

India-Bhutan Relations: King Jigme's Visit and the Looming Shadow of China

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The King of Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, recently concluded a week long visit to India (3 November to 10 November).

The King met with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the External Affairs Minister S Jaishanker. During this visit he went to Assam, Delhi and Maharashtra. The delegation consisted of high-level officials.

The King's visit can be seen as a success because India and Bhutan agreed to cooperate on building two rail links. One which will be constructed by India will connect Gelephu and Kokrajhar in Assam while the second proposal is of a rail link between Banarhat in West Bengal and Samtse in Bhutan.

Both these rail links will help boost the connectivity and trade between India and Bhutan.

This will also feed into the International Airport which is in works by Bhutan as a part of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Samtse. The Bhutanese King will be announcing this SEZ on 17 December later this year.

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The overview of the visit of the Bhutanese King underscores the Indian commitment to help in the economic growth and development of Bhutan. A number of proposals and plans have been announced and thus provide a positive colour to the relationship. But what stands out is that there has been no mention of any discussion or even reference to the border issue and the Bhutan-China border talks.

But one cannot ignore the fact that this visit comes immediately on the tails of the Bhutanese Foreign Minister, Tandi Dorji's visit to China. The foreign minister met with Wang Yi and also concluded the 25th round of border talks. The announcements and statements after the meeting gave a perception that China and Bhutan are very keen to conclude the border negotiations and establish diplomatic relations, however, Bhutan cannot fully achieve this goal without the Indian involvement.

This visit underscores the economic and diplomatic dependency that Bhutan has on India. The Bhutanese economy has been struggling to recover since the COVID pandemic. Bhutan needs a revival of its tourism sector and also wants to address the growing debt (mostly to India) problems it faces. Bhutan has always been committed towards its friendship with India and consistently asserted that the border negotiations (especially in tri-junctions) will not be conducted without Indian presence.

However, the question that looms large is what major options Bhutan does have today.

Thimphu is facing almost similar challenges to those that most of the smaller nations in the South Asian region face. It is struggling to make space for its own domestic voices, some of which are in favour of normalising relations with Beijing, while balancing its commitment and Friendship Treaty with New Delhi. What makes this walk more difficult is the growing challenges and problems between India and China.

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Bhutan Cannot Totally Disengage With India

India has always been committed to help and support Bhutan. The 76 days military standoff at Doklam underscores that commitment. However, it would not be wrong to argue that given the weakening of the domestic economy and the absence of any credible deterrence Bhutan would look for a way to mitigate the challenges from Beijing, on its own. Bhutan knows that it is still dependent on Indian support, but the question remains that this does challenge the credibility of the Bhutanese government in domestic eyes, especially the Bhutanese youth.

Given that there has been a consistent rise of domestic voices in Bhutan asserting for more independent foreign policy can the King ignore them completely? Was the foreign minister's visit to China a response to appease these voices and show that the Bhutanese government is keen to undertake its own foreign policy push and is not completely under Indian influence?

Bhutan cannot totally disengage with India, not anytime soon. India and Bhutan share a very cordial and close diplomatic relations. However, a lot of onuses now lie with India as well. India needs to be ready to deliver on the promises that it makes if it is to continue to enjoy the close ties.

In the highly globalised world and with the added push from China to makes inroads and economic ties based on investments in infrastructure and trade primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative, New Delhi needs to up its game plan. India needs to act and just not talk.

The need for infrastructure for smaller nations is real and China is ready to fulfil this. In addition, Beijing has also shown its desire to resolve the border issue. But one has seen the outcomes and end plan of Beijing associated with the investments. Hambantota should be a wake-up call and an eye opener to China's geopolitical aspirations.

But what is crucial now for India-Bhutan relations is that, given such push from Beijing, New Delhi will have to renew its focus on Bhutan and also acknowledge that the challenges which Bhutan face are real, primarily the desire to assert sovereignty and resisting the push from a major economic and military power.

It will need all the support and commitment from New Delhi to successfully resist the lure for Chinese investment.

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