

NO ZERO SUM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

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President Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal after the Mamallapuram meeting with Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) underlines starkly the challenges India faces in its relationship with China, with Nepal, and more generally, with China's deep-pocketed outreach in the entire neighbourhood. In fact, Xi's visit to India was sandwiched between receiving Pakistan Prime Minister [Imran Khan](#), and his Nepal visit. If Delhi has been disturbed at the signals from these engagements around the Mamallapuram summit, it has managed to hide it well. It cannot but know that, as far as Nepal is concerned, the problems are largely self-inflicted.

Xi was the first Chinese President to land in Kathmandu in over two decades, and the visit acknowledged the closeness between the two countries from the last decade, but more so, since 2015. That was when Nepal Communist Party leader Kharga Prasad Oli took office as prime minister. His first term, which lasted barely a year, was dominated by a crippling blockade of the Nepal border at Birgunj from the Indian side. China stepped in at the time to provide fuel and other essentials. Oli was quick to strengthen Nepal's relations with its northern neighbour. He was ousted from office within a year, but much to India's surprise, returned even stronger in an election in early 2018. Modi's three visits, and agreements for more infrastructure projects, including a rail line from Kathmandu to Raxaul at the border, have clearly not persuaded landlocked Nepal that the only friend it needs in the neighbourhood is India.

Xi's generous assistance to Nepal of USD 495 million was of a piece with the style with which China makes friends with India's neighbours. There is to be a feasibility study on a trans-Himalayan train link between the two countries, and a road link from Kathmandu to Kerung, on Nepal's border with Tibet, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Both connections will increase Nepal's access to the Chinese economy. To the extent that this pushes up the possibility of Chinese goods flooding India through Nepal, Delhi should be concerned. But it must also come to terms with the reality that there can be no zero sum games in foreign policy. Viewing relations with neighbouring countries only through the prism of India's security has its limits. As the region's largest economy, India needs to find better ways to make friends with its neighbours, and retain these friendships.

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