



India-Nepal Diplomacy Since 2014

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ABSTRACT

Since 2014 India and Nepal has seen several ups and downs in conduct of diplomacy. The arrival of new prime minister in India and the imminent promulgation of new constitution in Nepal mark a turning point for both the countries. While India pursued a policy of neighbourhood first, eliciting equal response from Nepal, the initial bonhomie did not last long. Nepal's difficulty in adjusting to the new constitution and its fallout affecting India, curtailed any significant development in India-Nepal diplomacy. But subsequent subsiding of domestic turmoil in Nepal and India's positive overtures helped to normalize relationship between India and Nepal.

KEYWORDS : India, Nepal, Diplomacy

Introduction

India and Nepal has historically shared a deep rooted relationship owing to the commonalities in culture, tradition, religion and thought. Geographical proximity, Nepal's reliance on India for its economy and India's magnanimous neighbourhood policy has kept the bilateral relationship warm. Both the countries have reciprocated to each other's political and strategic needs. India-Nepal relationship is so deep rooted that both the country shares an open border which allows visa less travel to its citizens.

The inauguration of Narendra Modi in May 2014 as the Prime Minister of India gave a boost to India-Nepal relationship with then Nepalese Prime Minister Sushil Koirala attending PM Modi's oath taking ceremony. India's neighbourhood first policy under the Modi government prioritised India's relationship with its neighbours including Nepal. Soon Narendra Modi visited Nepal in August 2014 (PTI 2014). Outlining his visit to Nepal in 4Cs- cooperation, connectivity, culture, constitution, PM Modi assured Nepal that India has no intention of dictating policies to Nepal (Ibid.). While addressing the Constituent Assembly, PM Modi said that "Nepal is a truly sovereign nation. We have always believed that it is not our job to interfere in what you do but to support you in the path you decide to take" (Ibid.). This was a positive statement by the Indian Prime Minister who tried to allay all kinds of fear associated with India's prominence in the South Asia region. India also announced \$1 billion Line of Credit (LoC) to Nepal which was in addition to any other existing LoC (Ibid.). India and Nepal also signed agreements to boost cooperation between both the countries. This way India and Nepal strengthened its relationship.

Bonhomie Continued

The warmth created by PM Modi's visit significantly strengthened the India-Nepal relations giving fillip to diplomacy. PM Modi again visited Nepal in November 2014 to attend the 18th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit. During the visit, PM Modi handed over one Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopter and inaugurated the Emergency Trauma Centre at Kathmandu (MEA Annual Report 2014-15: 15). The first Kathmandu-Delhi bus service was also flagged off (Ibid.). PM Modi also announced the gifting of sapling of Bodhi Tree to be planted at the Maya Devi Temple complex at Lumbini (Ibid.). Several other agreements were also signed. India-Nepal diplomacy has always exemplified a mix of material as well as cultural components in bilateral relationship.

In July 2014, the third meeting of India-Nepal joint Commission was held after a gap of 23 years which agreed to review, adjust and update the Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 (Ibid.). Also in 2014 both the countries made significant headway in the area of boundary issues and electricity generation. The upswing in diplomacy created a positive atmosphere and both the countries increased their cooperation.

India's commitment to uphold the relationship was so strong that after the devastating earthquake of 25 April 2015, followed by a powerful aftershock on 12 May 2015, rescue and relief materials were dispatched by Government of India by special aircrafts within six hours of the first earthquake (MEA Annual Report 2015-16: 14). India subsequently became one of the major donor to Nepal. In June 2015 India pledged to grant US\$ 1 billion to Nepal for rehabilitation after the earthquake (Ibid.). Nepalese people appreciated India's help. Leaders from Nepal Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' of UCPN(M) and Sher Bahadur Deuba of NC visited India from 14-20 July 2015 and 19 July-3 August 2015 respectively (Ibid.). The bonhomie between the two countries seemed to be unbreakable.

Shift in Relationship

India-Nepal diplomacy took a downward trajectory when the Constituent Assembly of Nepal promulgated new Constitution on 20th September 2015. The people living in the Madhes-Terai region of Nepal, which is the southern plains, started to protest against the constitution. Commonly known as Madhesi, are those people who also have more similarity with people living in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar of India. Too this also includes some tribes who are also known as janjati. Madhesi demanded the inclusion of the word 'federalism' as an abiding promise towards state restructuring that would take into account ethnic identity, proportional representation for Madhesi and increased representation for electoral seats (Sen 2016).

The protest turned into blockade of the India-Nepal border resulting into severe essential goods crunch in Kathmandu and other places of Nepal. Majority of residents in Kathmandu saw the blockade as unwanted Indian interference in the sovereign decisions of the nation-state, although Nepalis in the Terai carry a profound sense of ownership over the movement (Ibid.). The violent clashes between the protestors and the police and the blockade polarised the Nepali community.

Nepal saw the blocked as "severe disruption of supplies by the Indian side" (Report on Nepal's Foreign Affairs (2015-16): 7). Therefore Nepal said that "the response from India, as a close friendly neighbor and a consistent supporter in our peace process, did not match our expectation" (Ibid.). India on the other hand had consistently maintained that it has no role to play in the protests in Nepal. The Madhesi protest resulted into a diplomatic challenge between India and Nepal.

Despite the changing perception the diplomatic activities were carried on. When KPS Oli got elected as the Prime Minister of Nepal in October 2015, PM Modi congratulated him. Nepal's deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Kamal Thapa visited India on 2-3 December 2015 and briefed India about the positive developments being made in Nepal regarding the Madhesi demand (MEA Annual Report 2015-16: 15). On 31 December 2015, the Nepali PM KPS Oli

telephoned PM Modi and briefed him about the political developments in Nepal (Ibid.). In the talk PM Modi emphasised the importance of finding a durable solution to the political problems in Nepal based on consensus or 'sahmati' (Ibid.). When two Constitutional Amendments on the issues of proportional inclusion and constituency delimitation were passed by the Parliament of Nepal on 23 January 2016, India regarded it as a positive development, and hoped that other outstanding issues would be similarly settled in a constructive spirit (Ibid.). Despite non satisfaction shown by the Madhesis over the amendments the protest subsided. The blockade ended on 5 February 2016 (Sen 2016).

The Nepali PM KPSOLI, in his first visit abroad after assuming office, visited India from 19-24 February 2016. During the visit, wide-ranging discussions on the entire gamut of India-Nepal relations were held, including developments in Nepal, as well as cooperation in the areas of reconstruction, energy and culture (Ibid.). India and Nepal started to improve their relationship. But the Madhesi problem had already punctured the bonhomie in the relationship.

Searching for New Grounds

Though the Madhesi protest subsided, Nepal's own tumultuous politics deprived Nepal of any political stability. Despite this, the India- Nepal diplomacy continued on a priority basis. When Nepal elected Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' as new Prime Minister in August 2016, he paid a state visit to India in September 2016. This significant priority to India-Nepal relationship helped in cementing the ties. During the visit a New LOCAgreement of US\$ 750 million and First Amendatory DollarCredit Line Agreement on reapportioning funds, for post-earthquake reconstruction in Nepal were signed (MEA Annual Report 2016-17: 15). The Nepali Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' again visited India on 15-16 October 2016, to attend the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit in Goa (Ibid: 17). With Nepal showing enthusiasm to further strengthen the relationship, India also significantly reciprocated. Indian President Pranab Mukherjee paid a state visit to Nepal in November 2016. During the visit it was announced that from 2017 onwards, Nepali students will get the opportunity to pursue graduate and post-graduate courses in Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) on a regular basis (Ibid: 14). The high level bilateral visits have helped India and Nepal keep the relationship warm and cordial.

In 2017 also both India and Nepal have shown greater will to continue the cooperation. The cooperation ranges in a wide array of fields ranging from education to development of infrastructure projects in Nepal. It seems that both the countries are eager to extend cooperation in multiple areas.

Challenges to Diplomacy

Nepal's political instability and domestic issues bear a great challenge to India-Nepal diplomacy. The short duration of political heads in Nepal has curtailed the evolution of significant foreign policy. With the absence of significant diplomatic projections from Nepal it becomes difficult for both India and Nepal to respond to each other's concern. Further Nepal's increasing proximity to China presents a diplomatic challenge for India.

The domestic politics of Nepal, especially related to the Madhesi issue is one more difficult problem which has the potential of offsetting any diplomatic gains between India and Nepal. While the new constitution of Nepal is further awaiting either amendments or election of local bodies, India has attempted to stir away any controversy.

Conclusion

The long shared history and cultural ties between India and Nepal has always stood the test of the time. The India-Nepal diplomacy is in a process of reinventing itself and finding contours of diplomacy. Both the countries see mutual gain in cooperation and have shown eagerness to widen the areas of cooperation. It is in the interest of

both the countries to further strengthen diplomacy.

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