

China wants to extend its Nepal rail link to India

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Beijing: Having already expanded its influence in Nepal with road and rail network through Tibet, China is now looking to stretch its railway link to Bihar to improve connectivity with India and South Asia, state-run Chinese media reported today.

A cross-border railroad link to the Rasuwagadhi area in Nepal has already been discussed between the two countries. China's railroad is expected to reach Nepal border by 2020, an article in the state-run Global Times said.

This rail line makes it possible to connect China to India as from Rasuwagadhi to Birgunj, which borders Bihar is only 240 km, the article said.

For Bihar, trade with China through the rail link will be easier along this route than through Kolkata, saving time, cost and distance, it said.

"The railroad connection to China not only is important for Nepal and Nepalese people's future development, but also has the capacity to build connectivity with the whole of South Asia. The government of Nepal has the chance to make history," the article said.

It also criticised attempts to block major projects in Nepal. "Challenge is both internal and external stakeholders' sensitivity about mega infrastructure projects. Unfortunately due to oversensitivity, some major projects were aborted before even a brick was laid. So the Nepali government must play a key role in bringing all the stakeholders into a sufficient consensus," it said.

While rail and road links with Nepal were regarded strategic for China to blunt India's influence in the country, analysts said the development of most expansive infrastructure through the rugged Himalayan mountains is viable only if get connected to India.

India, China bilateral trade currently hovers around USD 70 billion with over USD 48 billion trade deficit in favour of Beijing.

Early this month, in a strategic move to cut landlocked Nepal's dependence on India, China opened a combined road and rail service to Kathmandu through the rugged mountain ranges in Tibet to step up transportation of supplies to the Himalayan country.

An international freight train from Lanzhou, the capital city of northwestern China's Gansu province has been operationalised.

The train will carry the cargo to Xigaze, the nearest Tibetan town close to Nepal from where the goods will be transported to the Nepal by road. The whole journey will take 10 days.

It includes 2,431 kms of rail transport 564 km of road transport to Geelong Port in Nepal.

From there it will take another 160 km of road transport to reach Nepal's capital Kathmandu.

Altogether, the combined transport takes 35 days fewer than traditional ocean transport, the report said.

The combined rail and road service has been started as a follow up to Nepal Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli's visit here in March during which the two countries signed the landmark transit treaty for Nepal to access supplies from China through the arduous route of Tibet.

Chinese officials said Beijing has also agreed to extend the rail link in Xigaze to Nepal border, which will enable Kathmandu to access growing rail and road infrastructure in Tibet.

Nepalese officials say the new routes with China will cut down dependence on India, which till now is the sole supplier of goods.

Oli government was keen on opening up new routes with China including access to its port Guangzhou to reduce dependence on India in the aftermath of the blockade along the Indian border imposed by Madhesis in Nepal to express their resentment against the new constitution, analysts say.

- PTI