

Secure relations

By now, India should be used to its smaller neighbours throwing the China card at it. And by now too, Delhi should have been able to fashion a confident neighbourhood doctrine that can deal with this card, takes on board the insecurities of these small countries, the politics that has shaped them, and the aspirations of their citizens. Unfortunately, on both counts, the answer is, not yet. In this respect, the visit by the Nepal Prime Minister, K P Oli, is an opportunity as much as it is a challenge.

India views Oli as “pro-China”. In Nepal, his unseating in 2016, which brought a coalition of the Maoists and Nepali Congress to power, is seen as India’s handiwork. His comeback, through an election fought on a nationalist platform, shows the limits of ouster diplomacy. Though his “10-point” infrastructure agreement with China during his earlier stint as PM angered India, and was shelved by his successors, Oli may revive it.

China’s open chequebook policy means it can offer Nepal the kind of projects that Oli dreams will make his country “land-linked” rather than “land-locked”. India cannot put down that kind of money. It is an unequal rivalry on this front. So it will make little sense, at least to Nepal and its people, if New Delhi decides to draw “red lines” around Chinese largesse when Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and his guest sit down to talk business on Saturday.

India’s security-driven foreign policy forgets one thing. China-card diplomacy too has its limits. Nepal may want to keep India at arm’s length, fearful of being overrun by its large southern neighbour. But it must be as, if not more, conscious of living in the shadow of a huge northern neighbour with regional and global ambitions much bigger than India’s in scale and sweep, whose desire to reach into its deep pockets to help Nepal cannot be free.

Once Delhi gets a grip on its paranoia, it can start asking itself what it can offer Nepal that China cannot, not in a competitive, but a complementary way. So if China builds a hydropower project, India should be offering to buy the power the project generates, instead of threatening the opposite. If there are lessons from India’s engagement with Nepal over the last four years, and indeed from the rest of the neighbourhood, it is not to make crude demands on loyalty based on size, but to acknowledge the agency of each, and offer a constructive friendship based on sovereign equality.

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