

Our Himalayan Neighbours

INDIA is a land of distant frontiers and of dizzy heights. She has also a far-Hung coast line. Throughout history, she has been vulnerable to invasion. In the nineteenth century, the eyes and ears of the British military strategists were glued to the Khyber Pass. That was the only think in the Himalayan curtain through which the enemy could penetrate into the plains of the Indus. Landikotal is no longer an obsession with New Delhi military strategists. This outpost is now a pre-occupation with Karachi. The late Mr Mohammed Ali jinnah made a diplomatic gesture which almost succeeded. Pakistan had no gold to bribe the tribal groups of the north-west frontier. Wisely Karachi abandoned the idea of relying on guns to keep them in submission. Air jinnah's policy would have succeeded had his Kashmir plan not failed. Karachi now faces a nationalist demand for a separate State of Pakhtoonistan.

By the late 'thirties, the British Raj in India became' conscious that India had also a north-eastern frontier. They discovered the importance of Lachmanjhoola as India's north-eastern outpost. Nothing much was done about it till the Japanese invasion of north-east Asia. With the loss of Burma, the threat to India from her undefended north-eastern frontier became evident. That threat never assumed alarming proportions. But wartime developments revealed that India, Burma and China had adjoining land frontiers. The threat grew only after the British had left India, and Burma had become independent. For sometime after Burma became independent her future remained uncertain. Today it seems that Burma may not go the way of China. With a non-Communist Burma separating India from China on the extreme north-eastern frontier, fears of Communist infiltration through this sector have, subsided.

Some of the after-effects of the war in this front were¹ intriguing. Manipui and Tripura are now included in the category of Part C States. But New Delhi's policy is based on the assumption that strategic border areas like Manipur, Tripura and Kutch will have to be under a different administrative

set-up. Though the north-eastern frontier is increasingly assuming strategic significance, India enjoys certain advantages in this part of the northern frontiers. Communist elements may be active, as election results show in Manipur and Tripura. But they are within Indian territory. India is, therefore, in a position to enforce arrangements for the security of her north-eastern frontier. New Delhi will require tact and diplomacy to win co-operation and allegiance from Assam's tribal areas. Rightly, New Delhi has launched a plan for economic improvement of these areas. The tribal people will welcome New Delhi's efforts to build schools and clinics, and to construct road links through dense forests. But the Government would be wise in taking precautions to preserve and encourage the tribal people's rich heritage and tradition.

Landikotal and Lachmanjhoola may have ceased to occupy the minds of New Delhi's military strategists. But partitioned India has long and intricate northern frontiers. With Tibet under the control of Red China, the Indian Republic no longer enjoys the Himalayas as a natural, impregnable defence line. From Ladakh in the north-west, India's massive northern frontiers extend to Burma in the north-east. In between, and on the borders, are Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal. Ladakh is a part of Kashmir. Ladakhis are Buddhists. Sandwiched between Tibet and Kashmir, they reflect some, of the intriguing influences now at work in India's northern frontiers. Ladakhi Buddhists have a religious affinity with their co-religionists in Tibet. But they are afraid of the Communist influence in Tibet. Simultaneously, they are uncertain of the attitude of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, dominated by Sheikh Abdullah. They demand autonomy as a part of Kashmir. There have been hints that they would prefer closer relations with New Delhi as a safeguard against any politico-religious pressure from Lhasa.

Further east lie Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal. They are all independent, but tiny, areas. All of them have adjoining land frontiers with the Communist controlled Tibet and the Republic of India.

All of them lack resources to defend themselves against aggression. But they are linked to India in a special relationship. Defence of their frontiers is a problem which is of common concern to them and to India. Tibet is a warning of what may befall each, or any of them. Ever since the Communist control of Tibet, Washington has been warning New Delhi to be on the alert. Friendly relations subsist between New Delhi and Peking. But Washington asserts that it knows more about the infiltrative tactics of the Communists. On many occasions America has warned India that too late New Delhi may discover that in world politics friendship is not always reciprocated.

New Delhi has become conscious of the Republic's long and tortuous northern frontiers. Some months ago the Prime Minister was on a goodwill mission to the Republic's northern neighbours. Whether the Government has any plan for joint defence of the frontiers of India and of the Himalayan neighbours is not known. But there have been suggestions from some quarters that India and her northern neighbours have a common interest in co-operating to organise a combined system of defence. And now Mr Asoka Mehta, General Secretary of the Socialist Party, has issued a clear warning against Communist aggression on India's territorial and political integrity. Mr Mehta relies on reports of contacts established between Nepali and Tibetan Communists to suggest that New Delhi should warn Red China to keep off Nepal.

For a proper appreciation of the problems of defence of India's northern frontiers, it is necessary to have a sense of perspective. Only those who are unaware of the historical relations between China and Tibet can be alarmed at the Communist control of Tibet. India had never claimed Tibet as part of Indian territory. China's suzerainty over Tibet is recognised in international law. Red China's policy to Tibet does not involve any threat to India or to her independent northern neighbours. Communist elements are active in Nepal. In Bhutan and Sikkim there is a demand for land reforms. These developments reflect the revolution

of our times. Poverty and economic discontent are the unflinching allies of Communism. Not by organising defence, but by fighting poverty can the Communist menace be fought. It would be an error for New Delhi to ignore the basic principles India has been emphasizing to the world.

To emphasise this is not to suggest that India must not take all the precautionary measures to defend her far-flung northern frontiers. Aggression must be resisted by force. It will be conceded that it would be easier for both India and her northern neighbours to collaborate in a joint system of defence. It will be a difficult and delicate task. India's approach is likely to be misunderstood by her northern neighbours. Even as there are suspicions of active Communist infiltration in Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim, there is growing propaganda in these countries about India's territorial designs. Distant rumblings of Mongolian nationalism can already be detected. These are influences which India can ignore only at her peril.

New Delhi's dealings with her northern neighbours have not always been diplomatic. Nepal started her march to democracy with India's help and good wishes. Yet, even in Nepal, there are influential elements who accuse India of unjustified interference. Nepal is not only a test case, but also furnishes a lesson. India cannot be uninterested in developments in her immediate neighbours in the north. Common tradition, culture and need for defence underline the necessity for mutual co-operation. But the emphasis should be on political and cultural kinship than on common defence requirements. Communist phobia will lead New Delhi nowhere. There must be greater understanding between the people of India and their northern brethren. New Delhi must have no room for doubt that India's only intent is to help her northern neighbours to continue their march to peace and prosperity, India cannot be unconcerned about her northern neighbours' stability and security. But New Delhi must make it abundantly evident that India has no desire to interfere in their internal affairs. New Delhi must not allow India's case to go by default. With a better appreciation of India's peaceful policy, co-operation of her Himalayan neighbours would be available.



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