

Chinese Premier Li Peng completes image-building trip to South Asia

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng, one of the prime movers behind the June 3 massacre of pro-democracy students at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, completed an eight-day (Nov. 14-21) visit to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, gingerly circling India. It was the Chinese regime's first major diplomatic foray since the Tiananmen crackdown shattered the illusion that China's leadership had changed and had become less brutal. Besides assuring "traditional friends" that "all is well" in China, Li's mission was aimed at securing some assistance to ease relations with the West.

With one well-cultivated myth in ruins, Li Peng had to undertake this journey to replace it in the minds of the gullible with yet another: that China has successfully weathered a turbulent episode, and its leadership has now secured full control of the country and its people. That the reign of terror is intact as before in China, was indicated in a Nov. 5 Pakistani news item that three Chinese diplomats were missing from the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad.

From the outset, Li Peng's South Asian tour was promoted as "strengthening relations with China's traditional friends." Since India is not considered a "traditional" friend, Li Peng stayed away from New Delhi. With the notable exception of Nepal, where irritation of India was perhaps unavoidable, the Chinese premier was generally careful to keep shaking the olive branch in the direction of New Delhi as he tiptoed around India's perimeter.

Balancing factor

In Pakistan, where Chinese friendship is considered a necessary deterrent against neighboring "big powers" such as India and the Soviet Union, and a critical balancing factor in the United States-Pakistan relationship, Li Peng's visit was labeled "important" by newsmen. Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, barely recovered from the opposition onslaught against her government, laid down the proverbial red carpet to the Chinese premier. As Li's own spokesman put it: "The warmth of reception at Islamabad Airport illustrated the close, friendly ties and high regards in which Prime Minister Bhutto and the government and people of Pakistan hold Mr. Li Peng, the Chinese government, and the great Chinese people."

Besides a well-manicured effort by Li Peng to portray the present Chinese leadership as friendly and benevolent, Li

Peng also employed the big-power tactic of handing out goodies. Among assurances of increased trade and cooperation between the two countries in various fields, Li Peng said China would supply Pakistan with a 300 megawatt nuclear power plant, and an agreement to this effect was signed. It was pointed out that since both China and Pakistan were members of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the project would be undertaken with the stipulated IAEA safeguards. This is not a first: China has supplied heavy water for the Karachi Nuclear Power Plant and helped to keep it operational.

Dhaka, Bangladesh was Li Peng's next stop. After extensive talks with President Hossain Mohammed Ershad, Li Peng declared the visit a "big success." Bangladesh boasts of "special relations" with China, with ties that go back more than a decade. Bangladeshi officials frequently visit China, and it has been reported often that Dhaka, not unlike Islamabad, looks to China for arms and to provide a "security blanket" in the region. Thus it is no surprise that when thousands of students at Dhaka University campus rallied in protest against the P.R.C., denouncing its leadership for unleashing the People's Liberation Army against the unarmed students, President Ershad kept quiet.

The goodies for Bangladesh consisted of four agreements: \$14 million in soft loans, abolition of the visa system between the two countries for official visits, purchase of 120,000 tons of urea fertilizer from Bangladesh for cash, and a new five-year trade agreement to begin next year. An air link between the two nations' capitals is also under discussion, as well as the possibility of using Chinese expertise and assistance for flood control, small industries, and population control.

High-altitude games

In Katmandu, Nepal, Li Peng made a clear effort to capitalize on the trade and transit feud that has soured Indo-Nepali relations, to strengthen Chinese influence in this strategically sensitive area. Addressing the Nepal nobility and gentry at the banquet held in his honor by Nepal Prime Minister Marich Man Singh Shrestha, Li Peng said the Chinese government and people would support the South Asian countries, including Nepal, in their effort to safeguard their independence and sovereignty and develop their national economies.

Since China has long been courted by the Nepali kings to act as the balancing power against India, Li Peng's visit at this juncture to the mountain kingdom is highly significant. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Nepal sidled up to China to deflect the growing domestic pressure for democratization of the political system, which under a feudal king has remained highly underdeveloped. The late King Mahendra's glowing gestures to Mao, Zhou, et al., and rabid anti-India rhetoric during that period, fully reflected Beijing's attitude toward New Delhi.

Subsequently, under cover of providing technical and skilled manpower to Nepal, China has carried out various road- and bridge-building projects inside Nepal. Even today a large contingent of Chinese "engineers" is actively involved in "road-building efforts" in western Nepal, to the dismay of Indian security officials. China's help, and Nepal's eagerness to accept it, has already resulted in completion of a strategic road from Lhasa, Tibet to the Nepal border, linking Beijing and Katmandu.

Also disturbing from the Indian point of view is the report that last year China sent 400 truckloads of arms to Nepal. The arms cache reportedly included missiles, AK-47 assault rifles, and anti-aircraft guns. It is well known that these two issues have further clouded Indo-Nepal relations, but there is no indication that the Chinese premier paid much heed to this sensitive situation.

Driving the wedge

On the contrary, Li Peng went some distance to drive the wedge further. Besides lamely qualifying that the Sino-Nepal weapons link was not directed against any other country, the Chinese prime minister actively took up Nepal's brief in the current disputes with India. Said Li Peng: "We consider it unjustified for a neighboring country to impose a 'blockade' of Nepal because the final victims, the direct victims, are the people of Nepal," adding imperiously: "As a big country in South Asia, we hope India can be more magnanimous and more generous in handling the issue."

As if that were not enough to raise the hackles in New Delhi, the Chinese premier's open endorsement of Nepal's long-term campaign to become a "zone of peace" surely was. In what India considers a tactical ploy, Nepal's King Birendra unilaterally declared his country a "zone of peace" and has sold the concept to at least 70 countries. India maintains that the zone of peace scheme violates the 1950 bilateral treaty between India and Nepal.

Otherwise, Li Peng seemed eager to assuage India. His endorsement of the proposal to make the Indian Ocean a zone of peace, which India has long pushed, considering as it does that the Indian Ocean is India's economic zone, is one sign. It was also reported that Nepali authorities were disappointed with the written statement Li Peng released upon arrival in Katmandu, which had emphasized that the Chinese premier was anxious to discuss international as opposed to regional

issues. During the tour Li Peng stated repeatedly that improvement in Sino-Indian relations was not directed against any country, explaining that the "climate of discord" between India and China for the last two decades had been broken down with the visit of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to Beijing last December. He said both countries are involved in peaceful negotiations to resolve the longstanding border dispute.

When asked to comment on the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir, Li Peng was equally circumspect and said there was no change in China's stand of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. He expressed the hope that both India and Pakistan would amicably settle their border dispute—à la Gorbachov—while adhering to the five principles of coexistence.

Economic motivation

Diplomatic positioning aside, the main reason behind Li Peng's visit to the traditional friends was economic. It is no secret that China's economy has taken a decided downturn. While various belt-tightening measures have been taken during the last two years with the hope of easing the 30%-plus inflation rate, China desperately needs foreign exchange, preferably in the form of foreign investment. However, the brute force exhibited by the present triad—Li Peng, Yang Shangkun and Deng Xiaoping (now a shadow warrior)—at Tiananmen square last June has scared away many among even the most adventurous capitalists of the West. Li Peng, with the help of Henry Kissinger, is now trying to get back these investors, and there are reports that the Chinese premier requested the Pakistani premier to goad the American investors to reinvest in China. Efforts are also afoot to smooth the feathers of the Asia Development Bank-International Monetary Fund-World Bank and other financial institutions.

Li Peng's second—and not unrelated—job was to sell arms in the region. The Pakistani media point out that the Pakistani Army is keen to have Chinese missile technology. What they have in mind is the Chinese-made Silkworm missile which, when sold earlier to Iran, caused an uproar in Washington. Since Pakistan is considered a friendly nation by Washington, Li Peng has reason to believe that selling Silkworm missiles to Pakistan will be accepted in the right spirit by the United States. Pakistani defense circles are said to believe that the Chinese missiles will be adequate to counter the Prithvi and Agni missiles which India has successfully tested recently. As the Islamabad-based English daily, *The Muslim*, pointed out, the induction of P-7 sophisticated Chinese planes by the Pakistani Air Force just on the eve of Li Peng's visit is telling. It is a pointer that Pakistan-China collaboration in defense is increasing.

The economic angle to the arms deals should not be underestimated. Li Peng stressed in response to press queries that all these countries he had visited could obtain weapons from not only China, but from anywhere they wish.