

[Note: While this article, from the *Daily Times* (Pakistan), focuses on the growing Chinese influence in South Asia, it also talks about the high-handed interference by India in Nepal and other countries.]

VIEW:

China's growing role in South Asia

—*Abhishek Parajuli*

July 9, 2010



China moved as early as the 1960s to clear border disputes with Nepal, often to Nepal's advantage. The goodwill this earned is clear from the fact that in 2008 Nepal sought Chinese help in settling its disputes with India

In February 2010, Vikas Bajaj wrote in the *New York Times* that China's expanding sphere of influence could "eventually" undermine India's pre-eminence in South Asia. I disagree. It already has.

India's 'soft power' is much touted. It is supposedly a counter-weight to Chinese influence. While such talk is comforting to Sinophobes, to say that India's reputation in much of its immediate neighbourhood is bad would be an understatement. China, on the other hand, is wooing the region. How these two powers operate in tiny developing countries like Nepal says a lot about the support they will receive in the international field.

India likes to think of Nepal as an ally. The Nepalese across the political spectrum look at India as a meddlesome bully. And with good reason. In June, India stopped the shipment of over 1,000 metric tonnes of newsprint imported by two Nepali newspapers. India is the only port for getting this newsprint to landlocked Nepal, and this action went against the Nepal-India Trade and Transit Treaty. India says the 28-day stoppage was caused due to a routine inspection. Many Nepalese see a link between the critical posture the papers adopted towards New Delhi and the incident. Regardless of what caused the delay, in the soft power battle for whose story wins, India lost.

If this were an isolated event, the reaction would have been more muted. India has come under repeated fire in the Nepalese press for encroachments into Nepali territory. In fact, this January, Indian External Affairs Minister S M Krishna was greeted with black flags by those protesting against the encroachment. MK Narayanan, until recently India's national security advisor, went on television to state that India supported one of the contesting parties in a 2008 election. If that is not interference, what is?

China, on the other hand, gets very different press coverage. In April this year, papers talked of how Nepal and China had come to an agreement on the height of Mount Everest. They did this

by saying that both the measurements, though different, were accurate. How that is possible is again irrelevant, what matters is that the big northern neighbour ate humble pie. China moved as early as the 1960s to clear border disputes with Nepal, often to Nepal's advantage. The goodwill this earned is clear from the fact that in 2008 Nepal sought Chinese help in settling its disputes with India.

Nepal is not an isolated case. China had, by 2006, settled 17 of its 23 territorial disputes, receiving less than 50 percent of the contested land. What it lost in territory it clearly gained in goodwill.

India's relationship with Pakistan needs no introduction. Pakistan was, on the other hand, one of the first countries to recognise the People's Republic in 1950 and remained a strong ally during Beijing's isolation in the 60s and 70s. Today, it is also a big economic partner, investing in projects like the Gwadar port. The Indo-US strategic partnership (strategic for whom remains to be seen) is going to probably push Pakistan and China even closer. China may have been a little more serious than most thought when it welcomed the Indo-US strategic dialogue last month.

Bangladesh was born with Indian support. But there are issues like the Farakka Dam where Bangladesh says India has hurt water flow during the dry seasons and has caused floods during the wet seasons. Bangladesh has also talked about Bengali migrants that live in many of India's metros — another factor that has complicated this relationship.

While India's relationship may be going south, China's is clearly headed north. It started to soar with China supporting Pakistan in the Bangladesh war. In 1972, it also used its veto power in the UN Security Council to block Bangladesh from joining the UN. By 2002, however, the relationship was very different with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao making an official visit to Bangladesh. Year 2005 was declared as 'Bangladesh-China Friendship Year' and in 2005, on Bangladesh's invitation, China was added as an observer to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

From Hambantota in Sri Lanka where China is building a port to Nepal where it is set to expand the roads in the capital to ease traffic, China is seen as a partner for development. When Shashi Tharoor, the then External Affairs Minister of India, said that the 21st century would belong to he who tells the better story, he was right. Only China seems to be doing it better.

The writer works at the South Asia Watch on Trade Economics and Environment. He can be reached at rv22.13@gmail.com

http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010\07\09\story_9-7-2010_pg3_6