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Nepal and the Indo-Pacific Strategy:

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Mon, 09/16/2019 - 14:50

Paper No. 6495 . Dated 16-Sep-2019

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Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in his three-day visit to Nepal early this month met President Bidya Devi Bhandari, Prime Minister Oli, Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali, Opposition Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba and the Co-Chairman of the Nepal Communist Party Pushpa Kamal Dahal. In one sense he had met all the top leadership in the country. It should not come as a surprise to him that the leaders were not in one both on the internal and external policies. Yet on his return he made a formal statement as if the leaders were in unison on all issues relating to Foreign Affairs though this was not so!

Wang Yi's meeting with Dahal proved to be the most controversial. The Foreign Ministry of China issued a statement on the visit that "Nepal firmly adheres to the non-alignment Policy, disapproves of the so called "Indo Pacific Strategy", opposes any attempt to stop the development of China and always believes that China's development is an opportunity for Nepal and is willing to learn from China's successful experience"

This statement probably is after Wang Yi's discussions with the Co-Chairman of Nepal Communist Party- Pushpa Kamal Dahal. When the US Embassy sought official clarification from the Government, on the "disapproval" of Nepal on Indo Pacific Strategy, Dahal's Foreign Affairs Representative short of admitting that statement said the "If the Indo-Pacific Strategy is targeted at any country, it is not acceptable to us." The fact that he did say that he disapproved the Indo Pacific Strategy was quietly side-stepped.

China also deliberately left out the name of the leader who actually used the term "disapproved" and made it as if the entire Nepal establishment disapproved the Indo Pacific Strategy. This is part of the traditional political chicanery we often notice from China!

It was no wonder that the American Embassy in Kathmandu soon sought for a meeting with the Foreign Secretary to clarify whether it was true that Nepal had disapproved the Indo Pacific Strategy. The Ambassador met the Foreign Secretary on the 12th and sought clarification. Though no details have come out of the meeting it is said that the Foreign Secretary clarified that Dahal spoke on behalf of the party and not on behalf of the Government!

The debate whether Nepal is part of the Indo Pacific Strategy has been going on for more than a year in Nepal and specially after the visit of Nepal's Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali in December last year.

US State Department officials in Washington had then conceded that Nepal is part of Indo Pacific Strategy.

Gyawali, on his return, though admitted that in his meeting with Mike Pompeo discussed about Nepal's role in the Indo Pacific Region, they did not talk about the Indo Pacific Strategy as such!

Following June, a visiting senior US State Department official David J. Ranz insisted that 500-million-dollar grant given to Nepal for some infra structure projects is very much part of the strategy.

At that point Gyawali had to refute that Nepal is not a part of the larger American Strategy.

Again, in the same month in view of strong local criticism, Gyawali reiterated that Nepal will never be a part of any military alliance and that has been their principled and consistent policy.

The United States has been a major and long-standing Development partner in Nepal and of late has shown keen interest after the Chinese have started in a big way in the entire region with their "Belt Road Initiative". The US has often criticized the BRI for lack of transparency in the deals and on their part have mainly relied on "grants" rather than "loans" from non State sources as China has often done! After the Habontota experience, other nations in the region have become more cautious in securing deals and more transparency with China as part of the BRI.

For a small country like Nepal (though its press has of late has been boasting of important its strategic location!) it is difficult and rather unfair to make them choose between two major initiatives of the Indo Pacific Strategy and the BRI though one can argue that it is not a zero sum game! But Oli has to take along with him some of the erstwhile and rabid Maoists in his party's fold. For example, Pampa Bhushal one-time politburo member of the former Maoists demanded that Nepal should cancel all the training programmes that are going between US Army and the Special Armed Police Force.

I think Oli's Government is doing the right thing in keeping the whole issue ambiguous rather than choosing one side or other. Nepal is not China and Dahal's views as party co-chief need not necessarily be the official view of the Government.

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