

Diplomacy take

By C Raja Mohan

The obsession with Pakistan on Jammu and Kashmir often makes New Delhi impervious to the fact that China looms large over the state

INDIA might be pleased with the success of its bus diplomacy in Punjab — but China, as always, is a couple of steps ahead when it comes to promoting trans-border connectivity as part of its grand strategy towards the Subcontinent. Barely a couple of days before Prime Minister Manmohan Singh flagged off the bus service between Amritsar and Nankana Sahib, China and Pakistan announced the launch of a new transport link between Kashgar in Xinjiang and Gilgit in the Northern Areas of Jammu and Kashmir. According to a formal protocol signed by the two countries earlier this month in Urumqui, the capital of Xinjiang, the first ever bus service between the two regions would be launched on June 1.

One bus will be operated from each side on a daily basis that will travel between Sust and Tashkorgan, on the border between J&K and Xinjiang. Each side will launch another bus service thrice a week between Kashgar and Gilgit via the Kunjerab pass.

The two sides have also agreed to promote good trade between Kashmir and the neighbour-

ing Xinjiang province. About 3,000 permits would be issued by each side to registered transporters. Each permit would be valid for one round trip. As demand increases the number of permits would go up.

Before Gilgit, Kathmandu:

Developing better connectivity and promoting cross border trade between China and its neighbouring regions in the Subcontinent has now become a major priority for Beijing. Last year, China launched a bus service between Lhasa and Kathmandu, through the Kodari highway that was built in the 1960s. Earlier this month, the Chinese State Councillor and former foreign minister, Tang Jiaxuan, was in Nepal seeking to promote trade and communication between the two countries. In a major move, Tang announced duty free access to Nepali goods into the markets of western China. While the list of items that would be eligible to duty free concessions remains to be finalised, the symbolism of free trade between Nepal and Tibet, one hopes, is not lost in New Delhi.

China is also planning to build many new highways into Nepal, to supplement the existing Kodari Highway. Beijing and Lhasa hope that eventually these highways would open up access to the north Indian plains. If trilateral arrangements are finalised between the three

countries, Nepal could emerge as an important region of transit between North India and western China.

Meanwhile, officials in Lhasa have also announced that the new railroad between mainland China and Tibet would soon be extended from Lhasa to Shigatse, which is

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hardly any distance from the Sino-Indian border in Tibet. If China's rail network comes this far, would not be outlandish to imagine that it could eventually be linked up to the Indian railroads. Paranoids in Delhi's security

kes a high road

establishment might lose sleep over it. Smarter ones in South Block should actually be planning for such an eventuality.

It's geography: China has always had a better sense than India of the link between geography and strategy. The contrast is striking. After Independence India allowed its existing

out Beijing's rising profile, India should find ways to leverage its positive ties with China to develop greater connectivity between the one hand and Tibet and Xinjiang on the other. This would bring peace and prosperity to the Himalayan region that has suffered so much because of territorial disputes involving India, China and Pakistan.

border infrastructure to degrade and consciously chose not to develop additional connectivity on its northern borders.

Beijing, on the other hand, was determined to build first class strategic transport links

between its eastern seaboard and the remote regions of western China, including Tibet and Xinjiang. Having consolidated its internal access, China sought to extend it to the border regions near Kashmir in the west to Arunachal Pradesh in the east with Nepal in the middle. The rationale behind China's emphasis on building the Kodari Highway into Nepal and the Karakoram Highway into Pakistan-administered Kashmir was simple enough — strategic access to politically sensitive areas.

China is now converting those strategic assets into economic opportunities. China's trans-border highways are no longer merely conveniences for the People's Liberation Army but instruments for the expansion of Chinese economic influence into the Subcontinent.

Kashmir's China openings: The obsession with Pakistan on Jammu and Kashmir often makes New Delhi impervious to the fact that China looms large over the state. China holds the territory passed on to it by Pakistan in the north-western parts of undivided J&K, but Beijing is also in control of Aksai Chin in the east.

The Kashgar-Gilgit bus service is only one part of growing Chinese economic presence in the Northern Areas. Media reports from Pakistan say Beijing is investing in a range of infrastructure projects in different parts of the

Northern Areas.

These include the construction and maintenance of the Karakoram Highway, small hydropower projects, construction of a dry port at Sust, water-diversion channels, bridges, and telecommunication facilities.

Rather than worry about Beijing's rising profile in the Northern Areas, India should find ways to leverage the current positive ties with China to develop greater connectivity between Kashmir on the one hand and Tibet and Xinjiang on the other. Such a creative approach — which might involve developing bus services between Demchok in Ladakh and Manasarovar as well as the revival of old trade routes between Leh and Tibet — would transform the fortunes of J&K and bring peace and prosperity to the Himalayan region that has suffered so much because of territorial disputes involving India, China and Pakistan.

If you are bold enough you could conceive a seamless network of roads connecting the regions of undivided J&K under the control of India, China and Pakistan. Manmohan Singh's idea that free flow of goods and people along the new highways of Kashmir would make the borders in that state "just lines on the map" should naturally apply to our frontiers with China in J&K as well.

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