



A STUDY ON REALITIES AND BARRIERS IN BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND NEPAL

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Abstract

Nepal and India have wonderful relations with each other on a bilateral level. These relations are intimate, all-encompassing, and multifaceted, and they are manifested most clearly in the parties' political, social, cultural, religious, and economic engagements with one another. These relations are founded on the age-old connection of history, culture, tradition, and religion. Nepal's sincere desire to cultivate and foster cordial and friendly ties with its neighboring countries is reflected in its long-standing position of not allowing its territory to be misused by any elements inimical to India. Nepal also expects the same sort of reciprocity and assurances from India. This position reflects Nepal's sincere desire to cultivate and foster cordial and friendly ties with its neighboring countries. Our ties will always be distinguished because both nations maintain an open border. The lack of restrictions along the frontier has significantly aided in making it easier for our people to go to the territories of one another and has improved their relations. On June 17, 2022, India and Nepal celebrated the completion of 75 years of bilateral relations between their two countries. Undeniably, there have been both good and sorrowful moments in the 75 years of diplomatic relations. Cooperation between the two countries has never been easy or interesting. The leadership of Nepal has always been suspicious of Indian leadership for fear that it will accuse them of interfering in any political issues occurring within Nepal. On multiple instances, the leadership of India has been cautious about Nepal's attempt to manipulate it by placing it against China.

Keywords: *Bilateral relations, Diplomatic leadership, Geo-strategic, Neighborhood.*

1. Introduction

India and Nepal are geographically near to one another, and as a result, the two countries have developed special bonds of friendship and collaboration. These relationships are defined by an open border & deep-rooted people-to-people interactions based on family and culture. The free movement of individuals across international borders has a history that dates back quite some time. Over 1,850 kilometers of Nepal's border is shared with five different states in India: "Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand." ^[1]

The foundation of the unique relationship between India and Nepal is "the India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950." This Treaty constitutes the basis of the special partnerships that exist between India & Nepal. In line with the Treaty's terms, Nepal's citizens have access to the same amenities and opportunities as citizens of India. There are over 8 million Nepalese people now living and working in India. Since the two nations established diplomatic relations 75 years ago, the bilateral relations between India and Nepal have been fraught with affection and animosity at various times. Their connections have always been complex on many levels and extremely intimate at the same time. Despite this, their relationships have always been disorganized and fraught with ambiguity. The bond is strained further because of the big brother and the small brother paradox. The fact that India and Nepal have historical and cultural ties is a fact of life for the two countries' bilateral relationship. It has been asserted that



what is currently taking place between India and Nepal is a “*roti-beti ka rishta*” (translated to mean blood ties exist between the two neighbors). As a result, the interaction needs to have been easygoing and constantly productive.^[2]

On the other hand, the reality on the premises varies significantly. Due to the unpredictability of the political system within Nepal, it has been rather difficult for Indian external affairs authorities to preserve even a measure of stability on the grounds. This is because of the situation in Nepal. Nepalese political parties frequently cast China and India against one another during their election campaigns. The majority of electoral politics centers on the issue of politicians’ commitment to either India or China. Even India has been keeping a careful eye on what’s going on in Nepal regarding this problem. There are times when even Nepalese citizens think of India as their enemy, especially if the political parties in their country give them that idea. The author has considered the inventory of India and Nepal’s relationship during the recent past while keeping in mind the background of the complications that lay at the foundation of the bilateral relations between the two countries. India has never been shaken by China’s increasing presence in its neighborhood. It has never been hesitant to be open and honest with its more diminutive neighbors, playing the role of an older sibling in this dynamic. India’s goal has usually been to keep its relations with its neighbors peaceful and organized so that there is a steady increase in the amount of economic activity that takes place between India and its surrounding countries. The efforts of India in this regard do not spare Nepal in any way.

With this historical backdrop, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid his sixth visit to Nepal to celebrate Buddha Purnima on May 16, 2022.^[3] Before this visit, Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba visited India from April 1 to 3, 2022.^[4] As a result of disagreements on borders and territories, India’s relationship with Nepal has become increasingly complicated. Several critics believe this visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi endeavors to revive the India-Nepal friendship through cultural and religious diplomacy. Prime Ministers on both sides of the border have made efforts to infuse life and vitality into bilateral relations by utilizing various foreign policy instruments. These actions almost often have strategic and geopolitical repercussions for the various actors locally and globally. On the other hand, the visit was described as a “time-honored relationship” by the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, and it further consolidated the relationship with an essential neighbor. As a result, the author of this paper has attempted to make sense of the growing relationships between the two neighbors over the past year.

2. Prime Ministerial Visits and Counter-Visits

As soon as he took the oath to become Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi declared that “Neighborhood First” would be his first choice regarding India’s foreign policy.^[5] This was a clear indicator of the objectives the Modi administration set for its foreign policy. “Neighborhood First” refers to India’s relationships with its land and sea neighbors. As a result, India’s foreign policy matrix included Nepal as a significant component of its main foreign policy priorities. Since taking office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has paid five visits to Nepal. Most of the visits have been met with an equivalent response from the other side. Therefore, the regular exchange of visits and reciprocal trips between the heads of state of the two countries is a defining characteristic of the relationship between the two nations. If followed up with administrative assistance from the current administration, summit-level encounters can infuse new vitality into bilateral ties. The visits by the leaders of both countries to each other have helped strengthen their relationship after months of diplomatic silence over border conflicts triggered by geographical assertions. Because of this, it is necessary to have a comprehensive



understanding of the obligations and implications of the visit and counter-visit on bilateral levels between India and Nepal. These initiatives and implications can be summed down as follows:

2.1. Diplomatic Methods Based on Soft Power

Since India and Nepal have a long shared history, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose a religious theme for his visit to Nepal to strengthen and deepen the bilateral relationship between the two countries. When Modi traveled to Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of Buddha, he made history by being the first Indian Prime Minister ever to do so. As a result, the visit needs to be understood to suggest that India is trying to portray the soft power potentials it possesses. Modi stressed the importance of India and Nepal cooperating for the benefit of both countries. Lumbini, the spot where the Buddha was born, is located in Nepal. Bodhgaya, Vaishali, Sarnath, and Kushinagar are other places in India where Buddha's footprints have been found. Kushinagar is the most recent of these. Therefore, India and Nepal must make use of the rich potential that lies within the pilgrimage tourism industry in both of their countries. Suppose all of these areas that contain Buddha's footprints are promoted to draw Buddhist followers from throughout the region and the world. In that case, it has a significant potential to contribute to general local employment in both countries.

As a consequence of this, both nations signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to cooperate in the dissemination of Buddhist cultural practices. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between the Lumbini Buddhist University and the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) also permitted the formation of the Dr. Ambedkar Chair for Buddhist Studies.^[6] In the Lumbini Monastic Zone, a Shilanyas ceremony was held to mark the beginning of building the Indian International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage. This use of soft power diplomacy by India will not only enhance the relationships between the two countries but also bring the people of these two nations much closer together. Several Hindu pilgrims would benefit from connectivity initiatives like the Buddhist circuit and its expansion up to Nepal, and vice versa, as it would make it easier for Hindus in Nepal to go to India to see religious sites. The well-known Pashupatinath Temple can be found in Kathmandu, and it is a major tourist destination for Hindus from India. Therefore, Modi pledged a clear road map to the people of Nepal and its leaders, stating that the time is not right to intensify tensions over banal matters of the complexities of boundary demarcation. Instead, now is the time to collaborate to advance national objectives, which can be characterized in the context of economic possibilities for both neighbors.

2.2. Increasing China's Impact

Recent events have shown that China is increasing its influence in Nepal, one of India's primary sources of concern. After the General Elections to Pratinidhi Sabha (House of Representatives) in November 2017, the Communist alliance in China was able to ascend to power with the help of China, which provided both the assistance it was due and an increase in that support. However, due to an internal power struggle between K.P. Sharma Oli and Prachanda (Pushpa Kamal Dahal), the Communist alliance, which only had a tenuous hold on power, could not maintain its grip on the seat of government. After that, Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress was elected as Prime Minister of Nepal due to interventions by the Supreme Court. China exerted every attempt to maintain the cohesion of the Communist bandwagon but was ultimately unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, China has been investing a significant amount of money in Nepal for the construction of Nepal's infrastructure projects, including the international airport, the widening of the Burwal-Narayanghat Highway, and the extension of the rail link to its frontier with Nepal. This is the case despite political disappointments. After the border battles in the Galwan Valley in 2020, it is suspected that Chinese investment in Nepal has increased. What China was unable to do in Bhutan due to the



Dokalam impasse, China is attempting to achieve in Nepal. It appears that China has taken the necessary precautions, and despite the political ramifications, it is continuing to pursue its economic projects in Nepal vigorously.

The remarks made by the Indian Prime Minister were quite appropriate and were aimed at boosting India's diplomatic ties with Nepal. It is a tricky piece of diplomacy: one, to improve India's economic involvement with Nepal by the instrumentalities of economic projects and soft power deployment; and second, to keep a close watch on further Chinese intrusion into Nepal's polity and economy. The first goal is to enhance India's economic engagement with Nepal; the second is to keep a check on Chinese future intervention in Nepal. Certainly, India needs to learn to live with Chinese hegemony in the South Asian regional scene, but India must not leave the territory wide open for repeated Chinese incursions. This lesson appears to have been learned rather well by the Indian diplomatic settlement, as evidenced by the fact that they made the astute step of inviting Modi to come in April 2020. It is difficult not to view India's choice to eventually demonstrate its occurrence in Lumbini via university cooperation and the India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage as a reaction to the growing existence of China. This is because the timeframe of India's choice to maintain its existence in Lumbini is finally hard to ignore. It is also necessary for India to assist the Nepali Congress party to prevent the Nepali Communists from gaining ground. This would make it easier for India to continue to deepen its economic involvement with Nepal, which would, in turn, further enhance the relationship between the two countries. Improving Relations on the Economic Front Following Sri Lanka's ongoing economic crisis, Nepal appears to face similar challenges.

On the contrary, many people believe that the Sri Lankan crisis will have a domino effect on the rest of South Asia. Concerns have been ratcheted up in Nepal as a direct result of the economic and consequent political crisis that has unfolded in Sri Lanka. This demonstrates that Nepal is looking up to India as an older brother and harboring a great deal of confidence in the relationship. Moreover, this occurs when Nepal is experiencing a severe economic crisis. By observing how Sri Lanka navigated the aftermath of its financial crisis, Nepal hopes to decrease its reliance on China. It has been abundantly plain to China that it does not desire a loan as a form of assistance since it will be required to pay enormous interest on the loan in the future. In addition, the administration in power in Nepal at the moment has shelved the grandiose Belt and Road Initiative project that China has been working on. The growing desire on the part of Nepal to strengthen its connections with India is made abundantly clear by such occurrences. Therefore, India ought to regard the crisis that is currently taking place in Nepal as an opportunity or a blessing in concealment. It is up to India to step up to the challenge and strengthen the economic connections between the two countries. Despite the current crises, India is well toward achieving its goals under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

2.3. Collaborating on Water and Energy Sources

Since a long time ago, India and Nepal have worked together in this sector. During their most recent visit, the two leaders signed an agreement between the Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam (SJVN) Ltd and the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) to develop and implement a hydropower project with a capacity of 490.2 megawatts called the Arun-IV project.^[7] Because India has the ambition and the capability to become an important energy provider in the South Asian region, it is anticipated that the project will generate electricity for Nepal. In addition, Nepal extended an invitation to India to invest in the West Seti Hydropower Project, also known as the 750-Megawatt Hydropower Project, which will be constructed on the Seti River in western Nepal.^[8] India will take over this project now that China has decided to withdraw. During the time that Deuba was in India, both countries celebrated the



inauguration of the 132-kilovolt direct current (KVDC) Solu Corridor Transmission Line and substation constructed using the “Line of Credit” that was provided by the government of India. The line is 90 kilometers long. The “Neighborhood First Policy” also focuses on energy commerce across international borders, and India is currently providing approximately 600 megawatts (MW) of total electrical capacity to Nepal. Several projects, including the Pancheswar Multipurpose Project under the Mahakali Treaty, the Sapta-Kosi High Dam Project, and the Sun Kosi storage-cum-diversions scheme, the Kamla and Bagmati Multipurpose Projects, are currently in the design and implementation stages.

There is no specific progress assessment for the projects mentioned above. As a result, it is reasonable to hypothesize that these projects are in jeopardy due to the tense relations that have been the norm between India and Nepal. India can halt Chinese dominance in Nepal if it completes the overdue projects simultaneously with the ongoing ones. Indian investment in Nepal’s renewable power sector, especially the Hydropower sector, can help both countries by boosting their economies, creating jobs, increasing export revenues, assisting in the construction of additional industrial and financial capacities, and any other advantages mutually agreed upon. Nevertheless, hydropower and connectivity are two fundamental ways in which India and Nepal can expand their collaboration with one another. Despite this, Nepal’s consistent efforts to put India against China have ensured that the two countries’ relations have always been fraught with tension and inconsistency. Because of its location as a buffer between two major countries, namely India and China, Nepal understands its strengths and shortcomings well. Consequently, any attempt by Nepal to coerce India by putting it in a position of competition with China has only succeeded in drawing the fury of India. Consequently, the ongoing hydroelectricity projects and many other infrastructure projects have been experiencing delays in their respective executions. As a result of this, the reality that Nepal’s geography, history, and political system are such that its affiliation with India is natural still stands. Nepal’s current and future leaders need to understand and internalize this unpleasant truth of bilateral ties for the country to move forward.

3. The Obstacles That Wait

The implications and problems outlined above frequently appear in the context of bilateral relations. One must understand the fundamental difficulties involved in keeping bilateral relations running well. India must maintain its bilateral relations with Nepal to enjoy the peace and economic growth while preserving its democratic institutions. This is because any political or social unrest in Nepal would generate an influx of migrants into India due to the porous border between the two countries. It would be irresponsible for India to allow Nepal to follow in Sri Lanka’s footsteps and become another Pakistan on its northern border. As a result, despite internal political instability and fighting among the Nepalese public, India’s primary concern is maintaining a level of ties that should provide leverage to its leaders during a crisis in Nepal. It is also important to protect Nepal’s sovereignty so that it and the people of Nepal can realize and appreciate its independence as they see fit. India must avoid giving the impression that it is acting like a mean big brother toward its surrounding countries. In addition to this, there are a few additional key problems, which can be summarized as follows:

3.1. Disputes Concerning Boundaries and Territories

The dispute over the Kalapani boundary between India and Nepal is one of the most significant concerns. After the publishing of a new map by Nepal in 2019 that claimed Kalapani, Limpiyadhura, and Lipulekh of Uttarakhand, as well as the area of Susta (which is located in the West Champaran district of Bihar) as a part of its territory, the issue gained a significant deal of significance.^[9] Nepal’s previous government, led by Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, took this measure to safeguard the country’s borders. Still, India’s Ministry of External Affairs deemed the move “unofficial” and



undesirable. Based on the Treaty of Sugauli from 1816, Nepal has been claiming the region in question as part of their territory, despite these areas being part of and controlled by India's territory.^[10] Based on the Sugauli Treaty, the government of Nepal asserts that it is entitled to sovereignty over the lands located to the west of the Mahakali River.^[11] After reaching some low points due to the border and territory dispute, bilateral ties are expected to recover during the visit of both prime ministers to the other country during April and May 2022. This might assist the nation and the effort to address the "unilateral conduct." Both nations must form a task force to settle their border dispute, which has the potential to undermine progress in other areas of cooperation.

3.2. Considering Security Threats

The Indian government prioritizes protecting its borders because of the precarious situation in which its neighbors find themselves. India poses a threat to Nepal, while Nepal, in turn, perceives that India poses a threat to them. It represents a risk to India because of its susceptibility to manipulation by China and Pakistan. As a result, Nepal's safety is inextricably linked to India. On multiple instances, Nepal has attempted to acquire armaments from a source other than India to sidestep India's influence. As a direct result, Nepal was forced to deal with severe repercussions, including economic blockades along its border with India. As a result, Nepal must ensure that the faith and confidence that India places in Nepal's relationships and bilateral engagements with its neighbors, such as China and Pakistan, does not endanger India's safety. As an alternative, India promotes itself as the "Net Security Provider" to all South Asian countries, especially those with smaller populations. It's possible that various neighbors took different meanings from this statement depending on their perspectives. As a result, India must ensure that its neighbors in the region continue to have faith and trust in its approach to foreign policy in the region.

3.3. Potential for Trade and Commercial Exchange

The trade volume between the two nations has expanded dramatically since both economies were allowed to become more open. In recent years, Nepal's imports from India have significantly surpassed the country's exports to India. At the moment, India accounts for two-thirds of Nepal's total commerce. In 2020-21, Nepal's trade deficit with India was approximately \$8 billion. Newspapers have reported that Nepal imports \$10 worth of products and services from India for every \$1 worth of goods and services it sends to India as exports.^[12] Even recently, in the 1960s and 1970s, India met about 95% of Nepal's requirements, including providing petroleum and petroleum products. Any anger in the relations between India and Nepal will affect the supply chain that connects the two countries, affecting the commercial and financial communities on both sides of the border. According to the allegations, India places blockades to prevent the movement of products and services into Nepal. Second, Nepal's exports are bolstered by palm oil and soybean oil purchased from third countries and then shipped to India, where they are exempt from customs. If India continued temporarily restricting these products' imports from Nepal, the country's export prospects would become much direr. One cannot say that Nepal and India are interdependent neighbors; rather, Nepal relies on India. Because it is landlocked, it has no choice but to maintain a positive relationship with India so that its trade with the rest of the world can be facilitated through Indian ports. India has the inherent benefit of being the port that is both the closest and the most cost-efficient. As a result, cruel bilateral ties would also affect trade and business, which has already been seen several times. For this reason, finding a solution to the looming problems at the border and ensuring that political and social relations between the two neighbors remain amicable is of the utmost importance. This remains a difficulty, and it appears that it will continue to be so in the future.



3.4. The Potential for a Financial Catastrophe

Nepal is currently facing a precarious financial situation. Nepal is still in the process of development and is heavily dependent on India. A country like China, which has vast coffers, is constantly looking for opportunities to exert its influence on other countries and has been successful in doing so with Nepal. China and Nepal have collaborated on several initiatives, agreed to work together, and completed those projects. On the other hand, India has been falling farther and further behind since it does not have a budget comparable to China's. India has been making more promises than it can fulfill within the allotted time. However, India was the first country to supply Nepal with the Covid-19 vaccine; India, however, ultimately decided not to participate in the second stage of the competition because of concerns regarding its position on the domestic political front. China seized the chance to assert its dominance over Nepal's leadership and the Nepalese people. China did step up to the challenge and fulfill that role successfully. Things are different now due to the establishment of a democratic government in Nepal and the ousting of communists from positions of authority inside the Nepalese parliament.

As a result, the new administration of Sri Lanka is trying to put more distance between itself and China after watching the country's economic problems unfold. In light of this, it has provided India yet another chance to fill the void left by China's withdrawal from the scene in the middle of the unprecedented economic crisis escalating in Sri Lanka. Even though it started in 2016, India's "line of credit" of 750 million USD was issued. Under the guise of a "line of credit," India is already carrying out other construction projects in Nepal for 1.65 billion USD. There are other projects with a total value of one billion dollars in the works.^[13]

The recent surge of Indian political activity in Nepal, along with the current political system in India, makes it abundantly clear that India is well on its way toward upholding its promise to the "Neighborhood First" foreign policy choice it made. Given India's track records and capacities, it will be quite a struggle to make all of the projects in Nepal function and to assist Nepal during this vital time of Nepal's growth. However, given the scale of these obstacles, they are not insurmountable. In addition to the preceding, harmonious and engaging ties between the two countries are necessary for the smooth execution of these projects at both levels.

3.5. The Demand of Madheshi and Proposed Amendments to the Constitution

The Indian Diaspora, known as Madheshi, is a part of the Nepali people and contributes significantly to the economy of Nepal. The Madheshi are demanding a constitutional amendment to reflect their status. As members of the Indian Diaspora, Madheshi serve as a connecting link between India and Nepal.^[14] Under the current Constitution, the Madheshi people, while contributing significantly to Nepal's gross domestic product (GDP), have not been politically rehabilitated in proportion to their population or importance. This issue has developed into another source of friction between India and Nepal. India has been very direct in demanding that the Constitution be amended to provide the Madheshi people with the appropriate level of political representation. If the Madheshi are not accommodated, radicalization in the region will only increase; if radicalization increases, instability will spread across the border. The two countries' relations would become even more strained as a result. For the Madheshi forces, the only way to have fair elections under this Constitution is for it to be amended to make it more widely owned, which would satisfy their primary demand of redrawing the boundaries of the federal government. This has remained a serious issue between the two neighbors and will likely continue to be a problem until the subject is resolved. As a result, it would continue to be quite difficult for any political dispensation in Nepal to change Nepal's recently promulgated Constitution to redraw the national boundaries, provide



the Madheshi with their due, and accede to their demand^[15]. Rewriting the Constitution requires a significant investment of political capital, which no political party could afford to undertake. In the circumstances like these, it isn't easy to foresee amicable and cooperative relationships between the two neighbors. Therefore, the leadership on both sides needs to get together to discuss and find a solution to the problem to serve the broader interests of Madheshi and strengthen the bilateral relationship between India and Nepal.

Conclusion

On June 17, 2022, India and Nepal's diplomatic relations will have been in existence for a total of 75 years. Without a doubt, the history of bilateral ties over the past 75 years has been a history of love and hatred. The leadership of Nepal has always been suspicious of Indian leadership for fear that it will accuse them of meddling in any political issues occurring within Nepal. On multiple instances, the leadership of India has been cautious about Nepal's attempt to blackmail it by placing it against China. India has also maintained a wary stance towards Nepal's relationship with Pakistan, which is its most bellicose neighbor. Even in the more recent past, their relationships were not an exception to this occurrence. However, the leadership on both sides of the border has been communicating with one another and making efforts to engage with one another by their needs and capabilities; this is because even though they may love to hate each other, they cannot ignore one another.

India has traditionally played the role of a responsible older brother to its more junior neighbors. India was the first country to offer assistance during emergency conditions due to the devastating earthquake in 2015. Additionally, India was the first country to provide Nepal with the Covid-19 vaccination. However, its size, capacity, and geographical features have acted contradictory to its aims for its neighbors, who have always been afraid of undue meddling in their internal affairs. This has led to a situation in which its neighbors view it as a threat to their sovereignty. The dread that exists in Nepal is not an exception to this phenomenon. Because of this, and their bilateral ties are as they are, they have no choice but to continue communicating with one another, work on improving their relations, and go forward with safeguarding and advancing their respective national objectives.

Perhaps the statement by Prime Minister Modi that bilateral ties are "as stable as the Himalayas" was more aspirational than it was. Despite this, and even though their connections may or may not be stable, the remark by Modi as a goal communicates a sense of the distance that both sides need to travel to further develop their economic and cultural engagements. Both Nepal and India are very significant neighbors to one another. They have a long and intertwined history, along with culture and civilization. They do, in essence, offer "roti beti ka rista." As a result of their shared adherence to Hinduism and Buddhism, they share many of the same cultural and religious ideas. Both countries share a common history and cultural background. Still, they also have special relevance for one another in the context of their respective foreign policies due to the proximity of their geographic locations and the economic links that bind them. Nepal's neighbors to the south include the Indian states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Sikkim, and Uttarakhand. This geographical characteristic has the potential to produce immensely in terms of wider connectivity between both countries and more opportunities to engage in trade and business. Connectivity may also result in forming so-called "security communities," easing tensions in the parties' bilateral relations while diminishing political leadership's importance. As a result, India-Nepal relations are intertwined via culture, civilization, and history, but this visit may add new aspects to their economic and political ties.



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