

Asia's changing balance of power

This week Rajiv Gandhi, leader of 800 million Indians, went off to Beijing to meet with the leaders of 1.1 billion Chinese.

Summit talks between the men who represent 40% of the people on Earth should be a major news event. They were not. The reason, as usual, was our western self-absorption and unconcern with the rest of the world.

The Beijing summit was particularly important because it was the first time in three decades that the heads of Asia's two mutually hostile superpowers sat down and talked. No dramatic results came out of the meeting, but it most likely signals the beginning of a long Himalayan thaw between India and China that could produce some interesting changes in Asia's balance of power.

India and China have been at loggerheads since the early 1960s. The real cause of friction between the two giants was rivalry for leadership in Asia and serious disputes over the 1,500-mile Himalayan border that separates them. In 1962 they fought a brief war in the mountains in which the Indians were thoroughly thrashed by the Chinese. Since then, Beijing and New Delhi have glowered at each other and argued mightily over the Himalayan border problem.

This dispute is no mere jingoistic squabble over barren ice fields, as it is often depicted. Imagine the Himalayas as a vast table, with Tibet as the top. By holding Tibet, China commands the key military heights. India is perched precariously just below the table top. As the late Chou En-lai once jokingly remarked, China didn't need nuclear weapons to destroy India. All it had to do was march 100 million Chinese into Tibet and order them to urinate downhill.

Equally important, virtually all of India's major river



Eric ARGOLIS

systems that provide vital drinking and irrigation water originate in the high Himalayas. Anything that touches the region is a life and death concern for dry India.

Unfortunately for all concerned, Britain drew the border through the Himalayas in the last century using a thick-tipped pen. The result is uncertain boundaries that meander around this strategic region, providing ample cause for border skirmishes. These the Indians and Chinese have been having for the past decade.

Last year there was a very real chance that India and China were going to go to war. The simmering rebellion in Tibet and its rough suppression by China has inflamed the border dispute. India has been sorely tempted to stir the pot in Tibet, particularly since China is the main ally of old enemy, Pakistan. So far, New Delhi has wisely refrained from such a dangerous game. Especially dangerous now that both China and India are nuclear powers.

India still insists it's a nuclear virgin, but by early next year, India will be able to deliver nuclear weapons by aircraft and missile. India also happens to be the Soviet Union's most important ally.

A "special relationship" has grown between Moscow and New Delhi that somewhat resembles the one between Washington and London. Many consider India

close to being a regional surrogate for Soviet power. This may be an exaggeration, but it's often hard to tell where Soviet interests stop and Indian ones begin.

Next year that energetic hatchet-buryer, Mikhail Gorbachev, will likely jet off for a long-awaited summit in Beijing with China's leaders whose attitude toward the Russians has until recently been, "Don't touch me."

India has been eyeing the slow but steady warming in Chinese-Soviet relations with unease and jealousy. The nervous Indians are now worried Moscow will no longer support them against China and those terribly irksome Pakistanis. India's usual reaction has been to fret and sulk. Now New Delhi seems to be trying some overdue diplomacy and making an effort to resolve the border issue.

If both sides really want to settle it, they can do so without too much trouble. China has used the border problem to squeeze India whenever New Delhi tried to bully its ally, Pakistan. Rajiv Gandhi and his mother, Indira, made shameless use of the supposed threat from China to promote their domestic political fortunes. Some problems are highly useful.

Even so, China and India seem to have been caught up in the current of Gorbachev detente that is sweeping around the world. Chances are fairly good that they will manage to ease tensions on their borders. Whether they can reduce their natural longterm rivalry as Asian superpowers remains to be seen. The collapse of Burma, for example, could quickly produce a highly charged confrontation between the two giants.

Very likely, India, China and the USSR are heading toward a three-way power rivalry in Asia. Or four-way, if you add Japan. Watching the interplay of these Asian giants will keep the 21st century quite busy.