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Nepal: Active China and a flurry of Visits by Indian Officials- View from Kathmandu

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With an active Chinese Ambassador making repeated visits to the leaders of the Ruling Political Party to prevent a split and save the Government and with a flurry of visits by Indian officials, Political Observers in Kathmandu are getting nervous.

Recalling the old and oft repeated saying of Prithvi Narayan Shah describing Nepal as a flower between two hard rocks, there is open expression of fear of a “geopolitical game” being back in play in Nepal. There is also a warning from many well-meaning analysts that Nepal’s failure to strike a balance could result in Nepal turning into a battle ground for foreign powers.

It all started with the controversial visit of India’s R&AW Chief to Kathmandu in the third week of October (before the Dasain) and his closed door meeting with Prime Minister Oli who was at that time battling for survival with the top leaders of his party seeking his resignation. Oli is yet to reveal as to what transpired and all one gets to know is that Goyal the Chief came in a special plane as an emissary of the Indian Prime Minister. The question that is asked is- why did he meet certain political leaders who are not from the ruling dispensation and not others?

C.K.Lal a well-known Analyst called it a “Goyal Gambit” that has started a new diplomatic duel between the northern and southern neighbours of Nepal. The fact that Goyal did not meet other top NCP leadership has irked Oli’s Party Colleagues. Dahal has in his meetings complained that the PM has not shared as to what transpired in the secret meeting!

Next came the visit of the Indian Army Chief which I thought was a traditional routine affair where the Indian Army Chief is made an Honorary General of Nepal's Army. The Ruling Establishment in Nepal were not happy with the Indian Army Chief who earlier had made an open accusation that Nepal was stirring up the border issue of Kalapani at the behest of another power meaning China.

Yet all the courtesies were shown to the Army Chief. Besides a visit to Everest Base Camp and the Pasupathinath temple in Kathmandu, the Chief was received by Prime Minister Oli.

This planned Army to Army interaction was seen by some as a "tool of diplomacy" by India. The Nepalese Army went out of its way to make his visit a success.

Following the visit of the Indian Army Chief, the Indian Foreign Secretary made a two day visit to Nepal. The Foreign Secretary of India who speaks fluent Nepali repeated in every meeting that "Nepal is a friend of India." He had set a positive note- I quote from the Nepalese Press of "benign diplomacy."

The Indian Foreign Secretary emphasised on the theme that India sees itself as Nepal's foremost friend and development partner. He pointed out that India's relationship with Nepal rests on four pillars and these were

1. Development Cooperation
2. Stronger Connectivity
3. Expanded Infrastructure and economic Projects.
4. Enhanced access to Educational opportunities.

The visits of the Indian Officials have been interpreted differently. This should be seen in the background of the visit of the Chinese Defence Minister's one day visit to Kathmandu on 29th November. It is said that the visit is the first one in 16 years! .

We should also take note of the meetings the Chinese Ambassador Hou Yan Qi had with the leaders of the Ruling Party and particularly with Prime Minister Oli. She is said to have met Oli the previous day of the meeting of the Party Secretariat to ensure that the Ruling Party stays in tact. She has met him thrice in recent months to prevent a split in the Ruling Party.

Mrigendera Bahadur Karki a political analyst has interpreted the visits of Indian officials as of India trying to restore its "old sphere of influence."

Others see that the visits are the result of unease caused by Beijing's overtures that "Delhi suddenly started making efforts to effect a rapprochement with Kathmandu".

One other analyst has observed that the “Ruling dispensation in Kathmandu is too closely tied in material and ideological terms with Beijing to care about the concern of. New Delhi.”

There is a political quake in the offing with the collision of Indian and Chinese tectonic plates- an apt description seen in one of the local papers. There is a genuine fear of China on one side and USA with India on the other side trying to dominate the political narrative in Nepal.

The immediate result is that it has strengthened the hands of Prime Minister Oli. He was confident enough in making a scathing attack on his rival and co. chairman Dahal just a few days ago! . He managed to get the top civic leaders in Kathmandu to issue a statement that the Party Secretariat or the Standing Committee cannot remove a Prime Minister and that it is only the Parliament that could decide on such an issue.

The Ruling Party -the NCP remains vertically split and one does not know how long the “band aid” arraignment made by the Chinese would last!

The Indian Foreign Secretary’s visit was timely and well received. This was diplomacy at its best and I wish we have more such Officers like Shingla in the Indian Foreign Service!

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