

Nepal As A Single State NWFZ

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In 1998 India and Pakistan after their tests openly declared themselves as nuclear weapons states (NWSs). By doing so they jeopardized the neighbouring countries of South Asia. A nuclear war between India and Pakistan will not, to put it as euphemistically as possible, leave the neighbouring countries untouched even as they would have had nothing to do with the reasons for such an outbreak! So far the only country in the region to at least officially declare its unhappiness with this development is Bangladesh whose foreign minister in the recent past has publicly called for the establishment of a South Asian nuclear weapons free zone (NWFZ). Whatever the governments of Nepal and Sri Lanka may have thought about this since 1998, there could hardly have been any doubt that their publics were and are opposed to the arrogant, immoral and insensitive actions of the governments of India and Pakistan which has for no fault of their own put them under the nuclear shadow.

Can something be politically done about the negative implications of this nuclearization of South Asia? The answer is yes and Bangladesh has at least called for a South Asian NWFZ to the irritation particularly of India whose acquisition of the bomb had much more to do with reasons of status and prestige than to do with supposed threats from Pakistan or China. After all, India faced no nuclear or other genuine military threats from China in the decades after its acquisition of the bomb in 1964. In the 1962 war, China essentially got what it wanted and after the end of the Cold War there were actually two border-related agreements between India and China which significantly lessened tensions between the two countries. It was a BJP-led government which went nuclear in 1998 without letting its coalition partners in rule know what it intended to do, and which in its previous incarnations as the Jan Sangh/Bharatiya Jan Sangh had been demanding such a bomb since the 1950s, well before China had the bomb, let alone Pakistan. In short, India's decision to go nuclear was basically ideologically guided and status-driven, not threat-driven.

Pakistan's bomb was and is India-centred, which is why since the mid-1980s, and even after 1998, Pakistan has been more prepared to consider, even publicly and officially, joint renunciation in a variety of ways – bilateral renunciation, mutual signing of the NPT, accession to a South Asian NWFZ. Gen. Musharraf in power on a number of occasions raised the issue of such a regional NWFZ. Whatever might be its other virtues, on the issue of who is responsible for nuclearizing the region, India is the primary culprit. Besides, for a country like Nepal, India is the real Big Brother which all too often interferes in Nepal's internal politics in ways it should not.

Nepal can do something about this and send a message globally about how it values its independence. As it is, Nepal is in the process of creating a Constitution-based

democracy which almost uniquely in the comity of nations will be drawn up by a Constituent Assembly based on universal suffrage. It therefore has the opportunity to do something remarkable. *Nepal can Constitutionally establish itself as a single state nuclear weapons free zone!* This would send a very important and powerful message to India about Nepal's sense of independence and create a real embarrassment and problem for India globally. This needs explaining.

The only other country that has declared itself a 'single state nuclear weapons free zone' is Mongolia. Austria has declared itself a 'nuclear free nation' but the superiority of the Mongolian example is that external protocols calling for other NWSs to recognize and accept this are a legal and practical part of any establishment of an NWFZ, whether single state or multi-state as, for example, the Southeast Asian NWFZ or Bangkok Treaty which encompasses all the main countries of that region including Vietnam. Thus the Bangkok Treaty and Mongolia's NWFZ status demands that the other NWSs – the de jure NWSs of US, Russia, China, UK, France – all recognize and respect their new status.

India, in fact, even as it, unsurprisingly, vehemently opposes the idea of a South Asian NWFZ, has declared its willingness to sign the Bangkok Treaty's external protocols for NWSs since this would be way of its gaining de jure recognition of its 'legitimate' status as an NWS. If Nepal were to Constitutionally establish itself as a single state NWFZ then this would have the following political benefits. First, it would be a positive anti-nuclear message in itself. It would legitimize the introduction of this concept into South Asia to be promoted and proposed for other parts of the sub-continent e.g., a NWFZ covering both parts of Kashmir across the border. It sends, like the Southeast Asian NWFZ and the Mongolian NWFZ, a serious anti-militarist message to much more powerful and nuclearized neighbours.

Second, by calling for the signing of external protocols of acceptance and recognition it is politically demanding a legal expression of sorts of peaceful and non-militarist behaviour by NWSs. Third, a Nepali single state NWFZ will put India (and to a lesser extent Pakistan) internationally on the spot. Such an NWFZ would be a political slap in the face of the two governments which they fully deserve anyway. But are they going to formally recognize this new status of Nepal or risk global opprobrium for refusing to recognize this status? In the case of India, should it refuse or even stall matters, it would face accusations of hypocrisy and double standards since it has declared its willingness to sign the protocols of the Bangkok Treaty as an NWS. If China recognized a Nepal NWFZ and India did not, the public embarrassment would be all the greater.

Finally, the move towards Constitutionally establishing Nepal as a single state NWFZ is fully within its power. No outside country, no matter how powerful, can stop it from doing this. Russia, China or US may not have liked Mongolia doing what it did but they could do nothing about it and have been pushed into signing or saying that they are considering signing the external protocols of recognition.

Although Nepal's political parties vary in the extent to which they are concerned about having New Delhi's goodwill and therefore not upsetting it, surely they are all committed

to a dignified assertion of Nepal's independence and its moral-political abhorrence of nuclear weapons? Such a step would, for the history books, create for itself a global uniqueness – the only country anywhere to *Constitutionally* establish itself for now and the future as a single state NWFZ. Isn't it time that Nepali progressives look to learn from the Mongolian example on this score and at the very least put this issue on the political and Constitutional agenda for serious consideration?