



## India - China - Nepal Triangular Relationship

### What is the issue?

- Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent visit to Nepal has helped focus on the changing dynamics between India, China and Nepal.
- One of the central themes in the new discourse is the alleged loss of Indian primacy over Nepal.

### How has Nepal's geopolitics evolved?

- The story of Nepal's geopolitics is a complicated one.
- Lying between Tibet and the Gangetic plain, Nepal has close civilisational ties with both China and India.
- Its geopolitics, too, were shaped by both the neighbours.
- Balancing between Tibet and the Qing empire in the north and British Raj in the south was very much part of modern Nepal's political evolution.
- The weakening of the Qing and the rise of the Raj from the mid-19th century set the stage for southern dominance over Nepal.
- However, the People's Republic of China gained control of Tibet in 1950.
- So, Nepal's monarchy that was frightened by the communist threat turned to Jawaharlal Nehru for protection.
- Delhi and Kathmandu revived the 19th century security arrangements of the British Raj in a 1950 Treaty of Friendship.
- China's premier Zhou Enlai was quick to assure Kathmandu that there would be no export of communist revolution from Tibet to Nepal.
- The Sino-Indian conflict, meanwhile, opened up space for Kathmandu to weaken the treaty arrangements with India and re-balance the relationship.

### How has India's influence over Nepal evolved?

- India's hegemony or primacy in Nepal is somewhat over-stated.
- It was limited in time and space and always constrained by Nepal's domestic politics.
- The deepening domestic divisions in Nepal caused disturbances to the geopolitical strategies.

- Consequently, Delhi has struggled since the middle of the 20th century to sustain the primacy in Nepal it had inherited from the British Raj.
- The emergence of a strong state north of the Himalayas, China, tested India's claim for an exclusive sphere of influence in Nepal.
- China's dramatic rise in the 21st century makes it a far more compelling partner for Nepal.

### **What are the determining factors to this change?**

- India's failure was not in an over-reliance on geopolitics, but the neglect of geo-economics.
- On the one hand, India's security establishment and the political classes operated as if Nepal was a protectorate of India.
- On the other, Delhi's economic bureaucracy treated Nepal as a separate entity.
- Delhi's emphasis on economic self-sufficiency made India to not attach any special value to the commercial interdependence with land-locked Nepal.
- Vested interests inevitably found space to take advantage of this wide gap in the economic policies of the two nations.
- Delhi also allowed the border infrastructure to weaken over the decades.
- India's attempts to revive connectivity with Nepal in recent years have faced India's traditional problems with project implementation.
- More importantly, there has been growing political resistance in Nepal to deeper economic relations with India.

### **How is China's stance changing?**

- The change in the regional balance and the communist dominance over Nepal's domestic politics is changing the traditional nature of the triangular relationship.
- In the past, China sounded sensitive to India's concerns in China's engagement with Nepal.
- However, China is now the second most important power in the world and the foremost in Asia.
- With this, China perhaps is a lot less interested in what Delhi might think about China's Nepal policy.
- Above all, China today is driving regional change with its expansive Belt and Road Initiative.

### **What are Nepal's options now?**

- On the face of it, Kathmandu has at least three possible options in crafting a new strategy for Nepal.

- One is to opt for neutrality and symmetry in its relations with India and China.
- This is not a new idea, and had been reflected in Kathmandu's past debates about "Nepal as a Zone of Peace".
- Second, Nepal could decide that a special relationship with China is more valuable than the one with India.
- Third, it could continue a policy of dynamic balancing and make the best of the possibilities with both China and India.
- **Challenges** - If Nepal opts for symmetry, it would have to turn its open border with India into a closed one similar to its northern border with China.
- On the other hand, a strategic tilt towards China would make Nepal discard the special privileges it has in the relationship with India.
- E.g. the freedom for Nepali citizens to live and work in India
- Nepal's sovereign choice would also involve an assessment of India's counter measures to Nepal's strong security partnership with China.
- The dynamic balancing option would involve modernisation of the India relationship and expansion of the China ties with sufficient regard to the concerns of both the powers.

### **What lies ahead for India?**

- For India, it is time to stop being worried about China's growing presence in Nepal or loss of its primacy in Nepal.
- The protectorate relationship that India inherited from the British Raj was never sustainable.
- Delhi's claim as to be knowing what is good for Nepal certainly intimidates the Nepali elite.
- Instead, Delhi should let Nepalese decide what is good for them and align India's own responses accordingly.
- The best India can offer now is a new deal with Nepal that can build on the natural geographic and cultural interdependence between the two nations.
- This time around, it must be based on sovereign equality and mutual benefit.
- It is up to Kathmandu in the end to accept, reject or negotiate on such an offer.

**Source: Indian Express**



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