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India's Strategic Concerns from Nepal & Bhutan

Sangeeta Thapliyal

Abstract

Peace and tranquillity in the Himalayas are essential for India's security and cordial relations with China. This has been a long-standing understanding of the Indian government and was also stressed upon and reiterated by the Indian officials during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to India in March 2022. Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar said that relations between the two countries cannot be normal unless there is total disengagement of forces by China. He reminded China to respect treaties and agreements signed between the two countries on border-related issues.¹ A peaceful and stable border is relevant for not only the Indian Himalayas but also for the Himalayan countries having common borders and border-related issues with China.

Introduction

Since the early fifties, the Indian government has emphasised on the strategic importance of Nepal and Bhutan for India's security. An open border with them has been one aspect of India's strategic calculation but China's policy pronouncements and activities in the Himalayan states had further raised the strategic bar. China had claimed that its borders with Nepal and Bhutan were unresolved and undemarcated. With Nepal, the

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issue was resolved but with Bhutan, it has lingered despite the bilateral negotiations on borders, and new claims have been put forth on the territory. The article tries to describe how China's border contentions with Nepal and Bhutan are causing concern for India's security. What are the available options to meet those challenges?

China-Nepal Border

As recently as 2020, there were reports that China had encroached on some territory of the bordering villages of Humla district in far west Nepal. To probe this matter PM Sher Bahadur Deuba had set up a six-member committee under the joint secretary of the Home Ministry in August 2021.² BBC News had claimed of getting hold of the report and published that the Chinese had restricted religious activities of the villagers in Lalungjong in Humla and also the grazing by the herders. It further wrote that people living in those border areas were dependent on the economic activities of people across the border villages in Tibet and hence were hesitant to openly talk about border violations.³ The report is still not made public but it was evident that the border issue was influenced by the domestic politics of the country.

The very next day Global Times countered the BBC News and wrote that such kind of reporting had been often raised especially in the last two years but was rejected by Nepal's ministry of agriculture and foreign affairs and also the Chinese foreign ministry. It considered the news as a smear campaign coinciding with the winter Olympics in China and tacit support to the Tibetans.⁴

Nepal and China share a 1414.88 km long border demarcated by boundary pillars. According to the former director-general of Topography, Buddhi Narayan Shreshtha there are two trijunction points where Nepal's border meets with India and China: Limpiyadhura (Kalapani) in the west and the Jhinsang pass in the east.⁵ India considers Limpiyadhura as its territory.

The issue related to border demarcation between Nepal and China dates back to the fifties. In a press conference in 1959, BP Koirala, Prime Minister of Nepal, had said that, “before the situation changed in Tibet, the northern border did not pose any problem ‘even from the defence point of view’. Tibet paid us tribute and we enjoyed extraterritorial concessions there. Historically speaking, we had some suzerainty over Tibet”.⁶

In the early 1960s, Nepal was engaged with China on territorial and boundary issues. To delineate boundary and resolve border demarcation a Boundary Agreement was signed in March 1960. It set up a Joint committee comprising of equal numbers of members from both countries, to conduct a survey of the boundary, erect markers and pave way for a Sino-Nepalese boundary agreement. Both the signatories agreed to not send armed personnel within 20 km from their side of the border but could keep officials for administrative and police services.⁷ In a press conference, BP Koirala informed the media that China had laid claims over Mount Everest during his visit to Beijing in April.⁸

In another incident in June 1960, there were reports that the Chinese Army had killed and captured Nepali Army personnel in Mustang. China clarified that their Army mistook them to be Tibetan rebels and the incident happened within Chinese territory. Chou en Lai had submitted a written apology to Nepal. Since there were reports of China’s military build-up in the demilitarized zone, Koirala sent a letter of protest against it and refuted the Chinese claim that the shooting incident had occurred on Chinese territory. It accepted Nepal’s demand for a compensation of Rs 50,000 for the losses but adhered to their position that the Nepalis were shot or imprisoned in their territory.⁹ Nepal expressed gratitude for the Chinese gestures while placing it on record that the incident took place in the Nepali territory. Koirala further noted that the unilateral action taken by the Chinese government within 20 km was in violation of the 1960 agreement.¹⁰

All this happened while India's relations with China were under strain as it had claimed Indian territory as its own. Added to it Dalai Lama along with Tibetans had taken refuge in India and that had become a major eyesore in the relationship. Simultaneously, Nepal was going through domestic upheaval. BP Koirala had assumed office through the first general election in the country that took place in 1959, however, his tenure was cut short as King Mahendra had dismissed the government on charges of corruption, misgovernance, etc. The Indian government's response was not favourable toward the dismissal of the democratically elected government and this did not go well with the King. Mahendra preferred visiting China after dismissing the Koirala government and signed a boundary treaty and an agreement on road construction linking Kathmandu with Kodari, at the border with Tibet. Nepal was using strained relations with its neighbours to its advantage by bringing in China as a balancer against India.

China utilised the opportunity to showcase itself as a benign neighbour by signing the Boundary treaty on 5 October 1961. Through the Treaty the issue of Everest was amicably resolved by agreeing that the boundary line passed through it. The southern slope of Everest belongs to Nepal and the northern face lies with China. China resolved border demarcation with Nepal while laying claims on the territories of India and Bhutan.

As happens in frontier areas, people move across borders with animals looking for pastureland. People in the Trans-Himalayas have been crossing the border with their animals for grassland. However, the administrative boundaries and rigid border demarcation by China affected the grazing rights of the people in the borderland of Nepal and Tibet. Through a Joint meeting of a Trans-Border Pasturing held from 8 July to 30 August 1983, both the sides agreed to end the trans-border pasture practices and develop their own pasturelands within their

territory. Till such time the locals had to pay in cash or kind to the local authorities compensation per animal.¹¹

On the whole, the border has been peaceful until news about the construction of a few buildings by China in the Nepalese territory made rounds in the media around two years back. China has built nine buildings in the Humla district in Nepal, it was reported in the House of Representatives by Rangmati Shahi of the Nepali Congress. She reported that China had constructed buildings on an area that earlier had a shed for animals, which was used by the graziers from Nepal.¹²

China has rejected the Nepali claims and its embassy in Kathmandu issued a statement that it “has always respected Nepal’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. The buildings mentioned by the media have been verified to be on the Chinese side of the China-Nepal border.”¹³ Refuting media reports through a press statement the Nepalese foreign ministry said that the Chinese constructions were within their own territory.¹⁴ Some in Nepal allege that Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli’s government was defensive on the border issue as it was facing opposition from the alliance partners and opposition parties. Soon after the adoption of the new constitution in 2015, his government’s relations with India were strained and he had moved closer to China. Oli had asked the Chief District Officer (CDO) of Humla to look into the matter. CDO Chiranjibi Giri along with his inspection team found that the construction activity in Lalungjong was within Chinese territory.¹⁵ The opposition party wasn’t convinced of the report and demanded a thorough investigation. Later Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba had set up a committee under the joint secretary of the ministry of home affairs to investigate the border issue with China. The committee found that some boundary pillars in Humla district were repaired and fenced unilaterally by China, which was against the boundary protocol signed in 1961 that entailed that both the signatories would repair boundary pillars in collaboration. The

committee suggested a joint inspection team composed of members from both countries.¹⁶

On an earlier occasion, Nepali media had reported construction of an embankment along Arun river near India-China-Nepal eastern trijunction. The embankment is constructed within Chinese territory but it has changed the course of the river and entered Kimthanka settlement in Sankhuwasabha district.¹⁷ Sankhuwasabha district was also in news because it is the shortest route for Nepal to reach both its neighbours. Nepal wants to take advantage of the geographical location of the trijunction for trade purposes and is constructing Biratnagar-Khandbari-Kimathanksa road with the help of China. It is said “362 km-long Biratnagar-Khandbari-Kimathanka road section is nearing the finish line with only 14 km of road left to build”.¹⁸ There is a change in the Nepali mindset regarding the land link with China. Nepal wants to be a transit between India and China for economic and trade purposes. On the other hand, issues of Chinese activities on the northern border are either brushed aside or trivialised by bringing it within the domestic political playground.

China on the other hand has followed a different trajectory with Bhutan. Its dealings with Bhutan do not establish it as a country ready to resolve boundary issues with its Himalayan neighbours.

China's claims over Bhutan's Boundary

In June 2020, during the 58th meeting of the global environment facility council, China had opposed Bhutan's proposal for funding the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary by claiming it to be a part of China. Despite China's objections, the Council cleared funding for the project.¹⁹

These are not new claims by China on Bhutan's territory. In the *Brief History of China* published in 1954, China had laid pre-historical claims on Bhutan's territory. In 1958, China laid claims on 300 sq km of Bhutan's territory. While it was signing a treaty of peace and friendship with Nepal

in 1960, China was claiming Bhutan, Sikkim and Ladakh as part of Tibet and hence part of China.²⁰ In 1731, Tibetan ruler Polhane had claimed suzerainty over Paro valley of Bhutan though Tibet never directly ruled over it. The Anglo-Bhutan war had brought Bhutan under the British Indian influence through treaty arrangements that were mainly interested in using it as a trade and transit country to reach Tibet. It is said that on certain occasions Bhutan also tried to lessen British influence by showing close relations with Tibet. Proclaiming close relations with Tibet the King of Bhutan wrote to the British Viceroy and Governor-General of India in 1946 that it had “acknowledged Tibetan sovereignty” up to 1860” and “a Bhutanese representative was posted in Lhasa up to 1959 as part of a tributary relation.”²¹ However, Tibet never had political authority over Bhutan. China after taking control over Tibet laid claims over Bhutan, basically, an extension of its middle kingdom thought.

After the Chinese maps claimed Bhutan’s territory as its own in 1958, the Chinese Army had occupied eight enclaves a year later. Chou En Lai had expressed to resolve the boundary issue with Bhutan bilaterally. This is the time when China had laid claims over Indian and Nepalese territory too but had resolved the issue with Nepal bilaterally. Bhutan’s border with China was closed.

Responding to these developments on 28 August 1959, Nehru had declared in the Parliament that aggression against Bhutan and Sikkim would be considered as aggression against India. This basically stemmed from the Treaty of Friendship that was signed between the two countries through which Bhutan had agreed to be assisted by India on its foreign policy.²² However, China challenged the Treaty and India’s relations by directly negotiating with Bhutan on the boundary issue.

The two countries share 477 km of common borders which China claims to be un-demarcated. Graziers and herdsmen have been historically crossing borders for pasture land leading to the assertion of traditional rights over the territory. In 1979, Tibetan graziers had crossed

the border. Jigme Singye Wangchuk, the fourth King of Bhutan said, *“Recent intrusions by Tibetan graziers deep into Bhutanese territory have underlined the need for direct talks between Thimphu and Beijing with the explicit purpose of demarcating and delineating the boundary between the two countries.”* *“Even this year, let me emphasise, there was no crisis situation.”* *But the graziers had penetrated deeper this year ‘for reasons which are truly difficult to analyse’.* *He confirmed that, “we have protested to the Chinese and have not yet received an answer.”*²³ Responding to the protest, China put forth its desire to solve the issue bilaterally. The two countries directly started dealing with boundary settlement issues from 1984 onwards. It was decided to hold talks every year alternatively in Bhutan and China.

In the process of 24 rounds of talks, it has been decided to negotiate on a sector-by-sector basis. China has shown more interest in the western sector than the middle sector. The western sector in question is at the trijunction of Sikkim state of India, Haa and Doklam province of Bhutan and Tibet region of China. It is in the Chumbi valley. The Chinese interests in the western sector was evident in the tenth round of talks held in November 1996, when it proposed to exchange 495 sq km area of Pasamlung and Jakarlung in the northern borders of the Central sector with 269 sq km of Sunchulumpa, Dramana and Shakhtoe in north-west Bhutan.²⁴ It is apparent that China's claim and interest was more strategic than otherwise as this would shift the Bhutan China border closer to India.

As Bhutan is the only South Asian country with which China does not have diplomatic relations, the border talks provide enough reasons to engage bilaterally. “Lyonpo Om Pradhan, minister for Trade and Industry, informed the National Assembly of Bhutan that, “the Chinese government had made proposals that the border negotiations be based on the establishment of bilateral trade and diplomatic relations.”²⁵ Diplomatic relations haven't been established between the two countries

but the border talks resulted in the signing of an interim agreement for the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the borders in 1998. It's a significant development as there has been no written document between the two countries before this agreement and in a way, it confirms Bhutan's sovereignty from the Chinese claims.²⁶

It is said that China wants to establish diplomatic relations before finalising border agreement.²⁷ In 1999, during the thirteenth round of boundary talk, China had proposed a package deal stating establishments of diplomatic and trade relations for the final settlement of the boundary demarcation.

Despite the boundary talks and the peace and tranquillity agreement, the Chinese have been indulging in construction activities or their soldiers intrude in Bhutan's territory, something they have been found doing in the entire Himalayan borders with India, Nepal or Bhutan. One major incident was the road construction in Doklam area in western Bhutan in 2017. Bhutan had protested against the intrusion and construction citing it to be against the peace agreement that had been agreed upon that, "The agreements also state that the two sides will refrain from taking unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo of the boundary. Bhutan has conveyed to the Chinese side, both on the ground and through the diplomatic channel that the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the agreements and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our two countries. Bhutan hopes that the status quo in the Doklam area will be maintained as before 16 June 2017."²⁸ India also considered the Chinese activity against their mutual agreement signed in 2012. The Ministry of External Affairs issued a statement clarifying its position that, "the two Governments had in 2012 reached agreement that the tri-junction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalised in consultation with the concerned countries. Any attempt, therefore, to unilaterally determine tri-junction points is in violation of this understanding."²⁹ The Indian

Army intervened and stopped the Chinese from road construction that would have linked Doklam plateau to the Chumbi valley. After a military standoff lasting for nearly 70 days, the ministry of external affairs in a press release announced that both the sides had disengaged from the conflict site.³⁰ However, there were reports that there is an increase in the deployment of Chinese forces in the location.³¹ It is also reported that China has not retreated to the original position and has gained a few kilometres, similar to what they have done in Ladakh. China was not only challenging India's strategic interests but also testing its response in support of Bhutan. Gen. Bardalai is of the opinion that China was trying to assess the Indian response so as to prepare for a bigger challenge in future.³² There are reports that China has constructed a new village, helipad and communications tower in Doklam in order to consolidate their claims on the territory. They have been indulging in similar tactics elsewhere by setting up frontline villages on Tibet's border adjoining Himalayan states of India, Nepal and Bhutan.³³ John Pollock writes that as per the satellite images of Maxar Technologies and Google earth, China has been active in Tibet's borderland with the Himalayas by constructing nearly 600 new villages, highways and rail lines, etc.³⁴ Barnett says that by constructing new habitats and infrastructure along the Himalayan frontiers China is trying to make Tibet secure.³⁵

The recent episode of the Chinese claim has been on the Sakteng sanctuary in the eastern trijunction. Bhutan had applied to the Global Environment Facility (GEF) for finance to develop Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary. It is in the Trashigang district of Bhutan adjacent to West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh. China made a claim on the sanctuary calling it a disputed territory. Its foreign minister made a statement that borders with Bhutan was not demarcated in the western, northern and eastern sector. Bhutan refuted the Chinese claims and its Embassy in India issued a statement claiming that, "*Bhutan totally rejects the claim made by the Council member of China. Sakteng Wildlife*

Sanctuary is an integral and sovereign territory of Bhutan and at no point during the boundary discussion between Bhutan and China has it featured as a disputed area”.³⁶ The statement was presented by Aparna Subramani, an IAS officer and Executive Director in the World Bank representing Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India. GEF council did clear Bhutan’s proposal for funding but the minutes of their meeting included Bhutan and China’s official position on the territory.³⁷ Taylor Fravel, Director of the MIT Security Studies Program is quoted in India Today that the “*Old Chinese maps do not show Sakteng or nearby areas in Bhutan as Chinese territory*”. Through the representation of old maps, he has demonstrated that the Chinese map used in the 1962 war with India also showed Sakteng as part of Bhutan.³⁸ There is a view that China’s claim on Sakteng was to bring Bhutan back to the negotiating table as the border talks had stopped after the Doklam incident in 2017.³⁹ Another view is that China’s tactic is to “pressure Bhutan to concede border territory, specifically territory politically and militarily sensitive to India.”⁴⁰

China’s new claims in Bhutan came close to its aggressive postures in challenging India in Ladakh. It had equally become aggressive in challenging India’s relations with Nepal. It was visible when PM KP Sharma Oli’s government had strained Nepal’s relations with India in 2015. China tried to cultivate Nepal and signed various agreements on trade and infrastructure development. It was actively involved in the domestic politics of the country and tried to consolidate left forces.⁴¹ Chinese ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi was visibly active in trying to save the Oli government from challenges posed by the opposition leaders and coalition partners. China’s stance to pressurise Bhutan was the continuation of a similar policy to challenge India’s traditional relations with Bhutan, to see how far could India come to help Bhutan.

It is said that there were murmurs from some quarters in Bhutan that they could have negotiated a better deal with China on Doklam. The Chinese have not retracted to their original position and some in

Bhutan feel the loss of their territory. These are not dominant and strong voices in Bhutan and can be sidelined only on the basis of India's political, economic and military strengths. Bhutan and China had a virtual meeting in October 2021 and signed a memorandum of understanding that has a three steps roadmap for border negotiations.⁴² Indian response has been that they have taken note of it.⁴³ As said earlier, border negotiations between Bhutan and China have been bilateral but the Indian government has been kept informed about it by Bhutan.

China was a factor in India's security in the Himalayas and it is here to stay. It would continue to challenge India in the Himalayas and its relations with the Himalayan countries. These challenges are a security concern for India. PM Nehru considered the Himalayan states as India's frontline. The strategic concerns remain albeit in a changed atmosphere. Nepal has come out of the old framework of special relationships and tries to develop relations with both the neighbours. However, either in its zeal to be a transit country or to create pinpricks by bringing China close to Indian borders, Nepal tries to ignore India's security concerns. Nepal has given some projects to China in its Terai region. China and Nepal have signed a rail project linking Kerung in Tibet Nepal border to the valleys of Kathmandu-Pokhara and Lumbini in Terai. Nepal Army has given contract to the Chinese company Poly Changda Engineering to construct bridges on Kathmandu-Terai Fast track expressway project.⁴⁴ Nepal and China have jointly set up a cement factory Hongshi Shivam Cement factory in Nawalparasi in terai.⁴⁵ There are plans to set up an industrial park by China in Jhapa and Chitwan in Nepal.⁴⁶ As of now China perceptibly has a good image in Nepal as a country that delivers. One has to see how much China is able to deliver in the long run. It is clear though that Nepal is looking for economic benefits from both its neighbours. It is equally clear that Nepal does not share India's security concerns vis-à-vis China as it did in the 1950s. There are reports of Chinese nationals crossing terai border and illegally entering India but Nepal does

not seem to be bothered but to bring Chinese presence in terai, closer to the open border with India. Even up in the Himalayas, it is suggested in the Indian media, Nepal had claimed Kalapani and Limpiyadhura and incorporated it in its map at the behest of China. General MM Naravane, had made a statement that, “there is a reason to believe that they might have raised the matter at the behest of someone else”.⁴⁷ That “someone” is considered as China more so because Nepal’s new map was issued close to the border skirmishes in Ladakh. There has been no official statement from India linking the episode to China. These strategic concerns can be mitigated by politico-diplomatic measures.

India has not lost its space in Nepal. The Oli government had many setbacks, the Chinese backed left coalition didn’t last its term. India has major stakes in Nepal from socio-economic, politico-diplomatic to military linkages which have to be strengthened not just to counter extra-regional influences but for consolidating bilateral relations. For this India has to strengthen its own capabilities be it political, economic or militarily. However, an economically strong India would be more attractive to Nepal.

Bhutan’s territorial disputes with China are alive and facing new pressures. China is not only engaging with Bhutan on border issues bilaterally but has made it conditional to open embassies in each other’s countries as a part of deal-breaker. India has intervened militarily in Doklam though it was silent on Trashigang. The Indian military has displayed its prowess to counter Chinese forces in Doklam. A militarily strong India capable of providing security to Bhutan would elicit confidence in the backdrop of expansionist China. Along with this, an economically strong India capable of helping Bhutan towards economic development and prosperity would hold the bilateral relations strong and stable in the long run.

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