

India and the Himalayan states

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Introduction

The Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan and the Indian state of Sikkim have occupied an important place in India's foreign policy scheme.¹ The importance of these Himalayan actors for India can be visualized from two different angles: a) the strategic importance of these Himalayan actors for India's national security; and b) the place of these Himalayan actors in India's own role perception in international politics. The Himalayas have become the southern border of the People's Republic of China, but they do not occupy such an important place in the Chinese life and culture as they do in India. The Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan and the erstwhile kingdom (now Indian state) of Sikkim were considered an integral part of the Indian regional system. As such, these three units are right in the middle of India's whole 'Himalayan frontiers', its northern 'borderland' flanks.²

Himalayan frontiers after Indian independence

The Himalayas were the arena for competition between British India and China in imperial times, with important buffer considerations being in play. The foreign policy of British rulers of India had been directed towards securing the alliance, integrity, or neutralization of the borderlands and minor states covering the Himalayan land approaches to the Indian empire, and blocking countervailing Chinese competition.³ The 'ring fence' system operated by Britain resulted in an independent but friendly and co-operative Nepal, with Sikkim and Bhutan as Indian protectorates, and with Tibet as an autonomous buffer state guaranteeing India's commercial and strategic interests there. On this 'imperial chessboard', the British Government sent a strong note of warning to a weak China on 11 April 1910, which informed China that no interference in the affairs of the Himalayan states would be tolerated.⁴ At the time these areas indeed formed 'the Gates of India [...] mountain ways which have aforetime let in the irrepressible Chinaman'.⁵ One hundred years later and similar dynamics and similar concerns were

in play for India. India was, though, in an enviable position on gaining independence in 1947, so far as security in the north was concerned, with 'Forward Rights' inherited in Tibet and a weak China still mired in civil war.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's architect of foreign policy, wanted to continue the British policy towards the Himalayan states, but he failed to do so. It might have happened due to the lack of long-term strategic vision or excessive idealistic structures of Indian foreign policy. The fault lines started with the Indian policy on Tibet. From 1946 to 1951 the Tibet policy of Nehru and his associates reflected that of the British: treating Tibet as an autonomous buffer state between that of India and China, recognizing vague Chinese suzerainty but *not* sovereignty over Tibet. Thus, in March 1947 a Tibetan delegation was invited to the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi, despite protests from Chinese (Kuomintang) delegates.

When the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) marched into Tibet in 1950, Indians (including Nehru), vociferously protested against the invasion. Such actions indicated India's preference for continuing the British policy towards Tibet. Nehru wanted to protect the Indian security interests in the Himalayan regions. As the Chinese communists neared their revolutionary victory, Nehru rushed through a series of defence treaties with Bhutan (August 1949), Nepal (July 1950) and Sikkim (December 1950). These countries constituted Nehru's definition of a redrawn security zone. Throughout the 1950s Nehru demonstrated his serious commitment to this Himalayan doctrine. In February 1951 he established the North and North-Eastern Defence Committee, and visited the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), Sikkim and Bhutan. In public statements in August and December 1959, Nehru offered support in the defence of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim in case of Chinese invasion.

Gradually, though, India started losing ground in the Himalayan regions vis-à-vis China. Neither India's vital interests in the Himalayas nor its stand on the border problem were recognized in writing or respected in practice by China. Nor was the autonomy of Tibet respected by China. Ironically, Nepal seems to have had a firmer sense of this. When Nehru was faced with the Nepalese Government's argument that 'they had not recognised the sovereignty of China over Tibet which for them was an autonomous state', this was met by Nehru's rejoinder that 'it was well known that Tibet is part of Chinese State and the Chinese exercised full sovereignty there. This fact has inevitably to be recognized'.⁶ In recognizing full Chinese control of Tibet, as a 'region of China' in the 1954 *Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India*, strategically India surrendered its outer ring of defence without gaining anything substantial in return from China. Ginsburg and Mathos, in their study on *Communist China and Tibet* (1964) clearly brought out the geographical importance of Tibet in this domino-theory type logic: 'he who holds Tibet dominates; he who dominates the Himalayan piedmont threatens the Indian sub-continent; and he who threatens the Indian sub-continent may well have all of south-east Asia within its reach, and with it, all of Asia'.⁷ The Chinese occupation of Tibet brought home to India the urgency of taking effective steps to safeguard its national security in the north. The occupation of Tibet by China was in itself a grave threat to India's security. To add to India's woes, the Chinese claimed that the Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim were in fact Chinese 'Middle Kingdom' territories that China had lost to the imperialist in her bad days and now that China had acquired strength it would try to regain the 'lost territories'. Occupation of Tibet by a strong China exposed the Himalayan states and India's northern frontier to a grave potential threat, with Nepal-Bhutan-Sikkim constituting what Dawa Norbu described as a 'new buffer zone', after the old buffer (Tibet) had fallen under China's sovereign political-military control in 1951.⁸ It is to Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim that we now turn.

Nepal

Strategic location of Nepal

Of the three Himalayan units, Nepal is the largest, covering an area of 140,797 sq km (54,362 sq miles). Bounded on the north by China (the Tibetan region) and on the south, east and west by India, Nepal is a land-locked state, smaller in size than several states of the Indian Union. Nepal is separated from the Tibet region of China by the great Himalayan range. Except for 8,000 sq miles of the southern plain strip, 80% of the total area of Nepal is mountainous. The three principal river systems of Nepal (the Karnali, the Gandak and the Kosi) all have their sources in Tibet, and enter Nepal through three gorges that cut across the Himalayas. Bhattacharya has been clear on Nepal's geopolitical significance. For him, Nepal's

[s]trategic importance can be fathomed not only from its geo-political location, being sandwiched between the two rising Asian giants but also from its transformation into a new buffer zone between India and China in the 1950s. This buffer has assumed even more importance in the current times with Royal Nepal being transformed into a People's Nepal in the aftermath of the Maoist victory in the election to the Constituent Assembly on April 10, 2008. The victory of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) CPN(M) a one-time rebel group, has significant geopolitical repercussions for the region.⁹

If one stands back, then 'Indian-Chinese rivalry in Nepal' indeed continues to provide the main strategic feature surrounding Nepal.¹⁰

Changed status of Tibet and its implications for Nepal

The withdrawal of Britain from the Indian subcontinent in 1947 brought India's inheritance of British pre-eminence in Nepal. Nehru's sense in 1948–49 was that 'politically our interest in Nepal is so important', and that Indian policy was 'to prevent the exploitation of Nepal by [other] foreign interests', but to 'help in developing Nepal to the mutual advantage of Nepal and India'.¹¹ However, one new 'foreign interest' raising its head was the conclusion of the Chinese civil war, and with it the emergence of a strong People's Republic of China. On 6 December 1950, summing up India's security concerns *vis-à-vis* Nepal, Nehru had said to parliament: 'from time immemorial the Himalayas have provided us with magnificent frontiers. We cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also the principal barrier to India. Therefore, as much as we appreciate the independence of Nepal, we cannot allow anything to go wrong in Nepal or permit that barrier to be crossed or weakened, because that would be a risk to our own country'.¹² The Indo-Nepalese Treaty of Peace and Friendship (July 1950) had the two states 'agree mutually to acknowledge and respect the complete sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of each other' (Article 1).¹³ However, with regard to sensitive military-defence matters, Article 5 gave India an important role: 'the Government of Nepal shall be free to import, from or through the territory of India, ammunition or warlike material and equipment necessary for the security of Nepal. The procedure for giving effect to this arrangement shall be worked out by the two governments acting in consultation'. Consequently, a close consultative relationship settled down on commerce, defence and foreign relations, with Indian military missions deployed during the 1950s. India has subsequently maintained that any attack on Nepal would be regarded as an aggression against India. However, the 1950 Treaty's military-consultative clause faced some resentment in Nepal, which

began seeing it as an encroachment of its sovereignty and an unwelcome extension of Indian influence.

China's occupation of Tibet in 1950–51 completely changed Nepal's status for India. India's status in Nepal became vulnerable, since India accepted Tibet as an integral part of China under the 1954 *Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India*. Once this had occurred, China began to claim territory along the Indo-Tibetan border, using the provisions of the 1954 Treaty as its rationale. The following year, China began to compete with India for a sphere of influence in Nepal. The changed strategic status of Nepal provided an opportunity to the Nepalese rulers to swing from one posture to another.¹⁴

Changing foreign policy of Nepal

The first significant foreign policy shift by Nepal was the establishment of diplomatic relations with China in 1955. Shortly after his return to Nepal, King Mahendra, to the great surprise of all (and more so of the Indian leaders) announced the formation of a cabinet headed by Tanka Prasad Acharya. Just after assuming office in 1956, Acharya declared at a press conference that Nepal would pursue a policy of equal friendship with all countries, and accept economic and other help from all friendly countries, including China and Russia. King Mahendra set for Nepal the ultimate foreign policy objective of balancing the external influences in order to minimize their capacity to restrict Nepal's freedom of action. The Nepalese Government embarked upon the policy of diversifying its relations, but alienated and antagonized India. Nepal made an informal request to India suggesting the revision of the Indo-Nepalese Treaty of trade and commerce of 1950 and is reported to have secured an assurance from her. Shortly after the conclusion of the agreement, in September 1956, Acharya paid a visit to Beijing to become the first Nepalese prime minister to visit the People's Republic of China. Significantly, he went to China *before* going over to India.

China gave aid to Nepal as part of its policy of detaching Nepal from India's embrace. It built the Kathmandu–Kodari road, the construction of which started in 1963 and was completed in 1965. The road provided a direct strategic connection between China and Nepal via the difficult Tibetan route. If Nepal was not able to resist an attack through this road, the Indian heartland would be easily accessible. For India, these developments were a cause of grave concern. The nature of this proximity was all the more troubling for India in wake of its defeat in the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

Nepal is the only one of the three Himalayan kingdoms with enough power to play an autonomous role between China and India. China openly exhorted the Nepalese assertion of independence throughout the 1970s. Intense anti-India propaganda was directed by China towards Nepal. When India annexed Sikkim in 1974, Chinese propagandists argued that Nepal might be India's next target.

The expanding role of China in Nepal and its implications for India

In India, the growing friendship between Nepal and China produced concern and anxiety, the more so in the arrival of the CPN(M) as the largest party in the 2008 general elections, and formation of a Maoist-led government under Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), which held office until May 2009. The talks held by his defence minister, Ram Bahadur Thapa, heading a three-member delegation to witness the PLA's 'Warrior 2008' military exercise with China's defence minister, Gen. Li Guanglie, raised yet more concerns for India. The Chinese PLA wanted to extend its relations with the Maoist PLA in Nepal.

Meanwhile, the Chinese presence in Nepal grew in size. Apart from road and rail linkages, there was a sudden proliferation of China Study Centres (CSCs) all along the Indo-Nepalese border, with their number rising from seven in 2005 to 19 by February 2008. Whilst they were initially set up in 2000 as civil society groups to promote cultural interaction, they have become effective enough tools for advancing Chinese perspectives concerning Nepal. These centres also distribute materials to undermine India's predominance in Nepal, to stress 'the benign role of China and caution the Nepalis about India's hegemonic intentions'.¹⁵ One indication of this growing Chinese influence in and on Nepal is the latter's crackdown on Tibetan protests in April 2008 at the behest of China, with Beijing deploying security officials inside Nepal to help detect fleeing Tibetans and keep a lid on unrest. Trans-border considerations are important here, China seeing Tibetan unrest as being stimulated by international forces operating from Nepal. Thus, in order to secure its southern Tibetan periphery, which it considers most vulnerable, it feels the need to monitor clandestine activities in Nepal.

China can also hope to capitalize on moves by land-locked Nepal to reduce its economic dependency on India. It has been mooted the extension of the China–Tibet railway line down into Nepal. India is Nepal's largest trading partner, accounting for more than 60% of its trade, and 12 of the 13 trade routes for Nepal are via India. About 50% of Nepal's remittances come from India. Thus, for strategic *and* economic reasons, the Maoists feel the urgent need to cultivate deeper ties with China on the one hand, and reduce their dependence on India on the other. This, therefore, also explains why the Maoists called for renegotiating the 1950 Treaty between India and Nepal.

The collapse in May 2009 of the Maoist-led government of Prachanda has, though, given India the chance to regain some ground *vis-à-vis* China in Nepal. Indeed, faced with new intelligence-sharing arrangements between India and Nepal, and talks of an Indian air base being set up in Nepal, worried Chinese sources were warning in March 2010 that 'India has resumed military cooperation with Nepal [...] the struggle between pro-India and pro-China forces in Nepal is at a critical stage and China needs to pay more attention to its interests there'.¹⁶

Changing contours of Indo-Nepalese relations

India–Nepal relations have been special from the very beginning, with 'interdependence' often used in connection with its Hindu monarchy.¹⁷ In recent years India's 'uneasy partner' has presented uncertainties for India, which in turn has had a somewhat 'rickety roadmap' to follow.¹⁸

During the 1950s the monarchy in Nepal for its own self-interests initiated an anti-India campaign. The *Citizenship Act* of 1952, which allowed Indians to emigrate to Nepal and acquire Nepalese citizenship with ease, fanned this resentment. Mahendra succeeded his father in March 1955. His desire to reduce the special relationship with India to an equal one by increasing Nepal's strategic options led to moves to circumvent the 1950 Treaty. Nepal signed an agreement to maintain friendly relations with China in 1956. It had already become a member of the UN in December 1955. It sought aid from Britain, the USA, France and the Soviet Union, besides India. All in all, during the last 50 years, powerful vested interests have injected an anti-India ethos into Nepalese nationalism to serve their narrow political and economic interests during the monarchy. Even the kingdom's socio-economic and ethnic divide between the hills and the plains have been linked to anti-India feelings.

Such anti-India sentiments were further strengthened under the Maoist Government in Nepal, the outbursts of which have systematically created an anti-India wave in Nepal. While

calling for reconsideration of India's present policies towards smaller neighbours, Prachanda said that India sought to intimidate, interfere with, expand its influence over and dictate terms to its neighbours. His wish list against India is indeed long and includes, among other items, the regulation of the Nepal-India border, banning entry of Indian vehicles into Nepal, and the end of Gurkha recruitments in the Indian armed forces. The Nepalese Maoists have tended to maintain a staunch anti-India posture from the very beginning. Prachanda said, 'Nepal after signing the Sugauli Treaty of 1816 with the then British India entered into the era of a partial-colonial and feudal system which continues to date', and stated further, 'we are yet to liberate ourselves from the partial colonial and feudal system with the dawn of the republican order'.¹⁹ Outside players are involved in this process, with China keen to end the Nepalese over-dependence on India. Another active player in fanning anti-India feelings in Nepal has been Pakistan. As Chengappa notes, there has been a convergence of interests there against India: 'over the years India has been the primary focus of Pakistan-Nepal relations [...] Pakistan has striven to exploit the irritants in India's relationship with Nepal and thereby strengthen her stature vis-à-vis India in the subcontinent. Nepal sought to develop ties with Pakistan, so as to reduce its dependence on India'.²⁰

Consistent ideological feeding against India among the Nepalese youth has been taking place for the last many years. Covertly and overtly it was started under the monarchy of King Mahendra, whilst the Prachanda Government cemented this still further into official policy-making. An anti-India wave in Pakistan was the result of the ideological fermentation by political leaders there. If Nepal moves on the same line, it will pose a similar security threat to India.

India's concerns loom large on the revision of 1950 India-Nepal Treaty. Should the controversial clause concerning arms sales change? If that happens, would Nepal choose China as a new supplier of weapons? Furthermore, access to energy from China will challenge India's almost complete current monopoly on energy exports to Nepal. If India is to prevent Nepal from slipping into China's hands completely, which economically and strategically it can ill afford, then it can no longer view Nepal as a subordinate partner and northern backyard of India. This may force India to rearrange the Himalayan frontiers policy.

Emerging cross-border threats to India from Nepal

As much as an 821-km stretch of the 1,664-km Indo-Nepalese border adjoins Uttar Pradesh. Of this, around 391 km is spread across Poorvanchal's five sensitive districts: Maharajganj, Sidharthanagar, Balrampur, Shravasti and Bahraich. The Union Minister of Home Affairs, Sripriyash Jaiswal, stated that, in view of Pakistani militants using Nepalese territory as a hideout and base for infiltration into India, the Government might re-draft its extradition treaty with Nepal. He said Pakistani militants had 'found a safe hideout in Nepal and it is a safe passage for coming to India'.²¹ The Minister's statement confirmed a fact well-documented over the years, that Nepalese territory has long been used by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) as a launching pad for its activities against India.

The ISI is trying to exploit anti-India groups with the utilization of Nepalese soil as a springboard for launching terrorist strikes against India with the help of Kashmir extremists. A large number of *madrasas* (religious schools) have mushroomed along the Indo-Nepalese border. Most of the new mosques and *madrasas* went up after 1988, in the Nepalese districts of Bardia, Kapilvastu and Nawalparasi bordering Kheri West, Siddhartnagar and Maharajganj in Uttar Pradesh, and in Parsa, Bara and Saptari bordering East Champaran, Sitamarhi and Supaul in

Bihar. There are also anti-India campaigns being run by the Nepal Muslim Etteland Sangh, Islamic Sangh Nepal and Muslim Youth Organization. The Ministry of Home Affairs *Annual Report 1999–2000* highlighted this Pakistani involvement in Nepal:

Pakistani intelligence agencies have started exploiting India's open border with Nepal for infiltration of militants along with arms, ammunition and explosives to carry out terrorist strikes in various parts of India with the help of certain Indian extremist groups as well as Pakistan based fundamentalist groups like Harku-uk Mujahideen. Since the 1990s, Pakistani intelligence agencies have been very active in Nepal for helping anti-India elements to infiltrate into India.²²

The arrest of several militants and their subsequent interrogation added to evidence on the growing ISI network in Nepal. Dawood Ibrahim is reported to have visited Kathmandu at least half a dozen times since 1998. He is believed to be using his connections with the ISI and Nepal's leading politicians, business houses and the underworld for large-scale smuggling and questionable *hawala* (remittance) transactions.

With the weak political situation in Nepal during the late 1990s and early part of the new century, not much attention was able to be paid to the porous 1,751-km Indo-Nepalese border. Some 20 Indian districts and 26 districts of Nepal are situated on both sides of the border and although there were 15 check point posts between the two countries to monitor human traffic, only seven were functional. In the absence of a secure control apparatus along the border, Maoists, aided and abetted by the ISI, have formed a common front and have been working hard to smuggle narcotics and arms. Drugs and mafia on the India–Nepal border pose a serious challenge to the Indian security apparatus, in which most of the criminals find safe passage to Nepal and a safe refuge too. The Nepalese border has been a road to heaven for smugglers, who have been able to smuggle drugs and arms to India without hindrance.

Finally, a further concern, of late, within the Indian security establishment, is the nightmare scenario of the Nepalese Maoists carving out a Compact Revolutionary Zone, a 'Revolutionary Corridor' spreading from Nepal through Bihar and the Dandkaranya region to Andhra Pradesh and the Naxalite insurgency. As one Nepalese Maoist figure, C.P. Gajurel, put it in 2009, 'we have extended our full support and cooperation to the Indian Maoists, who are launching armed revolt'.²³ Thus India's external and internal challenges converge, and make ties with Nepal of extreme importance, yet also of extreme delicacy for India.

Bhutan

Bhutan, the *durk yul* 'land of thunder dragons', is the second largest of the Himalayan kingdoms, with an area of around 38,394 sq km that is less than one-quarter of the size of Nepal's area of around 140,797 sq km. Two-thirds of Bhutan is covered with forest and everywhere there are mountains and strong water flows. Bhutan is bounded on the north (like Nepal) by the Tibetan region of China, and on the south and the east by the Indian union territory of Arunachal Pradesh. Geopolitically, the location of Bhutan between the Tibetan plateau and the Assam-Bengal plains of India makes it important for India; as one Indian analyst summarized, 'Bhutan occupies a strategic position on our northern border'.²⁴ In terms of external boundaries, Bhutan has a border of 605 km with India and 470 km with China; the two countries 'collide' in and over Bhutan.²⁵ Bhutan, therefore, emerges as a crucial buffer state between India and China in the eastern Himalayas in the military sense. Western Bhutan borders the sensitive Chumbi valley, and therefore guards any possible Chinese ingress routes in any possible future

conflict. The Indian state of Sikkim, adjoining western Bhutan, until recently was being disputed by China. Similarly, eastern Bhutan adjoins vital Indian Army defences in Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state still wholly claimed by China.

Bhutan's special relationship with India

On the one hand, Bhutan has cultural affinities with Tibet, as 80% of Bhutan's population was of Tibetan stock, and their language, customs and religion were much like those of the Tibetans. On the other hand, Bhutan is geographically a part of the Indian subcontinent, and has extremely close political ties to India. Under the 1949 Treaty of Friendship and Neighbourliness, 'The Government of India undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations' (Article 2).²⁶ That particular 'guidance' clause was removed in the revised 2007 Treaty, however.²⁷

Between 1951 and 1958 India's relations with Bhutan and Sikkim were by and large harmonious. Various visits were quickly made by the Bhutanese rulers to India in 1952, 1954 and 1955, reflecting the close relations between the two countries. Nehru, the architect of Indian foreign policy, fully realized the importance of Bhutan for Indian security. Nehru's description of Bhutan in 1954 was sanguine:

Our relations with Bhutan are friendly. Bhutan is a semi-independent State whose foreign policy has to be conducted in consultation with us. The State receives a subsidy from us also. They are very anxious to preserve their independence, but realise that they have to rely on India. We have no desire to interfere internally in Bhutan but we have made it clear that, so far as external matters are concerned or any defence matters, India is intensely interested and must have a say. This is the position.²⁸

Such perceptions remain the position for India. The persistent Indian effort to persuade Bhutan to become a partner yielded some result, and by 1958 Bhutan was persuaded to embark on the gradual modernization of the country and link its fate with India. Nehru was the first foreign dignitary ever to visit Bhutan. During his 1958 stay in Bhutan, Nehru had discussions with the Maharaja and other high officials of the kingdom. The visit was not only a landmark in Bhutan's relations with India, but also a step in the gradual opening of Bhutan for India. It also brought assurances from Nehru in the Indian parliament, on 29 August 1959, that any (Chinese) aggression against Bhutan, and Sikkim, would be considered an act of aggression against India. A team of Indian military officers visited Bhutan in 1961 in order to make the necessary arrangements with Bhutan for its defence. Half a century later and such linkages are still very evident between India and Bhutan.

Military and economic assistance

India's continuing military assistance to Bhutan was reciprocated in 2003 when Bhutanese military forces took action in *Operation All Clear* against some 30 camps of Indian insurgent groups (such as the United Liberation Front of Assam—ULFA—the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, and the Kamtapur Liberation Organization), which had set-up training camps on Bhutanese territory.²⁹ India has assured Bhutan of its continued support for military and development projects, and is currently preparing a comprehensive modernization package for the Bhutanese army. It has agreed to sell low-tech arms to Bhutan—5.56-mm INSAS assault rifles,

51-mm or 81-mm mortars, night-vision devices, winter clothing for the army, and military vehicles. It has also agreed to increase the military training of Bhutanese army officers in India. India will also establish a joint military grid to patrol against Indian militants.³⁰

India is the single largest donor to Bhutan; in fact, it has flooded Bhutan with economic aid. Eight Five Year Plans in Bhutan have been completed since 1961, the first two of which were totally financed by India. Indian contributions to Bhutan's Five Year Plans remain significant. The Indian contribution to the 7th Five Year Plan for 1992–97 was 750 crores; to the 8th Five Year Plan for 1997–2002 it was 1,050 crores (26% of the total plan outlay); to the 9th Five Year Plan for 2002–07 it was 2,600 crores. India has also contributed to Bhutan's development outside the scope of the Five Year Plans, through megaprojects on infrastructure and power supplies. Bhutan also enjoys complete free trade with India, and remains dependent on India for most of its imports and exports. During 2008 imports from India were of the order of Rs17,330m. and constituted 74% of Bhutan's total imports. Bhutan's exports to India in 2008 amounted to Rs21,480m. and constituted 95% of its total exports.

Manmohan Singh's visit to Bhutan in May 2008, the previous visit being by Narashima Rao in 1993, brought a raft of economic and hydro-electric energy deals, with India also again agreeing to fund nearly one-quarter of Bhutan's 10th Five Year Plan, with an outlay of 3,400 crores. In his speech to the Bhutanese parliament, the Indian Prime Minister reckoned that India's wider total bilateral economic engagement with Bhutan over the next five years was to be of the order of Rs100,000m. (10,000 crores). In terms of security, he flagged up new security issues, where 'India and Bhutan are well placed to create a new paradigm for inter-governmental cooperation in the areas of water security and environmental integrity. The Himalayan glaciers are our common asset and we can do much more together to devise strategies to combat global warming'.³¹ Interestingly, though, he avoided any mention of Bhutan's security problems with China, though he did announce the construction of the first railway linkage between Bhutan and India, perhaps a response to China's construction of a direct railway line to Lhasa and its moves to extend it to the borders of Nepal and Bhutan. Bhutan's moves against terrorist groups and its common problems with China have moved Bhutan's relationship with India 'from development cooperation to strategic partnership', albeit between two partners with very different power.³²

The Chinese stand on Bhutan

The July 1958 issue of *China Pictorial* published a map of China in which the Sino-Indian border was indicated by a thick brown line. This map once again included a large chunk of Indian territory within the territorial limits of China. A considerable area of eastern and north-eastern Bhutan was also portrayed as part of China. China had always claimed rights in Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim on grounds of traditional, ethnic, cultural and religious affinity between the populations of these lands and China's Tibetan region, in which the chief aim of the Government's current manipulations in the region seemed to be to detach these territories from India and integrate them into the Chinese orbit by any means short of war.³³ It came to the notice of the Bhutanese and Indian authorities that the Chinese had occupied eight villages on the Bhutan–Tibet border in 1959. In accordance with the Article 2 provisions of the 1949 India–Bhutan Treaty, India took up the border matter with China on behalf of Bhutan. In a letter dated 22 March 1959, Nehru wrote to the Chinese premier that the publication of Chinese maps showing parts of Indian and Bhutanese territory as parts of China were not in accordance with long-established usage as well as treaties. Even though Nehru firmly adhered to the view that the security of Bhutan and Sikkim was the concern of India, Zhou Enlai refused to

recognize any 'special relation' of Bhutan and Sikkim with India. Since 1984 some 19 rounds of border talks have been held between Bhutan and China, but with little result.³⁴

Recent developments in Bhutan and concerns for India

India assumed the responsibility for the defence of Bhutan because of what it considered to be China's ruthless actions in Tibet and its aggressive posture along the disputed borders. Bhutan has also become concerned about China's road-building ventures on its immediate northern borders in recent times. In November 2004 Bhutan lodged a formal protest to Beijing stating that some of China's road building programme violated the *Bhutan-China Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity Along the Sino-Bhutanese Border Areas* (1998). The agreement stipulates that China and Bhutan will maintain peace and tranquillity on the borders, uphold the status quo of the boundary prior to March 1959 and not resort to unilateral action to alter the status quo of the border. China purportedly agreed to suspend the construction work until the next round of border talks in 2005, but then resumed activity, amidst inconclusive border talks and cross-border incursions. This all led to Indian accusations of China's 'bullying and teasing tactics'.³⁵ Chinese troop movements in late 2007 into the disputed Chumbi valley tri-junction between Bhutan, China (Tibet) and India (Sikkim) brought immediate Indian reinforcements, and pointed attention towards Sikkim's role in Himalayan politics.

Sikkim

Sikkim is the smallest of the three Himalayan kingdoms, with an area of 7,096 sq km (2,739 sq miles). The relatively short, but strategically important, Sikkim-China frontier lies between the Nepal-China and Bhutan-China borders. There are several easily traversable passes on this border, the most important being Nathu La. During British rule Sikkim was not considered part of British India, either as an allied princely state or as a colonial territory. Instead, relations between Sikkim and British India were handled under a separate set of treaties. Those agreements did, however, establish British administrative control over Sikkim, which was considered a protectorate. Following Indian independence, India's role increased when an Indian official was loaned to Sikkim to serve as prime minister and reorganize the region's administrative system. Sikkim-India relations became closer still in 1950, as the Chinese occupation of Tibet destroyed India's Tibetan buffer. China's move prompted India's leaders to debate the proper approach to Sikkim.

Sikkim came under India's umbrella with the India-Sikkim Peace Treaty, signed in December 1950.³⁶ Under the Treaty, politically 'Sikkim shall continue to be a Protectorate of India, and subject to the provisions of this Treaty, shall enjoy autonomy in regard to its internal affairs' (Article II). Militarily, 'the Government of India will be responsible for the defence and integrity of Sikkim. It shall have the right to take such measures as it considers necessary for the defence of Sikkim or the security of India, whether preparatory or otherwise, and within or outside Sikkim. In particular, the Government of India shall have the right to station troops anywhere within Sikkim' (Article III). Diplomatically, 'the external relations of Sikkim, whether political, economic or financial, shall be conducted and regulated solely by the Government of India; and the Government of Sikkim shall have no dealings with any foreign power' (Article IV). India's argument was that such arrangements were 'dictated by the facts of geography'.³⁷

Sikkim remained ethnically divided. The eruption of serious ethnic rioting and anti-Chogyal (Sikkim's ruler) demonstrations in early 1973 provided India with an opportunity to act, with policy inspired by a belief that India must act or China would take advantage of the situation.

Units of the Indian army and the paramilitary central reserve police force were deployed to Sikkim to re-establish order.³⁸ In September 1974 the Indian parliament adopted a constitutional amendment making Sikkim an 'associate state' of (i.e. within) India. China's ministry of foreign affairs 'strongly condemned' this as 'outright expansionism' and 'colonialism' on the part of India.

Foreign support encouraged the Chogyal, to attempt to use foreign influence to limit India's embrace of Sikkim. In March 1975 the Chogyal attended the coronation of Nepal's King Birendra in Kathmandu. While there, he met with Chinese and Pakistani representatives, seeking their support. He also gave a press conference in Kathmandu criticizing India's moves and challenging the legality of Sikkim's new status as an Indian territory. The meeting with Chinese and Pakistani representatives sealed the Chogyal's fate and provided the pretext for which India had been waiting to move ahead with the full incorporation of Sikkim. Consequently, Sikkim's assembly called for the Chogyal's removal and a full merger with India. A referendum was quickly organized, resulting in overwhelming support for both moves. On 29 April 1975 Sikkim was incorporated into the Republic of India as a full state. Sikkim's monarchy was abolished and the region became a state of India, operating under the administrative and constitutional rules applicable to other Indian states.

China's recognition of this incorporation by India was not forthcoming at the time, though indirect Chinese recognition seemed to be implied with the designation in 2003 of Nathu La as an official border trade post between India and China. Nevertheless, Sikkim's disputed border with China continues to be an issue. The bloodiest Sino-Indian clashes since the 1962 war occurred on Sikkim's borders in 1967, at Nathu La pass, rousing Indian concerns about China's intentions regarding Sikkim. Rising 'incursion' incidents into Sikkim during 2008 by Chinese troops undermined Wen Jiabao's assertions in 2005 that 'Sikkim is no longer the problem between China and India'.³⁹

Conclusions

Garver's sense remains persuasive, that 'taken together, and placed in the context of their particular location and terrain, the status of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan are highly significant. The political-military regime regulating the three areas is a significant component in the overall correlation of forces between India and China'.⁴⁰ India's starting point in looking at and dealing with these two areas is geography, and the perceived role that geography plays in maintaining the integrity of India's defensive barrier in the Himalayan ranges—in other words, geopolitical. From the Indian perspective, China's approach is difficult to understand. China has taken for itself the largest buffer, the vast area of Tibet, destroying Tibet's culture in the process and ignoring persistent Indian protests. India desires for itself a much smaller buffer in the three Himalayan units of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim, and does not seek to alter the traditional cultures of these areas. Having consolidated its hold over Tibet, China now seeks to erode India's special position in the Himalayas. The last 60 years of Indian foreign policy have seen India lose its privileged status in much of the Himalayan sphere. Although India has incorporated Sikkim, Nepal has already moved from India's clutches. Could Bhutan be next?

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