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India, China should engage with each other; Bhutan needs to have diplomatic ties with Beijing: Karma Phuntsho

India Today talks to Dr Karma Phuntsho, an expert on regional politics, on the current tensions prevailing between India and China, Bhutan.

 **Geeta Mohan**
New Delhi, July 2, 2017 | UPDATED 16:01 IST

A + A -



Dr Karma Phuntsho

Q: What could have been the reason for the recent provocation and how should have Bhutan handled the aggression at the border by China?

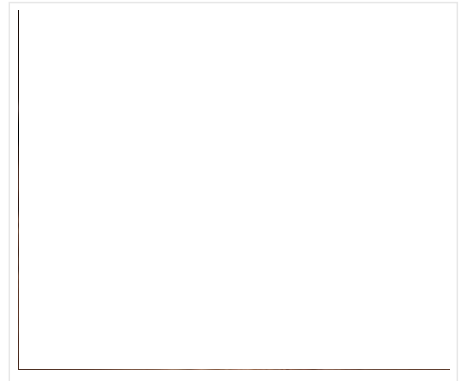
A: The current crisis is a sign of how vulnerable, sensitive our geo-political situation is and how we could easily lose the peaceful, serene life we live here. It is very unfortunate that our two big neighbours, China and India, can sometimes become unnecessarily bellicose and it is quite sad that these two giants in Asia can't come together to engage to solve problems, to have more an optimistic future for the whole region. It is certainly very disturbing for us here in Bhutan to know that some parts of Bhutan, the disputed area has become a battleground for these two big forces. I think our two big neighbours have to make an effort to engage each other in friendly terms and promote peace and prosperity.

Q: Is the recent crisis unprecedented?

A: I am not a military historian so can't talk about the past. What we do know is that Bhutan and China have been having border discussions for at least twenty four rounds in the past decades and it is important that we sit down with China and resolve the border issues at the earliest.

Q: Dr Karma, in terms of diplomatic exchanges, there are no engagements with China barring the border talks. What should Bhutan do?

A: I would certainly encourage engagement both between China and Bhutan and the two big neighbours. I am very positive in terms of having a diplomatic relationship. Bhutan should



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Q: Do you think tensions between India and China are the reasons for provocations by the Chinese at the border?

A: I don't really know what geopolitical developments triggered this tension between China and India. Some people think it is because of the meeting between Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** and US President Trump. But, if you look at history you would see that China and India for half a century now have been having a tense relationship and it is time they overcome and open up to more friendly relationship.

Q: What can Bhutan do to de-escalate tensions and convince China to return to pre-March 1959 status?

A: Our foreign office has already issued a demarche requesting China to stop construction of roads in the disputed area because the areas are claimed by both Bhutan and China and as there is an ongoing process of negotiation, any unilateral action wouldn't be favourable to the negotiations. The foreign office has already sent a letter to Beijing and now we hope that China will take into account Bhutan's reaction and we hope there wouldn't be any military conflict in the region. This area should be treated as a buffer zone that is fully demilitarised and can remain as a safe buffer ecological zone between China and Bhutan.

Q: Can there be a resolution to the military standoff we are witnessing at the border?

A: The resolution really begins in the hearts of the leaders. I would, as a Bhutanese, make a plea to the leaders of China and India to resolve the issues peacefully and not make the disputed area a battleground between the two big powers.

Q: Do you think that Indo-Bhutan partnership and the rejection by Bhutan of diplomatic ties with China could be the reason for China being riled?

A: I personally don't think China is aggressive with Bhutan. China actually has been outspoken about how it will support and respect Bhutan's sovereignty and no third country intervene on the sovereignty issue. I don't think the Chinese hold any such malice or sion towards Bhutan.

then do you see the current crisis and the threat perception?

A: If you take such pessimist approach, there would be many such dark imaginings. So, it's very difficult for countries to get along with such fears. We should always promote better and friendly ties rather than fear mongering.

Bhutan is a very small country and it will be very difficult to influence big powers such as India or China on how they engage with neighbours, so I would say that China and India should take their own initiatives to develop a much better positive relationship with each other because it impacts them much more than third countries like Bhutan.

WHAT MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF BHUTAN SAID

In a press release published on their official website, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bhutan made the country's stance on the rising tension between the India and China.

It said, "On June 16, 2017, the Chinese Army started constructing a motorable road from Dokola in the Doklam area towards the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri. Boundary talks are ongoing between Bhutan and China and we have written agreements of 1988 and 1998 stating that the two sides agree to maintain peace and tranquility in their border areas pending a final settlement on the boundary question, and to maintain status quo on the boundary as before March 1959. The agreements also state that the two sides will refrain from taking unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo of the boundary."

The press release also said, "Bhutan has conveyed to the Chinese side, both on the ground and through the diplomatic channel, that the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the agreements and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our two countries. Bhutan hopes that the status quo in the Doklam area will be maintained as before 16 June 2017."

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India's Ministry of External Affairs, in a press release, cleared the air about the situation in Indo-China border. The release started saying, "The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs made a statement on 26 June 2017 alleging that Indian border troops crossed the boundary line in the Sikkim sector of the China-India boundary and entered Chinese territory. This has been reiterated since then in other Chinese official briefings," and listed "facts of the matter" below.

"On June 16, a PLA construction party entered the Doklam area and attempted to construct a road. It is our understanding that a Royal Bhutan Army patrol attempted to dissuade them from this unilateral activity. The Ambassador of the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) has publicly stated that it lodged a protest with the Chinese Government through their Embassy in New Delhi on 20 June," it said.

The press release also acknowledged the statement Bhutan Ministry of Foreign Affairs put out.

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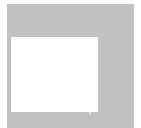
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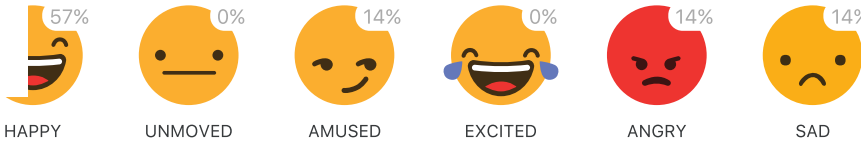
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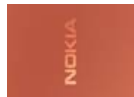
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Speaks rightly about the perception of a small country Bhutan sandwiched between two giants China and India.

^ 0 v 0

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R K

Raj Kesav 23250 Points

2 months ago



23250 "I personally don't think China is aggressive with Bhutan." If this 'expert' feels it is okay for a neighbouring country to build roads and operate military in his country, it can surely only be a 'personal' rather than popular opinion. I suppose his stipend must also be paid in Yuan.

^ 1 v 0

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