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Indo-Nepal relations: Unfolding trajectories

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of Indo-Nepal relations, shaped by geographical proximity, cultural ties, and historical divergences. Despite Nepal's independence from colonialism and India's colonial past, diplomatic ties were formalized in 1947, solidified by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which emphasized sovereignty but introduced asymmetries in security and trade. The historical trajectory reveals fluctuations: India's role in Nepal's democratization, anti-India sentiments under monarchs, support during wars, and economic aid amidst territorial disputes like Susta. Post-2008 republican era highlights political instability, border conflicts over Kalapani-Lipulekh, economic blockades, and China's BRI influence, straining ties. Looking ahead, the paper envisions strengthened cooperation in transit, infrastructure, and development, urging resolution of irritants like migration and security threats for mutual benefit. India's "Neighbourhood First" policy positions it as a key partner in Nepal's stability and growth.

Keywords: Indo-Nepal relations, treaty of peace and friendship, territorial disputes, economic cooperation, political instability

Introduction

Despite geographical proximity, cultural affinity and akin religious faith and beliefs India and Nepal had a different political history.

Nepal never ever became a colony of any imperial power whereas, India remained under British rule for almost two centuries. Anglo-Nepal war led to the Sagauli Treaty, in 1815 demarcating the boundary between British India and Nepal, thus sealing any expansionist design of Nepal ^[1]. Political unification of Nepal was accomplished by king Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1768, giving birth Monarchy in Nepal. With the abolition of monarchy on May 28, 2008 Nepal transcended to Federal Democratic Republic ^[2].

Diplomatic relations between Nepal and India was established on June 17, 1947. Ever since the establishments of diplomatic connect, the bilateral relations has waxed and waned reaching the present. It needs a thorough and comprehensive understanding and analysis of this dynamic exchange. For this very purpose, I am going to push through the discussion under three sections, the past, the present and the future.

The Past

Though some degree of exchange between the various human settlements have taken place from antiquity, nonetheless, the exchange between two or more sovereign nation states is a modern phenomenon, certainly post Westphalia. Though Nepal has never been a colony, it was recognized as a sovereign independent state first by United Kingdom on 21st December, 1923 ^[3], followed by America on April 25, 1947.

Though India established diplomatic relations with Nepal on June 17, 1947, formal recognition as a sovereign independent country began with the conclusion of Treaty of Peace and Friendship on July 31, 1950 ^[4]. This was a landmark development as it prepared the pitch on which entire edifice of bilateral exchange was erected. One of the defining principles of India's foreign policy has been mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of the fellow members of the comity of nations. This was put on test on several occasion, one such being Nehru's refusal to merge Nepal in India as suggested by king Tribhuvan ^[5]. Though this alleged offer has been vehemently contested by academia and politicians in Nepal.

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On June 4, 2020 the BJP leader Dr. Subramanian Swamy in a diatribe to Nehru posted on the 'X' that former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru rejected an offer made by Nepal's Rana rulers in 1950 to 'merge' Nepal with India. This was rebuked by former Nepal ambassador to India Dr. Lok Raj Baral as 'rumour' [6]. This treaty paved way between two on the basis of sovereign equality. The treaty provided that "neither government shall tolerate any threat to the security of other by a foreign aggressor," and two countries promised to "consult each other and devise effective counter measure" in case of any threat from a third country [7]. It provisioned Nepal procuring war equipment from India, and with India's consultation from others. Though very basis of the treaty was recognition of equality between two countries but the provision to consult India before procuring arms ammunition or war related material from a third country put a dent into the equality principle and also placed a question mark on autonomy of Nepal as a sovereign state. Probably this war a price paid for being landlocked state.

In the immediate aftermath of the agreement India created seventeen check-posts to watch the passes between Tibet and Nepal and Bhutan. These posts were jointly manned by the India and Nepalese personnel. An India Military Mission was also established in Kathmandu for the organisation and training of Nepalese army.

Treaty of Commerce and Trade was also signed between the two on July 31, 1950. This treaty enabled India to make available to Nepal, upto most extent, commodities essential to its economy, secure their routes and methods of transportation which were most convenient and economical. As Nepal is a landlocked country, this treaty acknowledged Nepal's "full and unrestricted right to commercial transit of all goods and through the territory and part of India [8]." It also provided for fixing same level of import duties on item imported from a third country. Nepal also agreed to levy on ground produce in that country, for export to India export duties at rates that would enable Nepalese goods to be sold in India at price not lowers than the price on which goods produced in India were sold. Thus, began an era if extensive economic cooperation and of economic assistance by India to Nepal.

It was around this time that domestic politics in Nepal was at the cusp of major change. The Rana dynasty who had captured political power through infamous Kol massacre and had turn the post of Prime Minister hereditary were facing imminent collapse. Inspired by freedom movements in colonies and suffocating stranglehold of Ranas, the Nepalese people resorted to popular movement. Power intrigues forced king Tribhuwan to take refuge in the Indian embassy in Kathmandu on November 6, 1950. Subsequently king Tribhuwan was deposed by the Prime Minister Rana Shamsher Singh and a child was crowned as king.

King Tribhuwan fled to India with his family members. Despite Nehru's firm commitment to Independence of Nepal and adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal matters of other country, India was coerced by the circumstances to jump into Nepalese bandwagon. Under Indian aegis a tripartite negotiation among king, Rana and the Nepal Congress resulted in restoration of king Tribhuwan and introduction of democratic process in Nepal [9]. India thus, played a crucial role in introducing democratic process and restoring political stability in Nepal leading to an end of Rana family's monopoly over power.

In the meantime Dr. Kumar Indrajit Singh's revolt against Delhi agreement started fuelling anti-India sentiment in Nepal. By early 1952, most political parties in Nepal had adopted anti-India stance [10]. King Tribhuwan died in 1955 and was succeeded by son Mahindra.

With coronation, king Mahindra assumed all power to himself. The rise of Chinese power in Tibet pushed king Mahindra further away from India, bereft of any respect for Delhi agreement, put all political opponents behind bar and instituted the Rashtriya Panchayat System [11]. This delivered a huge jolt to Indian dream of institutionalizing democracy in Nepal. Leaders of Nepalee Congress who dreamed of Parliamentary Democracy fled to India to work for democratic government in that country. This fuelled further anti-India sentiment of King Mahindra. Though India supported democracy in Nepal, it didn't allow insurgency from its soil. The exigencies of situation drew Nepal closer to China, securing economic assistance and cooperation, reducing dependence on India. "Peking was more than ready to play the game and not only encourage and stoked anti-India sentiments but seemingly gave concessions on a border treaty while obtaining the right to build the Kathmandu-Kodari road [12]." King Mahindra portrayed himself a poster boy of Nepalee nationalism, stoking and endorsing anti-India sentiment. This was the bitterest phase of bi-lateral relations. Nepal's pro-China tilt continued and it stood neutral during Chinese aggression on India in an explicit violation of Treaty of Peace and Friendship 1950.

India's strategic thinking and planning got refurbished post 1962 and Nepal captured renewed attention. Then, Union Home Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri visited Nepal breaking the ice, removing doubts from Nepalese mind about India and its policies. It followed by 13 days Nepal king's visit to India and a return visit by president Radhakrishna cemented the improved relations. Boosting the detente in Indo-Nepal relations, president of Rashtriya Panchayat, Surya Bahadur Thapa assured India that none would be allowed to attack India through its territory [13]. In 1964 Foreign Minister Swarn Singh visited Nepal and signed an agreement of large economic assistance to Nepal. All these efforts bore fruit and Nepal stood with India during 1965 India-Pakistan war and supported India's stand on Jammu & Kashmir. Leaders of two countries stated that "the principle of self-determination could apply only to a dependent country. It didn't apply to a sovereign country or to parts thereof [14]."

While that renewed bonhomies was in the process of consolidation, a new contention cropped up over Susta region. This region was claimed by Nepal in 1966. This territorial dispute was whipped up by vested interest in Nepal to propagate anti-India sentiment to sustain Nepali nationalism. In 1969, Nepal made public demands for the withdrawal of India personnel from the northern check posts and its military liaison group in Kathmandu. This demand was formally conveyed by the Nepalese ambassador in New Delhi. Nepal's foreign minister Rajbhandari said in the Rashtriya Panchayat, that the liaison group had completed its work and the Nepalese personnel were now available to man the checkpoints [15].

The tensed situation reverted back to normally with the signing up of a new Treaty of Transit in 1971. The acumen of Sardar Swarn Singh, India's Foreign Minister secured Nepal's expression of deep concern over the developments in the then East Pakistan, the refuge

problem and the need for political settlement of Bangladesh crisis. Nepal didn't stop Gurkha soldiers of Indian army from fighting against Pakistan and supported India's stand in the United Nations and finally recognised Bangladesh.

King Birendra succeeded King Mahendra in 1972. The relations improved further with the conclusion of a number of agreements in 1974. Along with the thaw, some old and some new irritants kept on surfacing and resurfacing. Nepali Congress and its leader B.P. Koirala were fighting for a democratic system while staying in India. The Nepalese authorities suspected encouragement by India, though having no truth. Secondly, working of the Treaty of Trade and Transit of 1971 faced bumps. Nepal was demanding faster flow of goods, fulfilment of stipulated targets and an agreed diversion of those goods which were in short supply in India. Thirdly, a new irritant entered during 1975-76 when people of Sikkim revolted against Chogyal. Post referendum Sikkim joined Indian Union and subsequently integrated. Nepal denounced India's move as "outside interference in the internal affair ^[16]" of Sikkim. The factor behind Nepalese panic appeared to be increasing demand for demoralization of Nepal. Anti-India campaign and demonstration were visible across Nepal. King Birendra's idea of Nepal being accepted by major powers and neighbours as a "Zone of Peace" was rejected by India, Bhutan and former USSR. This would have made India's security vulnerable to unfriendly China. Janta Party coming to power in India in 1977, improving relations with neighbours got boost. In 1981 King Birendra reiterated the idea of Nepal as a 'Zone of Peace'. India countered by floating the idea of entire sub-continent or entire South Asia as a Zone of Peace. India and Nepal became the founding member of SAARC in 1985.

The age old demand of the Nepalese Congress to replace partyless democracy with party based democracy was conceded with the replacement of absolute monarchy by constitutional monarchy on April 8, 1990. First Nepalese parliamentary elections were held in May 1991 after the restoration of multiparty democracy. After the second general elections, Manmohan Adhikari became Prime Minister of Nepal, the first ever communist Prime Minister in South Asia. His government wanted to drop the requirement of reciprocity in matters of citizenship of two countries. Nepal's contention was that India being a large country can afford to absorb Nepalese settling in India, while it finds it difficult to absorb Indian living in Nepal.

In 1996 in Maoist insurgency took over Nepal. The political feud between those who did not want change and those who wanted radical change plunged the country to turmoil, violence and instability. In the year 2001 the entire royal family of Nepal including king Birendra and queen were massacred. After 2006 popular uprising monarchy was abolished in 2008 and Nepal transcended to a democratic Federal Republic from Limited Monarchy ^[17]. The next section delves around the post 2008 relations between Nepal and India.

The Present

With the heralding of republican democracy in Nepal in

2008, it has struggled to establish a functioning democratic system, instability, frequent government changes as evident from 16 governments in last 16 years. The abolition of monarchy led to the transition period where a new constitution was drafted through a constituent assembly. While Nepal is now a federal democratic republic, it has faced challenges in implementing federalism, and combating corruption leading to public discontent and even calls for return to monarchy. This section of the paper focuses upon relations between two neighbours, one aspiring to be a regional power and the other striving for political consensus and political stability.

When Nepal was undergoing epochal political changes, India played crucial role though from behind the curtain Dr. Manmohan Singh did not visit Nepal, yet when it was yelling under Maoist armed insurgency for a decade from 1996. In 2006, after a 12 point agreement mediated by India, they and seven other political parties came up as an alliance against king Gyanendra Shah's direct rule. Maoist came to the centre stage of power within democratic framework marked the end of an insurgency that had taken a toll of over 10000 people. In 2010, India increased the credit line to 50 million USD and also supplied 80 thousand tonnes of grain.

Since Prime Minister Modi coming to the helms of affair, the intensity of bilateral interaction could be gazed from the frequency of mutual visit by top dignitaries. Since May 2014 Prime Minister Modi visited Nepal five times and ten return visit by the Nepalese Prime Ministers. Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' Policy raised hope. He became the first foreign leader to address Constituent Assembly of Nepal. Modi has expressed his displeasure at Nepal's constitution, a position made clear in a series of statement issued by Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi ^[19]. Economic blockade of Nepal understood to be tacitly endorsed by India created anger in Nepalese side prompting to look north. India's act made Nepal think as interference to their sovereignty and created a gap between the two.

In the years since abolition of monarchy, Nepal has faced challenges like political instability, corruption, economic struggles. This has led to huge dissatisfaction with the current political regimes prompting demand for restoration of monarchy by some section. Street protests in the month of February 2025 was markedly significant. March 28, 2025, witnessed violent clashes between pro-monarchy protestors and police in Kathmandu leading to injuries and death ^[20]. The communist party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre) leader Matrika Prasad Yadav accused Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Aditya Nath of supporting pro-monarchy movement in Nepal ^[21]. This has emerged as the latest irritants between two.

Territorial dispute over border along Uttarakhand State of India has added a new dimension to the persisting difference between two. It involves the Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura regions. This dispute has been ongoing since 1960's resurfacing intermittently, but in 2020, Nepal proclaimed, these territories by showing in official Nepalese map.



India rejected the map saying it involves artificial enlargement of territories which is not based on historical facts and evidence. As of this much pocking was not enough, Nepal on May 3, 2024 announced the printing of a new NPR 100 currency note with a map that shows the controversial territories of Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura and Kalapani, already termed an artificial enlargement and untenable by India ^[22]. India's reaction has been unprovocative. Foreign Minister S. Jaishanker said in a lighter vein, "Nepal's unilateral action will not change ground reality ^[23]," Though these Nepalese moves have not infuriated India, Yet, the motive behind these needs to be dug out and addressed.

On February 16, 2025, a Nepali girl student was found dead in her hostel room at Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) University in Odisha. This led to unrest among student community. The Nepalese government has asked for an investigation. The National Human Rights Commission of India has ordered the high level probe into the matter ^[24]. This has certainly restored the confidence and sense of security among Nepali students pursuing various courses across the universities in India.

At present apart from those mentioned, issues of criminal taking refuge there, drug and narcotics trafficking, counterfeit currency are some prominent issues brewing tension between two countries.

Trade and Commerce is a vital link between two. Nepal being a landlocked country needed safe and secured transit passage for procuring or exporting any or all kind of commodities. The treaty of Trade and Commerce of 1950 provided the framework. Agreement on Trade and Transit in 1961 visualised setting up of a common market between two

countries. A new Treaty of Transit was signed in 1971. Based on these basic frameworks, economic relations are being operationalised. Besides providing transit routes and ensuring supply of essential commodities, India directly participated in development related and infrastructure building works in Nepal. Starting with the construction of an air strip at Gaucharan in 1952, since the India has been assisting primarily in the areas of infrastructure development and capacity building of human resources in Nepal. These assistance have multiplied since restoration of multi-party democracy in Nepal. Both sides have agreed to advance new partnership in agriculture, expansion of rail links connecting Kathmandu to Raxual with Indian financial support to develop inland waterways for movement of cargo providing additional access to sea for Nepal ^[25]. A Nepal-India joint oversight mechanism has been constituted co-chaired by the foreign secretary of Nepal to review the progress made and resolve issues in the implementation of projects under India's economic and development cooperation. The mechanism meets every two months.

At present India is supporting Nepal's development through a series of projects. Prominent among them is High Impact Development Projects (HICDPs) focusing on health education, connectivity and public utility. Since 2003, out of 573 HICDPs, 495 have been completed. In the field of education India's support has been in construction of school, e-libraries and providing means of transportation in urban areas. In the field of healthcare, India has helped in building some art of state healthcare infrastructure like B.P. Koirala Institute of health science, Dharan: Emergency and trauma centre at Bir Hospital Kathmandu.

In the field of connectivity to facilitate Nepal's access to sea

lane is vital for transport and commerce. This includes, Jayanagar-Bijlapura-Bardibas rail link which is Nepal's first ever broad gauge line, Jogbani Biratnagar, rail link, Hulaki / Terai road, integrated checkpoint at Birganj. The first cross border broad gauge passenger train service between Jayanagar in India and Kurtha in Nepal was flagged off during the visit of former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba to India from 1-3 April 2022 ^[26]. Other areas of intense cooperation has been erection of cultural infrastructure, disaster relief and reconstruction, power sector cooperation are few to name.

Canvas of cooperation between two neighbour has been quiet vast. In true spirit of enabling Nepal to become politically stable and economically viable, India has gone beyond formal links to create necessary wherewithal. A lot has been done and even more awaits.

One major geo-strategic irritant has emerged between the two i.e., Nepal joining China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Nepal officially joined BRI in 2017 and a more detailed framework was signed in December 2024. This paved the way for realising the projects like Trans-Himalaya connectivity network ^[27]. India has voiced concern about the transparency of the BRI and its potential impact on territorial sovereignty, particularly with regard to the China-Pakistan economic corridor.

The Future

Past leaves an indelible mark on the present and present influences the future. A thorough understanding of the past and a careful analysis of the present supplies ample clues to envision the future. Nepal shares boundary with India from west, east and south, and being a landlocked country heavily depends on India for transit, transport and life line supply. Since the signing of Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950 and Treaty of Trade and Commerce 1950, Indian transit routes and transportations have been life line for Nepal. Here I am reminded of what former Prime Minister of India Late Atal Bihari Vajpayee in his address to the parliament, said, "you can change friends, not neighbours" ^[28]. No matter what turn the geo-politics takes in future, India is indispensable for Nepal and will remain the supply lifeline. Horizontal and vertical expansion of this transit and transport channel would continue as evident from the joint effort of two to facilitate Nepal's access to water route. India is linking Nepal to its waterways by granting Nepal access to three inland waterway routes: Kolkata-Kalughat, Raxual; Kolkata-Sahebganj Biratnagar and Kolkata Varanasi Raxual ^[29]. This expansion will enable Nepal to utilize the Ganga River for transit to the sea, allowing the country to operate its own vessel on the river. Additionally, Nepal has access to three of India's river ports: Sahibganj, Kalughat and Varanasi.

Since 1950 free movement of the citizen of two countries across the border is on rise every year. Most of the Nepalese citizens come to India seeking economic opportunities. In the ongoing section of the paper, I have posited a rosy picture of unfolding relationship between the two intimate neighbour, yet there are many thorns in between. The grievance of the aspiring Nepalese youths embedded with the fervour of nationalism, that India treat them as an inferior species has to be done away with. For this all the available channels need to be explored. Nepal's huge trade deficit with India is another grudge, Nepal itself can cure this ill by exporting more and more goods and

services to India. Heavy cross flow of citizens across Nepal and India has also emerged as a concern for Nepal. Nepal argues that India being a vast country can absorb Nepalese migrants but Nepal being a very small country can't absorb Indian citizens entering Nepal. This is not such a tricky issue and both the countries should work out certain modalities to seal an agreement mutually satisfying. China as a factor between Indo-Nepalese relations can't be ignored. Nepal as a sovereign country has every right to have relations with any country. Since Nepal joined China's Belt and Road initiative have made India cautious about Beijing's influence in the region, particularly the projects in Trans-Himalaya's pose a perception of security threat to India. Nepal has to ensure no country uses its territory against India.

Finally the territorial dispute are also festering the wounds. The Susta Dispute along the border in Bihar due to shifting river course is persisting. Youth constitute about 42.6% of the total population of Nepal. In coming years, for the pursuit of higher education, economic opportunities and employment, India is going to be sought after destination.

Nepalese youths, educated and aspiring, loaded with nationalist fervour is looking for pushing the country along the path of progress and development. So far India has been a partner in Nepal's growth and development. India is a burgeoning economy, holding 4th / 5th global rank in terms of size, has a policy of providing aid to friendly and neighbouring countries. In realizing the dreams of aspiring Nepalese youths to push the momentum of development of Nepal, India would be a worthy and reliable partner as reflected in a number of joint developmental projects being executed and many more to come.

Though India is pursuing the policy of 'Extended Neighbourhood' and 'Neighbourhood First' simultaneously, yet India is surrounded by hostile neighbour like China and Pakistan. In such a geo-political set up, India needs to cultivate afresh bonhomie with as much neighbour as possible. Looking at the proximity with Nepal, it could be reliable diplomatically at the hour of need. When India struck terrorist camps in Pakistan in the night of May 6-7 in self-defence, Nepal was among the few countries that supported India's stand ^[30]. A friend in need is a friend indeed.

Nepal claims over the territories of Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura as per the Sugauli Treaty of 1815. Despite Nepal's claim India doesn't regard these as disputed territories and are under India's full control. It is better for both the countries to sit together, negotiate and resolve the issue amicably once and for all.

When interaction between two sovereign countries takes place interests are bound to converge at some points and diverge at others. India and Nepal are no exceptions. One can't sever the interaction due to divergence, particularly when the two are intimate neighbours. Wisdom lies in two pronged strategy of pushing along the trajectory of convergence as far and as quick as possible and simultaneously working on irritants to resolve. In case of resolution seeming far cry, these should be put under the carpet and move along with the rest. Few bumps can't be allowed to block the unfolding of the trajectory. I find Indo-Nepalese relation moving along with this strategy.

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