

South Asia: Indo-Nepal relationship under the cloud of Hinduvta

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The construction of a motorable road by the Indian government, towards the Chinese border and near the disputed Kalapani area on the Indo-Nepal border sparked off a diplomatic row. Although there were minor complications in the past around such issues, the situation has worsened rapidly since Modi came to power in 2014.

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The Indo-Nepal diplomatic relations have hit a trough at the moment. Of course, the mounting tension was evident for quite some time. A recent construction of a motorable road by the Indian government, towards the Chinese border through the Lipulekh area near the disputed Kalapani area on the Indo-Nepal border sparked off the diplomatic row. India claims that this construction was done for the convenience of Kailash-Mansarovar bound pilgrims towards Tibet and this would cut down the travel time by at least three days. The Nepalese government protested against this construction alleging that India built the road violating Nepal's border. A number of anti-India protests were evidenced across Nepal, especially in the capital Kathmandu. Nepal's Prime Minister KP Oli threatened to send more troops to the disputed border area. Shortly afterwards, the Nepalese government released a new map showing the area as an integral part of Nepalese territory.

Border dispute

While essentially not taking part in these claims and counter-claims, let us examine these. According to Indian opinion, this road from India to Tibet has always existed through the Lipulekh area and the 1954 Indo-China agreement mentioned it as one of the centers of border trade. Another Indo-China trade agreement in 2015 also reiterated this fact. This route has been used for walking to Tibet since 1981, when China reopened the Kailash-Mansarovar to Indian pilgrims.

On the other hand, Nepal claims that this area is part of their territory according to the Sugauli Treaty signed December 1815 and ratified March 4, 1816. This century-old agreement between the East India Company and Nepal marked what we currently know as the Indo-Nepal border. It was decided that Nepal would lie on the eastern part of the Kali river and India on the western part. The problem lies in locating the source of the river, a fact which has complicated the issue to its present state.

Nepal had written earlier to both countries protesting the 2015 Indo-China trade agreement acknowledging Indian claims on this territory, but the Indian government has not responded to their submission. Once again, in 2019 they wrote in opposition to the new Indian political and

geographical map that included this area however, India is still unresponsive. It can't be denied that the Modi government is dragging this issue unnecessarily. Even at the beginning of the current impasse, in early May, the Nepalese government demanded talks on demarcating the borders, but the Indian foreign ministry dismissed the issue under the pretext of the lockdown due to the current pandemic.

The Modi government, in order to defend its position came out with stories dished out effectively by its lackeys in the media. First, it claimed that KP Oli, the Nepalese prime minister, is finding it hard to retain his post because of Nepal's internal political turmoil and especially, due to the faction-fights within the Nepal Communist Party. He has picked up this border dispute in order to seek refuge under ultra-nationalism to consolidate his position. Secondly, it wanted to convert this into an anti-China show. It tried to prove that the Chinese instigation is the root cause behind this unnecessary border dispute with India. The present KP Oli government marched to power in 2018, on the back of a heavy win, based on the huge expectations of the common Nepalese people, However, there is a disenchantment with this regime owing to the implementation of neo-liberal policies, unpopular at its hilt. Something, that has made life difficult for ordinary folks in the country. Nevertheless, let us not be fooled by these justification that the current Indian regime seeks to exploit in order to hide its own bankruptcy. The Modi government precisely wants to do this. It is using this pretext to diffuse, distract and divert public opinion when the whole country is suffering from an acute health crisis, exposed by the pandemic and also an economic crisis that sees no light at the end of the tunnel. A critical assessment of the Nepalese communists and their policies is certainly urgent but not in the footsteps of Modi and his cheerleaders, the India media.

Nepal occupies an important place in the China's capital export plans. China is investing heavily in the countries in sectors like big dams, airports, road construction, etc. It is an important partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a large-scale Chinese-driven project aimed at building infrastructure across three continents and establishing international economic zones and corridors. Both, India and China are competing for the Nepalese market but despite all this fuss, Indian investment in Nepal is still much larger than its Chinese counterparts. Besides, there is no direct evidence of China's involvement in this border dispute. Instead, China in an official statement made it clear that the issue is a bilateral one between India and Nepal, and hoped that both countries would be able to resolve it issue through dialogues.

The Indian provocation

A closer look at the political problems behind Indo-Nepal relations reveal that the situation has worsened rapidly since Modi came to power in 2014, although there were minor complications in the past. Earlier, the BJP was accused of interfering in Nepal's internal politics. The BJP tried to meddle with Nepalese politics by inciting the Madhesis, in a political conflict involving the Kathmandu Valley and the Madhesis of Nepal's Terai region in the South. Taking advantage of relative under-development of the latter, the RSS spared no efforts in entrenching them in this region and has since started promoting Hindutva, openly. This has led to apprehensions in Nepal. It is important to note that the largest number of RSS shakhas (branches) outside India, are in Nepal.

On September 23, 2015, India imposed an undeclared economic blockade on Nepal. This six-month unofficial blockade caused an economic and humanitarian crisis in the country and severely affected its economy. Nepal, a landlocked country, has to import all its petroleum products through Indian ports and transport them by road. This embargo virtually paralyzed the country. In addition, there were reports of Nepalese trucks being stopped at the Calcutta port. The blockade also hampered the imports of medicines and earthquake relief supplies. A major earthquake in April, that year, caused

widespread damages in Nepal, including the Kathmandu valley. This unofficial embargo vitiated Indo-Nepal relationships and drew aggressive reactions from the Nepalese public.

The Hindu kingdom's march towards secularism

The root of the current problem is not in the diplomatic tensions between these two neighbours. This lies somewhere else. The people's movement (Jana Andolon II) of 2008 unseated the monarchy and proclaimed Nepal as a republic. Nepal's onward march towards secularism sent shocks to Hindutva forces in India that essentially backed the monarchy to preserve the Hindu identity of the country. The demise of the ancien regime was a blow to the latter - practical and ideological. Secondly, the leftist hegemony in Nepal is something that the RSS can't swallow at any cost. They take this opportunity to buttress the left, at any cost.

For the Sangh Pariwar, that seeks to turn India into a Hindu state, it is imperative that Nepal's secular achievements be thwarted. Especially, contemplating their own political future. Whereas they attempt to intoxicate Indian masses with their doses of Hindutva, our neighboring Hindu state, that existed for centuries, has been crushed under the pressure of irresistible mass uprisings. This example is problematic for the RSS, extremely undesirable. Although Modi or Amit Shah could not make a public call on the issue owing to international diplomatic reasons, there is no obligation or responsibility for other Hindutva functionaries to remain silent. Many top RSS officials have reiterated on the for Nepal to return to the path of Hindutva. More than a couple of hundred RSS branches in Nepal are particularly active in this regard. In March 2010, Rajnath Singh, while attending the funeral of the former Prime Minister of Nepal, Girija Prasad Koirala, said, "We were proud of the Hindu kingdom of Nepal. Hopefully, Nepal will be a Hindu state again."

The Hindutva organizations in this country regularly send their sadhus and leaders to Nepal to campaign for the Hindu state. The collapse of the Hindu state and the triumph of the secular republic have undoubtedly frustrated and angered the Hindutva forces in this country. Although the BJP shares this anger, it cannot officially express it publicly. To understand the Modi government's aggressive stance on Nepal, we need to keep these facts in mind.

However, everything is overshadowed by a recent statement by the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Commenting on the border dispute, he told the Nepalese people in an interview earlier this month to remember Tibet. He did not explain precisely what this meant. Is he threatening to say that if Nepal chooses its own independent path without listening to the Delhi calls or the Nagpur sermons, it will meet the same fate as of Tibet? In other words, similar to the unethical Chinese occupation of Tibet, will the Indian government attack Nepal, if necessary? Such shameless talk no longer strengthens the foundations of our democracy core. Let's raise our voice to these threats of occupation. We need to say aloud "Not in our name"! Not only to extend solidarity to the Nepalese population. In our own interests. In order to preserve our future.

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P.S.

• Two corrections have been introduced June 28, 2020.