

STABILISING TIES WITH NEPAL IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

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Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' takes oath as Nepal Prime Minister in Kathmandu on December 26, 2022. | Photo Credit: PTI

The electoral [verdict in Nepal's recent elections](#) was credible. It reflected a clear emergence of voter preference for more responsive governance and an impatience with traditional political power games that ignore the aspirations of the youth and the disadvantaged. It also reconfirmed the successful 'taking root' of democracy in the Himalayan country whose transition from a Hindu monarchy to a secular republic happened after great struggle, sacrifices and ideological adjustments across the political spectrum.

Some of the major accomplishments, although accompanied by shortcomings and controversy, included the peaceful mainstreaming of the Maoist movement into the democratic structure, the integration of guerrillas into the Nepal Army, the transfer of power, the adoption of a Constitution and the emergence of a federal structure.

On the negative side, however, the hung Parliament that the final results created is a sure recipe for instability and frequent changes of government in the coming years. This could easily translate into an inability to deal with the many daunting challenges confronting the country and the continuing unpredictability in the graph of India-Nepal cooperation.

There were widespread expectations that Sher Bahadur Deuba, leader of the Nepali Congress, which was in an alliance with [Pushpa Kamal Dahal \(Prachanda\)](#)'s Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) and three other parties, would form the new government as the alliance commanded the largest number of seats in the new Parliament. However, it was [Prachanda who was sworn in as Prime Minister](#) as he decided to revive his earlier alliance with former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, who heads the CPN (Unified Marxist–Leninist). This unexpected development will undoubtedly be a source of satisfaction for China, which had earlier conspicuously but unsuccessfully attempted to prod the left wing in the political spectrum to reunite (to promote its own interests and to the detriment of India's interests).

India can, however, take this development in its stride. It is used to dealing with political instability in Nepal, frequent changes of government, and even reputedly anti-India or pro-China leaders heading them. Its focus for many years has been on non-partisan support for inclusive economic development, interdependence, communication links, people-to-people contacts, and building on the compulsive logic of economic complementarities, especially in hydropower where Nepal has huge but largely unexplored potential. The extent of its linkages of history, geography,

culture, religion, and economy with Nepal facilitate management of its security concerns within tolerable limits.

Moreover, leaders like Prachanda and Mr. Oli are seasoned veterans capable of making shrewd judgments in their long-term political interests even when they talk about the new government adopting a policy of “equi-proximity” with India and China. The truth is that, as is evident even in robust democracies (Israel’s being the most recent example), ideological consistency has less and less meaning in the politician’s search for power. So, too, in the case of Nepal, labels such as ‘pro-India’ or ‘anti-India’ need to be taken with increasing amounts of salt. It should also not be forgotten that ultranationalist leaders such as Mr. Oli and Prachanda have, on occasion, spoken with courage and conviction to question senseless opposition to India. Mr. Oli, for instance, aggressively questioned the strident demand from his own party to oppose ratification of the Mahakali Treaty a few years ago.

Public opinion in Nepal is now alert to the reality of Chinese intentions, the risks of falling into a debt trap, and the limitations in terms of Chinese capacities in comparison to India’s. China’s image itself has taken a huge beating because of the current COVID-19 tsunami.

India, however, cannot be complacent. Traditional irritants such as the 1950 India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship and the border issue need not be kept festering but should be sorted out in an open and transparent manner. There is no reason why the worldview of the East India Company or British India should be the determinant guide in shaping perceptions or policies, when people on both sides of an open border are awaiting a better quality of life. Nepal is a transforming country. India is a player on the global stage. The world itself is heading towards major transformations, with new challenges, changing priorities and boundless possibilities.

The COVID-19 crisis and its long-term fallout is the largest shock to the global socioeconomic framework since the Great Depression of the early 1930s. More than 100 million people fell below the poverty line in 2020-21 alone. India and Nepal are uniquely positioned, because of the breadth and depth of ties between them, to jointly rethink economic governance with a view to enhancing human welfare. There are huge challenges but also huge opportunities in expanding and diversifying cooperation to mutual advantage. Now is the time for fresh thinking on a host of issues, including economic recovery; bilateral, sub-regional and regional cooperation; restructuring supply chains; human as well as conventional security; energy cooperation; development; people-to-people contacts; and the untapped potential for technology to accelerate inclusive growth, and soft power to maximise mutual advantage.

Perhaps the one missing factor in bilateral ties has been mutual empathy: the will of the political class across party lines, bureaucracies, and civil society on either side of the border to understand what the world looks like from the other side. Empathy is an urgent necessity more than ever before, as a factor for sustainable friendly ties.

Diverse but balanced and constructive approaches to India-Nepal relations will contribute to a clearer understanding of the past, better awareness of present trends, and new roadmaps for substantive upgrading of ties in the years to come.

New and innovative approaches are needed on both sides. What all Nepalese yearn for is a sense of equality and Indian respect for their identity. With a Prime Minister who has visited Nepal more times than any of his predecessors, an External Affairs Minister who has won huge respect for his clear and consistent approach to foreign policy priorities, and a Foreign Secretary who was until recently India’s Ambassador to Nepal, India has a range of policy drivers with huge combined understanding and sensitivity as far as relations with Nepal are concerned. This should stand both countries and the region in good stead in the challenging times ahead.

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