

Arunachal Pradesh And The Dragon's Eye

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Arunachal Pradesh, home to a rainbow configuration of tribal ethnicities, has long been baulked at by New Delhi in terms of policy specifications pertaining to the geo-strategic dynamics of one of the country's most deciding frontier region. So what if the name has been 'Indianized' — from North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) to Arunachal Pradesh? The State remains as frontier as ever, more so with China — the "Dragon with wings" — not budging an inch from its long-held and treacherous position of claims over Tawang, the birth place of the Dalai Lama, and at times over the entire State too.

On his return from his recent visit to China that quite a few discerning and optimistic China observers have hailed as "positive" and pregnant with new possibilities, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was at pains driving home the point that a new beginning in the Sino-Indian relationship could be made if the two sides were to work consistently on the areas of "least disagreement". While addressing the media on his way back from Beijing, Dr Singh said: "Progress has been made, both President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao assured me that they have the political will to make the necessary decisions — the two Special Representatives have already set up a working group which is looking at two alternative drafts of the framework which should ultimately emerge as an agreed framework. That process is on." There was high talk among some of the China observers as to the altered geostrategic equations in the region that would have both sides cooperate for the making of a new economic order, given their strength stemming from the economic resurgence that they have witnessed in recent years — "decoupled" as they are said to be from recession even in the US.

However, all that glitters is not gold; and as for China, even the sheen reflected upon by the new bilateral initiative is interspersed either with deliberate ambiguity or with sheer belligerence symbolic of a power hell-bent on effecting a Sino-centric order in this part of Asia. Hence the latest Chinese protest against India's military activity in Sikkim. It is rather ironical — but that is what the 'pragmatic' Chinese have always excelled in — that within days after Dr Manmohan Singh's "successful visit" to



The Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh announced a Rs. 1,100 crore aid for Arunachal Pradesh, which included Rs. 5,500 crore for trans Arunachal Pradesh highway from Mahadevpur to Tawang. Picture shows the Prime Minister being welcomed by Governor, Gen J J Singh and Chief Minister Dorji Khandu in Itanagar.

China, that country should claim that Indian troops were being active on the Chinese side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and protest the building of structures along the LAC and Indo-Bhutan border. The Chinese argument, rather very boorish, is that such activities by India amounts to violation of the understanding to maintain peace in the area.

Just Buttressing Defence

But what has India done to jeopardize peace? Nothing at all. What India has done, since last one year, is just an attempt to buttress its existing defences on its side of the LAC in Sikkim. Calling back about a division of troops from Jammu & Kashmir to take up defensive positions in North Bengal and Sikkim, from where the troops were moved out to Jammu & Kashmir for counter-insurgency operations a few years ago, does not in any way constitute a breach of peace understanding; what it means is that the troops are back to the positions where they should be — guarding the border with a country known for anti-India hostilities. India has the sovereign onus to protect its borders and build world-class infrastructure in the bordering areas, just as China has marvelled at on its side of the border with India. And what is China doing on its side of the

LAC? Last November, it destroyed the unmanned bunkers near Doka La on the India-Bhutan-Tibet tri-junction, and then it moved its troops into the disputed Dolam plateau in Bhutanese territory so as to consolidate its defences in the area. Did India raise the issue during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's recent visit to China? No. For, thanks to the courtesy diplomacy regime in place so very reflective of diffidence and triteness, Dr Singh's visit to China was to emphasize the need for "peace and tranquility" along the LAC! So has China appreciated Dr Singh's gesture? Absolutely not, except for words that apparently border on goodwill but are filled with hidden agendas, all sinister.

I touched upon Sikkim as just a case in point in relation to Arunachal Pradesh. My theory of Arunachal Pradesh in the backdrop of China's oft-repeated claim on the area is a different one though. The sheer geographical size of Arunachal Pradesh, along with the abundance of hydro-resources, charms the diligent Chinese who, we must accept, have produced a marvel of engineering feats in their country, even in difficult terrains and hostile weather conditions. And we must also accept that had China had a territory as Arunachal Pradesh, it would have embellished that zone with the same kind of infrastructure that it has built on its side of the LAC. The fact remains that China's expansionist mode of existence — calibrated against the forces of free-market economy so very carefully and pragmatically because it has to also lay claim to Communism, though in its modern variant — necessitates a policy framework built around hegemonic rhetoric first, to be followed by action on the ground in accordance with an expedient stratagem. Obviously then, given the callous attitude of New Delhi towards building infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh for as long as one remembers since the "nationalization" of "NEFA" into "Arunachal Pradesh", the State figures high in China's expansionist priority list.

Spontaneous Nationalism Among Tribes

There is, however, a forceful current of spontaneous nationalism among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh — a characteristic that stands in sharp contrast to the stridency of subnationalism in other tribal States of the Northeast. There is no insurgency in Arunachal Pradesh, despite the fact of neglect and backwardness of the State, and despite the ethnic uniqueness of the tribes of the State that forms a clear mismatch with mainland culturalism. I have had occasion to spend a part of my formative years

in that State — my late father being an Education official there — and, also, as a student of Ramakrishna Mission School, Along, West Siang district for about four years. I recall that most of my Arunachali friends wrote better Hindi than a mainlander as me; they were passionate about Hindi songs and movies, with some of them having mastered the nitty-gritty of music as to even sing a Mohd Rafi classic almost flawlessly. And, then, among the elders, there was — and I hope there still is — a nationalistic language of wishing each other: "Jai Hind", which in the Arunachali accent would sound more like "Joi Hir" — nevertheless, a unique tribute to the Indian soldiers who braved the superior Chinese forces in the 1962 war.

Against such nationalized space of thought and action, the Chinese would operate; and no one can say that the Chinese are not aware of the spontaneously nationalized Arunachali discourse. Yet, the design is clear. The Chinese might have had a fair idea of the nuances of insurgency in Northeast India long ago when the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) leaders ended up in that country looking for sustainable base and support. Would anyone argue that the Chinese, with all their intelligence alacrity, do not know what fuels insurgency in the northeastern part of India? It is the lack of infrastructure and human development in this part of the country that has led to rebellion — metamorphosing, of late, as terrorism too. Let it be a wake-up call then: there could well be a Chinese design — if not now, then in the days to come — to engineer a rift in the nationalistic Arunachali discourse to foment trouble in the State and make it a suitable laboratory for Chinese machinations there.

World Class Infrastructure

What is the way out? New Delhi should build world-class infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh and tell Beijing bluntly that not an inch of that State is and can be China's. That will form pragmatic diplomacy to counter the "Dragon with wings", nothing less or else. And no more jugglery of meaningless diplomatic words please — we have had enough of them.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh landed up in Arunachal Pradesh as though to reassure the Arunachalis of New Delhi's 'concern' for the frontier State. But Tawang is a strict no-no; it was not in the itinerary of the Prime Minister. Needless to say, a visit to Tawang would have been far more reassuring, far more realistic. It is another matter if the Prime Minister wants to avoid the sub-zero Tawang temperature for good health!

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