

Chinese incursions: Bhutan suffers alongside India¹

The Indian press recently reported that China was building 'a massive infrastructure in Bhutan'. A report of Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's external intelligence agency, apparently warned that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had constructed a new road from Gotsa to Lepola via Pamlung.

While it is difficult to ascertain the details of the RAW report, it is an open secret that China has been very active on Bhutan borders.

On August 9, *Kuensel*, a Bhutanese publication, reported that the Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) Shivshankar Menon arrived in Thimbu to 'congratulate' the new Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay after the latter assumed office.

Tobgay was indeed happy to host Menon in Bhutan; Delhi had just promised some 5,000 crore rupees to assist the implementation of Bhutan's 11th Plan and its Economic Stimulus Plan.

However, oh surprise, Shivshankar Menon was accompanied by the new Indian Foreign Secretary, Ms Sujatha Singh.

Why this 'double' visit? The NSA does not usually travel with the Foreign Secretary. Indeed, there was more than the usual patting.

It soon became clear that the NSA's main purpose was to advise the Bhutanese government on how to handle border talks with China.

The 21st round of boundary talks between Bhutan's foreign minister, Rinzim Dorje and the Chinese vice-minister in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was to be held a couple of weeks later. This made Delhi nervous.

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These border talks have indeed serious strategic implications for India's security and Delhi's own negotiations with China probably needed to be 'synchronized' with Thimpu.

The New Indian Express asserted: "NSA spoke to his interlocutors about the current status of the India-China border talks. But, with the political leadership in Bhutan being brand-new, Menon took the opportunity of the Foreign Secretary's visit to share Indian 'experience' and knowledge of Chinese negotiation tactics to advice Thimpu on the way forward."

Delhi was particularly anxious after Thimbu had decided, during a previous round of talks with China, to have a joint technical field survey in one of the disputed areas in the central sector (eventually, the 21st Sino-Bhutan border talks held in Thimphu on August 22 agreed to conduct the joint survey of the 495 sqkm in the Pasamlung area, north of Bumthang).

Another claim by China, the Doklam plateau is adjacent to the hyper-strategic Chumbi valley. That is the real nightmare for India.

It is a fact that China never liked India's monopoly over Bhutan's foreign affairs. Liu Zengyi, a research fellow at Shanghai Institute for International Studies wrote in *The Global Times*, "New Delhi sees Bhutan as little more than potential protectorate". Referring to China's attempts to establish diplomatic relations with Bhutan, the Chinese scholar admitted: "India won't allow Bhutan to freely engage in diplomacy with China and solve the border issue."

The Global Times' article alleged that Indian ambassador to Bhutan VP Haran followed a 'carrot-and-stick' policy and 'played a big role' in the victory of the opposition Peace and Democratic Party (PDP) over the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT).

Beijing acknowledges that for India, China's advances in the Doklam area is a strategic threat to the Siliguri corridor: "As a country located between China and India, Bhutan serves as a buffer and is of critical strategic importance to the Siliguri corridor, a narrow stretch of land (known as chicken's neck) that connects India's northeastern states to the rest of India. ...Delhi worries that China will send troops to the corridor if a China-Indian military clash breaks out."

It is indeed a serious issue for India.

Even if India's special influence over Bhutan is acknowledged by China, New Delhi needs to keep a tab on the Sino-Bhutanese negotiations, which could definitively impact the Sino-Indian talks. Though China and Bhutan do not have direct diplomatic relations, last year Jigme Thinley, the then Bhutanese PM met with Chinese premier Wen Jiabao on the sidelines of a United Nations summit in Rio, establishing a first formal contact.

Historically, during the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, Beijing was not too happy when the Bhutanese authorities permitted some Indian troops to retreat through southeastern Bhutan. Though Bhutan formally has maintained a policy of neutrality, during the following years, Thimphu quietly expanded its economic ties with India. In the 1970s, several incidents of cross-border intrusions by Chinese soldiers as well as Tibetan herders were reported and when Thimphu and New Delhi protested against the incursions into Bhutan, Beijing ignored the Indian protest, responding to the Bhutanese complain only.

In 1996, China offered a package deal to Bhutan: Beijing was ready to renounce its claim over the 495 sq. kms of disputed land in the Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys in exchange for the Doklam Plateau, a smaller track of disputed land measuring a total of 269 sq. kms located in the Northwestern

part of Haa District. The Doklam Plateau is extremely close to India's 'chicken neck' area (The Chumbi Valley) and the Siliguri corridor connecting the Northeast to the rest of the country. Since then, talks are going on.

In 1998, China signed a peace agreement with Bhutan to 'maintain peace and tranquility' on the Bhutan-China border. For the Bhutanese, it was a de facto recognition of their territorial integrity and independence.

A Bhutanese blogger believes that for Bhutan, "this is clearly a case of being caught between a rock and a hard place."

It is clear that the claim on the Doklam Plateau is a second thought for China. In 1959, there was no discrepancy between the Chinese and Bhutanese maps (except for eastern Bhutan where Beijing did not recognize the McMahon Line). At that time, Beijing commented: "The strength of a horse is known by the distance travelled, and the heart of a man is seen with the passage of time, ...China's peaceful and friendly attitude toward India will stand the test of time."

The 'passage of time' has shown that China was an unreliable horse, not only the PLA has intruded in several areas of India and Bhutan, but it has also built important infrastructure, such as the road from Yatung to Phari in the Chumbi Valley cutting across the Doklam Plateau.

The Chinese engineers have also built traversal roads and set up a communication network within the disputed area.

How to dislodge the Chinese is not an easy proposition.

By grabbing the Doklam Plateau, Beijing considerably enlarged the Chumbi valley and its access to Sikkim and Siliguri; let us not forget that the Siliguri corridor is one of India's most critical areas along the Sino-Indian border.

Let us hope that Delhi will keep watching and preserve its vital interests.