

## CHINA-NEPAL AT ODDS WITH INDIA: A STUDY OF INDIA'S MID PANDEMIC BORDER CRISIS

MEGHA SHRIVASTAVA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>M.A. in Politics (With Specialization in International Relations) (2017-19), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*India's border conundrums have had appeared over time and again since independence. Many portions of India's northern border are disputed by one or the other neighbour. During the time when the world is facing one of the worst pandemic of all times which has created convulsive economic and humanitarian crisis for India, it is facing two front border crises with both China and Nepal. The three countries share close yet complex relationships with each other concerning the historically close ties which have recently taken regressive geopolitical turns. This article takes a brief view of the border crisis of India with both Nepal and China. It analyses how China and Nepal looks at one another's border crisis with India and unfurls their inherent interests involved in the borders with India. Lastly, it engages the readers with the view as to how both at sodality with each other are turning hostile towards India.*

**KEYWORDS:** India, China, Nepal, border dispute, Kalapani, Lipulekh, Galwan valley, Pangong Lake

### INTRODUCTION

The year twenty-twenty will remain in the memory of all of us not only for the havoc caused due to the outbreak of the lethal viral disease called COVID-19 but also for significantly altering India's relations with its northern neighborhood countries namely China and Nepal. In the mid of the pandemic, the decade's old border crisis dramatically escalated to a point where the exchange of armed fight along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) led to high casualties at both the Indian and Chinese side first time in 45 years. The nationalist voices heard at the India-Nepal border also resulted in the unwanted firing and caused casualties on the Indian side. India is fighting a war at many fronts simultaneously-- at northern borders with Nepal and China, at the western borders against opportunists insurgents and at home against the virus. A precarious picture in the Himalayas has shaken the very core of the relationship with these countries. There unleashed a spur of nationalistic anti-Chinese and anti-Nepalese public discourse in India and on the other side a strong anti-India public protests was led by Nepali citizens at the Indi-Nepal border. Significantly, the geopolitical overturns means much more than the border skirmishes and that will cardinaly reshape the current equations among the Himalayan neighbours.

### A CARTOGRAPHIC WAR WITH NEPAL

Nepal and India are historically connected not only through a common cultural spirit but a larger geographical bond. The border dispute between India and Nepal is somewhat unnecessary as both the country had agreed to have a completely porous border in the 1951 India Nepal treaty of Friendship. This treaty makes border only a geographical entity

as citizens of both the countries are allowed to live, work in each other's country without a permit. The excessive friendliness in the relations started nosediving in the year 2015 when Nepal accused India of the Madhesi ethnic group led blockade of India-Nepal border. This significantly hurt the post-disaster reconstruction work and raised anti-India feelings among the Nepali population.

Another spur of the dispute have arisen in the late 2019 November when India unilaterally released a new political map after it reorganized Jammu and Kashmir as a union territory. The new map disputably includes the contested territories of Lipulekh pass, Limpiyadhura, and Kalapani in its territory. The 335 sq. Km. of the area including the three points is collectively called Kalapani region. Interestingly, the areas have been disputed between both countries forever; however, the Nepali government has raised the issue only after gaining democracy at home.

Both the countries share an open border of about 1,880 km which was finalized leaving the three strategically important points disputed. The origin of the boundary demarcation goes back to the colonial treaty of Sugauli signed in 1816 between the British and the Nepali monarchs. The treaty proclaimed the origin of the river Mahakali as the determining factor to declare the western border of Nepal with India.

However, the issue remains contested as the two countries do not agree on the origin of the river Mahakali. From 1816 to 1857, all the maps have shown the area of Limpidhura as the origin of the river and hence the Kalapani and Lipulekh come under the Nepali territory as claimed by Nepal. After

1857, British realizing the strategic significance of the region altered the origin towards the Lipulekh, and the river was called Kali. This supports India's claim that areas to the west of Lipulekh fall under its territorial sovereignty. Thus, India stands to the view that the boundary and areas covered by the British in the treaty of Sugauli were changed in the subsequent years. The new map included the contested part of the border under India. Since then the whole Kalapani region is kept firmly under the control of India and have been retained by India as its sovereign territory in the post independence period till date. People living there are Indian citizens, and Indian soldiers have been guarding the area-- which is strategically significant to the point that it acts as a potential area of transgression by the Chinese, being at the tri-junction of India-China (Tibet)-Nepal.

Three most important factors will always drive India's actions towards securing full civilian and military control of the Kalapani region-- Religious symbolism, trade, and commerce with China and Geopolitical significance of the region.

Another point of contention was raised by the Nepali government when Indian

Defense Minister inaugurated 75 km upgraded road via the Lipulekh pass connecting Dharchula in India to Kailash Mansarovar in Tibet. The road has been built for safe and easy travel for Indian pilgrims to the Kailash Mansarovar path. This outraged the Nepali government and under the pressure of public anger, Nepali Sansad released a new map of Nepal including the Kalapani region as a part of their sovereign territory. Nepal has been claiming the two areas- Lipulekh and Kalapani as their part since 1976 and has added Limpiyadhura in recent times. This issue is used by the Nepali nationalist politicians to manifest their political interests in the domestic politics and hence has become an important part of its foreign policy towards India since a decade or so. (Basu, 2020)

**HOW CHINA EYES AT INDIA-NEPAL BORDER DISPUTE**

Professor S.D. Muni, once described India-Nepal relations as intestines locked in one another due to the extremely close engagement and interdependence of both over one another. (Muni, 1973) This tag seems to have been crushing for a decade as Nepal has found new confidence in its northern neighbor- China.

Beijing, at times, is aroused by the fear that Nepal can be used by external powers like the USA in its strategy to encircle China and turn it against the strategic interests of China. Therefore, Nepal occupies a special position in not only Beijing's bilateral foreign relations but also its tactical strategies to influence the whole region of South Asia. Tibetan separatists have had their bases in Nepal that had raised a pro-autonomy stance in the past. It makes China keep Nepal as one of the first areas of its influence and for that Beijing would do anything.

Nepal has accused India of construction roads in Kalapani region without any diplomatic consultation.

However, India's construction in the Kalapani region is not an unprecedented act. China had also recognized the sovereignty of India over the Lipulekh by agreeing to expand the



mutual economic trade via the Lipulekh pass. It is time for Katmandu to reckon within that why China agreed with India to allow construction work and trade links via the disputed Lipulekh. The strategist and political leaders in Nepal must emphasize on whether Beijing sees Nepal independent of its ties with India?

Indian strategists have accused Nepal of acting against India under the bidding of China. China is aggravating the ultra-nationalists forces in Nepal to which it is a key beneficiary. For China, border disputes and strong anti-India opinion in Nepal will not be like any other small gain. China is well aware of the Gorkha regiment in the Indian army. Indian Army may face a huge peril if this regiment of about 30,000 soldiers goes rogue. Wouldn't that be a dream situation for China?

No, doubt China has played an instrumental role in strengthening the Nepali Communists regime by facilitating a coalition within the communist factions that made PM Oli even stronger and in turn he gradually emerged as the puppet of China. The



observed along the LAC including 2013 and 2017 and the most serious comes in the mid of the global health emergency which also saw the second violent encounter since 1975. It is because a particular section of the border on the LAC

escalated mode of tensions between India and Nepal should have been apprehended by the Indian strategists and government way back in 2018 when the communist coalition led government was sworn in power in Nepal.

Now when the whole world is struggling with a health crisis, it was expected from governments to take harsh decisions and China being in front. China, during such a critical point look at Nepal as a nation that can further its mid-pandemic geopolitical tactics and to pressurize India from many fronts. China, after brushing off the virus from its soil, has been meddling with several countries and disputed regions like Taiwan, Hong Kong, the South China Sea, threatening the UK and Australia for countermeasures, why China would not throw Nepal on the Lipulekh pass issue?

Moreover, the border aggression of China is becoming vocal and visible at the time when India is joining hands with the west to take coercive actions against China making it responsible for the mishandling of the Virus. India's urgent conference call joining the US's counter-China strategy and signing a Logistics Agreement with Australia is seen widely as anti-China posturing by Beijing. (Eurasian Times, June 4, 2020) PRC could find no better time to take on a series of pressures on India and to give it a clear signal of China's non-rhetoric aggression.

#### TUSSLE AT THE LAC

The two Asian giants and one of the most insecure set of neighbours, unfortunately, never had any official boundary line between their respective territories. The war fought in 1962 resulted in a de-facto and un-demarcated line called Line of Actual Control (LAC). Irregular skirmishes have since been

remained disputed. As per inputs prepared by the Indian Express, India has identified 23 areas on the border which are disputed by both sides.

The PLA troops have led well-planned transgressions cum intrusions across the LAC, mainly in three areas: northern bank of Pangong Tso Lake, Gogra-Hot Spring, and Galwan Valley in Ladakh sector. The main site of the battle lied in the Galwan Valley and the Pangong Tso. The Pangong Tso Lake is a 134 k.m. long lake stretching from India's Ladakh to Tibet Autonomous region of China. The LAC crosses through the Lake which is divided by points where the slopes jut into the Lake called 'Fingers'. India claims border up to finger 8 in the northern shore of the Lake. India maintains the status quo and its troops up to finger 4. The area between finger 4 and finger 8 is claimed by both and hence remains disputed. However, during the crisis Chinese troops, by breaking the status quo, moved up to finger 4 and have built defense structures. India's response by maintaining heavy troops at finger 4 resulted in a face off. (Vij,2020)

In the area of Hot Spring, Chinese soldiers have moved into three areas of PP14, PP15, and Gogra, backed by a large number of troops and heavy equipment on their side. (Indian Express, 16 June)

Strategist claims that the Chinese aggression on the LAC comes in the backdrop of Indian infrastructure activities, especially building the Daulat Beg Oldi (DSDBO) road in the Indian side of the border, which was completed in 2019. (Submaniam, 2020) This road lies close to the Galwan Valley which is strategically important for India, the site of present tensions.

## HOW NEPAL LOOKS AT INDIA-CHINA BORDER DISPUTE

Amid the India-China standoff, Nepal fears that the newly raised issue of its territorial sovereignty may be well sidelined due to the ongoing issues between the two Asian giants. Nepal can harness gains profoundly if it can derive the India-China dispute to its advantage. However, at the same time, Nepal will be afraid of incarcerated itself in between the great Asian game. Some Nepali leaders also fear that the events should not have a spillover effect on the whole region. An anti-China India should not take a harsher look at Nepal and India's response towards Nepal should not become a part and parcel of its anger towards the mid pandemic Himalayan border crisis.

On the other hand, considering the factor of Nepali domestic politics, the sudden rebounding of Kalapani dispute at this time has served as a new lease of life to the Oli led communist party rule in Nepal. The border issue and inauguration of Indian road connecting to Mansarover Lake have diverted the domestic political attention from home crisis and anti-government protests to international attention and anti-India protests. This is the second time when issues with New Delhi have served as a blessing in disguise for the Nepali government. Hence, taking advantage of the simultaneous Chinese aggression at the Eastern Ladakh, it was an apt time for Nepal to react or overreact on the age-old disputed piece of land. That's the reason that many in India's strategic community believe that Oli is playing up the "nationalist card" for rescuing himself from allegations of mishandling the whole corona virus situation in the country.

## CHINA'S CURRENT PULSE

The breakout of the Virus in the Wuhan City of China created a huge set of diplomatic challenges for China. Since the beginning of the year, criticism against Chinese assertiveness heightened around the world. China had got mired in conspiracy theories and its image turned severely negative amongst the global community. World leaders led by countries like the US, Australia pitched for an independent investigation against Beijing's handling of the virus in the early phase. (Hurst, 2020) The economic downturn at home and backlash around the globe made China take even more assertive to cut the sharp anti-China stands. China, after settling its health crisis at home, has ventured upon all other tension areas including the Hong Kong issue, Taiwan, South China Sea, refreshing its border Clash with India at Ladakh and Sikkim, and instigated Nepal's anger against India. (Baynes, 2020) This comes in the backdrop of two major reasons. First, to divert international as well as the domestic attention from Chinese mishandling of the coronavirus and resultant disorder to China's increasing clout in the military sphere. Second, the pandemic comes as an opportunity for China to manifest its national interests in PRC, taking control of Hong Kong and reassert its claims in the South

China region. China stands to show an increasingly domineering role before it could face the western strife led by groups like QUAD. The attempts of the USA at enlarging the QUAD membership by organizing a seven-country conference call further raised anti-China signals. (Shishir, 2020) Under pressure, Beijing's clandestine ploys are targeting country by country to weaken their morale of taking any anti-China stand once the crisis is swatted.

## A LEAGUE AGAINST INDIA

A US Republican lawmaker recently tweeted that Beijing's action in eastern Ladakh falls in line with the larger plan of the Communist Party of China of using the tragedy of COVID-19 as a cover to launch a large scale military provocation against neighbours in the region including Hongkong, Taiwan, and Vietnam. (Jha, June 28, 2020)

The reports suggest good evidence of how the Chinese Communist Party has maneuvered the consents of the Nepali communist party in recent times. With the growth of its political influence in the both domestic and foreign policy of Nepal, Beijing has indirectly, encouraged Prime Minister Oli to take a bolder stance against India during the current crisis. Sometimes, it may also be unreasonable to say that the cold matter between India and Nepal has been completely engineered by China as the dispute is aged and was inevitable to arise any time soon even without the meddling of China. However, it is significant to recognize the comments of Army Chief M.M. Naravane - nationalist parties in Nepal are reacting at the behest of a third party, indicating towards China. Securing Beijing's confidence and instigation, Nepal is reacting assertively against the backdrop of a corresponding India-China dispute in eastern Ladakh. The push role played by China has significantly contributed to the severity of the crisis which India and Nepal have reached today. Also, considering the communist credentials of the Nepali ruling party, it is safe to say that the Oli government is 'Pro-China' and 'Anti-India'.

Interestingly, this is not the first time that China is opportunistically using the third party as a proxy against India. A clear instance is the Maldives crisis post the Doklam crisis when China did not shy away to make Maldives turn a back on India. (Singh 2018) Notably, the South Asian democracies are young and vulnerable at their formative stage and can easily be swayed away by China's style of 'Debt Trap Diplomacy' and politico-economic dependence on Beijing may weaken their democratization process, independent media, and political leadership.

Nepal has been leading political protests against India and anti-India initiatives since its adoption of a new constitution. Nepal boycotted the BIMSTEC multilateral counter-terrorism exercise considering BIMSTEC as it is taken as an anti-China alliance led by India. (Economic Times, 8 September, 2018) Nepali Communist Party also created hurdles

in the implementation of the MCC (Millennium Challenge Cooperation) grant for up-gradation of the Nepali electricity transmission system. The only country which has not faced the spat of Nepali political protests is China even after realizing the fact that China has not delivered a single promise made to it in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project.

China has continuously mediated between the various factions of parties in Nepal to keep the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) in power. It has also put pressure on media and reporting in Nepal to keep the CPN's interests align. No doubt, with its increasing role in the domestic affairs of Nepal, China has been promoting the model of authoritarian governance in the constitutionally built democratic Nepal. Nepal's policy towards China has also been one of appeasement that has invited self-censorship and over cautiousness in governance.

Notably, in a recent border encounter between China and Nepal, Nepal's agriculture department reported that large patches of Nepali land have been encroached by China. Further, the department quotes that more territory is under threat of Chinese encroachments if the rivers in the region keep changing their courses. It is also apprehended that with the due course of time, Beijing may well find itself in a position to settle its Border Observation Post of Armed Police in these territories. (NDTV Report, 24 June 2020) Nepal's response to this has been nil and indicates the way it has turned a blind eye to encroachments from its northern giant. Though Nepal is bordered by both China and India, no wonder the Chinese influence on Nepal leadership has grown to the extent that the rhetoric in Kathmandu blamed India for spreading corona virus in Nepal and called it an Indian Virus.

Such a band is geopolitically and intelligently woven by China to take advantage of the development and investment hungry Nepal to woo its political and ideological lobby in Kathmandu to accept China the way it is and drag Nepal farther away from India's exclusive sphere.

## CONCLUSION

C. Raja Mohan identifies the territorial dispute with Nepal as "merely a symptom of the structural changes unfolding in the external and internal context of the bilateral relationships. (Indian Express, June 2, 2020) Thus, the mid pandemic border crisis of India indicates a hardened state of affairs with both the Himalayan neighbors in the times to come.

Delhi is aware of the fact that Nepal, for a few years, has been embracing a policy of significant diversification from its dependence on India and strengthening strategic and non-aligned autonomy in its foreign policy. In this pursuit, China is serving a facilitation mechanism and India's actions are further drifting away Nepal in the court of China. India needs to forget the post cold war attitude of taking Nepal as a satellite or its exclusive area of influence. Before the trust level sinks

irreversibly, India should open the ways for extensive diplomatic dialogues. Conforming to the fact that rising tensions with Nepal will further benefit the Chinese agenda in the region's geopolitics, India should prevent the incident from turning the table upside down between India and Nepal, and perhaps permanently. Needless to say, India's responses during this time and soon will shape the emerging narrative in Nepal.

Oli has been successful in bringing a structural shift in India-Nepal relation by aligning with China. Therefore, the approach of Indian government should look beyond Oli and make consistent efforts to enhance its engagement in economic, political and diplomatic affairs. Indian government still has the opportunity in hand to restructure the relationship with its neighbourhood in which it has largely failed. India needs to shed away the short sighted bureaucratic approach for both Nepal and China and should look through a larger prism of changing geopolitical realities of the Himalayan region.

China's unrelenting revisionism is trying to threaten the Asian security. China's strategy is to win without fighting that it is achieving by turning Indian neighbourhood against her. If India wants peace in the Himalayas, it should make China pay for its aggression so as to create a deterrent effect. India has accepted the disengagement instead of de-escalation which has created a new status quo in favour of China. India needs to accept the reality of facing three hostile neighbours as far as Nepal proximity with China is concerned. India needs to closely and cautiously frame its Himalayan policy considering the band between the two and prevent a new status quo from taking ground in the region. If such aggressive face-offs like Galwan and Doklam(2017) continues, the security architecture in the Himalayas may turn against India. Only an implacable and non-negotiable approach of India can save her from increasingly destabilizing dynamics in the region.

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