

Nepal PM Oli's visit to Delhi signals a new equilibrium

When Nepal's new prime minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli arrives in New Delhi on Friday for a three-day state visit, it will be one of the most politically significant visits by Nepal's head of government to its immediate neighborhood. Already, there are strong indications that the election of the Left Alliance government signals at new terms of engagement with the international community: it will be more nationalistic, will take a business-like approach and will caution foreign powers to stay away from Nepal's internal affairs. Secure in his home turf, the new Prime Minister seems intent on projecting a confident Nepal externally.

In his recent address to the international community in Kathmandu where he outlined his government's priorities, Prime Minister Oli put 'nationalism' as the number one pillar of his governance. "This," he told heads of diplomatic missions and donor agencies, "comes as a non-negotiable priority for us."

Both domestic politics and regional dynamics have changed appreciably since Oli last visited New Delhi in 2016 when Nepal was under an undeclared border blockade by India. India felt slighted that Nepal's major political parties, including Oli's Communist Party of Nepal-Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), had failed to take New Delhi in confidence about the content of the new constitution. Nepal's leaders, on the other hand, insisted that it was Nepal's internal affair.

New shift

There has been a tectonic shift in Nepal's politics since 2016. In the elections to the federal parliament and seven provincial assemblies late last year, the Left Alliance received a sweeping mandate across the country. The pre-poll electoral alliance—which brought together Nepal's two largest communist parties (Oli's CPN-UML and former prime minister Prachanda's Maoist Centre, MC)—are now close to unification, with the two senior most party leaders currently co-chairing the would-be Communist Party of Nepal.

The numbers are staggering. If he headed a loose multi-party coalition when he last visited Delhi as Prime Minister, Oli is now supported by more than 60 percent of Left Alliance lawmakers in the federal parliament. And if the Madhes-based Federal Socialist Forum Nepal (FSFN) party led by Upendra Yadav, joins the ruling coalition, the Prime Minister will enjoy over two-thirds majority. In a vote of confidence earlier, Oli received a resounding "yes" from 3/4th of the House.

In fact, the Left's sweep has been near-complete: since its landslide victory in the elections last year, its candidates have been comfortably elected as Nepal's President, Vice-President, Speaker of the Lower House and Chair of the Upper House. The Left controls six of the seven provincial assemblies and will possibly also control the seventh one—if the FSFN gets on board. No prime minister in Nepal's history has enjoyed the level of political support as K P Oli currently does. (Which also makes some people in Nepal very nervous).

China factor

Second, as much as the domestic politics, it is the fast-changing regional dynamics that make Oli's current visit very meaningful in New Delhi. After he last visited the Indian capital as prime minister, Oli signed 10 crucial framework agreements on trade and transit with Beijing to wean Nepal from its historical dependence on India.

Granted, Nepal still gets all of its petroleum products from India and conducts its trade through Indian ports, and nearly 70 percent of Nepal's trade takes place with India. But the Oli government

is expected to deepen trade and transit ties with China. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that Nepal signed with China in May last year, Nepal is also expected to receive huge investments to finance its vastly underfunded hydropower, connectivity and tourism sectors.

Attracted by its natural beauty and relative affordability, more than 100,000 Chinese tourists travelled to Nepal last year and the number is growing. (More than 160,000 Indian tourists arrived by air in the same period; Nepal doesn't keep data of Indian tourists crossing over from land). There are plans to connect the capital Kathmandu with Lord Buddha's birthplace Lumbini and the lake city of Pokhara with China-funded railways. Chinese are building international airports near Lumbini and Pokhara, and Chinese companies are already the leading investor in Nepal's hydropower sector. The power-generation and irrigation potentials of Nepal's great Himalayan rivers still remain largely untapped.

Chinese officials stress that over 23 million Chinese tourists travel to Tibet each year and a vast number of them will be willing to travel to neighbouring Nepal if there is a better connectivity and infrastructure in place. The Qinghai-Tibet railway line, which travels through the world's highest plateau, has arrived in Tibet's second city Shigatse and is expected to connect the Nepal-China border point of Kerung (also called Gyirong or Kyirong) by 2020. Align all this with the recent changes in China, set to ensure President Xi Jinping's reign as the country's top leader for a long time, and you will get a sense that Chinese policy in its neighborhood is likely to remain predictable. Anxious to leave his stamp in the immediate periphery, the Chinese President is expected to visit Nepal either this year or next. By all account, his flagship foreign policy project, BRI will further expand China's influence in the region.

Some in the Indian foreign policy establishment believe that these developments should be seen as a strategic opportunity for India to engage in economic partnership with China, the world's second largest economy and all set to become the largest. In a recent interview, Indian ambassador to China Gautam Bambawale told the 'South China Morning Post' that India should regard China a partner, not a rival. This should suit Oli just fine. His government seems keen to revive the moribund SAARC, headquartered in Kathmandu. In a surprise move last month, the Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi landed in the Nepali capital to congratulate the newly elected prime minister. The visitor made no secret that he was seeking Oli's good offices to salvage a SAARC summit long due.

Some in the Oli administration seem anxious to see the China-Nepal-India trilateral cooperation get off the ground for its obvious political dividends. The trilateral cooperation will not only make Nepal's job of balancing relations with the two giants easier but will also consolidate Nepal's existence as a "vibrant economic bridge" between the world's fastest growing big economies.

What next?

In 2015, when Nepal's new constitution came out, India merely 'noted' the historic event and subsequently imposed an undeclared border blockade to express its displeasure. If anything, the Indian move only made Oli more popular among Nepalis and the elections to three tiers of government—local bodies, provincial assemblies and federal parliament—that followed the Indian blockade saw the nationalist CPN-UML emerge as the largest party.

As the two close neighbors try to reset their relations in a changed context, the current message should not be lost on New Delhi. This visit is being closely watched by millions of Nepalis as an expression of a more confident and coming-of-age Nepal that deserves to be treated on parity. To us in Nepal, the visit hopefully turns a page on the historically complex relationship between the two countries.

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