

That old spark: Nepal Prime Minister's visit brings bilateral hope

At a time when the [Doklam stand-off had focussed attention](#) on Himalayan geopolitics, it was impossible to miss the significance of the visit of Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba to India. This was his first foreign visit as Prime Minister, and it confirmed Kathmandu's abiding interest in strong ties with India. The recovery of bilateral warmth has taken some doing on both sides. Mr. Deuba is Nepal's 10th Prime Minister in a decade, and its fourth since its Constitution was promulgated in 2015. India had mounted strong opposition to the Constitution with demands that it be made more inclusive, especially *vis-à-vis* the Madhesi in the Terai area, sending ties with Kathmandu's ruling establishment on a downward spiral. Even as Nepal struggled to cope with rehabilitation work after the massive earthquake of 2015, many in Kathmandu held India responsible for the three-month-long "great blockade" of goods and fuel supplies that followed sustained protests by Madhesi groups. To that end, Mr. Deuba's visit was another opportunity, as were the visits of his predecessors K.P. Sharma Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', to repair the India-Nepal relationship. The joint statement at the end of the Delhi leg of his visit refers to the "deep, comprehensive and multi-faceted" ties between the neighbours as it listed projects being developed in Nepal under lines of credit provided by India. These include \$200 million for irrigation projects, \$330 million for road development and \$250 million for power infrastructure in Nepal. India made the obligatory appeal to Kathmandu "to take all sections of society on board" while implementing its Constitution, but the tenor was notably softer this time. No mention was made of a key amendment to the Constitution to accommodate Madhesi demands that had been defeated just last Monday.

On Doklam, Nepal walks a tightrope

Yet, it would be a mistake to presume that ties can so easily return to their pre-2015 strength, as the ground has shifted in too many ways since then. To begin with, memories of the blockade still rankle in Nepal. And while South Block and Singha Durbar have been keen to move ahead with trade linkages and complete the integrated check-posts at Raxaul-Birgunj and Jogbani-Biratnagar, the land-locked country has actively sought to break its dependence on India for fuel and connectivity. Since 2015, Nepal and China have cooperated on infrastructure plans, including a big hydroelectric project and a rail link to Tibet. Nepal is also part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. India is struggling to leverage the historical closeness with Nepal, the open border the two share and the special status Nepalis working in India have enjoyed. The India-China stand-off in Doklam will add to the awkwardness in the trilateral relationship. Mr. Deuba's visit will need a sustained follow-up.

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