

U.S., China fish in troubled waters in Indian Himalayas

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The controversial Gorkha leader of the Darjeeling Hills, Subhas Ghising, has accused anti-India forces in Nepal of working with Beijing, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), and the Nepali royal household in a plan to merge Bhutan, an independent Himalayan kingdom with about 1 million people, Sikkim, and the Darjeeling Hills area of West Bengal into a "Greater Nepal Kingdom." CPI-M leader Jyoti Basu claims that, as early as 1939, chairman Mao Zedong had stated that "dependent states and territories," which include Nepal, Sikkim (then an independent kingdom), and Bhutan, belonged to China and were taken away by foreigners.

Ghising also alleges that the U.S. ambassador to Nepal, Julia Chang, a Chinese-American, had secretly paid a visit to Darjeeling recently, ostensibly to further the "Greater Nepal" cause.

Ghising's charges come at a point when India has come under increasing pressure on its eastern borders. In the first week of August, a contingent of Burmese troops made an incursion 30 kilometers into the Indian state of Mizoram, according to Ghopal Mishra writing in the *Sunday Mail*. Such incursions have been taking place at regular intervals over the last six months, as the Burmese carry out hot-pursuit operations into India against Burmese students fleeing the military regime in Rangoon. Such incidents take on a more serious character in the context of a June 8 report in the *Bangkok Post* that Pakistani military officers were in Burma training Burmese troops in the use of Chinese weapons.

Ghising's allegations against Nepal and China have not been responded to by the governments in either New Delhi or Kathmandu. In Nepal, the ostensibly pro-India Nepali Congress party won a slender majority in parliamentary elections a few months ago, but the United Communist Party of Nepal (UCPN) gained 82 out of 205 seats. During the elections, the UCPN was the beneficiary of vast sums of money which China channeled to it through North Korea. Most of the UCPN literature was printed outside of Nepal, and the sight of Mercedeses and Peugeots clogging up UCPN rallies did not go unnoticed.

According to one Indian political analyst, the government of Nepal has once again begun playing the China card against India in an effort to cover up its own economic failure. It is also said that the Nepali monarchy, fearful that the impact of

Indian democracy may wash away its throne, has begun to equate national integrity with an anti-India tirade. The Nepali Communists, on the other hand, have all along been pro-China and a solid underpinning to the Nepali monarchy. The UCPN recently advocated closer relations with China.

Following its unexpected electoral successes, UCPN chief and leader of the opposition in the Nepalese Parliament, Man Mohan Adhikari, said in an interview: "It is in the interest of India that it should be realized [by India] that the Nepalese cannot be part of India's security perception. We are not against India's security, but cannot be their part." Adhikari, who was a member of the undivided Communist Party of India for a decade during his exile in India, has close relations with a number of CPI-M leaders, including Jyoti Basu.

At the same time, Nepal Prime Minister G.P. Koirala, who has long been associated with strong pro-India factions within the Nepali Congress party, has made it clear that his unavowed allegiance to India cannot be taken for granted. At a function of the Nepal-China Friendship Association on Aug. 3, he said: "I have no misgiving or confusion about the relationship between Nepal and China." He even mentioned on that occasion that he had told the Chinese ambassador that Nepal would never go against the national interest of China.

Heavily dependent on India on economic matters, apart from close historical, cultural, religious, and even family ties between the people, the government of Nepal was tied to the security of India through the 1950 Indo-Nepalese Treaty of Peace and Friendship. In 1986, following a spell of acrimony caused by a number of factors, including Nepal's buying arms from China without informing India, the Indo-Nepal Joint Commission was constituted to provide an "umbrella" to all aspects of bilateral economic interactions. The commission has finally begun to inch forward and has opened discussions to concretize "a long-term program of economic cooperation."

Despite Nepal's economic dependence on India, the Nepali monarchy has made policy moves to aggravate India. The dismissal of the duly elected government in 1960; signing an agreement with China for the construction of the Kodari Highway linking Tibet with Kathmandu; a declaration of support for the principle of "self-determination" in settling the Kashmir dispute; allowing Bangladesh to internationalize

a purely bilateral issue with India by including Nepal; buying 500 truckloads of Chinese arms without notifying India, in explicit violation of the 1950 treaty; and putting out a cry against Indian "hegemony" and "interference" in Nepal's politics to secure monarchic rule and stem the democracy movement within the country are only a few of the nettles that irritate India.

Washington and Beijing have designs

At the same time, in order to elicit a favorable response from Washington, besides citing India's "hegemonistic" policies toward its small neighboring states, Kathmandu was allegedly planning to recognize the Pakistan-based mujahideen interim government for Afghanistan in 1989. Benazir Bhutto, then Pakistan's prime minister, had sent her personal emissary to Nepal to seal the deal, it was reported. King Birendra's call to make Nepal a "zone of peace," in contrast to India's proposal to consider the entire subcontinent as a zone of peace, pleases Washington. It is no secret that the Nepali monarchy has long harbored the plan to convert Nepal into another Hong Kong, where tourists would spend freely on gambling casinos, prostitution, and cheap heroin, and help Nepal gain its economic independence. The monarchy's total commitment to a free-market economy, with support from the pro-China Nepali Communists, has pleased the Bush administration.

While U.S. interests are limited to geopolitical concerns and free-market promotion, the Chinese political goal is derived from its perception of setting up a federation of the Himalayan Kingdom, a vassal entity of China. Such a federation will include Nepal, Bhutan, and three Indian border states—Sikkim, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh. Ghising claims that the Chinese Communists have always set their eyes on the Himalayan Kingdom—a concept first formulated by the British and handed over to the Chinese at a later date.

China's involvement in Nepal goes back four decades. In 1953, S.P. Mokkerjee, a leading Indian opposition parliamentarian who did a short stint in the Nehru cabinet, warned the Indian government of Chinese infiltration in Nepal from Tibet. China's aggressive designs were also exhibited in the incorporation of Sikkim and Bhutan within China in the map issued by the P.R.C. government during the fifties.

The Gorkha factor

The Chinese design to form a "greater Nepal Kingdom" in the region is also based on the fact that in all the areas designated for inclusion in this kingdom, people of Nepalese origin form the majority. However, Ghising's exposé indicates that he, belonging to the tribal Gorkha people of Nepal, does not consider that all "Nepalese" are in it together. When the British reached this area, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan were partially dependent on China. Nepal, formed in the 18th century, was the kingdom of the Gorkhas. In 1792, the Gorkhas had invaded Tibet and were beaten back by Chinese-

led troops and were forced to accept a treaty which made Nepal a tributary of China. The British annexed Nepal in 1816, and encouraged the Gorkhas, one of the tribes of the hill people in Nepal, to settle in Darjeeling. The present monarchy of Nepal is not an indigenous family and was supplanted from India later—a fact that Ghising has tried to agitate around in the region.

Ghising's Gorkha identity has made him the target of attack. In 1986, demanding a "Gorkhaland" in the Darjeeling Hills, Ghising launched a violent movement which finally ended 27 months later with the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hills Council (DGHC) within the CPI-M-led West Bengal. Ghising's agitation, which was as irrational as it was violent, was based on the fact that the Bengali-dominated CPI-M had done little to alleviate the economic misery of hill people, who are mostly Nepalese. At that time, Ghising did not distinguish between Nepalese and Gorkhas—although he had demanded a Gorkhaland and not a Nepaliland. Ghising was receiving moral, if not financial, succor from the neighboring state of Sikkim, which is ruled by upper-caste Nepalese.

Now, however, Ghising has changed his tune and is demanding recognition of the Gorkha language, which is different from Nepali, as the official language of the hill people in the area. He argues that Nepalese are those who live in Nepal and the recognition of Nepali will only further the Greater Nepal Kingdom concept. The West Bengal Official Language Act of 1961 recognizes Nepali as the official language of the hill people of the area.

Ghising's demands have drawn blood from both the West Bengal and Sikkim chief ministers. Nar Bahadur Bhandari, the Sikkimese chief minister who belongs to the Nepali upper caste and is widely known for his anti-India activities, although overlooked by New Delhi for reasons unknown, has said that he is preparing a paper to back his demand for Greater Sikkim, which will also include a sparsely populated part of the Darjeeling district. It is commonly known that Bhandari, who has strong links to Kathmandu, is aspiring to topple Ghising and to emerge as the sole representative of the Nepalese in India.

At the same time, Ghising's charges linking the CPI-M with the Nepal Communist Party and hence with the pro-China lobby to weaken India, have drawn sharp ripostes from CPI-M leader Jyoti Basu. Basu dismissed the "Greater Nepal" conspiracy theory of Ghising as a "bogey." At a recent debate on the budget for hill affairs in the West Bengal Assembly, Basu claimed neither New Delhi nor Calcutta had any reports about the "Greater Nepal" concept.

Although Ghising is using the "Greater Nepal Kingdom" issue to boost his own political credentials and undermine Basu and Bhandari, there is however ample evidence that Beijing and Washington are acting from their "friendly" terrain in Kathmandu—a sure indication that the "Greater Nepal Kingdom" idea is in the air.