

A PRAGMATIC APPROACH, FOR BETTER INDIA-NEPAL TIES

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The visit has helped in underlining the real priorities' | Photo Credit: ANI

Despite daunting challenges to Nepal's democracy, governance and stability and seemingly intractable bilateral irritants, the Prime Ministers of Nepal and India have shown that a pragmatic approach and mutual sensitivity can re-energise bilateral relations

The Prime Minister of Nepal, Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda's first bilateral visit to India since assuming office in the current term is notable in this sense. Driven by challenges presented by the post-COVID-19 world, current realities as well as huge opportunities, India and Nepal were able to review the entire spectrum of the bilateral agenda covering political, economic, trade, energy, security and developmental cooperation.

Prachanda deserves credit for this. He is in a weak position at home as leader of only the third largest party in Parliament, well behind K.P. Oli and Sher Bahadur Deuba, who are waiting to take over from him, not to speak of leaders from smaller parties who are being wooed by the Opposition to cause political instability. Prachanda has shown political courage and probably shrewdly calculated the costs of paying heed to the spectrum of political noises warning him not to be soft and to extract solutions to irritants such as the 1950 Treaty, border differences, and India's reluctance to receive the report of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) set up by the two governments. Instead, he seems to have listened to the few voices of reason and moderation, and to focus on opportunities to building a better future.

Prachanda has had stints as Prime Minister. In his very first term, as a fiery Maoist rebel-turned political leader, he did give India a few rude shocks, crossing red lines by insisting on visiting China first, or dismissing the Army chief, considered to be a palace loyalist, to which India took strong objection (there was a clear understanding that when the Maoists joined the political mainstream, there would be no interference with the Royal Nepal Army). Later, India too would give Prachanda a few shocks — sending a Prime Ministerial special envoy to urge Madheshi parties not to support Prachanda in order to save his government. But this time round, Prachanda came across as a serious, self-confident and mature statesman.

The Indian Prime Minister, too, has shown sensitivity, for example when he reassured Prachanda that differences on the border issue would be resolved to mutual satisfaction. Neither side tried to justify their official version of the border as the correct one.

The visit has helped in underlining the real priorities — the “game changers” which can transform the economic landscape of the sub-region, such as hydropower projects to supply energy to India (and eventually to Bangladesh), infrastructure, access to Indian river transport, innovative tourism circuits, and better connectivity.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, renewed high-level commitment to bilateral cooperation on multiple fronts, with improved deliveries, was necessary. There was unprecedented cross-party consensus when the Mahakali Treaty, identifying the Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project (PMP), with power stations of equal capacity on both banks of the river, was negotiated, signed and received parliamentary ratification a few years ago, despite political changes in both countries. The finalised Detailed Project Report (DPR) will be submitted to both governments expeditiously, finances arranged and modalities of implementation concluded within one year after their approval of the DPR.

There is a new dimension of cooperation in the power sector with the transmission passage (trilateral power transaction) from Nepal to Bangladesh through India. With new power projects now under implementation or on the drawing board, and the finalisation of an agreement for long-term power trade wherein it was agreed to strive to increase the quantum of export of power from Nepal to India to 10,000 MW within a timeframe of 10 years, an era of prosperity awaits the entire sub-region.

Enhancing digital financial connectivity is another crucial development. The MoU between the National Payments Corporation of India and the Nepal Clearing House Ltd. for facilitating cross-border digital payments, and the Indian offer to create a ground station and supply 300 user terminals to offer the services of the South Asia Satellite to Nepal under grant assistance are important; they would promote regional cooperation in the space sector, and space technology applications in telecommunication and broadcasting, tele-medicine, tele-education, e-governance, banking and ATM services, meteorological data transmission, disaster response and the networking of academic and research institutions.

The real challenge for Nepal is to depoliticise cooperation with India, especially in water resources cooperation, improve the quality of democracy and governance at home, and check unbridled corruption, which is alarming even by South Asian standards. For India, it may be necessary to address the perception in Nepal that it is no longer a foreign policy priority, and to give a sense of ownership, equality and credit for major forward movement in sectors such as hydropower to parties across the political spectrum, rather than only to the government of the day.

Predictably, the Opposition parties in Nepal have termed the visit a sell-out. But they should be made aware of the fact that if there continues to be a steady focus on development — as demonstrated during the Prachanda visit despite possible political instability in Kathmandu — Nepal will find India going the extra mile in meeting its needs and expectations.

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