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Trans-Himalayan Region: Evolving Politics and Strategies

by
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Trans-Himalayan Region: Evolving Politics and Strategies*

The Himalayan region represents different terrain ranging from plateaus to high mountains and valleys, lower Himalayan ranges, each representing diverse ecology, resources, social moorings and political identities. The Himalayan region stretching from Afghanistan to the mountains of Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bhutan is at the cusp of South Asia, Central Asia and China. This geographical location has allowed transit for cultures, trade and movement of people from India northwards to the trans-Himalayas and from Tibet, China and Central Asia southwards to India. It has assimilated Hinduism and Buddhism along with indigenous cultures, languages, dialects and ethnicity. People have emotional and cultural sentiments towards the Himalayas, especially Hindus, Jains and Buddhists, who revere sacred Kailash Mansarovar. Ancient texts have written about the Himalayas as a symbol of divinity and spirituality. The *Vishnupurana* states that the country south of the Himalayas and north of the ocean is Bharat, thus signifying the Himalayas as a frontier in the north.

The definition or identification of the Himalayas as a buffer between India and Czarist Russia and China is a new construct. It was a British construct to safeguard imperial interests in the Indian subcontinent from the Russian or Chinese Empire. The Himalayan states such as Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Sikkim and Tehri-Garhwal had internal autonomy but their external relations were directed by British interests through their forward policy. The territories of the Himalayan states were restrained till the mountains and the British claimed hills and plains through treaty arrangements. Through these, the defence of the countries was made complementary with British India, such as the Treaty of Sugauli which Nepal signed in 1815 which defined the borders of the signatories and

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prohibited Nepal from employing any American or European in the Durbar without British consent. Another treaty signed in 1923 stated that in case of any threat from the northern neighbour, Nepal would inform British India. Similar treaties were signed with Bhutan, Sikkim and Afghanistan to safeguard any threats emerging from the Himalayas to the security of India.

The relations thus evolved were influenced by geo-strategy and geopolitics and this modern political construct has been statist in nature. The emphasis on defining the Himalayas as the spiritual and cultural transit route or trade route between India and Central Asia or Tibet had shifted to emphasis on its political entity.

The Cultural Context

Nepal, located between India and China, has cultural and civilisational influences from both the neighbours. It was influenced by the cultural connectedness and in turn acted as a vehicle for cultural interactions between the two. It has been a melting pot where Indic, Tibetan and indigeneous local cultures met and flourished. The cultural boundaries were fluid by the movement of people across the borders and traders for commercial interests. Buddhism further brought cultural interconnectedness and linked the three areas.

Buddhism spread in Nepal during the rule of the Licchavis from 536 BC to 877 AD. Originally from Vaishali, the Licchavis had a strong republican state during the time of the Buddha in the 6th century BC. Following the invasion of the Kushans, one branch of the Licchavis went to Nepal as Shakyas and Koliyas in the 6th century BC. They propagated and popularised Buddhism and gave it state patronage. Buddha as Boddhisatva in the form of Lokeshwara and Avalokiteshwara was developed during this period.¹ The Mauryans also had close links with Nepal. It is said that King Ashoka's daughter had married a nobleman in Nepal. In 249 BC, the Rummendei pillar was erected in Lumbini by Ashoka indicating his visit.² It is considered as the first epigraphic evidence relating to the life and history of the Buddha. He had sent Dhamma missions to Nepal that

led to the spread of Theravada Buddhism.³ It was, however, during the rule of the Kushans that Mahayana Buddhism spread in Nepal.

Nepal's links with Tibet through Buddhism began during the time of Srongstan Gampo in the 7th century AD. He had married a Nepalese princess named Bhrikuti and a Chinese princess named Wenchen. Both his wives had faith in Buddhism and it had influenced the King to give patronage to it. Nepalese scholars credit Princess Bhrikuti for the spread of Mahayana Vajrayana Buddhism who had taken along with her images of Akshabhya, Maitreya, Tara and Avalokitesvara to Tibet⁴.

Tibetan Buddhism has a strong influence in the northern regions of Nepal. People with the same ethnicity and culture are found on both sides of the borders. Tamangs, Magars, Sherpas, Thakalis and Gurungs are some of the ethnic groups. It is said that during King Gampo's time, people were encouraged to settle in the adjoining areas of Nepal in order to make the border secure—such as Tamangs, part of the King's cavalry, who had settled in the border areas. Thakalis had settled mainly in the Mustang region of Nepal, and Gurungs in the Manang region bordering Tibet.

In the southern border of Nepal bordering India, Hinduism is the predominant religion. The cultural fluidities exist till date. There are matrimonial alliances and shared cultures between the communities living across the borders. In the valleys of the country, Hinduism and Buddhism have flourished. In fact, there is a syncretic relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism and no sharp lines exist between them. Nepal is at a transition zone between India and Tibet where one finds both the religions existing in harmony apart from indigenous and other religions.

Nepal emerged as a meeting zone for scholars from India and Tibet. Indian scholars travelling to Tibet stayed and interacted with the Nepalese monks who prepared them for the Tibetan way of life. Shantarkshita, Kamalasila, Buddhasree, Ratnakirti, Kanakashree, and Vairochana were some monks who stayed in Nepal before going to Tibet. The Tibetans also learnt Sanskrit in Nepal and acclimatised themselves before travelling to

India for advanced learning. Brog mi, Marpo-Do-Pa, Rwa-Lotsa-ba rdo rje, and Milarapa from Tibet were a few scholars who visited Nepal in order to learn Sanskrit before visiting India in pursuit of knowledge and philosophy. Nepal served as an interactive zone for scholars from the North and South. As late as 1822, a Japanese monk, Ekai Kawaguchi, stayed for three months to learn Tibetan ways of life with the headman of Marpha village in Mustang.

The cultural fluidity was eroded with diminishing state patronage and changing socio-political conditions in India and Nepal. From the 6th century AD, Buddhism had started losing social and political patronage in India. There were various reasons for it. The rise of 18 sects within Buddhism brought in divisions. People were sceptical of giving patronage to the monks who had started compromising on Buddha's teachings and their ascetic way of life. Simultaneously, there was a revival of Hinduism which gave a setback to Buddhism. In the 7th century AD, Shankaracharya revived Hinduism by adopting many doctrines of Buddhism. Buddhism further lost state patronage from the Islamic rulers and the British had commercial interests rather than cultural.

The political changes within Nepal had decreased state patronage to Buddhism. Prithvi Narayan Shah, ruler of the Gorkha kingdom, had conquered other kingdoms and unified Nepal by 1769. In 1854, Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana declared *Muluki Ain* (legal code of conduct), which gave emphasis to staunch Hinduism and banned conversion to Buddhism. Often, the Nepalese army was engaged in armed conflicts with British India and Tibet for expanding its territory and protecting its trans-Himalayan political and commercial interests. For example, in their pursuit to expand their territories in the east, west and south, the Gorkha forces had expanded all the way to the Mechi river in the east, the Sutlej in the west and the Terai in the south. In this military adventurism, Nepali forces clashed with the British in 1814-15. These conflicts were for gaining new territories and also Himalayan passes for trade and commercial purposes. The Nepalese interests clashed with the British and Tibet. Henceforth, the academic writings on India, Nepal or Tibet were more on war, treaties or British

missions to Nepal, with emphasis on geo-strategic and geo-political considerations. The socio-cultural linkages did not form part of the narratives in this statist discourse.

Geo-strategy Overshadows Cultural Links

The emergence of British power in the region influenced India's relations with the Himalayan countries. For example, the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16 led to the signing of the Treaty at Sugauli in 1815 which was ratified the next year. The Treaty restrained movement of Nepal to its east, west and south. The Treaty also constrained Nepal from expanding its territories and if any conflict arose with Sikkim, then it had to be resolved through British intervention. Nepal's borders were defined and confined to the hills, and the plains were taken over by the British. The present boundaries of Nepal are a construct of the Treaty of Sugauli.

Nepal's borders in the north were defined through the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed on 24 March 1856. Nepal had to relinquish its rights over the northern passes used for commercial purposes—such as Kuti, Kerong, Jhangagadhi, Taklidakhar, Dhaking pass and Khasa—and fixed its border till Tatopani. These treaties confined Nepal to the mountains and it emerged as a buffer between its northern and southern neighbours. The identification of the Himalayas and Tibet as a buffer between British India and Czarist Russia and China is also a British construct. Highlighting British India's interests, Lord Curzon had said, 'It would be madness for us to cross the Himalayas and occupy it. But it is important that no one else should seize it, and that it should be turned into a sort of Buffer between the Indian and Russian empires....Tibet itself and not Nepal must be the buffer state that we endeavour to create'.⁵

The change in the narrative on India's relations with Nepal is evident from the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed in 1923. Through this Treaty, Nepal was bound to inform the British if any incident of friction or misunderstanding took place with its northern state. This took into consideration the strategic interests of the British emerging from China. The Treaty also restrained the signatories from using their territories against the interests

of the other. A look at Nepal's Treaty with Tibet signed on 5 October 1792 establishes the fact that China also did not want any disturbance in the Himalayas. As per the Treaty, the Chinese Ambassador was responsible for mediating and resolving disputes arising between Nepal and Tibet. Another provision stressed that China would help Nepal in case of attack by any foreign power. Through these treaty arrangements with British India and China, Nepal emerged as a neutral zone.

Britain and China did not want any political disturbances in the Himalayan, Trans-Himalayan region and wanted it to be a neutral zone or a buffer between them. Henceforth, the narratives on Nepal or the Himalayas overtly emphasised conflict or managing conflict. Since Nepal was treaty bound with both its neighbours in the north and south, and committed to not engaging in territorial expansion and armed conflicts, the narratives on Nepal described it as landlocked rather than landlinked with its neighbours, with an over-emphasis on geo-strategic and geo-political interests.

Geo-politics in the Himalayas

The year 1950 emerged as an important milestone in the contemporary political history of Nepal. Chinese forces had entered Tibet and it had a strong impact on India and Nepal. Tibet, which was considered as a buffer by the British, did not remain so. India was concerned by the infringement of its security considerations from its north. Over the years, India had identified the Himalayas as a frontier and its strategic line reached there, which lay breached by the Chinese involvement in Tibet. Located within the cold war context, ideological differences with communist China was another concern for India. India's preferred policy choice was to keep the neighbourhood free from the interference and involvement of extra-regional powers. Nepal was equally concerned with the southward expansion of China that brought it closer to its border. As a result, India and Nepal entered into certain agreements to consolidate their strategic interest, such as the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed in 1950, continuation of Gorkha recruitment in the Indian army, and reorganisation and modernisation of the Royal Nepal Army. India had trained the Royal

Nepal Army and had sent military missions to Nepal in the year 1952, 1959 and 1962. All the joint communique and press releases described the period from 1950 to 1955 as one of special relationship which highlighted complimentary geo-strategic and geo-political concerns. The consideration for an open border and the free movement of people across the border, providing national treatment to the citizens of Nepal in India and vice versa arose from these geo-strategic concerns to take care of the socio-economic development of Nepal and the Nepalese against the advancement of China and its ideology.

The impact of domestic politics on foreign policy is a much discussed issue amongst the realists in international relations. The linkage theorists have further linked domestic politics with external politics. In Nepal, King Tribhuvan was succeeded by King Mahendra in 1955. He brought a change in foreign policy by emphasising non-alignment instead of a special relationship with India and began diplomatic relations with China in 1955. He asserted his power and dismissed the first democratically elected government of Prime Minister B.P. Koirala in 1960. During his visit to China the next year, King Mahendra signed certain agreements such as the resolution of the boundary issue on Mount Everest or the construction of a highway connecting Kathmandu with Kodari in Tibet. This was the first highway agreement between Nepal and China, much to India's dislike. Nepal's attempt to ignore the geographical proximity with India and the open border was due to the rise in Nepali nationalism which had taken an anti-India turn due to the presence of anti-panchayat, pro-democracy Nepali congressmen in India. Nepal perceived it as Indian patronage to the anti-establishment forces. The political relations were strained during the 30 years of Panchayat rule. King Birendra, son and successor of Mahendra, had continued with the policies of his father by trying to balance both the neighbours of Nepal. He came to power in 1970 and emphasised the policy of non-alignment and equidistance with neighbours. He had proposed a novel concept in his foreign policy through declaring Nepal as a Zone of Peace in 1975. The proposal ignored the realities of open border between India and Nepal, unrestricted movement of population across the border,

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facility for the Nepalese to access economic activities in India—which was withdrawn for the Indians in Nepal by King Mahendra. China and Pakistan were the first ones to give acceptance to the Zone of Peace proposal in an attempt to weaken Nepal's close relations with India. Rulers in Nepal used the strained relations of their neighbours to their advantage by proposing policy pronouncements and proposals which balanced one against another.

There was a shift in Nepal's relations with India due to two developments: normalisation of relations between India and China from 1985, and restoration of multi-party democracy in Nepal in 1990. Thirty years of panchayat rule ended through people's agitation which brought in democracy and constitutional monarchy. The democratic governments in Nepal tried to forge close relations with India. The new constitution of Nepal (1990) dropped the concept of the Zone of Peace and instead emphasised close and friendly relations with India.

China had good relations with the Monarchy during the panchayat period and it continued to remain close to the palace even after the status had changed to constitutional monarchy. In fact, in 2005 when King Gyanendra had imposed an emergency and took direct power in his hand, China's reaction was rather pragmatic—that it was an 'internal affair of Nepal'⁶, unlike India's reaction which called it 'a setback to democracy'. The King made an attempt to appease China by closing down the Dalai Lama's office in Kathmandu in 2005 and was in negotiations to open its consulate in Biratnagar.

Despite ideological contradictions between communism and monarchy, China gave credence to the monarchy as a political power in Nepal. Probably its pragmatism stems from the issue of Tibet and Tibetans. China is not comfortable with Nepal's territory being used by any outside supporter to the Tibetan's cause. The Chinese were concerned following pro-Tibetan demonstrations in Nepal during the Olympics in Beijing. China's security concerns were heightened by the presence of Western media in Nepal highlighting the human rights violations of Tibetans.

During the Maoist movement, the presence of Western powers like the US, UK and other European countries had increased in Nepal, enhancing China's security concerns. China tried to increase its presence in Nepal through military cooperation, economic aid and cultural connect.

China–Nepal relations

China is using various strategies to forge closer links with Nepal. It is using Buddhism as a soft power to create linkages with Nepal. In recent times, China is making an attempt to get involved in developing Lumbini as a major Buddhist pilgrimage centre, upgrading infrastructure and constructing an international airport there. In November 2010, Nepal had given permission to Beijing Zhongtai Jinghu Investment company to construct a 100-metre statue of Buddha in Lumbini.⁷ The Nepal government led by then Prime Minister Prachanda also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese-backed Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (APEC) to jointly develop and operate Lumbini international airport for which it had planned to raise \$3 billion. However, when the Nepalese questioned the government for giving projects to China without any formal agreement, the response from Prime Minister Prachanda was that India, Nepal and China should forge a strategic partnership to develop Lumbini.⁸ The project was later taken away from APEC.

Since the year 2000, China has set up nearly 35 China study centres (CSC) in Nepal and proposes to open one in every district of the country. Presently, nearly 10 CSCs have been set up close to the border with India, such as Butwal, Biratnagar, Morang, Sunsari, Nepalganj or Lumbini.⁹ In 2007, the Confucius Institute was set up in Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu to teach Chinese language and culture. Cultural agreements have been signed to promote exchange of students and scholars. There is a marked increase in the number of Chinese tourists visiting Nepal. In fact, there is a concerted effort by both the governments to emphasise tourism. China has increased air connectivity with three operators flying daily to Nepal.¹⁰

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Nepal, on the other hand, has waived visa fees for Chinese nationals and made the yuan convertible for tourists and businessmen. There is a host of other related industries that have come up in Nepal catering to Chinese tourists, such as restaurants, tutorials and language schools.

The joint communiques or press statements signed between Nepal and China have begun to highlight historical linkages and geographical connectivity through the Himalayas. To create greater connectivity with Nepal, China has signed agreements with Nepal on road and rail connectivity. Till now, the Kathmandu-Kodari road was the main route between the two countries. This road was damaged and blocked after the earthquake in 2013. Another route from Kerong pass in Rasuagarhi was opened in December 2014. The future plan is to bring the Qinghail-Tibet railway line till Kerong.¹¹

Chinese investments have entered into areas which were hitherto not their familiar terrain, such as hydropower projects. The Three Gorges Corp of China constructing the 750 MW West Seti hydropower project has 75 per cent equity and the remainder is shared by the Nepal Electricity Authority. The Export Import Bank of China will provide \$1.8 billion for 10 years.¹²

India's Approach towards Nepal

Under these circumstances, India made an attempt to redefine its relations with Nepal. As stated earlier, India had supported Nepal's policy of the twin pillars of democracy in Nepal, that is multi-party democracy and constitutional monarchy. With the changes in the domestic politics of Nepal after the removal of monarchy, India's emphasis has been on respecting people's choice in Nepal. However, for 17 years, no Indian Prime Minister visited Nepal. Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an attempt to redefine India's relations with the Himalayan states by visiting Bhutan and later Nepal as his maiden foreign visits. Modi visited Nepal in August 2014 and later attended the SAARC Summit in November the same year. The warm welcome and reception given by the government

and people of Nepal was unprecedented. He was seen as a strong leader who could deliver and bring positive changes in relations between the two countries rather than agencies and bureaucracy which had become the dominant voice in determining relations.

Modi's style of emphasising socio-cultural relations was new and unprecedented. His visit to the Pashupatinath temple and the magnitude of the prayer has got legendary fame. He donated 2,500 kg of sandalwood to the temple priest. No Indian Prime Minister had exhibited his religious preferences in such a manner.

The socio-cultural ties that exist amongst the people have had little impact on the political leadership of the two countries. Cultural affinity has not led to harmony in foreign policy interests, goals or security interests. Over the years, relations have evolved from special relationship to friendly ties and cordial relations, reflecting the political environment. Every sovereign country works to the best of its national interest defined by time, context and the actor. In fact, in the past, Indian leadership and bureaucracy have tried to downplay the cultural similarities because it gives an image of Indian cultural dominance in the region. They have interacted with the other country based on national interests rather than religious and cultural similarities. Indian and Nepalese leaders had worked closely for the Indian national movement or Nepal's movement for democracy against the Ranas. But the post-independence leaders and bureaucrats emphasise relations based on mutual trust rather than the emotional baggage of the past. The same is true of the political leaders and bureaucrats in Nepal who want to maintain relations with India emphasising mutual benefit. However, realising the Chinese emphasis on utilising culture as a soft power approach in Nepal, India has stepped up its cultural diplomacy; it cannot take existing socio-cultural realities as the given truth but has to nurture them.

In 2006, the Public Diplomacy Division was set up in the Ministry of External Affairs to promote soft power in its foreign policy. The Indian

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Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) has set up academic chairs in Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University in Kathmandu and one in Pokhara. It has also set up a cultural centre in Kathmandu. However, till date only one professor was made the Chair in Tribhuvan University.

Religious tourism is another area in which the government has laid emphasis. Nepal has been an important tourist destination for Indians. Geographical connectivity, cultural ties, no language barrier, acceptance of Indian currency, no requirement of visa and passport were some of the reasons for Nepal to evolve as a preferred foreign destination for Indians. Even during the peak of the Maoist insurgency, religious tourism to Pashupatinath and Janakpur Dham flourished as there was no advisory by the Indian government, unlike the American or other European governments which had cautioned their citizens travelling to Nepal. In tune with developing socio-cultural linkages, India signed agreements to establish sister city relationships between Kathmandu-Benares, Janakpur-Ayodhya and Lumbini-Sarnath.¹³ The number of tourists to Nepal can increase if infrastructure linkages through road and railways are improved. India has tried to emphasise infrastructure development through Highway Information and Technology connectivity. The Motor Vehicles Agreement was signed during Modi's visit to Nepal. Direct bus services have begun from Kathmandu to Delhi and Varanasi, and from Pokhara and Mahendranagar to Delhi. During his visit to attend the SAARC summit held in Kathmandu in November 2014, Modi had laid emphasis on infrastructural linkages and said, 'Infrastructure is my greatest priority in India. And, I also want to set up a Special Purpose Facility in India to finance infrastructure projects in our region that enhances our connectivity and trade. We speak of ease of doing business in India. Let's extend this to our region. I promise to ensure that our facilities at the border will speed up, not slow down, trade'.¹⁴

Sushil Koirala, then Prime Minister of Nepal, had also emphasised on developing infrastructural linkages with its neighbouring countries.

He said, ‘Despite geographical proximity, our region is one of the least integrated. Lack of connectivity has kept us far apart... We need to build roads, railways, pipelines, ports and waterways to facilitate greater movement of goods, services, capital and people’.¹⁵ The discourse in India, Nepal and China is on infrastructural linkages. Nepalese political leadership has been emphasising land-links with its neighbours for enhanced trade purposes. It also lessens its over-dependence on India for transit. The neighbours view developing these geographic linkages for strategic purposes. China’s rail and road connectivity will bring it in Nepal from where there are roads leading to India. The open border lays open India’s heartland to them.

To develop Nepal’s economy, two areas are generally emphasised: tourism and water resources. India’s involvement began with the Sharada canal in 1927. However, hydropower cooperation has not been a success story between the two countries. Agreements like Pancheshwar Multipurpose Power Project were signed, but not implemented due to various reasons. Modi’s visit gave a boost to the project by signing a memorandum of understanding amending the Terms of Reference on the project and declared Pancheshwor Authority Regulations to take forward the work on Pancheshwor Development Authority. Two other agreements were signed on Arun3 and Upper Karnali.

The euphoria in the relationship was short-lived. One of the major reasons was domestic politics within Nepal following the promulgation of the new Constitution and its impact on relations with India. India, during Modi’s visit to Nepal, had made its stand clear that the Constitution should be written by taking all the stakeholders together with consensus. ‘Modi said the new Constitution should reflect the aspirations of Madhesis (those from the plains), Pahadis (from the hills) and the Maoists and other people in the country. ‘Delay in writing the Constitution will not be in Nepal’s interest,’ he said.’¹⁶ Foreign Secretary Jaishankar Prasad visited Kathmandu before the promulgation of the Constitution. The Madhesis

and Janjaties had started an agitation before the promulgation as they felt that their demands were not fulfilled. The Madhesis particularly were against the restructuring of the state under the new Constitution, which has carved out seven new provinces. Madhes was divided into two provinces, but three districts in the east and two in the west were not included. This was against their agreed position of 'One Madhes, Two Prades'. The citizenship rights for the Madhesis and inclusion in the state structures were other issues of contention.¹⁷

The protests became stronger from black flag demonstrations and street protests to blockade of the trade and transit points. Protestors led by the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF) took advantage of their geographical location and did not allow the movement of goods and vehicles leading to the short supply of fuel, food supplies and medicines. It was generally believed in Nepal that India had supported the Madhesi strategy to block the border in order to pressurise Nepal for a political outcome. The Indian government had refuted the charges of the blockade and requested Nepal to take care of political instability. They fear that it will have a spill-over effect into India.

The dilemma for India always is: where does friendly advice end and interference begin. When Modi made the statement on Constitution through Consensus, it was seen as interference. When Modi sent a foreign secretary to Nepal, it was again seen as interference in Nepal's domestic affairs. There are of course no official statements from Nepal but the media projects these sentiments and creates public opinion. As a result, it has propped up nationalism in Nepal which is critical towards India. This is not new in India-Nepal relations. There have been incidents in the past when nationalist sentiments flared up to counter perceived Indian interference. Mainstream political parties like the Congress and CPN(UML) looked towards India for support to democracy vis-a-vis monarchy. Monarchists criticised India for interference. Every political actor in Nepal has links with groups in India. And their reactions are based on their own interests.

Thus, there are no permanent constituencies in Nepal, be it Congress or Madhes.

The Nepal government showed its readiness to amend the Constitution and set up a committee to discuss the contentious issues with the Madhesi and other protesting groups. On the other hand, the Nepal government tried to elevate the issue to the level of India-Nepal relations and brought in China to the equation who had earlier welcomed the new Constitution of Nepal. In order to meet the fuel deficit, the Nepal Oil Corporation and China United Fuel Corporation signed a Memorandum of Understanding to import petrol, diesel and petroleum products. China had agreed to supply 1,000 metric tonnes of fuel on grant basis, but was unable to fulfill it due to inefficient infrastructure and adverse weather conditions.

The geo-strategic paradigm still continues to influence India's relations with Nepal. China in the north is an important variable though not the only variable influencing India-Nepal relations. This discussion shows the changes in emphasis in the trans-Himalayan region. The region's geographical interconnectedness and identity of being instrumental in the transit of cultures, trade or movement of people has given way to its political identity and boundaries cutting across these linkages. The cultural and ecological boundaries transcend political boundaries. The cultural linkages exist best at the people's level and continue to exist despite political boundaries and identities.

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Bio data

Sangeeta Thapliyal is Professor and Chairperson of the Centre for Inner Asian Studies in the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her area of specialisation is India's strategic interest in South Asia with a special emphasis on the Himalayas and Trans-Himalayas, Nepal, Bhutan, Regional Cooperation in South Asia and issues related to Water Security. She is also in the editorial advisory committee of the *Journal of International Affairs*, published by MIRD, Tribhuvan University. Presently she is working on the B.P. Koirala funded project on '*Political Participation of Nepalese in the Indian National Movement*' and the JNU supported project on '*Trans-Himalayan Socio-cultural and Economic Linkages between India, Nepal and Tibet*'.



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