



China nibbling at Arunachal

December 4, 2007

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee went to China in June 2003. Everyone clapped. Jawaharlal Nehru's dream, the emergence of a Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai era, was finally in sight. The ancient ideologues of the Long March were dead and gone; a fourth generation of young, pragmatic and dynamic leaders had taken over. But soon India's hopes died again: As the Prime Minister returned to Delhi news broke of Chinese intrusions on Indian soil.

Asked about a Chinese patrol entering Arunachal Pradesh, South Block could only feebly respond that the Government of India was aware of the 'transgression' of the Line of Actual Control (LAC); but never mind, they would 'diplomatically' handle the situation. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman was less shy, he declared: "China does not recognise the so-called Arunachal Pradesh mentioned by the Indian newspaper report."

Nothing is new under the Indian sky. In June 1954, even before the ink on the Panchsheel Agreement had dried, incursions had already begun. In May 2007, Arunachal Pradesh was again in the news when the State's MP, Mr Kirren Rijju, alleged that the Chinese had intruded 20 km into Tawang sector. Though it was denied by the Chief Minister as well as the Union Home Minister, nobody doubted that the incident had occurred.

Worse, even the Army played the 'friendship' card: Brig Sanjay Kulkarni said no such move by the Chinese had been reported since

1986 and that "perfect harmony exists between the two nations". Well, when the Indian Army starts having a diplomat's mindset, it can only be a prelude to disaster.

It could be argued that Mr Rijiju, being a BJP MP, was just interested in spoiling the Congress's image in the State. But now similar allegations have been made by Mr Nabam Rebia, the Congress's Rajya Sabha member from Arunachal Pradesh. He also mentioned the demolition of a Buddha statue in Tawang district by Chinese troops. When Mr Rebia asked the Government what was happening, Defence Minister AK Antony remained vague, just stating the obvious:

"Incursions could be avoided if the two countries had a common perception of the LAC." The Congress MP accused the Indian Army and the Government of cowardice by keeping silent: "Nothing has come from the mouth of the Government; no reaction has come from the Government till now."

Whether it is the elected representatives or the common man in Arunachal Pradesh, everybody feels deeply insecure in the State. Mr Rebia told the Rajya Sabha: "We are told that a lot of negotiations are going on, lot of discussions are going on but we are yet to know exactly what discussions are going on. Why are you keeping us in the dark?"

The Defence Minister has not been able to deny the fact that around 300 cases of intrusions by Chinese troops have taken place over the last two years. Most of these incursions have occurred in Arunachal Pradesh which is persistently claimed by the Chinese Ambassador as a part of China. This assertion is historically untrue: The Chinese have never set foot in the area, except in 1962. During the tripartite Simla Conference between British India, China and Tibet in 1914, an agreement was signed (and maps exchanged) between the Dalai

Lama's Representative and Sir Henry McMahon to define the border between Tibet and India, thus giving birth to the McMahon Line.

It was a bilateral agreement; the Chinese did not object to the signing of this accord between Delhi and Lhasa as they were not concerned about this frontier; they were only bothered about the demarcation of their own border with eastern Tibet.

After India's independence, Premier Zhou Enlai tried to convince his naïve Indian counterpart that the British were 'imperialists' and, therefore, all treaties or agreements signed by the latter were 'imperialist treaties'. Hence, the McMahon line was an imperialist creation and, therefore, not acceptable to new China. "I presumed that India had no intention of claiming special rights arising from the unequal treaties of the past," Zhou told India's ambassador to China, KN Panikkar. Nehru agreed that the British were imperialists, but stood by the McMahon Line.

In the following years, hundreds of letters, memoranda and notes were exchanged, each party sticking to its position. Zhou's visit to India in 1960 was followed by five rounds of detailed discussions which were held between June and December. While India presented detailed maps and documents proving its claims, the Chinese could not give any evidence of their 'possession'.

Rounds of negotiation followed the rounds of talks, but nothing has changed for the past four decades. The Indian side repeats that it is "happy with the progress of the talks" and the Chinese keep intruding while Delhi keeps quiet so as not to jeopardise the 'negotiations'.

In 1993, during Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's time, an Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the LAC in the India-China Border Areas was signed and mechanisms have been put in place to avoid any escalation of border incidents. Mr AK

Antony has correctly stated: "Whenever there is an incursion, we take it up at flag meetings between Indian and Chinese commanders in the area concerned or through diplomatic channels." But, he added, "The border, by and large, has been peaceful".

'Peaceful' or not, the problem is precisely the famous Confidence-Building Measures (CBM). The Chinese know perfectly well that they will get away with giving India what is known as 'a bloody nose' in Army jargon; the CBMs have become an alibi to continue creating an atmosphere of insecurity.

A former Army Chief recently told me that the Minister is not wrong: There is today no 'common perception' of the border (China occupies 38,000 sq km of Indian territory in Aksai Chin, 5,180 sq km in the Shaksam valley in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and claims 90,000 sq km in Arunachal Pradesh). But the point is that while there have been no incursions by Indian troops, the reverse has happened frequently. As usual with the Chinese, it is a one way business.

In June 1986, the People's Liberation Army had intruded into Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh. They tried to occupy the Wangdung IB observation post which is used in summer as a yak grazing hamlet. The Indian Army this time did not wait for diplomatic orders from Delhi and stood firm on the ground. As Gen VN Sharma, a former Army Chief, said: "We were on our territory and any withdrawal orders by Government or Army Headquarters would be considered illegal as the Army was tasked to defend India's border." He added, "It was with renewed confidence that Rajiv Gandhi could plan his visit to China". For the first time India had taken a strong stand, showing the Chinese that they could not bluff their way through Indian territory. Is denying the obvious the best way to prepare for the Prime Minister's visit to China?

Several decades ago, historian RC Majumdar wrote about "the aggressive imperialism that characterised the politics of China throughout the course of her history... if a region once acknowledged her nominal suzerainty even for a short period, she should regard it as a part of her empire for ever and would automatically revive her claim over it even after a thousand years."

In the case of Tawang, China cannot even claim 'nominal suzerainty'. But just because it was once under Lhasa's administration, it will forever remain a Chinese 'possession'. Unless, of course, Delhi decides not to be bullied!