

# United States, China shadow-boxing over India

by Susan B. Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

In a surprise move recently, Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng gave an interview to a visiting Indian delegation representing the official Press Trust of India (PTI), and emphasized the need to take the necessary steps to improve Sino-Indian relations. The gesture is unprecedented—Li Peng is the first Chinese premier to meet with an Indian press delegation in China—and becomes even more significant in light of a front-page story entitled “New Era in Indian-U.S. Ties Likely,” which appeared in the leading Indian English-language daily the *Times of India* on Sept. 8.

Interestingly, on Sept. 7, just four days before Li met with the Indian press, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, leading a high-level delegation consisting of two former U.S. ambassadors to China, a former U.S. assistant secretary of state, and two former undersecretaries, met with the Chinese prime minister. Kissinger, who was also in Hong Kong at the same time former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was there to work out a deal with China over the 1997 transfer of Hong Kong, acts on behalf of Israel, Britain, and the Zionist lobby in the United States. His relationship to the surprise Chinese move is also moot.

In his talks with the Indian newsmen, Prime Minister Li Peng, alluding perhaps to growing Indo-U.S. relations as well as the collapse of the Soviet system and President Bush’s “new world order,” said: “China and India are two great nations. The two countries have large populations and vast territories. So we should adhere to our own policies in building our two countries. We should not be affected by changes in the world. Those changes have made the situation of the Third World countries and developing countries more grim. Therefore, in addition to dialogue between North and South, we should accelerate South-South cooperation.”

The Chinese prime minister also stated that “large countries like India and China should adhere to their own policies and should not be swayed by those changes” taking place on the global scene. In discussing how to improve Sino-Indian relations, the Chinese prime minister reiterated the old formula of increasing high-level as well as people-to-people contacts. Significantly, however, was his observation that high-level contacts held between the two countries will bear

fruit if the topic for talks includes “the establishment of a new international order.”

Li Peng’s statements appeared in the news media three days after a *Times of India* lead front-page story claimed that “far-reaching” plans were under way for closer India-U.S. ties. “Relations between India and the United States could transcend to a new level of understanding if far-reaching plans for expanded strategic cooperation between the defense forces are realized, as expected in the near future,” wrote the *Times*’s Washington correspondent Y. Adhikari.

## The U.S. proposal

The lofty plans turned out to be a balloon floated by a U.S. Lt. Gen. Claude Kicklighter (ret.), former commanding general of the U.S. Army in the Pacific. General Kicklighter, who apparently visited India last April to hold talks with Indian officers supportive of his plans, has made a string of proposals to bring the two militaries together with the ostensible purpose of forming a strategic alliance. The proposals, which range from high-level visits by military top brass of both countries to combined training activities and joint participation in the Pacific Command’s joint committee level meeting, according to the *Times of India* report, were presented to Indian Army Chief Gen. S.F. Rodrigues during his recent visit to the United States. Rodrigues’s trip, and Indian Defense Minister Sharad Pawar’s recent remarks in the Parliament about the likelihood of “better cooperation [with the United States] in the defense field,” were cited in the article as possible indicators that the Indians are agreeable to the proposal.

Although the *Times of India* article, quoting U.S. officials, admits that “neither side wants to jump into bed with the other without carefully weighing the consequences and fall-outs,” it nonetheless leads one to the conclusion that it is only a matter of time before the proposal becomes reality. A series of joint symposiums in which the defense officials of both countries will participate, and an array of visits by top brass of both countries, according to Adhikari, have already been planned. “Importantly,” he states, “an Indian-U.S. Army executive steering council would be set up and it would

be headed by the vice chiefs of Army staff on the Indian side and the general of the U.S. Army Pacific on the U.S. side."

### Was the story a 'plant'?

Notwithstanding the "optimism" conveyed by Adhikari, it is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of the report. Reliable sources here insist there is nothing real in the report, but is a "trial balloon." It is no secret that a number of U.S. generals, mostly of the World Anti-Communist League (WACL) type who had earlier trashed India for being a "Soviet stooge," have now become extremely active in an effort to rope India into a strategic alliance to exert pressure on the remaining communist bastion, China. It is also no secret that a section of the Indian Army, notwithstanding India's close defense relations with the Soviet Union, were fascinated by the American firepower exhibited in the Gulf war and are yearning to have some of that in their arsenal. Apparently, they see forging a military alliance with the United States as the best security from threats posed by both Pakistan and China.

It is another matter whether the proposal stands on its own merit. Interestingly, no leading Indian news daily has either reported or commented on this harbinger of a "new era." There are many reasons for such silence. First, the Indian political leadership is preoccupied with India's dwindling foreign exchange reserves and growing foreign debts, and is busy trying to garner as big a loan from the International Monetary Fund as possible while at the same time trying to stave off harsh IMF "conditionalities." The leadership is aware that if the minority government in New Delhi accepts such harsh austerity as the price for IMF loans, it may turn out to be a kiss of death. At the same time, efforts by Indian Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to unshackle the economy from strangulation of licenses and regulations, welcome as they are, are looked on suspiciously as an indication of India bowing to U.S. wishes.

Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao certainly recognizes that the path toward better relations with the United States is a slippery one, and there is no need to make it downright treacherous by forming a strategic alliance with the United States. It is perhaps from this vantage point that the prime minister chose Bonn for his first formal overseas visit as prime minister, and overlooked both Moscow and Washington.

The only discussion of the U.S. proposal was an endorsement by one scribe of a think-tank devoted to strategic matters, the Institute of Defense and Strategic Analysis (IDSA) based in Delhi. In a commentary in *The Hindu*, the analyst argued that the Kicklighter proposal could act as a "major breakthrough to qualitatively transform the relationship" between India and the United States. The author, allegedly a former Naxalite, says that the absence of strategic cooperation with India remains "a huge gap in the larger dynamics of America's Asia strategy." He said filling this gap has become all the more important at a time of increasing Sino-

American tensions, the growing isolation of the Chinese leadership, and the possible "new assertiveness" of Japan in the Asia-Pacific region. According to the author, under such circumstances, exacerbated by the growing economic weakness of the United States which has constrained its military deployments, the United States needs a "great power" such as India to maintain strategic effectiveness in Asia through what is known as "cooperative vigilance."

A similar concept, which, however, excludes the United States, appeared in August in the Delhi-based *Sunday Mail*. The author, R.R. Subramaniam, another IDSA analyst, wrote that India must expand its presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Subramaniam pointed out that since China is in no mood to accommodate India in the Asia-Pacific region, India must develop military ties with Vietnam and Indonesia in order to function as an economic power in the region. He also said that such military ties will "demonstrate that she [India] can act as an antidote to China."

### China-India relations

In such an environment, where the Anglo-Americans are trying to line up their new world order and Indian analysts are asserting a need for a strong military presence in the Asia-Pacific region to "act as an antidote to China," the statements of Li Peng will act as a damper. It is widely acknowledged by political analysts here that China, despite the border war with India in 1962 and its anti-India activities in the region, enjoys a wealth of good will in India. It is also said that Sino-Indian rapprochement, which must translate into peaceful cooperation between the two nations, will be overwhelmingly endorsed by the Indian people over an Indo-U.S. military alliance, to ensure India's security.

The reasons China enjoys such good will are few, but include long historical and cultural ties. In addition, both nations are economically staggering and have received little outside help. In recent days, both nations have worked together to counter the international environmentalists' attack against the two populous nations for allegedly being the major sources of environmental pollution. This cooperation became evident during the recent U.N. Conference on Environment and Development-sponsored conference in Geneva in preparation for the 1992 Earth Summit in Brazil.

However, Sino-Indian relations cannot change through one friendly gesture. The thorny border issue, where each accuses the other of occupying its territory, and increasing reports of China funding and arming secessionist movements in northeast India and instigating the Communist Party of Nepal and other Nepalis to carve out a chunk from the Indian Himalayan territory to form a "Greater Nepal," will not be overlooked by the Indians in responding to Li Peng's sudden gesture. It is expected that while the Indians will favor closer China-India relations, this will be conditional on Beijing showing a positive inclination to give up arming the subversives and anti-Indian elements in the region.