

'IT'S TOO EARLY TO CALL OFF SAARC AND SAY IT ISN'T RELEVANT OR VIABLE'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Bhutan

Six months after he was sworn in as Prime Minister of Bhutan, Dr. Lotay Tshering is still treating his patients and had a surgery scheduled just hours before travelling to Brussels for talks with EU leaders. In his first major interview since the elections, Dr. Tshering speaks about major themes in Indo-Bhutan relations, the SAARC region as well as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's upcoming visit, widely expected in July.

Is the delay in PM Modi's visit to Bhutan, which was expected in the past year, due to delays in completing the Mangdechhu hydropower project, which he is due to inaugurate?

No, I want to correct you, there is no delay, as no timeline was set. I am very happy Mr. Modi accepted my invitation to visit when I was in Delhi, but I also told him that there was no need to rush. He has so many engagements laid out in his new tenure, and we look forward to his visit here when that is possible. As far as Mangdechhu project is concerned, high-level visits are not connected to inaugurations or media events. Mangdechhu is in the final stages of completion now, and we have other bilateral projects that are being worked on: for example the South Asia Satellite programme. In my party's (DNT) manifesto we had promised a stand-alone, multi-disciplinary hospital outside of the planned expenses, and India is willing to support us on that. We have requested another government-to-government mega-hydropower project on the Sankosh river, which may see some progress as well.

Have other bilateral issues, such as the tariffs and Cross-border Trade in Electricity (CBTE) guidelines, now been sorted out?

It was never a big issue between us, although the CBTE policy that first came out in India (in 2016) wasn't friendly to our interests. After we requested some changes, New Delhi agreed to change them and we are very grateful for that. While people believe hydropower is the cornerstone of our ties, I think our relations rest on the mindset of the visionary leadership in our two countries. Any change of government in New Delhi or Thimphu doesn't change the depth of our friendship, which makes it unique, and it has only grown in strength over the decades. It is an unconditional relationship, and I don't think we should tag it to any one project or issue.

On the issue of connectivity, does your government plan to move forward on the Indian proposal of a Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) within the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) grouping?

I can say or promise anything, but this is an issue where we may not be able to move forward quickly. The same party (DPT) that stopped the MVA going forward in the National Assembly with the previous government is also in Opposition now, and they are stronger this time, so they could stop it again. I believe we need connectivity to enhance our economic growth, but Bhutan is the smallest country in this partnership, and we have a very high commitment to environmental conservation. We are different from our neighbours in the choices we make, and signing on to BBIN for the economic benefits must be balanced with our desire to preserve our environment, tradition and culture too.

Bhutan is also part of the BIMSTEC grouping that India says it is now promoting over the

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Is SAARC no longer viable, according to you?

I think it is too early to call off SAARC and say it isn't relevant or viable. SAARC has a long history and emotionally connected to us all. I believe that we in South Asia need to develop as a region and we must work together. Geographically, we are grouped together but we aren't doing well economically together.

But given the current relations between India and Pakistan, how do you see that happening?

We must open our hearts and march together without countering each other. If India and Pakistan don't work together for this region, nothing can move ahead. So my prayers and wishes from our deeply spiritual country are for the leaders in the region to go ahead together.

Two years after the confrontation between India and China at Doklam, there are reports once again of a military build-up by the PLA on parts of the Doklam plateau. How worried are you about a recurrence of the confrontation we saw in 2017?

Anybody in my position will always worry about that, as these are issues that could hamper bilateral relations between any two countries in the world. We are aware of the situation, and whenever we discuss border issues (with China), we stick to our stand that the status quo must be maintained. No side should do anything without informing the other side at the border. The problem comes when you work unilaterally and have a unilateral agenda. So long as the status quo is maintained, there will be peace and tranquillity in the region.

Has there been any progress in the boundary talks between Bhutan and China? There were reports that a "package" agreement involving a trade between Doklam and northern areas had been considered once...

I think the progress has been in clarity of what the issues are between us on the boundary. I don't believe in trading on boundary issues, we need to create a strong consensus for the way forward. I am very clear about this. In 24 rounds of border talks between China and Bhutan, we have progressed a lot, and it has become a forum for us to know each other better.

Is there any move towards diplomatic relations between your two countries?

No. Bhutan does not have diplomatic relations with any of the P-5 (UN Security Council Permanent members), which is our policy. China is different from others in the P-5, because we share a physical boundary with it, but even so a small and under-developed country like ours cannot afford to spend efforts on foreign relations with those big countries.

I believe that we in South Asia need to develop as a region and we must work together

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