India-Nepal Relations over the Years

What is the issue?

- Relations between India and Nepal are currently strained with Nepal's Parliament approving a new map with Indian territories included. 
- In this context, here is a look at how India-Nepal relations have evolved over the years, making it a "special" one.

How have differences been dealt with in the past?

- In 1960s, a road was built to connect Nepal with Tibet. 
- On India's concerns, King Mahendra of Nepal convincingly assured India that the road had only “developmental significance and no strategic significance at all”.
- In the 1980s, China had won a contract under a global tender to build the 210-km Kohalpur Banbasan Road closer to the Indian border. 
- After the then Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi raised security concerns over this, King Birendra annulled the contract that China had won. 
- King Birendra also handed the task over to India.
- The accounts of Bishwabandhu Thapa, Nepal's Home Minister in 1962 provide insights to the Kalapani issue. 
- According to him, King Mahendra gave the Kalapani location temporarily to India on PM Jawaharlal Nehru’s request. 
- This was following India’s setback in the war with China. 
- [However, this is not in line with India’s official perception. 
- Former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran recently remarked that both Monarchs Mahendra and Birendra thrived on a diet of anti-Indian nationalism.] 
- According to Punya Prasad Oli, a former Director General of Nepal’s survey department, King Birendra had asked him not to make an issue of the Kalapani dispute in the 1970s. 
- All these are seen as instances of Nepali rulers maintaining a delicate balance in relations with its two giant neighbours, India and China. 
- But eventually, they favoured India, whenever India and China’s interests have clashed.

What was the turning point to this?

- A 12-point understanding among Nepal’s eight political parties including
Maoists was signed in November 2005 in Delhi.
- This scripted the ouster of the monarchy in Nepal.
- India was for long a factor, and to a large extent the sole external actor, in Nepal’s internal politics.
- Gradually, India openly took the lead role in transforming Nepal into a secular republic from a Hindu kingdom.
- But, this set off events leading to India losing its influence and allies in Nepal.
- The monarchy was suspended and was subsequently abolished in 2008.
- It was eventually declared as a secular country.
- All these were followed by Nepal’s journey towards federalism.

**What did the global forces' intervention mean?**

- The **European Union** emphasized on the 'right to conversion' being incorporated as a fundamental right in the new Constitution.
- The EU took a very open stance that secularism will have no meaning without this right.
- This led to resentment among the majority population about this “imposed secularism”.
- Other radical agenda got overshadowed as the civil-society-new-power axis and international stakeholders simply dismissed these as regressive forces.
- The **EU and the US** had begun to emerge as India’s allies in Nepal’s transition after 2005-06.
- These began supporting radical federalism based on ethnicity, higher autonomy and with the right to self-determination that initially Maoists had backed.
- **China** was worried about the combined presence of India, US and EU in Nepal and their influence on internal politics.
- It thus began increasing its presence and investment in Nepal.
- China targeted tourism, post-earthquake reconstruction, trade and energy.
- It showed that its interest in Nepal was no less than India’s or its allies put together.
- Political parties backed by India in the 2005-06 movement continue to be in power in Nepal.
- However, they have visibly become more and more distant from New Delhi.
- The Maoists are now part of the ruling NCP (Nepal Communist Party) headed jointly by Oli and Prachanda.
- They are no longer under Indian influence.

**How has India's role in Nepal evolved?**

- The **Nepali Congress** was formed in India in the early 20th century.
Many of its leaders participated in India’s freedom struggle. They were with an idea that an independent and democratic India would help establish democracy back home.

The party consistently took the lead role in the movement for a multi-party democracy with constitutional monarchy.

But despite this, it was often branded “pro-India” by Communists given their close ties with Indian National Congress and socialists.

However, following the 12-point agreement, the Nepali Congress was forced to accept the lead role of Maoists (Communists) in the political arena.

They agreed to dispense with constitutional monarchy.

But notably, they had all along said that monarchy represented “forces of nationalism” and “symbol of unity in diversity”.

Besides the monarchy, Nepali Congress and in the recent past Madhes parties to some extent, the only other institutional ally that India has had is the Nepal army.

The chief of each national army has enjoyed the status of Honorary General of the other side, on a reciprocal basis since 1950.

The NCP leader Oli refused to accept India’s invitation for a state visit in April 2006, during a blockade.

Back then, it was the armies of both sides that did the homework for lifting the blockade.

Oli became a nationalist and gained much popularity due to the blockade in 2006.

**How has India's approach transformed?**

- During major face-offs, three trade embargos since the 1970s and sensitive security issues, India and Nepal have succeeded in ending the crises.
- They did it directly or by using back channels including Indian royalty and even shankaracharyas when Nepal was a Hindu nation.

But over the years, India’s focus on Nepal appears driven more by security concerns and threat perception.

- Promoting a soft power-based approach like in the past has seen a shift.

**What is the realisation with the current happenings?**

- In the current spell of dispute, India has once again begun ‘valuing’ common civilisational, cultural, historic and people-to-people ties.
- On the other hand, India’s old allies are now regretting having aligned with the Maoists.
- The Nepali Congress feels its time to review the 12-point agreement and restore a lead role in Nepali politics.
- Despite all, it is Oli who is dictating India-Nepal relations now.