

RECALIBRATING INDIA-NEPAL TIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Nepal

Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla. File photo | Photo Credit: [PTI](#)

When Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla arrived in Kathmandu on November 26 and spoke in fluent Nepali to the media, there was some hope that the visit would go beyond the traditional exchange of pleasantries. When he departed, the hope was that his visit would be the beginning of a continued dialogue between the two countries that have had a strained relationship since the imposition of a five-month-long blockade in 2015 in Nepal just as the country was recovering from a devastating earthquake.

In the past five years, the only glimmer of hope to work on the relationship was the constitution of an Eminent Persons Group. The Group was disbanded after submitting its report, the outcome of which is still not known. Nepal thought that the Eminent Persons Group would be the foundation for reworking the relationship between the two countries, but for India, as a former diplomat put it, it was just one of the hundreds of initiatives or administrative mechanisms. The Foreign Secretary did not touch upon the issue of the Eminent Persons Group in his latest address. His speech was not different from speeches made in the past, and the joint statement from both the governments was a usual nicety.

The Nepal-India relationship has never been free of controversy as the perspectives of both sides are yet to change. Many in Nepal continue to equate being anti-India with being nationalistic. Politicians and political parties whip up such sentiment and compete with each other on who can be more extreme, especially before an election. Prime Minister K.P. Oli won the 2017 election partly because he projected himself as someone who stood up to India during the blockade. He again whipped up nationalistic sentiments when he got the Nepal map amended to add new territory. This was a good way to deflect attention from the poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic by his government. His government's excuse was that after India released its new map in November 2019, Nepal wanted to discuss the map with India but the latter did not provide any time for a discussion.

India continues to think that by providing largesse to Nepal in the form of aid and development projects, it can win Nepali hearts. But despite pouring billions of rupees into Nepal over decades, it has still not been able to do so. Therefore, it needs to reflect on what it is not doing right. Two issues are important to understand here. First, all aid to Nepal from countries other than India and China go through the Plans of the Government of Nepal. Indian aid is seen in Nepal as a favour bestowed on a constituency it wants to garner support from rather than a contribution to Nepal's planned development. Second, India competes with China in providing aid outside government budgets. And China picks up projects of visibility and strategic location. Chinese involvement in Nepal has increased since the April 2015 earthquake and Nepal is surely an area of strategic influence in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The Foreign Secretary raised the issue of people-to-people exchanges between the countries, a welcome development. In the past two decades, two significant changes have happened in this area. First, Indian workers in Nepal constitute a big part of the workforce and send about \$3 billion to India every year. In terms of remittances to India, Nepal ranks eighth. So, the Government of India needs to keep in mind that many households in India are being run with remittances from Nepal. Second, Nepalis have migrated in the past 20 years to more than a hundred countries; India is not the only country that Nepalis rely on for jobs or education. This is a new Nepal comprising young people with global aspirations. Nearly three-fourths of the

population of Nepal is under 35 years of age. India needs to engage beyond its current constituency, the minuscule proportion of the population who are above 65. Meanwhile, Nepal needs to plan how it engages with the youth in mainland India for whom Nepal is just like Bangladesh or Myanmar, areas they study about in geography in school but know little about.

There are some fundamentals that we simply cannot forget: geography will not change, the border will remain open as millions of livelihoods on both sides depend on it, and China is going to be a big global player with varied interests in the neighbourhood. Therefore, the India-Nepal relationship has to be recalibrated. The hope is that the Nepali-speaking Foreign Secretary who has Sikkimese ancestry will be able to rethink the dynamics of the relationship as he reflects on his visit to Nepal.

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