

CHANGING CONTOURS OF INDO-NEPAL RELATIONS: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

BY

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The thrust of India's foreign policy approach remains that India will only attain its natural credibility not only by cultivating the great powers but by success achieved in winning the trust of all its contiguous neighbours. However, the asymmetry in size and power among different states of South Asia makes it difficult for India to achieve success towards having warm and cordial relations with its neighbours on long-term basis. India has been facing challenges almost with all its neighbours at one time or the other that has posed strategic implications as it provides powers external to the region to make inroads in South Asia, much to the distaste of India. Ironically, India and Nepal is the only pair of neighbours which share affinity which are in their long-term interests; compare to other pairs of neighbours which have some ingredients in common but not the comprehensive unbreakable natural, historical and cultural linkages that this pair of neighbours possesses. However, the bilateral relations between these two neighbours have seen frequent ups and downs yet things always seemed to be in command. Short-term politics frequently have been obscuring the long-term interdependence and bonhomie between the two neighbours, which has serious strategic implications. This is because worsening of India's relations with its neighbours possesses the potentials of significant change in geo-politics in the region.

India has been the most important external factor in the internal political development of Nepal. The historical ties have always been strong with minor ups and downs in the relations between the two countries. India has always projected Nepal, and considered as well, a traditional ally. India has stood by Nepal in its hours of need and crisis. It extended a helping hand in true spirit of friendship and in consonance with advocacies of Gujral Doctrine which envisaged that India should play the role of an elder brother with its smaller neighbour rather than 'big brother'. Nepal witnessed radical changes in post-2006 phase of its Constitution writing process. It was India's mediation in bringing together eight parties including the insurgent Maoists and pro-federalism Madhesi groups that could smoothened the process of hammering out the Constitution. It gave India an unprecedented popularity in Nepal. Especially India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and RAW bureaucracy which worked together on the mediation and subsequent political developments along with Nepali actors were seen as a 'patron of democracy' in Nepal. The then relationship between the two countries went to its zenith where Delhi became a regular and preferred pilgrimage for the political leadership of Nepal and all those leaders who were involved in the changeover.¹ However, within a span of one decade things seems to be falling apart and all is not well between India and Nepal. Author explores the changing contours of relationship between India and Nepal in the recent past and different dynamics of the same to decipher the strategic implications and imperatives for India's foreign policy in the immediate neighbourhood.

INDO-NEPAL RELATIONS ON A NEW LOW

Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi visited Nepal twice to drive home his announced foreign-policy priorities i.e. 'Neighbourhood First'. This sent a strong signal across both the countries that good and healthy relations are ahead on account of convergence between the two countries. Nepal promulgated its new Constitution on September 20, 2015 and nation-states across the world heaved a sigh of relief that finally the tiny nation is going to be politically stable and peace and tranquillity will prevail in this Himalayan state. However, the relations hit a rock bottom since September 2015 when

Changing Contours of Indo-Nepal Relations: Strategic Implications

Madhesi groups started agitating for their demands to be met in the new constitution articulating that they have not been given a fair share in the federal structure within the newly promulgated Constitution. India expressed its sympathy with the cause of Madhesi and Terai people, and tried to prevail on Nepali leadership that an amicable political solution to the same must be arrived at through negotiations across the table. Nepal accused India of a blockade, whereas India denied of any such blockade on the ground.² In spite of such bickering Nepal's Prime Minister K. P. Oli visited India for Six-days in February 2016 and called the visit a successful one.

The bonhomie that developed between the two countries in the post-2006 phase and continued till the year 2015 suddenly got disrupted and soon India lost its role and acceptability within Nepali political clique and many of the Nepali citizens. The relations touched the bottom as the visit of any Nepali leader was being seen with suspicion and eyebrows were being raised by the existing political dispensation within Nepal. Any comment by India or its diplomats on Nepali politics raised hackles within Kathmandu and once Oli went public to issue a warning to Indian Diplomats not to interfere in internal politics of Nepal. Even Maoist Chief and former Prime Minister Pushp Kamal Dahal commented in public that "India's micro-management will not be acceptable."³ Therefore, India and the friends of India within Nepal were put on scanner and were under strict observation as if a conspiracy was in the offing.

The anger of Prime Minister Oli reached its height when he alleged that a game was being played to topple his government and India was a conspirator into the same. Allegedly the leaders of Nepali Congress, its chief Sher Bahadur Deuba and Maoist leader K B Mahara visited Delhi and after returning they engaged in a failed attempt to bring down Oli's government. The brunt of this entire episode was borne by Nepal's Ambassador to India, Deep Kumar Upadhyay. Subsequent to the allegation Upadhyay was dismissed as he too was accused of conspiring to oust Oli. Upadhyay was also alleged of frequent interactions with Indian Ambassador Ranjit Rae. The dismissal of Upadhyay received a great deal of publicity in both the countries because it was

coincidental with the Nepal government's decision to cancel the visit of President Bidhya Devi Bhandari to Delhi and Ujjain in India.⁴ Deep Kumar Upadhyay, an appointee of the Nepali Congress (NC) was thus a collateral damage in the entire episode of power struggle that was orchestrated within the Nepali political leadership.

Later Bimlendra Nidhi, a member of NC was quoted in a newspaper saying that his party which tried to form a new government by breaking the ruling coalition would try to do so once again when they have the requisite number. He further said, "As a democratic party, we will maintain the dharma of opposition and will play our expected role to replace the government when we have adequate numbers in our favour. Mr. Oli is leading a coalition government and therefore his government cannot be as stable as it is expected to be. The coalition partners of Mr. Oli, are no longer feeling comfortable in his company. It is a matter of time before they fall apart."⁵ According to the same source the crisis was triggered on May 3-4, 2016 when former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda, a member of the ruling coalition met NC President Sher Bahadur Deuba and requested him to create a political formation combining the UCPN-Maoist which he leads, and the NC.

Oli's left dominated government survives on the support of the Maoists. The crisis commenced when in first week of May 2016 Maoists moved a resolution to pull down the government with support mobilised by Sher Bahadur Deuba led Nepali Congress. Surprisingly, within 24 hours, Prachanda did a U-turn, leaving Oli still in command of the government but bitter and very upset. This political development provided a pretext to Oli to play the victim card and blame India for attempting a change in government. However, Prachanda ditched Deuba and switched positions by striking a deal with Oli.

This was made possible through conclusion of a nine-point agreement between the Maoists and the UML—which commits the Oli government to granting clemency to Maoists cadres, providing compensation to the injured and others who lost their livelihoods, facilitating land allotments, bringing in controversial transitional justice provisions pending for over a decade, and ensuring close

Changing Contours of Indo-Nepal Relations: Strategic Implications

consultation with regards to government appointments. Some newspapers reported that Oli also promised of relinquishing the office of PM after the Budget and allowing the office under oath to Prachanda. The agreements also provided for accelerating reconstruction work and addressing Madhesi demands at the earliest though it is clear that the Oli government is in no mood to move forward in this regard.⁶ Though, the casualty to Oli's power was contained but it took its toll on India-Nepal relations.

Not only Nepal Ambassador to India was recalled but also the Nepalese government, according to reports, was contemplating legalities and implications of declaring Indian envoy Ranjit Rae as PNG (Persona non grata). The relations went so low that an anti-India feeling was being indoctrinated into the minds of Nepali citizens and children. Allegedly the children were being convinced that it is because of India and Narendra Modi that they are unable to go to school.⁷ Nepal's inner power struggle has this kind of character that for any fuss they blame it on India. The entire episode that ensued in the month of May 2016 delineates a strong lesson for both India and Nepal.

First, that irrespective of the cause of crisis and whichever country is responsible, it shall affect both the countries as neither is going to be benefitted out of this. Nepali leaders are fooling themselves by passing the buck of their internal political chaos on India. Nepali leaders must understand that coalitions are utterly vulnerable across the world, especially when it lacks a strong and dominant party. It is increasingly unstable if it is a conglomeration of more than one ambitious leader. It is bound to be doomed if it is an alignment of leaders who have been into the seat of highest authority.

Secondly, rather than putting own house in order, blaming it on others has been favourite recourse to most leaders of the world. It is easier to do but it creates long term damage to their relations in international politics. It almost derails the existing relations. Power approach to politics means that it is power that matters for all practical purposes, but one must also understand that it may be easier to acquire power by fair or foul means; but it is damn difficult

Alok Kumar Gupta

to maintain power amidst number of power-hungry political leaders. One needs to be mild, crafty and diplomatic enough to do so.

Thirdly, statecraft and governance is not an easy job. A political leader who is competent and experienced enough in this art shall avoid falling into blame-game. The lacunae in number on the floor of parliament could be overcome by effective statecraft and delivering quick governance and development to the people of the country, as it counts the most. Common people don't get to see what happens within close doors or on the floor of the Assembly; but they certainly count what is done on grounds and in the public. Failure on governance front cannot be replenished by any amount of blame or excuses as it is revealed soon to the public.

Lastly, even the tiniest nation-state of the world understands that in contemporary world territorial expansion is next to impossible, more so in south Asian region. Countries of South Asia are already aspiring hard to resolve their territorial dispute as world today is being governed by 'economic might' rather than military might'. Under such circumstances even the powerful and territorially bigger countries cannot dream of dominating smaller countries and they cannot do so even if they aspire. Bigger countries are more interested in having long-term economic relations rather than territory or a favourable government working as a stooge or puppet. Forces of globalization have necessitated more and more of convergence rather than divergence; and have also led to softening of territorial boundaries for free flow of goods and services. Therefore, the blame of Oli on India was completely uncalled for. He should have explored within before being aggressive to neighbours, and shifting his failures to others.

**REASONS FOR SAGGING
RELATIONSHIP: WHO SHOULD BE BLAMED?**

The most obvious reason was the attempt by Prachanda and Deuba to bring down the government of Oli and as alleged India's hands into it. It was projected as if the entire conspiracy was hatched in India. However, the

Changing Contours of Indo-Nepal Relations: Strategic Implications

developments that took place within Nepal and its relations with other neighbour require to be understood in right perspective.

First, the eight groups that India helped to come together ten years ago and arrive at consensus for evolution of Constitution; soon got fragmented and some have even turned into bitter rivals. Therefore, there has been complete realignment of political forces within Nepal and seemingly India is not in a position to keep a hold on development within Nepal, as it sounds like weighing frogs on a balance.

Secondly, India expressed its reservations on the new Constitution and supported the blockade by insurgent Madhesi groups that followed the promulgation of the Constitution, even though it was not involved directly or officially in the blockade. The blockade began on September 23, 2015 and led to frequent skirmishes. Right from beginning Oli smacked of India's hands into it and also went on telling people that while he has been trying his level best to reason with India that the inadequacies in Nepal's Constitution, if any, should best be left to the Nepalese to sort out.⁸ Yet he also kept warning its people that they better be ready for facing scarcity of goods and services on account of the disturbance.

Thirdly, India issued statements and on its part asked Nepal to deal with the agitating Madhesi leaders politically and address the issue of discrimination they have raised. India also assured Nepal of lifting the blockade soon after the agitating groups vacate the no-man's land along the border. India projected as if it is not interested in blockade, but is being forced or it is happening on account of the agitating groups.

Therefore, it was growing mistrust right through the Madehsi protest that commenced in September 2015 that was responsible for the sagging relationship between the two neighbours; that reached its nadir when Prachanda orchestrated a sort of abandoned political coup in May 2016.

Alok Kumar Gupta

Both countries failed to understand the problems of each other and kept blowing their own trumpet, amidst the crisis perpetuated by Madhesis. A crisis like this cannot be resolved on streets of Kathmandu or in Terai; rather it can always be resolved on negotiating table. Oli should have been quick to invite disgruntled elements and it would have provided him enough space to bring peace to Terai region and on border. It would have also helped him to clear blockade and avoid unnecessary hardships to his own citizens. Oli did invite them but at a later stage when enough of damage was done, which smacks of his failure to govern; a behaviour which is bad politics.

Fact remains that flow of goods and services are bound to suffer in view of protest and blockade organized by any group. Government and businessmen both fear losing their assets owing to mob violence; as it is next to impossible to understand the behaviour of mob violence. Mob culture is totally different from individual and group culture. Therefore, India may have been right that the blockade that ensued following the Madhesi protest were not official; rather product of circumstances. However, India needed to make endeavours to prevail upon Madhesi groups to allow smooth entry of goods as it causes havoc and hardships to general public, and that must not be the aim of protestors. India could have convinced Madhesi groups that such blockade will also earn them the wrath of common people rather than their sympathy and support for their cause.

CHINA AS A FACTOR IN WORSENING INDO-NEPAL RELATIONSHIP

According to several experts, China has always been looking for an opportunity to fill the vacuum created by India owing to suspicion and bitterness on one or the other count between India and Nepal. When allegedly India went for blockade in late 2015 China seems to have favourably responded to Nepal's request to open another six, in addition to the existing two check-posts, in order to address the situation that emerged on account of the blockade.⁹ There is no doubt that Nepal needed goods for its citizens, but falling to China has more to it than mere requirement for consumable goods.

Changing Contours of Indo-Nepal Relations: Strategic Implications

The growing engagement between Nepal and China in recent years is noticeable. Prime Minister Oli made a seven-day official visit to Beijing at the invitation of his Chinese counterpart Li Keqiang in March 2016. Ten different bilateral agreements dealing with free trade, transport connectivity, financial cooperation, and transit facilities through China were signed. The 15-point Joint Statement issued at the end of the visit charted out a number of areas of cooperation that will greatly deepen engagements between the two countries. The occasion of the visit was not only opportune but it also took place against the backdrop of a four-month long unofficial Indian economic blockade as alleged by Nepal, and something that India denies that it ever orchestrated.¹⁰

Both the countries agreed to a Chinese train from Shigatse to Rasuwagadhi on the Nepal border. Nepal has also for the first time been given transit rights from China. The trade and transit agreement will give the landlocked nation a right to trade with third countries through Chinese ports. This arrangement will break Nepal's total dependence on India. However, the nearest Chinese port, Tianjin, is over 3,000 kilometers away from the Nepal-China border, while the distance to the nearest Indian port, Haldiya, is just 1,000 kilometers from the Indo-Nepal border.¹¹ Therefore, such development between Nepal and China is surely not to the taste of India and smacks of India's diplomatic failure. Nepal needs to understand that politics is an arena of wishful thinking in the process of acquiring power and then maintaining power. However, politics can never change the dictates of geography. China can fund power generation projects in Nepal and also provide concessional funding for expanding Pokhara airport, which India would welcome but China will never allow an open border between Nepal and Tibet for visa-free travel; something that exists between India and Nepal.

The problem lies in the ever changing maturity among the Nepali breed of political leaders. Some Nepali leaders were smart enough and understood the China's role and balanced their relations with both their giant neighbours. The fine art of balance seems to have been lost on the current generation of leaders, who, if they have an interest in foreign policy at all, seem too close to

either the Indian or the Chinese side. The geographical and economic reality of Nepal is such that the country must necessarily be closer to India than to China. China and many other countries may be of great help to Nepal, but they can never be a replacement for India, rather they can help Nepal towards its endeavour of lessening its dependence on India. Today, the estimates of the number of Nepalese working in India range from over 800,000 to more than 1.7 million. Can China accommodate such huge numbers of Nepali workers? According to yet another estimate about 40 per cent of Nepalese migrants are in India.¹² Nepal thus has been and continues to be bound to India in a way that it is not with other countries—and the most basic reason is livelihood.

Sino-Nepal trade is not a match to Indo-Nepal trade, which is extremely unequal. China in a subtle way made it clear on number of occasions that it was not in competition over Nepal with India. China views Nepal as a bridge between his country and South Asia. China wants Nepal as an area of some influence, but not to the extent that it is in direct competition with India, so as to help it develop relations with the rest of South Asia. Considering the nature of historical, cultural and economic linkages between the two countries, that would appear to be a pragmatic choice on the part of China.¹³ This is something Nepal needs to understand and accordingly balance its relations with both the giant neighbours; else in the process it is Nepal that shall have to suffer not its neighbours. Accordingly, China is not a considerable factor towards worsening of Indo-Nepal relations. Fact remains that both China and India have started learning the benefits of 'Cooperating for Development' in the region rather than 'Competing for Development'. Therefore, both these countries prefer to operate in an ambience of cooperation rather than competition.

It makes it obvious that China ceases to be a factor in worsening of relations between India and Nepal. It is economic imperatives that determine the engagement of China and India in South Asia. Both countries are looking for commercial projects within South Asia for their business houses and government companies. Therefore, they are more akin to resolve their

Changing Contours of Indo-Nepal Relations: Strategic Implications

impending border issues and move forward for their economic interests. Nepal political leaders need to educate themselves about changing nature of foreign relations imperatives and dynamics of regional and international politics.

PROBLEMS WITHIN COALITIONS AND OLİ'S MISTAKES

Coalition formations in any state fall on account of different problems. One because of number of ambitious leaders within the coalition as partners, in which each of the leaders are out to have their own share of the cake called 'power' and they are interested to become the head of their State. Second, the dominant partner of the coalition fails to perform so far as governance of the polity is concerned. Thirdly, the dominant partner takes the support of allies for granted and starts thinking that the partners lack the will to withdraw from the coalition or it is simply not feasible for them to withdraw from the coalition on account of losing their seats in the Assembly. Fourthly, the arrogance of the dominant partner sometimes also leads to a crisis, which is most often sensed in attempts of marginalizing the smaller partners in important decision-making. Fifthly, one of the coalition partners is smart enough to play with the numbers within the parliament, especially when the distribution of the seats is in such a manner that he can switch sides with others if the present partner fails to honour his/her demand.

Nepal seems to be suffering from most of the above-stated problems. Prachanda has been the Prime Minister of Nepal, hence it may be that he is uncomfortable within the coalition and is longing for a dominant role. Hence, Prachanda thought of knocking at the doors of Baluwatar (the Prime Minister's Residence), by conspiring with Nepali Congress, the other dominant party within the parliament. The above-mentioned inter-party struggle for power has perpetuated political instability. This has been the general feature of Nepal politics. Mr. Oli is the eighth Prime Minister since 2008 when the first Constituent Assembly was elected and his tenure has been a spectacular failure, because rather than performing at ground zero he involved himself into India bashing and cultivating China. Probably he thought of playing China

card against India and designed to strengthen his government with the support of China, which is a gross miscalculation.

PM Oli could be blamed for failing on three fronts: One is that the fault lies within the Constitution. It is being considered that it is not an equitable Constitution. Nepal Polity too is not an equitable one. This is because it has failed to accommodate the sensitivities of Madhesis, Janajatis and other marginalised groups.¹⁴ Oli came to power after a new Constitution had been adopted but instead of using authority to push through the necessary amendments and get the alienated Madhesis on board, he dug in his heels. He blamed India for backing the Madhesi agitation and imposing an economic blockade on Nepal. His assurances (of negotiation with Madhesi groups) to Mr. Modi during his visit to India remained unfulfilled. Madhesi agitation may have been called off but there is simmering discontent and unrest across the Terai.¹⁵ Therefore, rather than introspecting, Nepali leaders choose to pass the buck on India. Fact remains that Madhesi people are Nepali citizen and Nepal government should have invited them on the negotiation table to resolve the conflict.

Second, failure of Oli is that he failed to manage his relations with India and allowed it to worsen with each passing day. Oli failed to read between the lines of Indian Prime Minister's statement and the statements of other diplomats. Oli did reach out to different groups, and invited the SLMM (Samyukta Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha), back for talks after a three-month hiatus. However, the strain in ties with India was prevented from worsening further owing to conciliatory statements from Deputy Prime Minister Kamal Thapa.¹⁶ Thus his tenure witnessed a steep downturn in relations with India. Like his coalition partner Prachanda, he has sought to bolster legitimacy by deliberately stoking nationalist sentiment and blaming India for his problems, both political and economic, and flaunting the China card.

Third, and possibly the most visible mistake was that Nepal's government has failed its people entirely. Nepal needed to speed up reconstruction after 2015 earthquake that killed nearly 9,000 people. According to an estimate

Changing Contours of Indo-Nepal Relations: Strategic Implications

by an NGO, only about one percent of the 7,70,000 destroyed houses have been properly reconstructed; and millions are living in damaged, unsafe homes or in temporary shanties.¹⁷ The pace at which the reconstruction is taking place children will continue to miss their schools, and citizens may have to continue without hospitals. It raises a pertinent question as to how a government could be so lethargic in planning for reconstruction and executing it when the world community is ready to commit billions of dollars to the effort.¹⁸ There is thus a strong sense of frustration among the donor community because the Nepal government has been unable to put systems in place for disbursement of the pledges because of internal politics and its own inefficiency.

Therefore, it becomes obvious that it is lack of performance in governance on part of Oli which was compounded by ambitions of Prachanda and Deuba that perpetuated the May 2016 Crisis; rather the highhandedness of India. Nepal political dispensation in general and Oli in particular failed to understand and appreciate it.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES FOR INDIA

India too has committed mistakes and contributed towards worsening the ties between itself and Nepal. India kept criticising Nepal's New Constitution and went to the extent of banding with other countries at the UN Human Rights Council as well as with the European Union to rebuke Nepal's government. It also revealed India's weakening diplomacy and disappearance of the clout within Nepali leadership which could have allowed it to prevail. India is quick at revealing its displeasures at Nepal's overtures to China. However, it always fails to introspect as to where exactly it has failed or created a vacuum that has provided grounds for both China and Nepal to converge. There is serious issue of lacking diplomatic prowess to enhance its engagement with Nepal. India rather should have devised and adopted a more open and more energetic outreach, one that is aimed at nothing more than the overall progress of Himalayan republic. This could have helped India weaning away the loyalty and confidence of the people of Nepal, and that could have also

paid India politically towards commanding respect and honour within the Nepali political leadership.

Therefore, Indian government also needs to introspect about why Mr. Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' policy has backfired in Nepal, after having gotten off to a splendid start when he visited Nepal in 2014 and laid out the contours of the relationship that he wanted to develop. Since, then relations have soured and perceptions have turned hostile. One must recall that Mr. Modi's dispensations made an excellent gesture by quick reaction and interventions when Nepal was struck by a devastating earthquake.

The political development that took place in Nepal is no doubt speaks volume about frosty relationship between the two countries and also about the unimaginative policy of India towards Nepal. Such diplomacy is bound to alienate the region. India must not be nose-y with neighbours and must refrain from interfering in their domestic affairs either citing security implications or to offset the target country's unfriendly strategic choices, on the basis of hypothetical analysis.

India could have resorted to substantive political argument with the Nepali leadership rather than engaging itself in poor diplomacy to dislocate the government of Nepal, if ever it attempted to do so.

Imperfections, if any in the Constitution of Nepal; should be treated as an internal matter of Nepal. Accordingly, it must be left to different political factions in Nepal to debate and resolve their differences. India must not get desperate about playing a role into it unless asked for.

Coercion or pressure tactics against smaller neighbours is an utterly bad diplomacy, especially with friendly neighbours. Blockade issue on account of Madhesi's protests could have been contained as it had large-scale humanitarian impact.

Changing Contours of Indo-Nepal Relations: Strategic Implications

Any comment by Indian political leaders and diplomats in public or on social media regarding social, political and economic developments in neighbouring countries, amounts to bullying for toeing India's line. It goes against the national interests of India that India must understand. Big or small every country ought to respect the sovereignty of other.

Last but not the least, the allegation of toppling the Nepal's government if has any amount of truth, then it is a crime against democracy which many other powers of the world are involved in. Even a minor role to topple a democratically elected regime is unmistakably reprehensible. India being the largest and mother of all democracies must not resort to such bad diplomacy. Loyalty of smaller neighbours requires to be earned rather than claimed by imposing or pressure tactics.

IMPERATIVES FOR NEPAL

POLITICAL IMPERATIVES

Cracks seem to have already developed within ruling coalition of Nepal. It remains a matter of time as to when the alternative coalition is going to emerge. Parliamentary democracy is a number game. Number-seekers are always on job and keep working to cross the number Rubicon in Nepal's 601-member Parliament. There is a difference of only 24 seats between Prime Minister Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) and Nepali Congress (NC). Maoists are in the real King-Maker role with 83 seats. Therefore, Prachanda has the capacity to tip the balance any time he feels like. The challenge thus was evident right from the beginning given the nature and ambitions of Prachanda. However, the early span of time in which the development took place need to be understood in right perspective and it is here that India need to devise its strategy.

It is true as reported in the media that NC leader Sher Bahadur Deuba had assured Mr. Prachanda of NC support and had suggested that the support of UDMF (Madhesi grouping) would be forthcoming. With 207 seats in a house of 601, the NC is the largest party with the UML and the Maoists following

with 181 and 83 seats respectively. The Madhesis were expected to add other 30-plus seats, providing for a comfortable majority. Compared to Mr. Oli's unwieldy coalition with six Deputy Prime Ministers including those from both Maoists and pro-Monarchy parties, the NC's support could have ensured a more stable government under Prachanda.¹⁹ Ruling party of Oli and his trusted aids played up the Indian angle knowing that Prachanda's relations with India have never recovered since his ill-fated attempts to undermine the Nepal Army which brought his tenure as Prime Minister to a rather abrupt and ignominious end. Like most Nepali leaders Mr. Prachanda continues to blame India for the collapse of his coalition and the subsequent breakup of his party.²⁰ Therefore, once again it is quite obvious that the political crisis that erupted in Nepal is more on account of vulnerability of political parties and their ambitions and immaturity; rather than external interference. Nepal first should put its own house in order, by enhancing its level of political and diplomatic maturity then think of blaming on external powers.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES

King Prithvi Naryan Shah, the founder of modern Nepal, described the country's situation as a "yam between two boulders", and emphasised that Nepal's territorial integrity can be preserved only through a defensive strategy by maintaining good neighbourly relations between the two giant neighbours. This dictum remains the reference point of Nepal's security policy even at present. Even today the dynamics of relations between India and China constitute the basic ingredient of Nepal's geostrategic thinking, and maintaining good neighbourly relations between the two remains the core strategy of Nepal's security policy. This policy was conditioned by Nepal's geo-strategic setting constituting the 1590 kilometer-long border with India and the 1414 kilometer-long border with China. Nepal's geo-strategic setting renders it impossible to allow the use of its territory for any subversive or hostile activity aimed at either of its neighbours. Balancing and responding to legitimate interests of these neighbours and not offending their sensibilities are critically important for its survival and security. Unfortunately the recent breeds of Nepali leaders are failing to understand these geo-strategic implications of their country. They are more akin to blackmail both the

Changing Contours of Indo-Nepal Relations: Strategic Implications

neighbours by pitting one against the other. Such a policy shall have dangerous strategic fallout for Nepal in long term; hence Nepal must refrain from playing this role and must endeavour to build credible credentials in regional and international politics.

INDIA'S RESPONSE: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF INTERNAL POLITICAL DYNAMICS

India seems to lack a consistent and settled diplomatic response to its neighbours on account of missing ideological base of its foreign policy. Therefore, it changes with change in political party in the seat of authority. The two leading parties of India have different ideological bases and hence their response bound to differ. Therefore, need is to evolve a long-term foreign policy based on consensus among all the leading parties of India so that a change in government does not affect the foreign policy response.

India's responses on two important occasions in Nepal need to be discussed and understood in right perspectives. India was in great hurry to recognise and welcome the changes that were taking shape in 2005-06. It was during these days that politicians in Nepal were debating how to involve people in settling the issue of monarchy vs republicanism. Maoists were pressurising Nepal's leaders and the Indian embassy in Kathmandu was working closely with the government of India to settle the issue immediately. In their haste, Nepal's leaders chose not to involve the people. They even decided to forego the normal parliamentary process followed by any debate in deciding why Nepal should be republican and secular.

However, in complete contrast to the above-mentioned excitement in 2006 within Indian leadership, India gave a cold response to the promulgation of the new constitution on September 20, 2015. The controversy lies here. Fact remains that the section of Indian bureaucracy, leftist groups and some intellectuals who have throughout maintained close links with Nepal's pro-republican and secular actors—even then formed a solid anti-Modi plank. It was this dispensation that prevailed towards getting Nepal declared a 'Secular'

country to strengthen their political and constitutional stand back home. Now that dispensation is out of power within India. Therefore, the political leadership with fundamental mind-set are not ready to appreciate this legacy, and they are not showing any concern to retain the secular character of Nepali society.²¹ History of Nepal's evolution is a witness that in its evolution as a modern nation-state during last almost 44 years till 2006 as a Hindu Kingdom, never faced the kind of caste-based clashes and religion-based communal clashes that has been the social infrastructure of Indian politics. It was neither felt by Nepali leadership nor by Indian interlocutors that switching to a secular state, that too without any debate may raise communal emotions within Nepal. There are thus allegations that Nepali leaders are in constant touch with Indian leftist leaders and the Congress party and Modi is being painted as a villain.

The Hindu right in India has long emphasized the cultural and religious links that bind the two countries and had always taken pride in Nepal being the only officially Hindu country in the world. Therefore, the change has not yet been accepted by many Hindu conservatives both in India and Nepal. There is also a growing movement within Nepal to hold a referendum on the issue. The right in India believe it to be a sustained attack on culture and religion of the majority by outside forces under the garb of secularism. There is evidence that in many parts of the country, proselytizing by zealous Christian missionaries is being carried on unchecked. They believe that West was indeed using secularism as a means to promote Christianity.²² Once again it makes it obvious that even within India different political parties have different ways of looking at Nepal and they want to craft Nepal's polity, society, economy and politics in their own way or in accordance with their avowed vision. This is an undue interference on part of India, which requires to be checked and the conduct of foreign policy must be made partly neutral, especially with neighbours. The foreign policy of the country should be designed in a manner that engagement with neighbours must not suffer or change with changing of hands on political power in India. Being a sovereign country Nepal must have its right to design its society and polity the way its citizens are interested and India may extend a helping hand only when it is asked for.

CONCLUSION

Nepali citizens and politicians have always suffered from amnesia regarding role that India have been playing since independence. They hesitate to admit that it was India-brokered deal in November 2005 that brought about the key political changes in the country in early 2006 that catapulted them to power. Nepal's streets are more conducive to rumour on India's interference, even if it is without bases. Political parties also find it easier to blame it on India for any failure of their own, including the inter-party and intra-political party struggle for power. It is quite unfortunate that India-bashing by Nepali leaders and population alike have quite often been taken to heart without realising that the 21st century is no longer an age of empires. A number of economists and businessmen who have been looking at investment opportunities in Nepal have been talking of 'connectivity' and the advantages that could accrue to Nepal from its 'bridge diplomacy'. Therefore, the fear psychosis that prevails within Nepali citizens is an uncalled for and is without any rhyme and reason. It is largely hypothetical and without any reality. However, India may be interested that Nepal must be loyal to India as far as possible given the kind of courtship that India has given to Nepal since independence.

On the other hand, India has failed to learn lessons in terms of its own limitations in Nepal and the extent of its role and interference. Consequently, India's role on most occasions in the recent past has been turning out to be counter-productive. Therefore, India needs to find a Nepal policy that can resurrect the image of India that she has been successfully presenting of a friendly and caring India, sensitive to Nepal's concerns, and generous in seeking mutually beneficial partnerships.

Nepal has all right to enter into diplomatic relations with other countries of the region and outside the region. It has the liberty to develop friendship to enhance its national interests in terms of its economic needs. However, Nepal must understand that given the international personality of India and its capability India shall always be the best bet for Nepal. Political stability which

is the most essential need of Nepal could be orchestrated and consolidated with the help of India on a long-term basis. The geography and geopolitics of the region both makes India and Nepal a natural ally. India has well understood it over the years but Nepal has always been failing on account of power-hungry nature of its political leaders. India need to understand that political instability in Nepal may prompt it to go the Pakistan way, if it is not contained well on time. Therefore, onus also lies on India in a bigger way to devise diplomatic means to engage Nepal in a constructive way and help bring political stability therein. A politically stable, economically prospered, and socially modern Nepal would be friendly than a pauper and perturbed Nepal. India's Nepal policy must entail that Nepal's economic viability is the key to its political stability and from its political stability will flow strategic security but not the other way round. There is some amount of misunderstanding about the threat perception on account of China. The threat to India is not likely to be a repetition of 1962 but the ups and downs in political equations between India and her neighbours. With lack-lustre economic progress and political instability Nepal by all means would be greater liability for India that it was 50 years ago. Hence fallacies originating from the erstwhile strategic perceptions need to be erased for the minds of policy-makers. Contemporary challenge is more complex as it is not only diplomatic but also political and economic.

END NOTES

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Changing Contours of Indo-Nepal Relations: Strategic Implications

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