

India-China tussle in South Asia and soft power

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In terms of Soft Power, India has an overwhelming edge even though China has tried to make inroads in various ways.



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When one looks at the India-China tussle in South Asia, it is tough to ignore the dimension of 'Soft Power'. There is no doubt whatsoever that China's economic clout and presence in the region have risen in recent decades. In terms of Soft Power, India has an overwhelming

edge even though China has tried to make inroads in various ways. Soft Power includes not just the cultural linkages, but India's emphasis on assistance in capacity building and the nature of its economic linkages – which despite political differences – is qualitatively different from that of Beijing.

India-Nepal ties

If one were to take the case of Nepal where once again the India-China rivalry is likely to be in focus after the swearing-in of the new PM KP Sharma Oli on July 15, 2024. Oli belongs to the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) and is considered to have pro-China leanings. In response to PM Modi's congratulatory message on X, the Nepal PM said: "Thank you, Prime Minister @narendramodi for your warm congratulations. I am committed to working closely with you to strengthen Nepal-India relations for our mutual benefit. Together, we can elevate our historic ties to new heights."

While India shares close economic and people-to-people linkages with Nepal, it is uncomfortable with several aspects of Nepal's ties with China. During Oli's previous tenure, there were tensions between India and Nepal after the imposition of an economic blockade in 2015, and Nepal's signing of the Trade and Transit agreement with China in 2016 (this gave Nepal access to China's ports for third-country trade). This agreement, signed after growing strains with India, has not been able to deliver any economic benefits (not a single shipment is supposed to have moved after signing of the deal). In 2020 tensions between both countries rose after the inauguration of an 80-kilometre road, for making the journey of Kailash Mansarovar pilgrims easier (Nepal objected strongly while accusing India of having encroached upon its territory).

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Here it would be pertinent to point out, that Nepal a signatory to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expressed its reservations regarding certain terms and conditions of Beijing – especially the rate of loans. Nepal had also objected to the inclusion of the Pokhara International Airport in the BRI. It would be pertinent to point out, that India has refused direct air flights to Pokhara International Airport, constructed with Chinese assistance, due to security considerations.

Importance of soft power and people-to-people ties in India-Nepal relations

In spite of the above issues, India-Nepal people-to-people links are strong. Indians accounted for 30% of the international tourist arrivals, via air, in Nepal in 2023 (there has also been a rise in entry of tourists via land borders). While Chinese tourists patronise shops

and hotels set up by Chinese nationals, this is not the case with Indian tourists (according to hoteliers, several of the businesses and hotels have thrived due to Indian tourists). Not to mention the large number of Nepalese working and studying in India (while there is a yearning amongst Nepalese youth to study in Western countries and Australia, India is a preferred destination for higher education due to cultural and historical commonalities between both countries). While the strong presence of Chinese businesses in Nepal is evident to tourists – especially in Kathmandu and Pokhara – there are interesting sites such as shops run by Chinese in Kathmandu selling Indian goods and Bollywood songs playing at restaurants run by Chinese in Thamel (Kathmandu’s tourist hub).

Conclusion:

While there are differences between India and its neighbours in South Asia, absolute convergence is not possible. It is important for New Delhi to build its strengths, especially Soft Power, while of course not losing sight of its longer-term goals. India should not have a zero-sum approach towards the relations of its neighbours with China, it is also important for India’s neighbours to be more pragmatic and focus on their economic growth and prosperity.

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