

From New Delhi by Susan B. Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

Time to expand relations with China

The Vajpayee government should quickly avail itself of the opportunity to strengthen ties with Beijing.

One of the major weaknesses of the "good-neighbors policy," otherwise known as the Gujral Doctrine, adopted by New Delhi in recent years in order to strengthen ties with its South Asian neighbors, is that it does not encompass the broadening of India's policy toward either China or Russia.

It is now an opportune time to rectify this weakness. The newly installed coalition government in India is led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who actually was the first to exercise the good-neighbors policy. Vajpayee's policy met with some success when he was the Foreign Minister for about two years (1977-79), in the Janata Dal government. During his term, he was the first Foreign Minister to visit China since the 1962 Sino-Indian border clash.

Virtually isolated from the world community for many years, China began to come into its own in 1979, when the late Deng Xiaoping started integrating the country's economy with that of the rest of the world. In less than two decades, it has become a mighty economic power, if not the leader of Asia. India has also come up during the interim, but slowly.

What is most important, however, is that India and China have improved their relations, brought peace and tranquility to their borders, and joined hands on various bilateral and international issues. This is the foundation on which Prime Minister Vajpayee's government must act, and act quickly.

Since his election in March, Prime Minister Vajpayee, who is the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP),

the dominant partner in the coalition government, has, wittingly or unwittingly, sent conflicting signals with respect to China.

On the one hand, he has made government appointments which should help him in the future to push the expansion of relations with China. His appointment of Brajesh Misra as Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, in addition to continuing with the Foreign Secretary K. Raghunath in this key position, will enable the Prime Minister to benefit from the assistance of two senior China hands.

More important, perhaps, is the fact that in President K.R. Narayanan, who was once India's ambassador in Beijing, Prime Minister Vajpayee has found an able and willing friend of China. It was President Narayanan's speech at the joint session of Parliament on March 25 that gave a very important clue on the matter. He said on that occasion that his government "will strive for Asian solidarity and enhanced regional cooperation." President Narayanan reiterated what the Bharatiya Janata Party had put that policy orientation into its agenda in the last parliamentary election.

On the other hand, Prime Minister Vajpayee has appointed George Fernandes as Defense Minister. Fernandes is a member of the Socialist International, and an avowed critic of China's Tibet policy. Fernandes is also a close friend of the Myanmar dissidents who actively oppose the Yangon regime, and promote what they call Western-style democracy. His stance on these issues is fully in opposition to the government's stated policy in

these matters. Whether Defense Minister Fernandes will be given a long leash by Prime Minister Vajpayee remains to be seen.

Fernandes is quite capable of muddying the waters and bringing fresh problems into Sino-Indian relations. A senior official of the party which the Defense Minister represents was seen among the Tibetans who are now on a hunger strike in Delhi. This has not escaped Beijing's notice. India's Foreign Office, which is under Prime Minister Vajpayee, however, has denied any change in India's stated policy toward Tibet.

The media reaction in India over the test-firing by Pakistan of its medium-range (1,500 km) Ghauri missile on April 6 points to yet another pitfall that the Vajpayee government must carefully avoid. While Indian intelligence officials are certain that the Pakistani government in Islamabad paid \$516 million to Beijing for the transfer of missile technology, New Delhi must open a channel to Beijing on security matters such as this. There is too much at stake not to develop a closer Sino-Indian relationship, and every effort must be made to avoid interference by any third party.

Sino-India relations must be looked at on a broader canvas. Early in March, India and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding which provides the framework for joint exploration, development, production, transportation, distribution, and marketing of oil and gas in Central Asia. According to analysts, both India and China would reap rich commercial and strategic benefits from this arrangement. The agreement assumes further importance in light of China's intention to tap huge reserves of Central Asian oil and gas, and transfer the oil and gas across the arid lands of Xinjiang, in western China, by a 2,000-km-long pipeline.