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India-Nepal Relation During Modi Government: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper seeks to analysis the India -Nepal relationship from many aspects, political- economic and Geo-Political perspective. The recent development and new trends in the relationship between the two countries is fundamental of the study, especially India's current government Neighborhood policy. India Nepal has shared unique relationship including open border cultural and religious similarities which have been helped to build contacts between two side people. This paper also focuses on the areas of conflict between the two countries which pose challenges for Indian diplomacy. India and Nepal relation is critical and complexes on border dispute such as, Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh, Kalapani and the area of Susta. China's growing influence in Nepal is serious concern for India and how India should balance its relation with Nepal in current situation.

Key Words: India, Nepal, Bilateral Relation, Geo-political, China's influence

Introduction:

Two culturally and historically rich countries Nepal and India's bilateral relationship has been faced ups and downs. The two countries are share close bond in terms of history, culture, economic, geo-strategic and political. People of the two countries share various commonalities including religion, rituals, food habits, and lifestyles etc. India is reshaping its relationship with Nepal under the Modi government and this is opportunity for Nepal to strength ties and cooperation with India. Both countries have been shared long term political and economic relations. Due to land locked status of Nepal it's highly depends on India for trade, export and import. India too gives important to Nepal in its Neighborhoods policy. I recent years high level visit from India side to Nepal, especially Prime Minister Modi official visit in 2014 and 2022 has became turning point of relation between the two countries.

Despite of small and landlocked country, Nepal has geo-strategically significant position in South Asia and due to a buffer state between India and China it's very significant for both countries. Nepal share border with India and China, Linpiyadhura and Lipulekha is root to enter into Tibet which strategically highly valuable for China. For India also Nepal is too significant for security perspectives, when Sino-India relationship not smooth due to border conflicts. In recent years this a key concern for India as China's raising involvement in Nepal through aid and investments. Nepal government had welcomed China's engagement which has lead to creating gap between Nepal and India. China is successfully shaping its diplomacy in Nepal with Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) large scale aids, loans and investment in big projects. On the one hand India is taking positive and supportive stand but unfortunately Nepal side has not given similar response. Nepal has continued to blame India for many ways such as, interfering in its domestic affairs and over border disputes too. In this context anti India voice has increased in some parts of Nepal which lead to push back cooperation and bilateral relations. In recent years India and Nepal are reshaping their relationship, particularly under India's foreign policy 'Neighborhood First Policy' gives attention to South Asian countries.

Political and Socio-cultural Relations:

India's growing position as a economically and political power in the world is also a opportunity for its neighboring countries; including Nepal. Current government of India is prioritizing India's political, economic relations with South Asian countries under its foreign policy agenda. India's positive stands towards Nepal is creating new phase of relationship between the two countries. Nepal is too welcomed respectfully Indian heads of states Prime Minister Modi.

The Prime Minister of Nepal, Sushil Koirala, breaking protocol and receiving Modi at the airport, giving Modi a nineteen-gun salute on his arrival (V. Pant, 2016:107). People of Nepal were giving him a rousing public welcome. Modi is first Prime minister of India after 1090s who addressed Parliament of Nepal. His speech at the Nepalese parliament was a concrete and a reflection of the ongoing relations between the two countries. "Modi's speech at the Nepalese parliament was a graceful reflection on the trials and turbulence that have shaped Indo-Nepalese ties over the last few years with a promise of a change of course in the coming years"(Indian Express, August 3, 2014).

After years of the territories issues between Nepal and India which created tension between the countries bilateral relation. In June 2021, began with new path of cooperation with India's help of one million COVID vaccines, testing kits and other medicine to Nepal. During pandemic India promised every possible support to its neighbor country (The Times of India Dec. 28, 2021).

With changing leadership in Nepal, India is looking towards strengthen its bilateral ties. Sher Badhadur Deuba became Prime Minister of Nepal in 2020, he has signaled cooperation with India. Deuba shared telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Modi and focused on friendly relationship between the two countries.

In January 2021, the foreign Minister of Nepal Paradeep Gyawali was on official visit of India he met his counterpart S. Jaishankler . He expressed Nepal side that both countries have "common commitment to resolve the border issues" (The Times of India Dec.28, 2021). During Deuba government several times both side leaders have been interacted and focused on the ways for cooperation with each other and work together. A Foreign Secretary level meeting was held in Kahmandu, India side Vinay Mohan kwatra and Nepalese counterpart Bharat Raj Paudyal emphasized on strengthening bilateral relations (The Economics Times Feb. 13, 2023). Both courtiers have been showing interests to maintain cordial relationship and continually exchanging dialogue with each other.

India has emerged as a favorite place of education for Nepali students. "The government of India provides around 3000 scholarships annually to Nepali students for doing various courses in India and Nepal" (Ranjan and Gurung, 2021, P-95). This initiative will lead to build trust between people of India and Nepal. It will also help to explore India's Soft Power in South Asian countries.

Geo-political Nuances:

Nepal shares border with five Indian states Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Sikkim and Bihar therefore a vital position of cultural and economic exchange. The importance of Nepal for India is can be analyzed from different ways; Nepal is strategically importance for India's national security and its position in India's role perception in regional politics. Nepal position as a buffer state can play significant role against any possible aggression from China.

For India, Nepal is a strategic state between China and India which can be used against India. China's support to Communist party in Nepal has been concerned for India. It became critical after China's occupation of Tibet in 1950. We cannot refuse China's keen interest and its access of human and economic in Nepal. Nepal is strategically significant for China too in geographical context its share boundary with Tibet. "Nepal, according to Beijing, constitutes a vital part of an inner security ring that cannot be allowed to be breached by any global or regional power" (V. Pant, 2016:108)

Over the years, China's policy toward Nepal has been guided by its bigger strategic interest vis-à-vis South Asia. China's increasing strategic partnership with Nepal is a serious security threats for India.

Border issue has become most challenging for India Nepal bilateral relation. Kalapani over 35 kilometers of area is lies at the trijunctin of India, China and Nepal. Trade between China and India throughLipulekha pass, North of Kalapani began in 1992. In 2015 India and China referred Lipulekha as a bilateral trade route between the two countries but Nepal did not accept this agreement and said that it was violation of Sugauly treaty 1816 (Ranjan Amit 2019). In November 2019 new map of India in which Kalapani was showed as a part of India, protest erupted against India of many parts of Nepal. Ruling Communist party, Student Unions protested at the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu. India is continuously trying to resolve this issue by bilateral dialogs. Though India was strongly defended our side the map if only based on India territory and protection its sovereignty.

China Factor:

Due to Nepal geostrategic position this country is as significant for China as India. In recent years this geostrategic status has given Nepal more opportunities to build cooperation with China. China's growing influence in South Asian countries poses a challenge for India's neighborhood policy. In recent years China's growing presence in Nepal has become a serious threat to India's security in this region. There is a question arises: how does China's growing engagement in Nepal affect India-Nepal relations? Nepal's strategic importance has led China to give preference and focus to building bilateral cooperation and trying to become close allies of Nepal. The China-Nepal Bilateral relationship will help reduce Nepal's dependency on India in a political, economic and security context (Pant 2016:108). China's influence is rising in Nepal not only in economic and security sectors but also in politics, guided by China's support. Prime Minister K P. Sharma dissolved the Parliament due to the political crisis in the country and in December 2022 , National Communist Party of Nepal led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal, was supported by China.

Under Chinese influence in 2020, Nepal released a new map in which they showed Lipulekha and Kalapani are part of Nepal's territories. China's growing presence in every sector of Nepal is concerning for India. China has expressed its interest in investing in various sectors such as agriculture, trade, industry and transportation (Ranjan Amit 2021). Currently, China has become the highest FDI contributor to Nepal.

In 2019, Nepal and China signed a MoU on the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) for development. Nepal is building closeness with China and maintaining distance with India. Xi Jinping government has offered to Nepalese Rupees 56 billion assistant to Nepal development. Nepal has Joined China's Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) investment in the Kathmandu- Kerung Railway. Xi Jinping visit called "as high level visits, sharing of communist ideology, training, as well as development models" (The Economic Times, Jul 11, 2020).

Both countries have signed an agreement on Transit Transport on Agreement of Paramount importance that is making landlocked Nepal to a land linked nation. Through Kerwang- Raxaul route, China is looking to reach the Gangatic plains Via Nepal (Sigdel Anil, 2018). China and Nepal are jointly working in the area of energy sector cross -border electricity transmission lines, which will help Nepal less dependency on India.

China is very keenly working on building railway connectivity between the two countries, The Trance Himalayan Railway Connectivity. Both countries have agreed to "intensify implementation of the MoU on Cooperation under the BRI to enhance connectivity," which includes ports, roads, railways, aviation and communications in the framework of the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 21, 2018). China is looking for an opportunity to connect Chinese people to reach most historical Budha birth place Lumbini. This will help to build people to people connectivity between the two countries and Nepal will also be able to attract Chinese tourists from China (Sigdel Anil, 2018). This is an alarming situation for India, because, through the rail and Road networks, China can easily access Nepal's routes for its own interests. It can be harmful for India in future conflict situations.

Conclusion:

In recent years, India and Nepal relationship have faced quite complex situation. India has often emphasized on its 'Neighborhood First' policy. Prime Minister Modi era began with cordial and positive stand when Prime Minister officially visited to Nepal in 2014. But time has changed and many issues between the countries emerged which have lead to push back bilateral relations. Anti India slogans in Kathmandu and other parts in Nepal was concern for India. Border issue during Prime Minister Oli government in Nepal was created tense situation between the two countries. Consequently Nepal has been building close ties with China that creating challenge for India's position in the South Asia. India's rising potion in the global politics as well as in the regional politics. Nepal see India as dominant power of the South Asia that's lead to looking towards China as counter balance with India.

Through engagement in Nepal China has been trying to increase its presence in the South Asia politics as well as maintain its control over Tibet. China's growing influence in Nepal to achieve its political, economic and strategic interests. China is trying to minimize India's role in Nepalese political and economic. China factor is major strategic concern for India and its negative impact on Nepal-India bilateral relations.

There is need to more effective foreign policy towards Nepal to balance with changing scenario of the South Asia politics. India's support to Nepal during massive earthquake and COVID pandemic was highly appreciated by the Nepalese citizens. Socio- Cultural cooperation between the two countries have been showed during Prime Minister Modi visit to Nepal and all agreement welcomed by the both side people. Nepal is still mostly depends on India for trade and export-import and India has been continually supporting Nepal economic development. India has played significant role in economic and political stability in Nepal, now needs to balance India's interests in Nepal.

Growing connectivity between the two countries, through Rail and Air will help to increasing tourism in Nepal especially Buddhist tourist from China to Lumbini. Nepal seems increasing connectivity with China can help to enhance its economy. India need to explore more opportunities for cooperation's in various sectors including trade, economy, tourisms as well as connectivity. These will help in cooperation building between the two side government and people also.

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