

Visit to India by Nepal's prime minister throws Beijing off guard

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

Nepal Prime Minister G.P. Koirala's recent visit to India, days before the much-heralded Dec. 11 visit to India of China's Prime Minister Li Peng, was a singular triumph for Indo-Nepal bilateral relations and may give cause for a serious concern to the Chinese leadership. Beside Prime Minister Koirala's assertion that the previous regime's decision to buy arms from China was a "mistake" which will not occur again in the future, his sudden deviation from Nepal's age-old position backing the proposal to make South Asia a nuclear free zone has been widely welcomed in India. Koirala's pointed pronouncements in New Delhi were made as Beijing was preparing for the first visit of a Chinese head of state to India in 31 years.

Prime Minister Koirala's visit was ostensibly to sign two separate treaties which have been hanging fire for more than two years, on trade and transit with India. Besides concluding these treaties, a number of agreements on projects for development of water resources were also reached during the visit. Among the projects are hydroelectric projects on the Karnali Bend on Karnali River, Pancheshwar River, and Sapta Kosi River, and multi-purpose projects like the Burhi Gandaki River flood-protection and forecasting scheme in central Nepal. It was also announced that the government of India will undertake an investigation of the road connecting the Tanakpura Barrage to the East-West Highway at Mahendranagar. In addition, Prime Minister Koirala invited Indian industrialists to invest in Nepal to set up agro-industrial infrastructure, and he assured them that rules and regulations governing trade and investment would be framed to facilitate greater cooperation with India.

Push for agro-industrial projects

This is the first time that Nepal has shown such clear interest in setting up agro-industrial infrastructure and moving away from the country's increasingly deteriorating dependency on agricultural produce. Koirala's pitch for developing agro-industrial infrastructure runs counter to the Nepali monarchy's present model of developing Nepal into a Hong Kong-style entrepôt ensconced in the Himalayan hills. Over the years, Kathmandu, the nation's capital, has become notorious for drugs and fast bucks to attract a certain variety of

foreign tourists.

Most important, however, is the decision to sign an agreement for joint cooperation with India to develop Nepal's "white gold"—its water resources. The projects, which the Indian prime minister described as "music to my ears," mentioned in the agreement have the combined potential to generate as much as 12,000 megawatts of electrical power at peak level—more than twice the amount Nepal generates today. The flood-protection scheme for controlling the Burhi Gandaki and the Sapta Kosi rivers will also reduce flooding significantly in India's Gangetic plains where the rivers disgorge their water into the Ganga River. Commenting on the agreement, Indian Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao said: "Our rivers, whose benediction has blessed our lands, must endure as a hope of well-being and of promise of our peoples."

Koirala spoke in Hindi, not English

At a joint press conference in New Delhi with the Indian prime minister, Prime Minister Koirala said that the success of his visit would be gauged by the extent to which he had been able to strengthen the relationship between India and Nepal. The Nepalese prime minister used Hindi instead of the customary English for his introductory remarks. "Agreements and treaties are minor matters before the fundamental fact of the centuries-old relationship with India," the Nepalese prime minister said.

Answering a question on the emergence of tensions in the relationship between India and Nepal as a result of Nepal's purchase of arms from China without consulting India, Prime Minister Koirala said that the arms purchases were a "mistake" committed by the previous non-representative regime and such mistakes "will not occur again." He also asked Indian newsmen "to bury the past" on a query about the Chinese involvement in building roads within Nepal.

Although the Nepalese prime minister told the press that he welcomed the forthcoming visit of Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng to India, the Chinese reaction to Koirala's press conference was sharp, if typical. Earlier, the Chinese ambassador to India, Chen Ruisheng, had told a scribe, who is promoting strong Sino-Indian relations to counter the North in the present global context, that India and China "should

go back to the relationship of the '50s," referring to the halcyon days of Sino-Indian friendship which were smashed in 1962 with the Chinese invasion across the Himalayas over their disputed border. One day after Prime Minister Koirala's news conference, Ambassador Chen accused India of harboring anti-China Tibetans in India. At the reception hosted by the President of India for the Nepalese prime minister, Ambassador Chen was found to be less than cheerful.

Nuclear free zones

But Koirala's disengagements from past "mistakes" was not the only thing to rattle the Chinese. At a news conference in Varanasi, where a large number of Nepalese academics are associated with various institutions, Prime Minister Koirala took a diametrically opposite position from what King Birendra, the present constitutional monarch who lost a large share of his powers with the installation of a democratic system last year, had voiced over the years to the satisfaction of both Beijing and Islamabad. Answering a query, Prime Minister Koirala said Nepal differs with Pakistan's assertions that only South Asia should be free of nuclear weapons. "Why only South Asia, why not the whole world?" asked Koirala.

With the full support of the United States, China, and whatever is left of the Soviet Union, Pakistan had recently moved a resolution successfully at the U.N. General Assembly to make South Asia a nuclear free zone. The process of de-nuclearization, Pakistan's prime minister suggested, should involve a five-party meeting including India, Pakistan, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Besides pointing out that global, and not regional, de-nuclearization should be pursued, the Indian objection is that the process would leave China (with whom India, Pakistan, Bhutan, and Nepal—all South Asian nations—have common borders), sitting with a formidable nuclear arsenal, a situation unacceptable from India's security viewpoint.

Closer relations with China

Though Prime Minister Koirala's visit took some wind out of its sails, a vocal lobby has emerged to push for closer relations with China, ostensibly to form a power bloc within the South countries to demand economic and other equalities with the North. The argument for this new "anti-imperialist" front conveniently ignores the fact that the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Reginald Bartholomew, who came on the heels of the Pakistani resolution to pressure India to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), was himself promoting closer Sino-Indian relations to the Indians.

Those who are in the know also point out that China has been a major supplier of arms to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Nepal (on one occasion). Despite the ritual disclaimer of all arms dealers that China is supplying only defensive weapons, the policy has increased tension on the subcontinent.

India's Ministry for External Affairs responded routinely

to Ambassador Chen's accusation by reiterating its position that Tibet is an autonomous region in China, and made no mention of "harboring of anti-China elements." But those who oppose closer Sino-India relations have also become active in the run-up to Li Peng's arrival. They point out that all along India's northeast borders, ample evidence exists of Chinese backing for various tribal and ethnic groups against Delhi. Such support comes via supply of arms, drugs, and providing arms training to the guerrillas. Most of the contacts are maintained by China through its southern paw, Burma.

China's critics are active

It is also a reality that China has not accepted the unification of Sikkim with India, which took place in 1975, and there is strong evidence that China is also behind the "Greater Nepal" movement, fomented through the Nepal Communist Party, the Nepali royal household, and anti-India elements within India. The "Greater Nepal" concept is to bring together a Himalayan kingdom—a pet project of the British in earlier days as a bulwark against the "yellow peril"—which would include Nepal, Sikkim, and the northern hill districts of West Bengal. China, the advocates of caution point out, has violated the very basis on which its five principles of peaceful coexistence is based and which is now preached as the new ideology for state-to-state relations.

It has also been pointed out in the media here that President Bush's new world order scheme, which Beijing nominally opposes, drew critical strength from the collaboration of China in the United Nations. China, which enjoys a \$12 billion surplus trade balance with the United States, is furthermore not likely to be interested in confronting Washington on economic issues, no matter what the verbal blasts are. In other words, the critics of a new fling with China point out, China's role in the post-collapse of the Soviet center suggests that it is working for nothing other than its "own interest"—as the mandarins of Beijing perceive it.

Critics argue that Li Peng's visit, hence, is not to seek the hand of India to fight the growing inequalities of which the South nations are at the receiving end, but to legitimize the discredited leadership in Beijing and to project China as a frontline activist among the South nations. Under the influence of Madison Avenue image-builders, Li Peng has embarked on a voyage to India to lift the faded image of a group of leaders desperately trying to hold on to power by appeasing the North while suppressing internal dissent.

Whether the Indian leadership will see through China's *realpolitik* or opt to go back to the relationship of the 1950s, is not yet to be seen. Meanwhile, the Nepalese prime minister's forthright approach to better relations with India, his very public distancing of China, will be eyed with suspicion in Beijing. It is unlikely that China will ease pressure on Nepal or give up support to its well-established assets there, if Chinese involvement, even today, with the disgraced and dangerous Khmer Rouge in Cambodia is any indication.