

Mending fences with a neighbour

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit will underline India's socio-cultural links with Nepal



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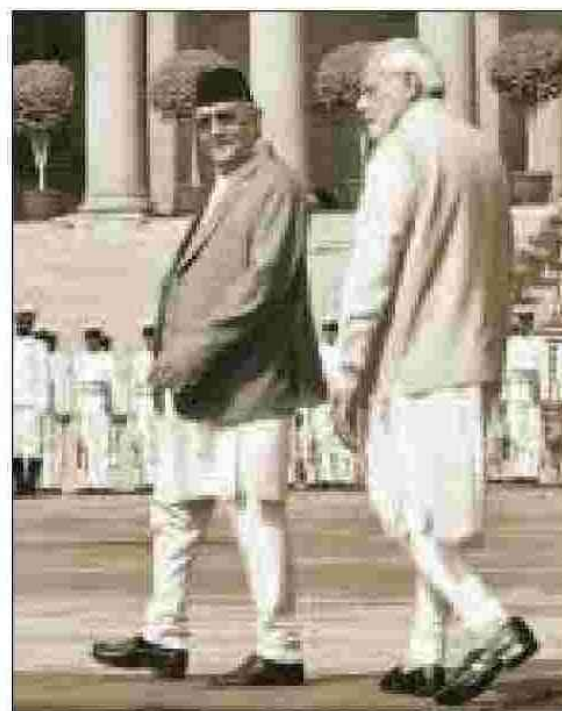
A month after Nepal Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli visited India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Nepal on Friday. Next month may see Modi in Nepal again for the long-overdue Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit. Friday's visit, however, comes after a gap of 41 months. Modi last visited Nepal in August and November of 2014. Among other irritants, Nepal's 2015 constitution was to become their bone of contention pushing Kathmandu towards China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This has since become the most important challenge for India's engagement with Nepal.

Then, what sets this visit part? Modi's foreign policy today increasingly underlines a clear understanding of India's asymmetry with China and seeks to calibrate India's strengths. Modi's Nepal visit will see him underline India's deep socio-cultural links with Nepal as also their economic inter-dependence. This is how India seeks to address its anxieties about China's aggressive pur-

suit of high-speed mega infrastructure projects.

Second, Modi will also seek to repair the damage in his personal equations. Oli had been strong in his critique of India interfering in Nepal's internal affairs, of that infamous 135-day-long blockade and for toppling his government in August 2016. Now, back with a bigger Left-alliance that received a 2/3rd majority in national elections last November-December, Oli talks of national pride and for recasting the historic 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship that binds Nepal to consult India before entering any security relationship with any other nation.

China also adds to his strength. Last May, Nepal signed a memorandum of understanding for cooperation under BRI. In April, Nepal's foreign minister, Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, announced in Beijing Kathmandu's decision to expedite work on building trans-Himalayan multi-dimensional connectivity incorporating projects on rail, road, dry ports, electricity, communications and air transport. China has initiated the extension of their Xining-Lhasa rail to Nepal's border, in addition to three roads connecting Nepal to China. Beijing has also promised to deliver the international airport at Pokhara by 2021. Of imminent concern to India remains their feasibility studies on rail link connecting Kerung (on the Nepal-China border) to Kathmandu and Lumbini (on Nepal-India border).



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Nepal PM KPS Oli, New Delhi, April 7 SONU MEHTA/HT

China has played its cards well. Only a week before Gyawali made that announcement in Beijing, Modi had offered Oli to connect the border town of Raxaul in Bihar to Kathmandu by rail. And three days after Gyawali's announcement, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi was to formally propose the China-Nepal-India Economic Corridor to external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj, who was visiting for a foreign ministers meet of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Potentially, such free access to China in Nepal raises questions regarding various special arrangements in India-Nepal relations, especially their porous borders.

This explains the why and how of Modi's visit, during which he will offer a puja at the

Janaki temple in Janakpur, and pray at the Muktinath temple in Pokhara. Modi will address a civil reception at Baarhabigha, as well as at the Indian embassy's pension camp in Pokhara. In Kathmandu, he will have multiple receptions and call on President Bidhya Devi Bhandari and Vice-President Nanda Bahadur Pun, and hold talks with Oli. None of these are expected to clinch any agreements but focus on building trust by expediting implementation of existing commitments.

As his special presents, Modi will announce, along with Oli, Janakpur joining the Ramayana Circuit, construction of two temple dharmshalas and asphaltting the city's ring road that were promised during President Pranab Mukherjee's visit in November 2016. Modi's presents could include high-tech equipment for the Kathmandu city hospital, plus city urbanisation or infrastructure projects. At Muktinath, Modi may announce another temple dharmshala and restoration projects. For economic integration, Modi and Oli will remotely lay the foundation of the 900-mega-watt Arun III hydro-electricity project, further expand inland waterways to facilitate Nepal's ocean-connect and join the groundbreaking ceremony of South Asia's first pipeline to bring relief for energy starved Nepal.

Finally, as election campaign ends in Karnataka on May 10, the prime minister's Nepal visit will be widely covered by the media, which makes Modi's Nepal visit of great significance for his politics at home.

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The views expressed are personal*