

Modi's Nepal visit shouldn't take the beaten track

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Saturday, 02 August 2014 | [Anshuman Behera](#) | in [Oped](#)

This visit must not be hyped up as 'the most important' visit by an Indian PM ever to Nepal from both sides. The age-old trust deficit is not going to be wiped out by just one visit. India needs to deliver

Earlier this month, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj paid a three-day visit to Nepal. According to media reports, Swaraj's visit has created a positive atmosphere in the run-up to Modi's visit. During her visit, both countries discussed a number of issues. The most important outcome of the visit was the reactivation of the Joint Commission (JC) after 23 years. It is important to mention that reactivation of the JC was highlighted during the visit of Madhav Prasad Ghimire, Minister for Foreign and Home Affairs of Nepal, to India during January 14-16, 2014.

Prime Minister Modi's visit is drawing the attention of analysts in both India and Nepali media as an important one and it is expected to re-energise India-Nepal relationship. Through this visit, the Government of India would hope to convey to the people of Nepal the importance and primacy that India gives to Nepal.

While there is a belief that the visit would take the India-Nepal in a new and positive direction, skepticism in this regard refuses to die. Though positive outcomes are highly expected, there remain a number of doubts. Will Modi's visit change the age-old complex relationships between the two countries? Will it be able to satisfy the multiple power structures in Nepal? Will it be able to change (the Nepali perception that) the way Indian bureaucracy and intelligence agencies meddle in the internal affairs of Nepal?

Re-narrating the narratives

India-Nepal relationship has been a hostage of a number of established narratives. More often than not, most of these narratives are mere perceptions. One of these perceived narratives, which are doing the rounds, is the lack of high-level engagements between India and Nepal for a long time given the fact that the last visit of an Indian PM was 17 years ago. If visits of the PMs to a particular country are understood to be the only high-level visits then the narrative sound logical. But in reality, it is otherwise. India and Nepal have been engaged with a number of bilateral visits at various ministerial levels after IK Gujaral's visit in 1997. So far as Indian PM's visit to Nepal is concerned, in the last 17 years, one must also look at the political instability in Nepal during these years. Almost a decade out of these 17 years was hijacked by a civil war in Nepal and the remaining years by political instability and lack of stable government there. In such a situation, the visit of any Indian PM could have contributed very little to the bilateral cooperation and relationship.

Another narrative that affects India-Nepal relationship adversely is the issue of 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. From Nepal's side, it is often perceived as an unfair and unequal one. The political and intellectual elites of Nepal use this treaty to whip up 'anti-India sentiments'. It is important to mention that it was Nepal who wanted this treaty to be signed as a defence against perceived security threats from China and to maintain special ties with India. In return, India will have Nepal as a buffer zone. The treaty has been benefitting the common Nepalese citizens and the political elites since then. India must not be negatively affected by "anti-India" sentiments fuelled by political establishments in Nepal. Anti-India sentiment, since the time of King Mahendra, has been the most important tool for the political forces to promote Nepali nationalism. It has been observed that the political forces in opposition are more prone to use anti-India card for political mileage. Most of this anti-India posturing in Nepal is

purely for domestic consumption, and rather than reacting to it, India must understand this dynamics and deal with it in an innovative manner.

The narrative regarding trust-deficit between India and Nepal is an important one. India is conveniently blamed to be meddling in the internal affairs of Nepal. It is widely believed in Nepal that India has been playing a vital role in encouraging the Madheshi movement in 2007 to weaken the influence of the Maoists in the Terai region. India has done little to alter this widely held perception. India's approach towards Nepal before and during the civil war has not kept this perception in view while structuring its policy. The "twin pillar policy" of India which advocated a cohabitation between constitutional monarchy and parliamentary form of government was not taken well by the any of the political forces in Nepal - monarchy, political parties and the Maoists. India failed to grasp the changing reality in Nepal ever since 1950s. It should have rightly committed itself to democracy in Nepal rather than hoping for a balance between two contradictory forces. The result of this policy was disastrous. Each of these forces suspected India to be favouring the other. Similar perception continues even today that India favours one party or group over the other. In this context, India must have made its stand clear as spelt out by Sushma Swaraj during her visit that "India has no favourites in Nepal". India as a country must invest in political stability in Nepal without favouring any party or group. As Nepal is multi-polarised at this juncture, India must keep away from making any attempt to satisfy each one of them. It must engage only with the legitimate government in Nepal for bilateral cooperation and focus on doable deliveries to alter public perception in Nepal about India as a country eternally conspiring to micromanage internal politics of Nepal.

Nepal, on the other hand, must realise genuine security interests of India. The porous and open boundary between India and Nepal is a hub of criminal activities. It is through this boundary that large amount of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) flow into India. The number of terrorists arrested from Indo-Nepal borders highlights the continued movement of terrorists in this area. Though on the last few occasions assistance from Nepal security forces was commendable, Nepal's effort in stopping illegal and criminal activities against India leaves much to be desired. Nepal must, thus, realise the difficulties of India in dealing with a country that virtually does not have a stable government for almost one decade. A country which is deeply divided internally is prone to develop a "foreign hand syndrome".

It is high time for Nepal to sort out its internal differences and come out with a Constitution. More importantly, Nepal must not behave like an over-dependent neighbour. It must talk to India like a business partner on many issues such as hydro-electricity projects, tourism, development projects, etc. The India government must reciprocate quickly as not doing so would push Nepal into the embrace of forces inimical to Indian interests (read China).

Modi's visit: Time to deliver

Modi is reportedly visiting Nepal with a huge contingent. He is expected to make some "generous offer". This visit must not be hyped up as 'the most important' visit by an Indian PM ever to Nepal from both sides. The age-old trust deficit is not going to be wiped out by just one visit. A number initiatives and measures must be taken by the Modi government to open the doors for lost opportunities and building mutual trust.

First of all, India must refrain from making tall promises. India is poor at fulfilling its promises and delivering its commitments on a timely basis. A number of collaborative projects between India and Nepal have not yet been executed. The Pancheswar Multipurpose Project as part of the Mahakali Treaty of 1996 remains unattended till today. A "generous gift" by the then External Affairs Minister of India, Pranab Mukharjee, to develop 250 Mega Watt Hydro Project in 2008 was also dumped by India citing it as "not feasible". Similarly, two more mega-projects, Saptakosi and Karnali-Chisapani have been on the drawing board for almost three decades. In order to avoid these pitfalls, Modi must promise to ensure timely completion of all these projects and promise only things which are doable.

Secondly, Modi's visit should take positive initiative to rewrite or update the 1950 treaty. As mentioned

before, this treaty is used as an alibi and an example of Indian high-handedness for whipping up anti-India sentiment. Though there have been demands from Nepal side to update the same, no political establishment in Nepal has made a sincere attempt to broach any constructive proposal in this regard. The same is true for India. By updating, rewriting, or even scrapping the treaty, India is not going to lose anything. The treaty is almost a dead wood and Nepal has violated the spirit of the treaty at will over the years. A new treaty drafted today with mutual consent keeping in mind the strategic interests of both the countries will have more legitimacy and credibility and serve India's interests better.

Finally, Modi visit must stray the beaten track. He should avoid basing India's policy towards Nepal on exaggerated fear of China. Given the inerasable natural, cultural and emotional links between the two countries, Nepal can ill afford to snap its relationship with India, despite periodic susceptibility of its people to anti-India propaganda by vested interests at the domestic level. India's policies towards Nepal should be pro-active and should be based on pragmatism taking into cognisance Nepal's needs, and its strategic importance for India.

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