

Pass between Tibet and Sikkim to finally re-open

The Indian national TV Channel Doordarshan-1 and other media sources in India have reported that the People's Republic of China (PRC) and India will re-open the Nathu La pass, which links the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) with the Indian state of Sikkim, "*within a month*". An agreement to this effect has reportedly been signed during Indian Defence minister Pranab Mukherjee's first visit to China which ended on 02 June 2006. The re-opening of the pass comes three years after a declaration of principle and many rounds of talks between India and China on border trade, and brings potential economic benefits for the Tibet-Himalayan border region as well as for local economies in the TAR and north east India.

The Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route was once a major axis of Asian trade. Together with its routes north and east towards China and Central Asia, and its extension south towards the port of Calcutta (Kolkotta) in the Bay of Bengal, it historically provided considerable wealth in Central Tibet and north east India. Travellers to Tibet until the mid-20th century noted that it was due to the intensive trade on this axis that many goods, including fashionable items from international trade centres in Europe, Japan and North America, were readily available in Lhasa's markets. The sealing of the Nathu La and the neighbouring Jelep La after the failed Tibetan uprising of 1959, and the complete closure of the border after the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict created dead ends on both sides of the border and marked the beginning of a period of economic atrophy in Tibet and the whole Himalayan region.

The re-opening of the Nathu La pass has been a key demand of the local authorities in Sikkim, the bordering Darjeeling Autonomous Hill Council and the TAR since the 1980s. However, both New Delhi and Beijing have rejected this for many years due to strategic and political considerations. Apart from obvious military concerns, the Chinese authorities have refused to acknowledge Sikkim as a part of India. The Himalayan principality, which had been a tributary state to Tibet until the late 19th century, and later a British and then Indian protectorate, was only formally annexed by the Indian Union in 1974. The move, though endorsed by the democratically elected Sikkimese parliament, was labelled illegal by China. On the Indian side, strong military lobbies feared the opening an 'invasion route' into India.

During a visit to China by the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in June 2003, agreements to foster "*the framework of a boundary settlement*" between the two countries were signed. These included a declaration of intention to re-open the ancient trade route via the Nathu La. A few months later, China finally acknowledged the disagreement over Sikkim as a "*thing of the past*". However, negotiations on border trade regulations and other details proved tough, and the actual opening of the pass was repeatedly postponed despite several public announcements to the contrary, as it was in October 2005, reportedly at China's request. The opening was re-scheduled for April 2006, although that deadline too passed without further official comment.

Meanwhile, on both sides of the border, considerable infrastructure to handle initial trade between the two countries was put in place. On 26 May 2006, Sikkim's Principal Secretary of the Department of Commerce and Industries Karma Gyatso announced that a trade hub has been set up in Sherathang, about five kilometres from the border outpost with parking lots for trucks, power, telecommunication and post facilities, as well as custom offices. Delays in the construction of similar infrastructure on the PRC side of the border are said to have led to the postponement in October 2005.

The Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route via the Nathu La offers today, as it has done in centuries past, the best possible terrestrial link between Tibet and South Asia. It is about one third shorter than the alternative Kathmandu-Lhasa road and is geographically more easily accessible. However, existing plans to use the route for large-scale container traffic from China to the port of Calcutta still face formidable natural obstacles. With an elevation of 4,310 m above sea level, the Nathu La receives heavy snowfalls and remains impassable for normal road traffic over several months of the year.

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