

HIMALAYAN DIVIDE: ON THE DRIFT IN INDIA-NEPAL TIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Nepal

Despite several attempts at a reset, [ties between India and Nepal](#) continue to be a cause for concern. The disconnect between the two governments was most visible at the seven-nation Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation military exercises that concluded on Sunday. After confirming its participation in the exercises in June, the [Nepalese Army was made to withdraw its contingent](#) due to a “political decision”; it sent only an observer mission at the last hour. Officials in Prime Minister K.P. Oli’s office said that they were upset with Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s “unilateral” announcement of the multilateral exercises during the BIMSTEC summit on August 30-31, without having formally proposed it to the hosts. India’s explanation that it had broached the issue with BIMSTEC members directly did not cut much ice with Kathmandu; even the contingent from Thailand did not join the counter-terror exercises because of lack of adequate notice. Nepal’s decision to join China for a 12-day Mt Everest Friendship Exercise in Sichuan province, also focussed on anti-terrorism drills, drives the wedge in further. New Delhi and Kathmandu must put an end to the unseemly controversy by renewing diplomatic efforts over the issue. India and Nepal don’t just share an open border; they have shared the deepest military links, with both countries traditionally awarding each other’s Army chiefs the honorary rank of General. Such unique ties must not be undermined due to lack of communication.

Chinese ports open up to Nepal

The larger geopolitical context of the discord over the military exercises must not be ignored. In his current term as Nepal’s Prime Minister, since February, Mr. Oli has said he will not be guided by India on several matters. Despite New Delhi signalling its discomfiture with the volume of Chinese investment in hydropower and infrastructure and transport projects, Nepal went ahead recently and finalised an ambitious connectivity proposal that will eventually link Kathmandu to Shigatse by rail; this will give Nepali goods access to Chinese sea-ports at Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang and Zhanjiang, and land ports in Lanzhou, Lhasa and Shigatse. Much of Mr. Oli’s rancour draws from the past. India is still blamed for the 2015 economic blockade against Nepal. It is also held responsible for attempts to destabilise Mr. Oli’s previous tenure as Prime Minister during 2015-2016. New Delhi cannot turn a blind eye to the rebuffs, and must address them. At such a time, the Army chief, General Bipin Rawat’s statement on BIMSTEC, that “geography” will ensure that countries like Bhutan and Nepal “cannot delink themselves” from India, could have been avoided; such comments unnerve India’s smaller neighbours and are misleading. Modern technology and connectivity projects could well take away geography’s role as a guarantor of good relations.

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