

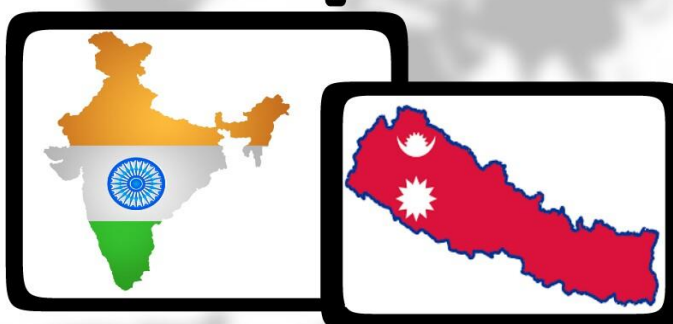


## Time to revisit the “special relationship” with Nepal

### Context:

- As the parliament in Nepal gets ready to approve a new map that **will include parts of Indian territory in Uttarakhand**, Delhi is bracing for yet another knock to a bilateral relationship.
- Many in the Indian strategic community believe that the train wreck was avoidable.
- But others view the collision between Delhi and Kathmandu as both **inevitable and imminent**.
- Even if the territorial issue had been finessed, something else would have triggered the breakdown.

## India Nepal relations



### Bigger fissures in relation:

- A closer look suggests that the territorial dispute is merely a symptom of the structural changes.
- These structural changes are unfolding in the external and internal context of the bilateral relationship.
- The question, then, is not what Delhi could have done to prevent the current crisis.
- It should be about looking ahead to build **more sustainable ties** with Kathmandu.

### What are the factors India must consider and depart from?

- Any new framework for engaging Kathmandu must involve two important departures from the past in Delhi.
  - 1) First is coming to terms with **Nepal's natural politics of balance**.
  - 2) The other is the recognition that Delhi's much-vaunted “**special relationship**” with Kathmandu is part of the problem.

### What is the history of Nepal's geopolitics?

- The founder of the modern Nepali state, Prithvi Narayan Shah, described Nepal as a “**yam between two rocks**”.
- He was pointing to the essence of Nepal's geographic condition between the dominant power in the Gangetic plains on the one hand and **Tibet and the Qing empire on the other**.



- Contrary to the conventional wisdom in India, **China has long been part of Kathmandu's international relations.**
- As the East India Company gained ground at the turn of the 19th century, Nepal's rulers made continuous offers to Beijing to act as China's frontline against Calcutta's expansion into the Himalayas.
- Kathmandu also sought to build a coalition of Indian princes to counter the Company.
- Even after it lost the **first Anglo-Nepal war in 1816**, Kathmandu kept up a continuous play between Calcutta and Beijing.
- As the scales tilted in the Company's favour after the **First Opium War (1839-42)**, Nepal's rulers warmed up to Calcutta.
- When **the 1857 Mutiny** shook the Company, **Kathmandu backed it** and regained some of the territories it lost when the Raj replaced the Company.
- As the fortunes of the Raj rose, Kathmandu rulers enjoyed the benefits of being Calcutta's protectorate.
- **India inherited this framework** but has found it impossible to sustain.

### Why the Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950) lost its appeal?

- The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship gave the illusion of continuity in Nepal's protectorate relationship with the Raj and its successor, independent India.
- That illusion was continuously chipped away amid **the rise of mass politics in Nepal**, growing **Nepali nationalism**, and Kathmandu's acquisition of an **international personality.**
- The 1950 Treaty, which proclaims an **"everlasting friendship"** between the two nations, has become the **symbol of Indian hegemony in Nepal.**
- In a paradox, **its security value for India** has long been hollowed out.
- It is a **political millstone around India's neck** that Delhi is unwilling to shed for the fear of losing the "special relationship".
- Delhi has **been trapped into a perennial political play** among Kathmandu's different factions and responding to **Nepal's China card.**

### Weakening of "special relationship":

- Once the Chinese Communist Party consolidated its power in Tibet and **offered assurances to Nepal**, Kathmandu's **balancing impulses** were back in play.
- At the risk of oversimplification, Nepal's foreign policy since the 1950s has, in essence, been about **weakening the "special relationship" with India** and building more cooperation with China.

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- Kathmandu has used different labels to package its desire for greater room for manoeuvre between its two giant neighbours — **non-alignment, diversification, “zone of peace”, equidistance, and a Himalayan bridge between India and China.**
- The stronger China has become, the wider have Kathmandu’s options with India become.

### Way forward:

- It makes no sense for Delhi to hanker after a “special relationship” that a large section of Kathmandu does not want.
- If Delhi wants a normal and good neighbourly relationship with Kathmandu, it should put all major bilateral issues on the table for renegotiation.
- Such issues **should include the 1950 treaty**, national treatment to Nepali citizens in India, trade and transit arrangements, **the open border and visa-free travel.**
- Delhi should make it a priority to begin talks with Nepal on **revising, replacing, or simply discarding the 1950 treaty.**
- It should negotiate a new set of **mutually satisfactory arrangements.**
- India had conducted **a similar exercise with Bhutan** to replace the 1949 treaty during 2006-07.
- The issues and political context are certainly more complicated in the case of Nepal.
- It is better that Delhi bites the bullet and makes a fresh beginning with Kathmandu rather than let the relationship deteriorate.
- No bilateral relationship **between nations can be built on sentiment** — whether it is based on faith, ideology or inheritance.
- Only **those rooted in shared interests will endure.**
- Rather than object to Kathmandu’s China ties, **Delhi must focus on how to advance India’s relations with Nepal.**
- It should bet that the logic of Nepal’s economic geography, its pursuit of enlightened self-interest, and Kathmandu’s natural balancing politics, will continue to provide a strong framework for India’s future engagement with Nepal.

### Conclusion:

- Discarding the appearances of the “special relationship” might, in fact, make it easier for Delhi to construct a more durable and interest-based partnership with Kathmandu that is rooted in realism and has strong popular support on both sides.