India - China - Nepal Triangular Relationship

What is the issue?

- Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent visit to Nepal has helped focus on the changing dynamics between India, China and Nepal.
- One of the central themes in the new discourse is the alleged loss of Indian primacy over Nepal.

How has Nepal's geopolitics evolved?

- The story of Nepal's geopolitics is a complicated one.
- Lying between Tibet and the Gangetic plain, Nepal has close civilisational ties with both China and India.
- Its geopolitics, too, were shaped by both the neighbours.
- Balancing between Tibet and the Qing empire in the north and British Raj in the south was very much part of modern Nepal's political evolution.
- The weakening of the Qing and the rise of the Raj from the mid-19th century set the stage for southern dominance over Nepal.
- However, the People's Republic of China gained control of Tibet in 1950.
- So, Nepal's monarchy that was frightened by the communist threat turned to Jawaharlal Nehru for protection.
- Delhi and Kathmandu revived the 19th century security arrangements of the British Raj in a 1950 Treaty of Friendship.
- China's premier Zhou Enlai was quick to assure Kathmandu that there would be no export of communist revolution from Tibet to Nepal.
- The Sino-Indian conflict, meanwhile, opened up space for Kathmandu to weaken the treaty arrangements with India and re-balance the relationship.

How has India's influence over Nepal evolved?

- India's hegemony or primacy in Nepal is somewhat over-stated.
- It was limited in time and space and always constrained by Nepal's domestic politics.
- The deepening domestic divisions in Nepal caused disturbances to the geopolitical strategies.
- Consequently, Delhi has struggled since the middle of the 20th century to sustain the primacy in Nepal it had inherited from the British Raj.
- The emergence of a strong state north of the Himalayas, China, tested

India’s claim for an exclusive sphere of influence in Nepal.
- China’s dramatic rise in the 21st century makes it a far more compelling partner for Nepal.

What are the determining factors to this change?

- India’s failure was not in an over-reliance on geopolitics, but the neglect of geo-economics.
- On the one hand, India’s security establishment and the political classes operated as if Nepal was a protectorate of India.
- On the other, Delhi’s economic bureaucracy treated Nepal as a separate entity.
- Delhi’s emphasis on economic self-sufficiency made India to not attach any special value to the commercial interdependence with land-locked Nepal.
- Vested interests inevitably found space to take advantage of this wide gap in the economic policies of the two nations.
- Delhi also allowed the border infrastructure to weaken over the decades.
- India’s attempts to revive connectivity with Nepal in recent years have faced India’s traditional problems with project implementation.
- More importantly, there has been growing political resistance in Nepal to deeper economic relations with India.

How is China’s stance changing?

- The change in the regional balance and the communist dominance over Nepal’s domestic politics is changing the traditional nature of the triangular relationship.
- In the past, China sounded sensitive to India’s concerns in China’s engagement with Nepal.
- However, China is now the second most important power in the world and the foremost in Asia.
- With this, China perhaps is a lot less interested in what Delhi might think about China’s Nepal policy.
- Above all, China today is driving regional change with its expansive Belt and Road Initiative.

What are Nepal’s options now?

- On the face of it, Kathmandu has at least three possible options in crafting a new strategy for Nepal.
- One is to opt for neutrality and symmetry in its relations with India and China.
- This is not a new idea, and had been reflected in Kathmandu’s past debates

about “Nepal as a Zone of Peace”.

- Second, Nepal could decide that a special relationship with China is more valuable than the one with India.
- Third, it could continue a policy of dynamic balancing and make the best of the possibilities with both China and India.
- **Challenges** - If Nepal opts for symmetry, it would have to turn its open border with India into a closed one similar to its northern border with China.
- On the other hand, a strategic tilt towards China would make Nepal discard the special privileges it has in the relationship with India.
- E.g. the freedom for Nepali citizens to live and work in India
- Nepal’s sovereign choice would also involve an assessment of India’s counter measures to Nepal’s strong security partnership with China.
- The dynamic balancing option would involve modernisation of the India relationship and expansion of the China ties with sufficient regard to the concerns of both the powers.

What lies ahead for India?

- For India, it is time to stop being worried about China’s growing presence in Nepal or loss of its primacy in Nepal.
- The protectorate relationship that India inherited from the British Raj was never sustainable.
- Delhi’s claim as to be knowing what is good for Nepal certainly intimidates the Nepali elite.
- Instead, Delhi should let Nepalese decide what is good for them and align India’s own responses accordingly.
- The best India can offer now is a new deal with Nepal that can build on the natural geographic and cultural interdependence between the two nations.
- This time around, it must be based on sovereign equality and mutual benefit.
- It is up to Kathmandu in the end to accept, reject or negotiate on such an offer.

Source: Indian Express

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