

Himalayan Joint Security Concerns

by Laurence Brahm

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The Himalayan region is a tinderbox. The Obama administration will increase the U.S. presence in Afghanistan by committing an additional 17,000 troops which will escalate the conflict there. China's police-military lockdown on Tibet and Xinjiang continues into a second year. Kashmir lacks a mutually acceptable solution between India and Pakistan. The Maoist government recently elected to power in Nepal after a decade of civil war offers hopes for stability.

Both sides of the Himalayan range should be viewed as a string of interconnected political electrons that could be sparked at any time. Regions of Tibet and Xinjiang are ethnically, culturally, and spiritually connected with the other side of the mountains. The Himalayas traditionally served more as bridge than a barrier. We should try to think this way in our own policy, particularly as we learn that terrorism needs to be addressed at its root cause, rather than end effect.

We assume that borders are clearly drawn. Cartographic lines present a logical basis for organizing foreign affairs bureaucracies and policy prescriptions. However, for people drawn together by ethnic, social, and religious identities, borders are often irrational. National boundaries that cross traditional homelands can split ethnic nationalities psychologically not limited by borders.

This echoes throughout the greater Himalayan region (running from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China's Xinjiang and Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and India). The region possesses 40 percent of the world's poor. Percentages of the population living under the poverty line are: Nepal, 42 percent; Pakistan, 33 percent; India, 29 percent; and Bhutan, 23 percent. Ethnic minorities in China's western regions represent only 10 percent of the population but account for 40-50 percent of China's absolute poor.

China's dialogue with the Dalai Lama's envoys has stalemated. Long-festering tensions erupted across China's Tibetan regions last March. China's draconian suppression has left intractable ethnic differences. A path forward is desperately needed. Tibetan communities spread from the Tibet Autonomous region and four other provinces of China to India and Nepal. All aspire to preserve contiguous culture, identity, and religion. The problem transcends borders. Instability in one region can affect another. His Holiness the Dalai Lama does not seek either separation, independence, or even "greater autonomy" but rather wants guarantees preserving Tibetan culture and religion within the context of

China's own constitution. Moreover, he has dropped aspirations of returning to Tibet. Closure of this chapter is easier for China's authorities than ever before if they want it. Time is running out, however. The danger of fossilizing intractable stances – " Hamas-ifying " – radicalizing the issue by not solving it – worries every government in the region. The Dalai Lama can be the key to solving this problem in his lifetime. China should work with, not against him. With this attitude progress can be made.

China can and should actively negotiate with India to finally solve border issues remaining from the 1962 war. Recognition of areas already under de facto physical control may be a practical first step. Given the potentially massive trade and financial synergy between these two powerful mega-economies, this is long overdue. Chinese rail lines through Tibet can link India and Nepal, and help Lhasa become a prosperous trade center between South and East Asia. If the Dalai issue is settled, Tibet (recognized as a holy land by Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains) will receive pilgrims from both East and South Asia, not to mention the West, developing a healthier brand of sustainable tourism.

On the sensitive question of Kashmir, continuing differences remain between India and Pakistan. Here U.S. diplomacy can play a robust role using smart power to actively encourage both parties to engage on this issue. With potential increased tensions in Pakistan and Xinjiang, it may also be time for settlement of this problem too. The terrorist attack in Mumbai earlier this year made obvious the issue of regional security and the need to begin active diplomacy to seek progress on the issues outlined above.

Nepal can be a keystone. Nepal's new government needs to develop economic programs for hydropower, roadways, and telecommunications to restart an economy torn by a decade of civil war. The Maoist party that leads the Nepalese government has abandoned its radicalism and Prachanda, its leader and now the elected prime minister, has made commitments to market economics, democracy, human rights, and religious freedom. The U.S. should drop the "terrorist" label, which was affixed to his party under the Bush administration. Working openly and positively with Nepal's new government on sustainable economic development programs for alleviation of poverty – which gave the original Maoist movement its support base – can ensure that Nepal becomes a source of regional stability.

A recent commitment by Prachanda to withdraw a case brought by the former king's regime against explorer and author Ian Baker should be seen as a signal to the Obama administration that Nepal is ready for rapprochement. We should not underestimate the strategic value of this tiny Himalayan nation. It was just such a miscalculation that created the current predicament in Afghanistan.

Sensitive cultural tourism in this region can be an engine for economic growth, prosperity, and sustainability of ethnic identities. All of this lays a platform for long-term stability that cannot be achieved through either suppression of religious or identity aspirations or galvanizing nationalist tensions along borders that are irrelevant to those living within them. These issues are as important to policymakers in Washington as they are in Delhi, Islamabad, Beijing, and Kathmandu. All should work together toward a common goal.

Lastly, but most importantly, coordinated environmental policies are essential. Most great rivers of Asia – the Yangtze, Yellow, Mekong, Brahmaputra, Ganges, and Irrawaddy – all originate in Himalayan glaciers. Severe glacial attrition from global warming means water shortages for two-thirds of humanity. It is time for coordinated policy on greenhouse gas emissions between the three main polluters – China, the U.S., and India. The Obama administration should make this a foreign policy pillar alongside the global financial crisis. Intricate policy coordination on protection of environmental biodiversity in the Himalayan region can be a keystone of such a policy.

Presidential appointment of a U.S. Envoy for Himalayan Affairs to coordinate regional governments on a tripartite set of issues concerning each country – security, sustainable economic development of ethnic identity, and the environment – would be a first step in the right direction. Recognition that these three issues are interconnected, interactive, and inseparable, is a second step toward achieving progress on each. Bringing together the interests of governments with connecting borders in the Himalayan region as stakeholders in a joint project and their recognition of the importance of being a stakeholder is the third step toward making progress a reality.