit, and customs arrangements as contained in the protocol and memorandum to the treaty".

Technically, no objection can be raised. But will arm-twisting really help Indo-Nepalese relationship? In the meantime China's 'strategic' partnership with the land-locked Kingdom is growing with each passing day. The greatest blow for India was the recent Chinese supply of 18 trucks of arms and ammunition that included 4.2 million rounds of 7.62 mm rifle ammunition, 80,000 high explosive grenades and 12,000 AK rifles.

Obviously, New Delhi, and more particularly the Ministry of Defence, is not happy with the development, but they have to look in their own backyard to find the reason. The uncompromising attitude of South Block under the leadership of Mr Natwar Singh, himself greatly influenced by the Indian Marxists, has pushed Delhi-Kathmandu relations to the brink. The Indian Government has been insisting on the re-establishment of democracy in Nepal before discussing any other matter (while closing its eyes to the non-democratic systems in China and Pakistan).

The King had no choice, but to seek Beijing support to fight the Maoists. Apparently, New Delhi urged Beijing not to fish in troubled waters, but to no avail. Unlike Delhi, Beijing looks at its interests first. The refusal to 'automatically' prolong the Transit Treaty for three years has its root in the new closeness of the Kingdom with India's 'foe', Pakistan, and India's 'brother', China.

It is ironical that the anti-King parties in Nepal are also deeply disturbed by the arms supplied to the Royal Nepalese Army. In an article, 'China: Friend or foe' in the Kathmandu Post, Siddhi Ranjitkar, writes: "By supplying lethal arms and ammunition to the autocratic regime of Nepal, China has darkened its own red face. The weapons would certainly be used against the freedom and democracy-loving Nepalis. China has already blackened its image by destroying hundreds of thousands of monasteries, killing and expelling tens of thousands of Tibetan monks in 1960s, and suppressing civil liberties and human rights in Tibet and Mainland China."

The writer goes a step further: He points out Beijing's double standards in its foreign policy: "China never seems to forget the atrocities wreaked upon them by the Japanese soldiers during Second World War. It objected to the Japanese Prime Minister's annual visit to the monuments made in memory of the soldiers killed in the war. Do the Chinese authorities want Nepalese to develop a similar contempt for them by supplying lethal weapons to this government?" So much for the peaceful rise of China!

Whichever way one may look at the recent developments, the situation is very grim. Unfortunately, the state of affairs is not brighter eastwards. On December 28, it was reported from the Bhutanese capital Thimphu that "the Chinese are in Bhutan - its soldiers are building roads and bridges deep inside the country".

The crossing of more than 200 Chinese soldiers into Bhutanese territory in mid-November has set off alarm bells in Thimphu and Delhi. On November 13, Chinese soldiers entered Bhutan's northern district of Paro and advanced 20 km inside the Kingdom of the Dragon. The People's Liberation Army later claimed that heavy snowfall in Tibet forced them to trespass into Bhutan. But they also infiltrated

uninhabited remote places such Haa, Boomtang and Wangdi Phudrang. Further, pucca bridges are alleged to have been built in Paro and Haa districts.

Bhutan has a 470-km unfenced border with China and considers the unrequested presence of the Red Army in its territory as a violation of the 1998 Sino-Bhutanese border treaty of peace and tranquillity. When the matter came up before Bhutan's National Assembly, Foreign Minister Khandu Wangchuk promised the House to take up the subject with the Chinese. Later, the Chinese told the Bhutanese that "they were over-reacting and that the roads were being built as part of the economic development programmes for western China".

In a recent article, the Bhutanese newspaper Kuensel wrote: "There are chances that the Chinese might build more roads further into our territory and gradually claim the land as theirs since they have their roads on our territory." Thimphu probably has in mind the Aksai Chin road in Ladakh, linking Tibet to Xinjiang, which was built by the PLA in the mid-1950s.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran may have a dialogue with Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Wu Dawei on Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity, but the fact is that progress on border talks has been negligible. A new round of talk is scheduled for end January in Kerala. The Chinese Ambassador believes that: "Dialogues on a houseboat would provide the ideal setting." It is doubtful. In this context, it is interesting to note the comments made by Rear Admiral Yang Yi, Director of the PLA's Institute of Strategic Studies: "We are quite smart enough to find some solution beneficial to both sides." It is not sure if the Indian side is smart enough and will not give away Aksai Chin against recognition of Arunachal as part of Indian territory.

The Bhutanese rightly worried. One occupies one's neighbour's territory, builds a road in it, and then tries to find a solution "beneficial to all". Very simple! Another worry for India is the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, set for trial operation on July 1, 2006. Chinese Vice-Premier Zeng Peiyan said in Beijing last week that the railway would be completed one year before schedule, "an overall victory of a decisive battle".

An overall victory for whom? Certainly not for the people of Tibet who will be annihilated by waves of Han colonisers just as Inner Mongolia has been and Xinjiang is in the process of being! Certainly not for India, which will have a railway line less than a day's drive from its border, particularly when it knows that the railway line could be extended to Nepal! Year 2006 does look quite ominous!