

## India-Nepal ties: After Modi's visit, the ball is now in Oli's court

Narendra Modi's third visit to Nepal as prime minister was high on symbolism. He started the trip from Janakpur, next to the Bihar border, with a prayer at the Janaki Temple, the inauguration of the Janakpur-Ayodhya bus service, and a speech at a civic reception. He also went to Muktinath, next to the Tibet border, and visited the Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu. This was coupled with political engagements in Kathmandu. The PM interacted with Nepal's prime minister KP Oli and his government representatives, and the two sides took forward discussions on bilateral projects.

There are four major takeaways from the visit. One, India has decided to use religion and culture as a source of deepening its ties with neighbours. This comes in the wake of the Chinese push into India's periphery, primarily on the basis of cash and connectivity promises. India's calculation is that instead of playing to Beijing's strength, Delhi must leverage its traditional linkages, and convert that into modern opportunities. Two, India has decided to reassure the Kathmandu establishment that it is committed to respecting the Nepali electoral mandate — and despite the wariness of Mr Oli, it would do nothing to undermine his government or play a role in destabilising Nepali politics. This comes in the wake of active Indian involvement in Nepal, starting from encouraging an anti-monarchy alliance (2005) to expressing its reservations about the Nepali constitution (2015). India is now telling Nepal, your politics is yours and we will respect it. Three, while emphasising this message, Delhi is conscious that Nepal is not just another neighbour. Both the open border and the China factor lend it special sensitivity. But zero interference doesn't mean zero engagement. As a part of this, Mr Modi met all key political actors and told them that Delhi wanted to see them and Nepali democracy grow stronger.

The Janakpur visit was a signal to the Madhesi people that they mattered to India. And finally, the bilateral component of the visit focused on projects such as power, rail, inland waterways, roads, and others. While India must meet deadlines, the ball for sustaining the relationship is now in Mr Oli's court.

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