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India and Nepal: Neighbours Trapped by Apprehensions

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A transit point on the India-Nepal border viewed from Nepal. File photo: R.V. Moorthy

*India's relationship with its neighbours is often a point of passionate discussion. In this article, The Hindu Centre's Public Policy Scholar, **Maanvender Singh**, places the bilateral ties between India and Nepal in context. Highlighting the reasons for a trust deficit between Indian and Nepal, he says that India needs to understand that Nepal is in the phase of transition from a feudal autocracy and monarchy to a democratic republic, and holds out a note of caution against attempting to build bilateral ties based on a religious identity.*

Nothing illustrates the current nature of Indo-Nepal relationship more vividly than the latter's response to the European Union (EU)-India joint statement, which urged Nepal to build an "inclusive constitution" in a "time-bound manner". The statement was issued on March 30, 2016, to which Nepal responded: "The constitution making and its promulgation are essentially internal matters of a country. Nepal has now moved along the path of political stability and economic development. Against this backdrop, the EU-India Joint

Statement not only hurts the sentiments of the people of Nepal but also defies the fundamental principle of non-interference in internal affairs of a country in breach of the UN Charter and norms of international law”¹.

The message was clear to the Indian state that it cannot dictate democratic norms and procedures to Nepal. In fact, over the last eight months, Nepal has maintained a similar tone, accusing India of ‘interfering in the domestic affairs of a sovereign nation’. The following two politically significant events place the bilateral relations in perspective.

1. In September, 2015, when the Nepali constitution was passed with a resounding majority and celebrated worldwide, the Indian government criticised the document by expressing its concerns over tensions in border region². Indian concerns were mostly in relation to the issue of the Madhesi residing in the Terai region and their inclusion and representation in the new constitution³. [Madhesis are persons of Indian origin settled in Nepal⁴.]

Unimpressed by the constitution, political leaders in Madhes went on to impose a four-month long blockade. The perception in Nepal was that the blockade was backed by India, even though India denied any role-play. Soon matters were taken to UN with both nations exchanging charges⁵.

2. To make things worse, in May 2016, a political crisis in Nepal, when the attempt by Pushpa Kamal Dahal (better known by his *nom de guerre* Prachanda⁶) to topple the Oli government was linked to India. As the suspicion grew on Indian intervention, the envoy to India, who was charged with the allegations of backing Indian interferences in internal matters of Nepal⁷, was recalled.

These events not only illustrate the fact that there is a deep antipathy against the Indian state but also strengthen perceptions of India as ‘a bully’ in the South Asian region.

What went wrong?

While it is true that the Nepali constitution did ignore some of the genuine concerns of Tharu and Madhes people resulting in tension in the border areas, the Indian mistake was to believe that it still holds a position of privilege in political matters of Nepal ⁸. This, indeed, was the case back in 2006 when India played an important role in striking a peace deal between the Maoist leadership and the Nepali government ⁹. However, the inability of the Indian state to understand its role and limitations in Nepal has affected bilateral ties. The first set of differences appeared in 2008 when Indian intervention in the constitution-making process was questioned by the Maoist leadership in Nepal ¹⁰.

This was to repeat itself in 2015. When the situation required patience and precision, the Indian state acted in haste by asking a sovereign nation to roll back a constitution it had produced after years of political turbulence.

As all this was going on, back in India, it was difficult for Indians to understand why Nepal stood in opposition to India. Why are a large number of Indians distraught over Nepal’s actions and fail to admit India’s lapses in maintaining a smooth relation with its northern neighbour? Clearly, such perceptions persist in India due to lack of information and knowledge among the general public about India’s intervention in Nepal. Therefore, it is important to approach this debate by recognising a few unpublicised facts before arriving at conclusions.

One is the proactive and partisan role of Indian state in Nepali politics, most dubious being the role played by the Indian agency, Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) ¹¹. The Indian strategy right from the rule of the monarch has always been two-fold: to identify such political groups in the country that are willing to produce changes that are suitable to Indian interests, or to side with political elite in the Himalayan nation. In both cases, India had shown little trust on the capability of political leaders in Nepal. In such an arrangement, whenever there is a change in

political actors on either side, it opens up the possibility of conflict. This is what has happened this time, with an Indian Prime Minister who wants total control over foreign policy matters proving disastrous to Indo-Nepal ties.

Second is the timely attempts made by the Hindutva forces to declare Nepal a Hindu state [12](#). The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) *parivaar* has been transplanting Hindutva even before they came to power [13](#). For instance, in 2004, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader, Ashok Singhal, urged Hindus of the world to follow the King of Nepal, who he addressed as the great Monarch. He said that “It is the duty of 900 million Hindus the world over to protect the Hindu Samrat. ... God has created him to protect Hindu Dharma” [14](#). Similar emotions are evoked from the right-wing parties in Nepal. In 2013, the Rashtriya Prajamtra Party chief, Kamal Thapa, declared that [Indian Prime Minister] Narendra Modi will help his party in reinstating the Hindu state in Nepal [15](#). Such fictional ideas about Nepal that it will revert to its position as a Hindu state completely ignored the history of revolutionary movement in Nepal.

While it is obvious that the current approach to bilateral ties is short of the required intellectual foundation in foreign policy, problems of this sort predate Prime Minister Modi’s adventures in Nepal. In fact, the history of Indo-Nepal relation is riddled with such circumstances. For instance, back in 1989, the Rajiv Gandhi-led government imposed a 13-month-long economic blockade against Nepal. They were punished for showing proximity with China [16](#). The truth is that the Indian policy towards Nepal follows the same recurring script where every Indian government in past tried highly coercive method to achieve its goals in that country [17](#).

Dependency-Dominance Relation

The hegemonic strategy pursued by India towards Nepal is not new to bilateral relations; the U.S. has been doing it for decades with Mexico [18](#). According to Sidney Weintraub, such actions are product of dependency-dominance relation between Mexico and the U.S. that has long coloured official behaviour of the respective governments [19](#). In a dependency-dominance relationship, the importance of both nations to each other is not symmetrical due to which their respective response to each other’s policy varies significantly [20](#).

This proposition helps us to understand the consistency of conflict between Indian and Nepal. The dependency-dominance attitude originates from at least three basic variables: Nepal’s location between India and China, which has military-strategic implications (Thapliyal: 2009) and signifies an obvious limitation for the smaller nation; power asymmetry, which signifies that Nepal is weaker partner in the relationship (Kumar: 1992); and the historical dependence of Nepal on India in terms of trade and commerce and dominance of Delhi in these key areas.

This sense of dependence on the one side and dominance on the other generates polar opposite perceptions, which ultimately affects the pattern of negotiation on various issues. The contesting perceptions between two neighbours are operated mainly in the areas of security, trade, energy, border, water sharing and migration. As Weintraub points out:

“On a larger canvas the dependency-dominance outcome of the two countries have shaped the attitudes and behaviour of not only of governments, but also of the populations of each country towards each other [21](#).”

This in a sense also explains the behaviour of a Nepali citizen towards the Indian state as suspicious and cynical. In Nepal, India is perceived to have acquired an advantageous position in bilateral ties, and in India the actions of the Indian government are seen as some sort of help to the disadvantageous nation. Take, for instance, the case of hydropower generation in Nepal. The common perception is that not only it benefits India disproportionately as

compared with Nepal but also that it will enable India to control Nepal's water resources ²². The problem is that instead of acknowledging that there is a knowledge-gap between the two nations, leaders on both sides had tried to further deepen bilateral ties on the rhetoric of commonality and shared culture. In fact, the idea that the two countries share common culture itself is mythical, as Nepal has its own distinctive culture, and such an assertion only leads Nepal to be perceived in the Indian public mind as a cultural extension of India.

However, the major issue between India and Nepal is the security dialogue that has hardly played to the tune of shared strategic interest. Historically, the two neighbours entered into the treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950) over the mutual security concerns, against the aggressive neighbour China ²³. Nepal, which was under the rule of the monarch, was anxious over the Chinese expansion towards Tibet and, therefore, agreed to continue with the colonial arrangement, binding the security concerns of Nepal with India.

In spite of the agreement, by early 1960s, Nepal had shifted its foreign policy towards China ²⁴. The traditional scepticism towards Beijing was replaced by pragmatism. On the other side, the military defeat of India at the hand of China brushed away the idealism of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) (Ganguly: 2010). The design of Indian foreign policy became more pre-occupied with the security concerns in the South East Asian region, expecting more "obedience" from Nepal. Indian paranoia against China has resulted in ugly confrontation with Nepal.

The fault lies in the historical understanding that treats Nepal more as 'buffer state' to protect Indian security concern in the Himalayan region. In fact, overt security concern is one of the reasons that Indian state can use to explain away any interference in the domestic affairs of Nepal. For instance, in 2009 when the Prime Minister of Nepal, Prachanda, sacked Army Chief General Rukmangad Katuwal for gross subordination, India intervened to revert the decision. The stated reason to do so was simple: that Maoists had plans to capture army by collaborating with China. This story that China has pushed Prachanda into sacking of army chief was carried in a leading English daily ²⁵. Within a few days, Nepalese President Ram Baran Yadav, who was considered close to India, reinstated the army chief. Soon after, other political parties withdrew their support to Prachanda, who was forced to resign on May 4, 2009 ²⁶. This was a sovereign government that was taken down, once again, over the allegation that it has shown proximity with China.

Is there a solution?

There is no quick fix to the age-old trust deficit between Indian and Nepal. There are certain dos and don'ts for India. First, India would do well to stop patronising political leaders in Nepal by not being tempted by any faction in Nepal that might seek Indian intervention. Second, Delhi needs to understand that Nepal is in the phase of transition from a feudal autocracy and monarchy to democratic and republic institution. Such transition is never smooth and there is every possibility that in future more assertive voices will be raised against the Bahun–Chhetri dominance in Nepali politics ²⁷. Yet, it is for the democratic nation to decide their future course of action. There is an important role India can play, not as superior counterpart, but as an ally that stands with the spirit of this new republic.

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