

The Nepal reset: on India-Nepal ties

Nepali Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's visit to India signals an important recalibration of bilateral ties. While the focus of the official pronouncements has been on connectivity, it is the perceptible absence of tensions in public interactions and official meetings, including with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, that gives hope that the rupture in ties over India's reservations about Nepal's new constitution is being repaired. The visit follows a great deal of preparation by both Delhi and Kathmandu. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj made an unusual departure from protocol to visit Mr. Oli in Kathmandu and congratulate him for his election win even before he had been sworn in. It was a significant shift from 2015-17, when the five-month-long blockade of truck trade at the Nepal-India border and Nepal's ties with China placed a severe strain on the relationship. For his part, Mr. Oli put aside the anti-India rhetoric of his election campaign, and came to India on his first post-election visit abroad seeking 'friendship first, and friendship second and third'. Bilateral meetings at Hyderabad House were devoid of any sermonising and defensive postures, steering clear of contentious issues on the constitution and China; Mr. Modi promised support on development projects that meet "Nepal's priorities".

The reset is long overdue, and should be accompanied by a transformation in the tenor of the relationship. Kathmandu has been too susceptible to conspiracy theories about Indian meddling, while New Delhi and its diplomats in the Nepal embassy have sometimes lent credence to the theories by adopting a patronising attitude. A first step to the reset would be the completion of the ongoing process of updating the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Nepal would acknowledge that its citizens have benefited from the ease of employment and residence in India that the treaty provides. But India must recognise that as in all other developing economies, Nepal's aspirational young population is also looking beyond the open Indian border for opportunities, and Mr. Oli's desire to turn his "land-locked" country into a "land-linked" country with a merchant navy must be considered positively. From here on it will be the deliverables, such as road and railway links, power projects and post-earthquake reconstruction commitments, that will determine the success of the partnership, not just the announcement of new initiatives. India has residual concerns over enhancing the constitution's provisions for Nepal's plains-based Madhesi population, but these should be taken up discreetly and diplomatically. Recovery in the relationship is still fragile, and any grandstanding must be avoided.

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