January 26, 2012

Interview of Dr. Mohan Lohani, Nepal
Interviewer : Dr. Reena Marwah

Mohan Lohani, scholar, diplomat and political commentator, is currently Executive Director, Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD) since 1992 and is also Principal, Kathmandu Model College (KMC), Kathmandu since 2005. As a diplomat he served as the Nepalese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives (1987-1991). He also served as Executive Director, Institute of Foreign Affairs (1998-2001) and was Nepal's Deputy Representative to the UN (1976 - 1980). Prof. Lohani is also associated with China Study Center, Nepal as its member. Email: m_p_lohani@yahoo.com.

Q. Please do introduce yourself and kindly let us know how your interest in China emerged?

My interest in China began in 1996, when I visited China as a member of the delegation led by then President of Nepal Council of World Affairs, Prof. Surya Lal Amatya. Ours was a five member delegation and we visited several cities over a period of 12 days including Shanghai and Beijing. We also visited Sichuan province and the day before returning home we spent three nights in Lhasa. The invitation had been extended to us by the China Institute of International Understanding. I presented a paper on the political dimensions of Nepal China cooperation at the South Asian Institute in Chengdu. Prof. Amatya, the President of NCWA, presented a paper on the economic dimensions of Nepal China cooperation.

Q. Did you visit China again soon after this visit?

Yes. The following year I visited China as a member of Nepal China Non governmental Cooperation Organization. This group was composed of members of the academic community, business people, journalists and others. Such cooperation at the non-governmental level had been initiated by the Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba when he had visited Beijing
in 1995. Actually this group was partly governmental and partly non-governmental. Mr. Madan Regmi and I were included in this group as members of the academic and intellectual community. In 2002, I attended another forum called the Boao Forum for Asia. In fact, I attended the forum in the subsequent two years as well, so I visited China in 2002, 2003 and 2004.

The inaugural ceremony of the Forum was held in February, 2001 at Boao, Hainan Province of the PRC and was attended by leaders from 26 countries, including President Jiang Zemin of China, King Birendra of Nepal and Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir of Malaysia.

Then again in 2005, I participated in another forum that was a part of the Boao forum – the Asian Forum for Education. As an educationist I participated in the forum in 2006, 2009 and 2011 as well. In 2009 and 2011, the conferences were organized by the municipal governments of Shaanxi Province in the Xian City.

So these have been my several visits to China sometimes in the capacity of an educationist and sometimes as a member of the Nepal Council of World Affairs.

Q. You have been writing extensively on China’s relations with Nepal. How did you begin to start writing on this issue?

For my graduate degree, I studied political science. Later I did my masters and PhD from Banaras Hindu University in India. The subject then was English literature. I completed my masters in 1961 and my PhD in 1967. I became interested in writing about Nepal China relations even before my first visit to China. For your information, I was President of Nepal Council of World Affairs from 1983 to 1987 for two terms consecutively I had been writing on political and foreign affairs soon after my PhD. To be able to write a research paper, one has to begin with the historical background of relations.

During the last six decades following the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China has established itself as an emerging power ‘with impressive economic growth, steady defense modernization, political and diplomatic confidence and the spectacular Olympics in Beijing in 2008’. The growing strength of China as an economic powerhouse of Asia has been widely recognized. Such strength, as the Chinese leadership has told the international community from time to time, does not pose a threat to any other country.
Q. When did Nepal formally establish diplomatic relations with China?

Nepal and the People's Republic of China established diplomatic relations on 1 August 1955. Nepal and China share a long border, spanning a range of about 1400 Kilometers. The two Governments resolved border issue amicably in 1961, and have been conducting joint inspection of the border at regular intervals. Nepal and China are supporting each other in many regional and international forums, including the United Nations. Nepal has been consistently upholding 'One China' policy and is committed not to allow Nepalese territory to be used against our friendly neighbor China's core interests.

Q. Before 1990 what were your areas of keen interest?

I was deputy representative to the United Nations. I participated in the United Nations meetings from 1976 to 1980. That is precisely when I started showing keen interest in international relations. I also attended three non aligned summits. I attended the sixth NAM (Non Aligned Movement) summit in Havana in 1979, the seventh summit in New Delhi in 1983 and then the eighth summit in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1986.

Besides the NAM summits, I have also participated in the SAARC Summits. The first one was in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1985 when SAARC was formally established.

The second summit was in Bangalore in 1986, the third was hosted by Nepal, the fourth by Pakistan in 1988 I remember it was Benazir Bhutto who was then the Prime Minister. Interestingly enough in 1989, it was Sri Lanka that was supposed to host the next SAARC Summit. However, it declined to do so on the grounds that Indian troops had not yet withdrawn from Sri Lanka which thought that Sri Lanka was under Indian occupation. Premadasa refused to host the Summit because he continually asserted that Sri Lanka had lost its sovereignty. From 1987 – 1991, I was ambassador of Nepal to not only Bangladesh but by virtue of my being in Dhaka, I was also ambassador to Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The next 5th summit was then held in Maldives in 1990. I also attended this summit before I returned home in 1991 on completion of my diplomatic assignment. The initial years of SAARC were of consolidation and initiatives.
were taken to build trust and friendship among the countries as well as to generate South Asian awareness.

Q. You undoubtedly are a seasoned diplomat and one can understand why you are considered both an expert on South Asia and on China. In those years India- Pakistan relations were also considered to be good.

We do remember and are familiar with the way the situation changed and Nawaz Sharif was removed in 1999. So far as my academic pursuit is concerned, I have written and published papers on Non Alignment, SAARC and South Asian cooperation. In recent years, I have focused my research and writings, among others, on Nepal – China relations.

Q. With respect to interest in China and China’s interest in Nepal, do you perceive that this has increased after China’s emergence as an economic power and a major player on the international scene?

There has been significant interest in China by diplomats and scholars in Nepal even before its emergence as a global economic power. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, since the reforms were initiated in 1979, China has followed an open door policy. China started liberalizing very fast and was inviting foreign investment in a big way. In my opinion, the reason why China was able to achieve spectacular growth rates of more than 10% per year was because of Foreign Direct Investment and its export-led economy.

Q. What about Nepal’s relations before 1979, especially during the era of Mao Tse Tung?

Even before 1979, Nepal’s relations with China were very good. China was a friend of Nepal. In fact, leaders from Nepal visited China many times. King Mahendra, King Birendra and even King Gyanendra had excellent relations with China.

Q. Would you consider that these god relations were on a personal level or at the State level? Did China favour monarchy?
The relations were both at the personal level and at the level of the state. Chinese leaders, before the abolition of monarchy in Nepal, considered monarchy as a stabilizing force. Although the country did have people’s representatives as leaders, yet everything was under the direct control of the king. He exercised all powers, whether in the Parliament or outside. All powers emanated from the Crown as clearly specified in the constitution before 1990 when parliamentary democracy was restored in Nepal and monarchy became constitutional.

Q. What has been the reaction of China after the monarchy has been replaced by the People’s Movement?

After the People’s Movement in 2006, China has been totally quiet; they have not commented at all. They say that this is an internal matter for the people of Nepal. They have said that they respect the wishes of the people of Nepal. As long as there was monarchy, they supported it as a legitimate institution which enjoyed the trust of the people. After the People’s Movement in 2006, we have seen that the people of Nepal are aspiring for change, for a new political system that is endorsed by the people.

Q. During the recent visit of Wen Jiabao were there any apprehensions expressed about the peace process and the stability of Nepal?

Recently, on January 14, 2012, when Wen Jiabao stopped in Kathmandu for four hours, he was very categorical and emphatic about the need for the restoration and maintenance of peace and stability in Nepal. His message to all the leaders including Baburam Bhattarai was that stability needs to be achieved urgently through the peace process being completed successfully. However, the former combatants of the Maoist Party have not yet been incorporated or integrated into the army or rehabilitated. The next most important unfinished work is the drafting of the Constitution. The Constituent Assembly comprising 601 members was elected in May 2008. The Constitution should have been drafted by May 2010. The deadline has been extended several times already- by six months, then three months and now the deadline given by the Supreme Court is end May 2012. In May 2011, the Supreme Court issued a directive to the effect that the Constituent Assembly must accomplish its mission by end May 2012, failing which the Assembly will be dissolved or the country should seek people’s mandate by other means.
Q. The situation is quite precarious and the Assembly should complete its work on time. Is this the reality?

Yes, it is a crisis like situation. In fact, some politicians are crying hoarse against the Supreme Court directive. The Constituent Assembly has 601 members and all of them belong to different political parties. They believe that it is only they who can decide when and how the process is to be completed. The Supreme Court should not try to meddle in affairs that do not fall within its jurisdiction. CA members, if not all, are really furious with the Supreme Court for imposing this deadline.

Q. Wen Jiabao has already urged the politicians to ensure peace and stability by drafting the Constitution. Will the pressure from China help?

We have been told time and again by the Chinese leadership that they would like Nepal to achieve stability and concentrate on accelerated growth. This can only be achieved though peace and stability in the country. China has stated that it is willing to cooperate with Nepal in every way and to be partners in the progress of Nepal. In fact, all our neighbors and other friends have expressed the same spirit of friendship.

Q. Nepal has been an enduring friend of China.

Yes, of course. We established diplomatic relations with China in 1955. Ever since the People’s Republic of China came into existence in 1949, Nepal has had good relations. Formal diplomatic relations were established in 1955. China has continued to assist Nepal in infrastructure development, establishment of factories and industries. They also assisted us with Goods for Aid program through which the assistance was made available in the form of goods produced by China. This is one of the ways in which development aid was received from China. We have maintained best of relations with both our neighbors, India and China, and the country has benefited from the friendly and generous cooperation of our neighbors over the years in multi-pronged development programs and activities ranging from the construction of roads, bridges, power generation, supporting social services like health and education to setting up
factories and other industrial undertakings through joint ventures. Over the years, China has invested in a huge sports complex, Convention center and other important structures. All these have come up with Chinese assistance. This is, however, not to minimize the importance of friendly assistance that Nepal has continued to receive from its southern neighbor India.

Q. Wen Jiabao also expressed concern about the possibility of anti China activities in Nepal. Was the fear of this that made him postpone his visit to Kathmandu?

China has continued to reiterate its stance that it does not want anti–China activities carried on in Nepal. This is a constant source of concern for the Chinese despite the fact that our leaders have assured them that the territory of Nepal will never be used for anti-China activities or, for that matter, for activities directed against our neighbors, including India. However, they are not convinced and the security aspect was the main reason cited for the delay in the visit. Nepal has a very long border with China and it has an open border with India, so Nepal is really sandwiched between these two big neighbors. However, Nepal has tried to keep a balanced relationship with both countries. Interestingly enough, we have been advised by Chinese leaders to maintain good relations with India. Similarly, when our Deputy Prime Minister was in India, he was advised by the Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh that Nepal should have good relations with China. With a population less than thirty million, we are a small country yet of strategic importance for our two big neighbors. Their goodwill and friendly cooperation is vital to our progress and stability.

Most politicians are hoping that the deadline for adopting a new constitution will be adhered to. Let us also hope that the constitution will have some provisions on Nepal’s foreign policy. Baburam Bhattarai has reiterated his conviction that Nepal’s national interest is served by maintaining balanced relations with our immediate neighbors.

It has also been said that Nepal is like a yam between two countries (a yam is a small fruit between two boulders.) However, there are others, including Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai who believe that instead of Nepal being a small yam, it can actually be a vibrant bridge between India and China. Rhetorically speaking, this is okay and one can hope to impress a large audience by saying this. However, implementing this requires a lot of homework and there are
several geopolitical compulsions that must be taken into account. We are situated between two Asian giants which should also recognize the importance of Nepal as a bridge between them.

Q. Your relations with India are however quite different from that with China?

Yes, of course. With India we share the same culture and language. Geographically, we are very close to the eastern side of India and culturally too we have a lot in common. Moreover, Delhi is just an hour’s flight away from Kathmandu, while to reach Beijing it takes at least five hours. Even for medical reasons, Nepalese fly to India for treatment. Quite a large number of Nepali students are studying in various Indian universities. Despite this, some politicians and scholars continue to look upon China as Nepal’s reliable neighbour. We are close to the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. Tibet is a soft underbelly of China which becomes sensitive when Tibetan refugees engage in anti-China activities from Nepalese soil.

Q. Nepal is home to thousands of Tibetan refugees. Does this cause a strain in relations with China?

Ever since the 2008 uprising, China has become more sensitive about the Tibetan issue. Prior to the Games, there were demonstrations by the Tibetans in Nepal for two to three months. They would stage demonstrations outside the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu. The Government had a very tough time keeping them in control. From morning till evening they were kept in barracks and then released in the evening. This continued till the Games were over.

The news of the visit of Wen Jiabao was flashed only twelve hours before his arrival. Self immolation by Tibetans during his visit would have been very embarrassing and thus, the visit was kept as a closely guarded secret. China has expressed its desire to help us beef up our security and provide police reinforcements. India has also been providing such assistance to Nepal and we welcome such help from both countries, while giving due consideration to the legitimate security concerns of our neighbors. China is also keen to strengthen infrastructure in some areas of Nepal. Just as a part of our armed forces are trained in India, China also wants to
train our police force and improve the state of our security apparatus. Of course, such training of our security forces does not imply that China is instigating people against India.

Q. What are China’s perceptions regarding the interest of the United States in this region?

China is apprehensive of the warming of relations between India and the United States. In China’s view, since India is emerging as a strategic partner of the United States, they might work together through Nepal to free Tibet. China does not spell the names of the countries. They merely refer to the countries as ‘external forces’ desiring to separate Tibet from Mainland China. It is obvious that the external forces do not comprise Nigeria or Latin America, neither New Zealand, nor Australia.

Q. Despite Nepal’s assurance regarding the Tibetan issue, why is China not yet confident?

The Chinese continue to fear that due to our security machinery being weak, Nepal will continue to be used by Tibetans to lodge protests against China. This is despite the fact that the leaders of this country formally and informally, have continued to reiterate the fact that the territory of Nepal will not be used for anti-China activities.

Q. Coming back to the China Study Centers in Nepal, please do tell us about the work that is being done to promote China studies in Nepal.

Mr. Madan Regmi has been the Chairman of the China Study Center ever since its inception in 1999. I am a life member of the Center. The one in Kathmandu is the oldest one. In addition there are Nepal China friendship organizations. The Center has set up its branches in other parts of the country as well with a view to promoting friendship, understanding and cooperation between the two countries at the non-governmental level.

Q. What about the publications of the China Study Center?
Mr. Regmi had started in 2010 a Journal of International Affairs. I was appointed as the Chief Editor of the Journal. The first issue was brought out with most of the articles being on China. Since the Journal was expected to focus on international affairs, we tried to source articles on diverse aspects. However, despite promises by several scholars and journalists we could not get enough articles to publish the second issue and the Journal, unfortunately, has not been able to bring out its second issue. As the Chief Editor of the Journal, I am asked time and again about the fate of the Journal. There are 4 or 5 publications on Tibet contributed by scholars of the Center.

Q. What about departments of China studies in the Universities, especially Tribhuvan University?

Although there is no separate Center or Department on China studies in Tribhuvan University, there is a paper on China that is taught by the Department of Political Science. Prof. Dr. Sushil Raj Pandey is head of the Department and well known to me. There is a keen interest in learning the Chinese language and the University has a School of International language, where different languages are taught. The popular languages besides Chinese are French, German and Japanese. The main motivation for Nepalese students to pursue Chinese language is that they are able to get fellowships for study in China. India of course provides scholarships to Nepalese students; in fact much more than China does. Others who are doing valuable work in the area of China Studies include the China Information Center, Arniko Samaj, media houses and some individuals too.

I was also a recipient of the cultural scholarship and that is how I pursued my research work at Banaras Hindu University in India. The stipend I received at that time was Rs. 475/- per month. This was more than enough for all my expenses. I could save almost 50% of this amount. This was between 1964 and 1967 when even one rupee could buy a lot.

The B.P. Koirala Foundation also gives scholarships for higher studies in India. The scholarships given by the Chinese are not for social sciences, but more in the areas of medicine and engineering.
Q. Obviously then they want students to be focused on areas which can develop their technological skills rather than their skills in other areas.

Although China has developed economically as a super power, yet it is a closed society. The people are not supposed to write articles on social or political issues, especially critical ones. But informally they are very frank and do not mind even critical comments.

Q. Going back to the China study centers, please tell us how they are financed?

Recently there were reports in the Indian press stating that the China study centers are financed by China and that several of them are being opened up near the border with India. However, there are not several China study centers. There is only one center as I stated earlier and there are branches of the center in different parts of the country as I stated earlier. However the activities are financed by members of the Center, including its chairman Mr. Madan Regmi.

In 2001, the Center had organized a seminar on the theme: China and SAARC. It was a one day seminar. I was the convener. I remember that scholars had been invited from different countries of South Asia and China. Professor Manoranjan Mohanty from India was invited to participate in the seminar.

Q. In your view, how will SAARC benefit with China as an Observer country in SAARC?

As an Observer country, it is good that China will be taking interest in regional cooperation. In fact, some people in Nepal feel that China should be a full fledged member of SAARC. China has supported the objectives of SAARC and is keen to promote trade and economic relations with all countries of the region. Besides; China has common borders with 5 out of 8 SAARC member states.

Q. How will this benefit the countries in SAARC?
They believe that China’s growth and economic potential will help all the countries to grow faster. This way the region can grow faster. This is an age of interdependence and no country, or for that matter, no region can develop itself in isolation.

Q. Is this the general belief of all Nepalese intellectuals, diplomats and scholars?

It is very difficult to generalize. Some, of course, are keen that China should join as the ninth member.

Q. Coming back to the China Study Centers in Nepal, please do tell us about the work that is being done to promote China studies in Nepal.

As I stated earlier, Mr. Madan Regmi has been the Chairman of the China Study Center ever since its inception in 1999. While this Center in Kathmandu is the oldest one, there are other Nepal-China friendship organizations. However, the extent and depth of understanding of China that is required for us in Nepal is lacking. Of course, the media also plays an important role in influencing both perceptions and policies.

Some think that China is a dragon and is a threat to its neighboring countries. However, others believe that China is a friend and not a threat at all. A few days ago I read an article that stated that China cannot be trusted as it is expanding its military muscle aggressively. It is not just satisfied with economic power. Whatever the views on China, no one can say that China is a nonentity. China is an emerging power and so is India. It is in the interest of Nepal to take advantage of both India and China as emerging powers with fast growth rates. Nepal should not play the India card with China or play the China card with India. This has become an outmoded concept.

Q. We believe that there are about eleven China study centers in Nepal. Where are they located?

These are branches of the China study center which are located in different parts of Nepal. India believes that the branches set up in the Terai area close to the border with India are being financially supported by China to carry on espionage activities. The Centers are funded by members of the business community and many of them are friends of Mr. Regmi. They
contribute regularly to finance the activities of the study centers. We can not read too much into such contributions. Members also make generous contributions.

It is not that India alone is concerned about China’s expanding influence in South Asia. Nepal is also watching with interest the role of China, both in South Asia and with other countries in the international community. Nepal looks to China for economic support. Wen Jiabao, in his recent visit to Nepal, has also consented to extend all help to Nepal in building its infrastructure. Nepal wants China to construct the railway link from Lhasa to Khasa. This will help to further relations with South Asian countries.
Q. Has China agreed to build this railway track?

No, not yet. China has said that this would not be possible before 2014. However, China has been extending financial support to Nepal. For China to give aid of one million dollars or two million dollars is not difficult at all. In the last 5-6 years, China has been giving untied aid to Nepal as it considers Nepal very important strategically and also as a traditional friendly neighbor.

Thank you very much for the interview.