

The Wuhan breakthrough

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. | Photo Credit: [Reuters](#)

Nepal's Marxist leaders have come of age. In dealing with a rising India and China, Nepal, led by Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, has hit the sweet spot: antagonise neither New Delhi nor Beijing, and seek benefits from both. A mature analysis of India's and China's interests, rather than resentment, especially towards India on account of the 2015 economic blockade, is guiding policymakers in Kathmandu.

The Nepalese have quickly grasped that playing the India versus China card to further their cause is history. The Wuhan summit in April between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping has been a game changer. Lines of "strategic communications" have opened up between Indian and Chinese establishments. The arterial flow of information exchange has meant that India and China can be joint custodians rather than rivals in managing their neighbourhood of shared interests.

If there were any doubts about the profound post-April shift in China-India ties, the Nepalese were possibly the first to know. Chinese leaders proposed during their talks with Mr. Oli, who had visited the Middle Kingdom in late June, a 'two plus one' dialogue mechanism. China and India will comprise the 'two', while the 'plus one' would be Nepal. The new arrangement would prop up an integrated approach towards trilateral development. While the 'two' would be the constants, the 'plus one' would be the variable. Instead of being a Nepal-specific formulation, Beijing and New Delhi could engage with any third country in the region, and arguably even beyond, wherever unruly competition between the two is to be avoided.

Nepali leaders have taken President Xi's message of a fledgling post-Wuhan special relationship with India in their stride. Nepal "understands the spirit of Wuhan," Shakti Bahadur Basnet, a Minister in Mr. Oli's cabinet, told *The Hindu* during a recent visit to Beijing. Others who accompanied Mr. Basnet, in off-the-record conversations, attributed the pronounced shift in Chinese policy to the "Trump factor" and alluded to the U.S.'s stepped-up campaign, especially on the technological front, to undermine China's "rise".

The ball is now in India's court to respond to China's two-plus one formulation. Nepal offers the perfect opening to test whether Beijing and New Delhi can dock their collective rise and uplift their neighbours based on their genuine consent. By grasping the two plus one opening, India will have the opportunity to join and shape the conversation of co-developing Nepal in a trust-building partnership with China. If the Nepal pilot project works, the 'two plus one' formula can become the template for the peaceful rise of South Asia, synergised by India and China as the twin engines of regional growth.

The writer is The Hindu's China correspondent

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