



Can the two dragons fly together?

A response to the letter from Vice Foreign Minister of China

Last week, Bhutan and China held their 20th round of border talks in Thimphu. While the talk seems to have made no real progress in resolving the border disputes, the meeting this year was significant for the new tone and atmosphere it set. Even before her arrival in the country, Miss Fu Ying, the Vice Foreign Minister of PRC, had a very friendly letter written to Bhutan's leading newspaper, [Kuensel](#), calling for Bhutan and China "to build bridges of friendship and cooperation." This was evidently a prompt and savvy follow-up to the [meeting](#) between two heads of state, Premier Wen Jaibao of China and Prime Minister Jigme Y Thinley of Bhutan in June on the sidelines of Rio+20 summit. The meeting and the overture from China are very important and interesting developments for Bhutan.

Although Bhutan is profusely described as a nation sandwiched between the Asian giants of China and India, China features very little in the lives and minds of the Bhutanese people. Apart from some Chinese goods which have made their way across the Himalayan watershed or by sea, China's presence is almost non-existent and China is still an unknown country to most Bhutanese. The same can be said about the China's awareness of Bhutan or rather the lack of it. Most people I met during my travels across China did not even know where Bhutan (Būdān) is. Even in historical times, the scanty knowledge the two countries had of each other was heavily sieved through the vast plateau of Tibet.

Tibet was indeed Bhutan's most important neighbour in the past but since 1959, Bhutan's border with Tibet was sealed. In tune with its south-facing geographical terrain, Bhutan chose to remain in the orbit of Indian influence for the past hundred years. Its southward orientation has certainly helped Bhutan see through the turbulent times of the 20th century, particularly in securing its sovereignty. However, such single-pointed orientation is no longer expedient in a highly globalised world of the 21st century. Thus, Bhutan and India have also rewritten their terms of friendship and relations in 2007 and Bhutan can now independently pursue its foreign relations without consulting India. Thus, the overture from China is a timely and positive initiative.

However, the stakes may be too high for a small country like Bhutan to launch formal diplomatic relations on the state level without sufficiently understanding the domineering power that China is. A more organic process of friendship could start with exchanges between peoples of the two countries at grass roots level in non-political spheres including culture, academia and trade. As an example, Bhutan could do more to attract more Chinese tourists and China could relax access to its holy Buddhist sites including those in Tibet for Bhutanese pilgrims. The NGOs and educational institutions of the two countries could initiate scholarly and cultural exchanges, allowing each other to amicably share

similarities as well as differences in a democratic spirit. Trade between Bhutan and China is already growing if political and religious differences do not hinder it.

There is, at this juncture, much need for a knowledge exchange and for the peoples of the two countries to know each other better. A true friendship and meaningful co-operation between the countries would inevitably emerge if conducive conditions are fostered in the hearts of the people.

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