

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### 1962, déjà vu?

*Probably not, recent alarmist scenarios of Sino-Indian border tension notwithstanding.*

**T**he Indian government does not currently expect Sino-Indian relations to deteriorate to an open conflict, Foreign Minister N.D. Tiwari reported to the Parliamentary Consultative Committee attached to his ministry on April 23.

On April 22, the government admitted that it made high-level contact with China on the sensitive border issue, but the official spokesman denied allegations made the same day by the Chinese foreign ministry at a weekly briefing in Beijing. The Chinese spokesman had claimed that India was massing its troops on the border, conducting a large-scale military exercise codenamed "Chessboard," and was "nibbling" at Chinese territory. Beijing also denounced Indian press reports of a build-up in Tibet.

Tiwari categorically denied that India had massed any troops on the border with China. No exercises had been carried out in the area, nor was there any question of air violation, he said. Tiwari repeated that India had no interest in border clashes with China, and remained committed to a negotiated settlement of outstanding issues.

A look at events just before the diplomatic flap, suggests that this has less to do with what is happening along the border, than with the fact that another round of border talks is coming up, and India is apparently still in the process of reevaluating its China policy, a process Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi initiated last fall.

The rupture in relations since China's 1962 invasion remained com-

plete until 1980, when talks were carried out to resolve the border issue—namely, China's claim to a large tract of land in northeast India that has been historically part of India, and India's claim to Aksai Chin in the northwest, a part of Jammu and Kashmir State occupied by China in 1962. But the talks stagnated, since India refused to entertain China's "package deal" legalizing the status quo, yet declined to propose any alternative.

Shifts in the overall Asian scene—the Sino-Soviet rapprochement is but one example—have begun to dramatize the absurdity of keeping up a posture of defensive belligerence vis-à-vis China. At a seminar here recently, there was near-unanimity that bilateral relations should be improved as fast as possible by "decoupling" the border issue and raising overall relations to the political level.

Not surprisingly, the foreign and domestic lobbies on this matter are strong and active. That brings us back to the recent flap. At issue is an April 16 *Times of India* report predicting a Chinese attack across the McMahon Line this summer, along with editorial citing American officials' messages of "warning" from Beijing.

The author, Ravi Rikhey, who first drew attention as a "military analyst" with a book-length scenario of the next Indo-Pakistani war, wove a cloth of fact and fancy including an alleged Tibet build-up, U.S. warnings, Soviet and Chinese denials, and defensive Indian maneuvers codenamed "Checkerboard." In a later interview,

Rikhey charged the Gandhi government with preparing a sellout to China.

A similar report was penned by Kuldit Nayar, the journalist famous for eliciting Pakistani nuclear chief Qadir Khan's admission of his country's nuclear capabilities. Days earlier, the *Far East Economic Review* had reported "a sharp rise in military truck movements" in Tibet.

While Moscow has pointedly conveyed its estimate that there is no threat from China, both Washington and the Kremlin have their own interest in fanning this flame. "The bogey of an imminent war with a formidable adversary, like China, comes in handy to pro-Soviet well-wishers of the ruling party," writes *Sunday Observer* correspondent Kuldeep Kumar in the Indian weekly, "because it confirms their destabilization theory." Meanwhile, it is well known that certain U.S. circles see in the Sino-Soviet rapprochement a chance to recreate the strategic relationship with India enjoyed briefly during the Sino-Indian war.

But China experts here insist that no hard evidence has been put forth to back up "imminent war" reports, and argue that the idea of China "teaching a lesson" to India does not make sense. China's hard line on the border issue is nothing new, they point out.

Otherwise, the density of bilateral contacts in the recent period is noteworthy. Besides the talks in Beijing between the head of the India's pro-Chinese Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping, prior to which the CPM boss received a briefing from Rajiv Gandhi, the stopover in Beijing of a high-power delegation including Defense Minister K.C. Pant and Congress Party Foreign Affairs Director (and former foreign secretary) Romesh Bhandari, for talks en route to North Korea, is significant.