

China calling shots in Nepal¹

While South Block meditates on the Chinese intrusions in Ladakh, even forgetting others in the Middle Sector and the Eastern Sector, the Chinese quietly advance their pawns in other border areas too; one of them is Nepal. Here is one more instance of Beijing dictating the foreign and defence policy of Nepal: AsiaNews reported that China has asked Kathmandu to close its military training facilities in the former kingdom of Mustang, due 'to the presence of too many foreigners'.

The Nepali training centre, which is located in Mustang, close to the border with Tibet, had been the headquarters of the Tibetan guerrilla fighting against Communist China in the 1960s and early 1970s. According to Asianews: "Beijing is concerned about the presence of officers and soldiers from other countries and points out that the CIA provided aid to Khampa rebels from this district. Nepal appears ready to accommodate the Chinese, but its Army offers alternative solution." Seven foreign nations are currently trained in mountain warfare at the military facilities in Mustang district. But Beijing seems deeply disturbed by the presence of 'foreign' personnel close to its border, adding that in the past 'several anti-Chinese actions began in the area'.

It was, however, reported that the Nepali authorities appeared inclined to listen to Beijing's demands 'since China has become the country's most important economic and trading partner'. In 1990, the Nepali Army opened its military facilities to foreign troops and officers, including some from the United States, India and a few European countries. The objective was to train the troops in a high risk mountainous area; Mustang was 'perfect' for unconventional war games.

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But Beijing still remembers the Khampas who from their bases in Mustang attacked the Chinese convoys in Tibet in the 1960s; at that time, the Tibetan freedom-fighters were financed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). If the Nepali Government in Kathmandu seems ready to bend once again to Beijing's demands, it is not the case of the Army. The Defence Minister Atma Ram Pandey who 'understood' the Chinese request, stated: "The presence of foreign troops in such a sensitive area may not be appropriate for our country's security," but the Nepali Army, which under Nepal's new Constitution may not to submit to the Government's decision, doesn't agree.

Army spokesperson Jagadis Chandra Pokharel affirmed: "We are aware of the Nepali Government's concern and of the strategic importance of the training centre in the area," adding: "We have requested our Government not to stop the training but rather monitor the activities of foreigners to ensure that nothing is done against the security of the country." The pressure of Beijing is bound to mount in the months to come, while at the same time, China continues to be very 'generous' with Nepal. According to the Nepali publication, The Republica, Luo Sang Jiang Cun (Chinese phonetic spelling of Lobsang Gyaltsen) the chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) assured Nepali officials visiting Lhasa that China would expand a rail service to Nepal, once the train reaches the southern city of Shigatse.

Gyaltsen made the commitment during a meeting with the Nepali chief secretary, Leela Mani Poudel. The Nepali delegation who had come to participate in the '14th Nepal-China's Tibet Economic and Trade Fair - 2013' in Shigatse, dropped by in Lhasa to meet the Tibetan local Communist authorities. The Nepali delegation also requested China's help for the construction of a railway line from Kathmandu to Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, near the Indian border. Quoting Lobsang Gyaltsen, Hari Basyal, the Nepalese Consul General in Lhasa elaborated: "Feasibility study is

underway for expanding rail service between Nepal and Tibet. We will immediately commence the process for implementing the plan once railway line reaches Shigatse from Beijing.” Gyaltzen expressed China’s commitment “to extend a meaningful support to Nepal for achieving the common goal of socio-economic development.”

Chief secretary Poudel solicited Beijing’s financial support to develop trade infrastructures ‘which are instrumental in promoting bilateral trade’. Later, Poudel and Ding Yexian, an executive vice-chairman of TAR, inaugurated the Economic and Trade Fair 2013 in Shigatse. Incidentally, Ding Yexian is a Chinese cadre born and educated in Tibet. His father served in the 18th Army posted in Roof of the World in the 1950s and he later settled in Tibet. Can one say that Ding Yexian is a Tibetan Han? An interesting case!

Let us come back to Nepal. Unfortunately for Kathmandu, there is no free (Chinese) meal! Poudel had to reiterate Nepal’s policy of not allowing anti-China activities on its soil; in other words, the Tibetans will continue to be repressed. What could Poudel do? He had to beg the Chinese officials to increase their ‘economic cooperation’ in the fields of infrastructure development such as dry port facilities, improvements of roads, railway networks as well as in crucial sectors of Nepal’s economy, such as energy, manufacturing, tourism and agriculture. Ding Yexian, responsible of infrastructure in the Tibet Government, said that such bilateral trade fairs are important forums for enhancing trade and commercial interaction between entrepreneurs of both countries. He expressed China’s willingness to help Nepal for its socio-economic development and emphasised the need for joint efforts to fully operationalise the agreed border points between Nepal and China.

Does it mean that very soon, Nepal will be able to import oil from China through a pipeline running alongside the railway line? According to the

organisers of the Economic and Trade Fair more than 200 representatives from 70 business enterprises, 36 observer business enterprises, and representatives of Trade and Export Promotion Centre are participating from Nepal in the biennial fair. Similarly, around 200 participants from Tibet are showcasing their products in the five-day event. In the present circumstances, it is doubtful if the training camp in Mustang will remain open for long. But more worrying for India is a Chinese railway line to Lumbini, a few kilometers from the Indian border.

Can the two ministries in South Block wake up before it is too late?