How India Shapes China-Nepal Ties

By Gaurav Bhattarai

Landlocked Nepal is fated to be forever wedged between India and China. As these two Asian giants eye each other warily as emerging global powers — even engaging in lethal hostilities recently on the border between their two countries — Nepal is trapped in a complex diplomatic dance.

One of the great ironies of that predicament is that even as India fears that Nepal is being used as a tool of Beijing, it is New Delhi itself that is inadvertently pushing Katmandu into the embrace of China, writes Gaurav Bhattarai.

BEFORE MODERN India was established in 1947, bilateral relations between the Himalayan country of Nepal and China remained unscathed. The intermittent presence of British India and Tibet as a factor in China-Nepal relations during the period of colonialism can’t be denied. But after Indian independence and Tibet becoming an integral part of China, China-Nepal relations detoured through the intricate geopolitical realities of the South Asian post-colonial setting. Not just because Tibet was no longer between them, but largely because of the emergence of modern India, which since its inception has perceived Communist China as an existential threat.

The Indian view of China-Nepal relations today appears to carry the same existential threat perception. For this reason, New Delhi leaves no stone unturned to foil Nepal’s attempts to get closer to Beijing. So it may sound paradoxical to know that every move Nepal makes toward China is triggered by New Delhi. First, by limiting Nepal’s engagement with China and shaping China-Nepal ties in its favor. Second, by exercising interventionist policies in the neighborhood, India has pushed Nepal closer to China, shaping ties, but not in its favor.

THE COMMUNIST CHINA SCARE

When India recently announced the new route to reach the mountain resort of Kailash Mansarovar in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, via the Lipulekh Pass, Kathmandu waited for Beijing’s response. That’s because the two Asian giants had agreed in 2015 to use the pass for trade and pilgrimage without Nepal’s consent, despite Kathmandu having long disputed the pass near the trilateral junction of its northwestern border with India and China.

Almost two weeks after the inauguration of the new route, China’s foreign ministry diplomatically stated that no unilateral action should be taken at the junction. In those two weeks, Nepal published a new map clearly showing that Lipiyadhura, not Lipulekh, is the trilateral junction. But the Chinese foreign ministry didn’t make it clear whether Beijing recognizes Lipulekh as the trilateral border point or accepts Nepal’s claim of Lipiyadhura. Meanwhile, India’s response was superficially hostile, reiterating its claim that Lipulekh is Indian territory, and drawing references from a new map that India published in November 2019 that included Nepali territory within India’s borders. New Delhi thus not only expressed its reservations over Nepal’s new map, but also erroneously hauled China into the Nepal-India border disputes: Indian news channels indiscriminately — yet in a hilarious manner — held China responsible for Nepal’s issuance of its new map, which was actually not the case; China in fact has always wanted Nepal to maintain good relations with India. But the Nepali public was astonished to see that India, which shares many affinities with Nepal, hasn’t actually understood the Himalayan country. Most probably, this was due to India perceiving Nepal as a security threat emanating from Beijing.

India has shaped China-Nepal relations in various ways. The hegemony, asymmetry and coercion that New Delhi often exercises has pushed Nepal closer to China. Although a regional power is expected to project a sense of accountability toward the region, post-colonial India opted for colonial hegemony in dealing with the countries of South Asia. Consequently, they have gotten closer to China. Imposing coercive measures such as blockades has also made landlocked Nepal creep closer to China.

Other countries that have eyed a substantial presence in Nepal have always made New Delhi smell a rat. But it’s not an approach introduced by democratic India itself. Instead, it has a colonial legacy. With the treaty of Sugauli in 1816, the British East India Company restricted Nepal’s strategic and economic relations with other European countries and the United States. But following the establishment of Communist China in 1949 and its incorporation of Tibet in 1951, New Delhi rejuvenated the colonizers’ security doctrine for Nepal because it saw its neighbor in the northern Himalayas, bordering China, as part of its defense. The 1950 treaty of peace and friendship between Nepal and India was the upshot of India’s “Communist China scare.”

For Nepal, the treaty is unequal, and it has demanded serious revisions. New Delhi had signed the treaty with the authoritarian Rana regime in Nepal, against which the people had fought to introduce a democratic system in 1950. With the help of the same treaty, India even attempted to limit Nepal’s independent foreign policy, particularly its relations with China. Although the treaty did not specify a role for India in Nepal’s foreign affairs, New Delhi used the treaty to ensure that while maintaining relations with China, Nepal did not overlook India’s security concerns. For instance, Nepal was required to consult with New Delhi prior to purchasing arms...
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THE NEW CHINA SCARE

Nepalis often hear Indian Nepal experts touting Nepal-India relations as “special.” They may wonder what makes it so special: blockades and interference? In reality, the idea of “special relations” is a strategic approach that India undertook predominantly to limit Nepal’s relations with China. Entering into a special relationship routinely overrides other kinds of bilateral relations. Realizing this, King Mahendra in the 1960s institutionalized relationships based on equality over special status, by going beyond the immediate neighborhood and introducing Nepal to the comity of nations. While a relationship based on equality relies on the process of treating all bilateral relations as equal, a special relationship favors one over the other. In the name of open borders, cultural affinity and people-to-people relations, India always wanted Nepal to favor it over China. But King Mahendra’s increasing closeness with the United States not only caused the Chinese leadership to raise an eyebrow, it also obliged Beijing to share with New Delhi the evidence of Nepal’s budding intimacy with the US.

As King Mahendra received a warm welcome in the US from President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967, this was sure to incite the Cold War anxieties of Nepal’s immediate neighbors. Still, the Chinese act of sharing information not only indicated that Beijing valued Indian interests in the region, but also reflected China’s firm desire to contain the US in Asia. Upon learning that King Mahendra had a heart attack in 1968 while hunting in Terai, President Johnson sent a physician to assist the treatment of the king. Throughout his rule, King Mahendra, who died in 1972, successfully managed to thwart India’s attempt to limit Nepal’s relations with China by adroitly balancing Kathmandu’s relations with New Delhi and Beijing.

The political socialization of Nepal’s leaders in India is a predominant factor in the way India shapes Nepal’s relations with China. Had the first generation of leaders been educated and socialized in the West, things might have been different. But leaders from Nepal not only actively supported the Indian independence movement, they also drew support from New Delhi to topple the authoritarian Rana regime in 1950. Almost all the mainstream political parties that Nepal has today, from Communist to Congress, Maoist to Madhesh-based, had their political schooling in India. But it is quite surprising to hear Indian TV channels imprudently stating that the ruling Communist Party in Nepal has always been closer to China, and is often scheming against New Delhi. Is this a new China scare? It shouldn’t have taken much time for Indian journalists to understand that India’s actions are actually pushing Nepal closer to China. For instance, in 2016, Kathmandu signed a transit and transportation agreement with Beijing that provided Nepal with access to the port of Tianjin in China. Previously, Nepal had access only to the Calcutta and Visakhapatnam ports in India. The agreement was the consequence of India’s unnecessary attempt to dilute Nepal’s sovereign right to promulgate its new constitution, followed by the imposition of a harsh blockade on Nepal in 2015. This is how India has shaped China-Nepal relations: the China scare obliged India to take Nepal into its confidence, but colonial policy remnants eventually made Nepal seek refuge with China.

Still, the Gujral Doctrine, a set of principles guiding India’s foreign relations with its neighbors, offered a different approach toward Nepal. Espoused by former Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral in 1996, the doctrine said India should not use its power to demand reciprocity from smaller neighbors. Thus, Nepal was free to pursue an independent foreign policy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s “neighborhood first” policy initially echoed the spirit of the Gujral Doctrine. But with the subsequent adoption of the neo-Kautlayan approach by Modi, suspicion over Nepal’s ties with China grew. Nepal’s entry into the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an apt example and is perceived by India as hostile. India continues to disparage China-Nepal ties openly. Surprisingly, even Nepal’s sovereign acts are being seen by New Delhi as Chinese covert actions against India. In October 2019, China pledged to provide 150 million renminbi in military aid to the Nepal Army, predictably ringing alarm bells in New Delhi.

But no Nepali expected that the unveiling of a new map by Kathmandu would be described by Indian defense officials as an act to fulfill Chinese interests on the Nepal-India border. Most possibly, Indian Army Chief General M.M. Naravane’s statement that Nepal “might have raised this problem” (referring to its new map that includes Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura) “at the behest of someone else” illustrates the new China scare in India. His remarks came at a time when China and India were experiencing border tensions in the mountainous areas of Ladakh and Naku-La. Still, it was hardly expected that the world’s largest democracy would authorize its army chief to make unsuitable remarks about bilateral relations. General Naravane’s hypothetical observations, once made, quickly stimulated India’s commercial TV news channels to portray Nepal-China relations in an abusive manner. Even though they are private channels, Nepal and possibly China might reasonably wonder to what extent the Indian media reflects the perceptions of the Indian establishment.

Given that the news media, whether private or state-owned, can influence public perceptions, the airing of unsubstantiated details and cock-eyed analysis can contribute to a negative public image about Nepal and China. It may be startling for the Indian news channels to know that while they were broadcasting misleading reports portraying Nepal’s new map as a covert act directed by China against India, Kathmandu was waiting for Beijing’s response over the Lipulekh Pass. That’s because the Nepali public suspected that India’s construction of a new road to Mansarovar was probably the result of a 2015 quid pro quo between New Delhi and Beijing over the pass.

CHINA AS A BALANCER

Today, as a new world order is on the threshold of emerging, Nepal has new aspirations, and it seeks its neighbors’ support to realize them. If India continues paying no heed to Nepal’s yearnings, there is no doubt that Kathmandu will be persistently attracted to Beijing as it seeks to be linked to the global value chain — and it should not be seen as a paradigm shift or a change in the status quo. All of Nepal’s governments so far, whether communist, democratic or authoritarian, have pursued a shared geopolitical tactic: creeping to the shade in the north to avoid the heat from the south. Still, friendship with all and enmity with none has been the core principle of Nepal’s foreign policy. But as India pushes back, Nepal will crawl toward Beijing. In that case, China is a balancer for Nepal, whether India likes it or not.

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