

India-Nepal 'bridge' is still unshakeable



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Nepal can be a bridge between India and China", declared Nepalese Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli, in an interview with China's state-run Global Times (the universally acknowledged official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party), during his five-day state visit to Beijing. Mr Oli is axiomatically correct as his landlocked country (surrounded by other nations, Nepal has no access to major navigable waterways) is a geographical bridge between India and China. Hence it's not only a question of what "Nepal can be", but what Nepal "is", owing to being an inalienable part of the geography, polity, culture, history and civilisation of South Asia. And unless and until a catastrophic human folly comes into play in the future, it will continue to be so.

But Mr Oli's words also need to be analysed in the light of certain recent events in South Asia. More so as his statement was made in China, which of late has been actively propounding its intention to initiate a "trilateral" diplomatic means and methodology in South Asian affairs; especially in matters relating to India. Hence, every word uttered by Mr Oli needs to be scrutinised thoroughly.

To start with, one sincerely hopes that Mr Oli has not been charmed into an indirect and complex Chinese plan of action leading to a trilateral diplomatic dialogue. His dilemma, however, is understandable. Sandwiched between the two great land masses of 2.7 billion

people (India and China), with access to just two waterfronts of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, Nepal faces all the disadvantages that the remaining 44 landlocked nations of the world face. This makes it imperative for Mr Oli "to move from the state of a landlocked to a land-linked country through development of adequate cross-border connectivity".

Nevertheless, the question arises — is there any dearth of "cross-border connectivity" between India and Nepal? Has "landlocked" Nepal been handicapped by any Indian design? We have never come in the way of Nepalese movement, profession, business and any other bona fide action in any way across this country; and we have always treated the Nepalese at par with Indians in all walks of life.

Under the landmark 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, citizens of Nepal have complete freedom of movement and liberty to live and work freely in India. Citizens of no other country in the world enjoy this freedom, not even Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, who were earlier a part of India. As against that, Nepalese citizens need a passport and visa to visit China. Plus, they can neither work nor live in China permanently. Let's now see things from the perspective of Nepal. There is no doubt that north of Nepal, its remote neighbour China is not so remote any longer owing to its economics. Yet, Nepal cannot be as open to China as it is to India simply because of the deep cultural, religious and social links that

bind the people of the two countries, besides of course the open border that facilitates easy access. The 130 crore citizens of India and Nepal are totally at ease with each other, moving unhindered, uninterrupted, unchallenged for thousands of years! Does it have any parallel in the 21st century Western world's growing xenophobia pertaining to immigration, migration and invasion, except for the 28-nation European Union, which is borderless for about 40 crore people.

It is, therefore, clear that landlocked Nepal not only holds a lofty, unique and exceptionally advantageous position in India, but its quest for becoming a "land-linked country through the development of adequate cross-border connectivity" is more than a matter of India's duty and responsibility for a win-win South Asian scenario. Also, India's policy pivot revolves around Nepal as one of the most effective and enterprising pylons of collective progress south of the Himalayas.

In reality, with China as the world's second biggest economy of \$11.226 trillion in the north, and India, positioned seventh, with a \$2.088 trillion economy, in the south, Nepal can only thank itself and nature's bounty which gave it a unique geographical position and location. In a way, Nepal should also thank its stars that it is not located north of the Himalayas to face the fate of a Xinjiang or Xizang (Tibet) at the hands of an army which is controlled and commanded by a unitary party rather than a democratically-

established polity like that of India.

Understandably, therefore, Nepal well realises the meaning, utility and importance of democracy of dissent and difference, debate and discussion much more than other similarly-situated nations worldwide. That speaks volumes of the intelligence, wisdom and vision of the people of Nepal. Indeed, the tradition of democracy in Nepal goes back thousands of years. Remember the old, ancient legacy of the democratic republic of the Lichchhavis of Vaishali in the 6th-7th century BC, which transcended the present Indo-Nepalese border? There was then the riverine connect between Pashupatinath and Vishwanath, through the Gomati, Gandak, Ghagra, Rapti and Koshi, emptying to the Ganga. And the majestic Himalayas for the common aims and objectives of the people of the great South Asian terrain, spanning from the Indus to the Brahmaputra, and to the Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri. It was, and still is, a normal, spontaneous and natural bond with or without agenda or polity, bridge or diplomacy. The same tradition exists even today as the unshakeable Indo-Nepal bilateral interaction continues as the natural bridge in South Asia as a geographical unit and all those across the Himalayas, without any instigation or provocation by any third party.

The writer is an alumnus of the National Defence College. The views expressed are personal.

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