

President Xi's Trip to Nepal Will Unlock New Strategic Opportunities

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Chinese President Xi Jinping's trip to Nepal will unlock new strategic opportunities for bilateral relations, as well as positively influence their ties with India by improving the prospects for trilateral cooperation.

At first glance, observers would be forgiven for thinking that this visit will heighten the competition between China and India over the landlocked country between them. Still, a review of the most relevant developments in Nepal this century greatly helps in understanding why this won't necessarily be the case.

Formerly a Hindu Kingdom until the monarchy's abolishment in 2008 just two years after the end of its decade-long civil war, Nepal was historically regarded as a "vassal" state of India for centuries until communists were democratically elected to office and peacefully succeeded in winning their revolution at the ballot box.

Thus began the country's irreversible movement towards strategic autonomy in domestic and foreign affairs, which has seen Nepal's attempt to maintain a careful balance between its two much larger neighbors. While China respected the choice of its partner, India fell into the trap of zero-sum thinking and became concerned by it.

Nepali-Indian relations reached their lowest point in fall 2015 when Nepal accused India of enacting a de-facto blockade against it as a form of pressure designed to compel the authorities to concede regional statehood to the plains-dwelling Madhesi people of the south that form a significant minority and have important socio-economic connections to India.



Nepalese military personnel remove debris in search of survivors after a fresh 7.3 earthquake struck, in Kathmandu, Nepal, May 12, 2015. /VCG Photo

Although India denied that it was blockading Nepal, especially with the intent of meddling in its internal political affairs to create a sub-state proxy entity along their shared border, many of the affected people blamed their southern neighbor for the hardships that they experienced as a result. It should also be noted that Nepal had been hit by a devastating earthquake earlier that year too from which it has yet to fully recover even to this day, so the shortage of food and fuel was especially catastrophic and perceived as the cruel punishment of an imperially minded country that panicked at the thought of losing its historic “vassal.”

The situation has tremendously changed since then, however, since Nepal prioritized the improvement of relations with China in the aftermath of that crisis to lessen its dependence on India.

That policy has been extremely successful so far, with Nepal recently signing an agreement with Huawei to develop its telecommunications infrastructure and even committing to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

About the latter, there’s also talk about a high-speed railway one day connecting the two countries to more closely embed the Nepali economy in the global one as a means of reliably ensuring its continued growth.

There are indeed some hyper-nationalist voices in India who regard these apolitical and purely economically driven developments as a so-called “threat” to their security. Still, unlike a little less than half a decade ago, the government isn’t overreacting and appears to have learned its lesson that pressuring Nepal to change its policies will only lead to disadvantageous outcomes for New Delhi.

Instead, the most mature approach to handling the changing dynamics in that country is to encourage these ongoing processes and find a way to make them multilaterally beneficial, which leads one to consider the prospects for trilateral cooperation.

Chinese-Nepali economic integration through BRI is unstoppable, so India should explore the opportunity to extend the proposed high-speed railway between those two all the way south to the nearby West Bengal port of Kolkata to more closely tie the three together in a system of complex economic interdependence.

This would prevent an outbreak of rivalry between the fellow BRICS & SCO members over their mutual neighbor by making India a stakeholder in Chinese-Nepali economic relations and, therefore, tangibly counteracting the fearmongering narrative that trade between the two is somehow a “threat.”



A truck goes past the Friendship Bridge that connects Nyalam County of southwest China’s Tibet Autonomous Region and Nepal’s Sindhupalchowk district, May 29, 2019. /Xinhua Photo

As such, President Xi’s upcoming visit to Nepal is expected to unlock unprecedented strategic opportunities in the region.

The expansion of bilateral economic ties can catalyze furthering multilateral ones with India.

The timing couldn’t be better either since China and India are both concerned about the long-term impact of the U.S.’ ongoing trade war, and they finally have the chance to use Nepal as a bridge for building a more trust-based relationship across this century.

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