

India's Election and its Implication for Neighborhood Policy

Nepal Council of World Affairs hosted an interaction on "India's Election and its Implication for Neighborhood Policy" on June 12, 2024, at NCWA Hall, Lalitpur. The event featured former Minister and Ambassador Mr. Deep Kumar Upadhyaya as the speaker and security expert Mr. Geja Sharma Wagle as the commenter. The program was chaired by President of NCWA Mr. Hemanta Kharel. The participants included members of NCWA as well as distinguished persons from various fields.



Welcome and Introductory Remarks

Delivering his introductory remarks, President of NCWA Mr. Hemanta Kharel noted that the foreign policy adopted by the Indian government in relation to its ties with its neighbors got prominent coverage in the run-up to the Indian parliamentary elections for the 18th Lok Sabha which brought Narendra Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) back to power. Due to its "neighborhood first" policy, some of the policies related to Nepal could also change in the days ahead. In that context, Nepal should be careful enough not to adopt immature diplomacy. He mentioned that India's move of inviting leaders of neighboring countries, including Prime Minister Mr. Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', for the swearing-in ceremony of Mr. Modi highlighted the importance it attaches to the "neighborhood first" policy. He also pointed out that although the BJP/NDA got lesser number of seats than the last election, it received 36 percentage of the popular vote which is only 1 percent less than that of the previous election.

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He further stated that India's "neighborhood first" policy has gained prominence since 2014 as it aims to strengthen physical, digital and people-to-people relations, enhance connectivity, create conducive environment for investment and promote business and trade. It has extended this policy to include the countries in the Indian Ocean region, South East Asia, East Asia and West Asia too. India's "neighborhood first" policy intends to counter Chinese influence and position itself as the net security provider in the region.



Commenting that Nepal's relations with India are unique, he stated that India should address the issue of *Agnipath* scheme vis-à-vis Nepali citizens vying to join the Indian Army and also expressed concern that it is expanding its infrastructure, including roads, on the 'no-man's land' along the Nepal-India border keeping Nepal in the dark. He regretted that Mr. Modi and the BJP had not been able to accommodate Nepal in India's quest to play a preeminent role for the leadership of the Global South.

Views from the Speaker

Former minister and former ambassador to India Mr. Deep Kumar Upadhyaya remarked that the government should realize that one of the reasons for relations between Nepal and India being not that smooth was due to lack of diplomatic efforts from the Nepali side. However, he also stated that both the countries are responsible for dampening of the bilateral relations. Explaining that there are two lines in India in viewing Nepal, he stated that the bilateral relations have faced difficulties as the government has not been able to understand this reality. Giving the example of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) report, he pointed out that due to the differing perception between India's political leadership and Ministry of External Affairs in viewing Nepal, many of the decisions taken at the political level do not get implemented and some of them do not even get notice of the political leadership which our Ministry of Foreign Affairs has failed to understand so far.



He recalled that while dialogue between the two countries used to take place earlier even during the times of dispute, it is not the case anymore. He pointed out that when relations between Nepal and India suffer, it is more problematic for Nepal and its people rather than India. He claimed that Indian side keeps record of the statements and actions of the Nepali leaders regarding India, and therefore, high-level leaders like the prime minister, foreign minister and former prime ministers should be mindful of the diplomatic protocol while talking about bilateral matters. He opined that the Indian side would



not be able to say no to having a dialogue on the disputes related to the map and boundary if we strengthen the political and diplomatic relations with India because our relations are not limited only at the government level but are linked with people and culture. He suggested that sensitive issues such as the boundary matters should be handled in a mature manner and a solution should be sought through diplomatic dialogue bilaterally rather than involving any third party for the benefit of all.

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Views from the Commenter

Commenting on Mr. Upadhyaya's presentation, security expert Mr. Geja Sharma Wagle stated that the fact that there is a dispute between Nepal and India can be considered as a diplomatic failure on part of both the countries, and since Nepal has conducted its relations with India in a light manner, it has led to the deterioration in bilateral ties. He mentioned that the concept of "5 स" (सम्मान, शान्ति, संवाद, सहयोग र समृद्धि) put forward by Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi prioritizing the neighborhood suggests that India wants to become a reliable and responsible partner in the region to promote cooperation, stability and prosperity. He noted that as the relations between India and Pakistan have remained frosty, South Asian cooperation has been put on the back burner. He also pointed out that while the BJP expressed its commitment in its election manifesto to increase cooperation with countries of the Indo-Pacific region in the security and economic sectors, the United States has also linked cooperation with Nepal to its Indo-Pacific Strategy over the years. He observed that India has maintained consensus in its foreign policy since independence, and the BJP-led government seeks to prioritize its relations with Nepal and Bhutan for mutual benefit.



Question/Answer Session

Replying to queries from the participants, the speakers declared that Mr. Narendra Modi's election as prime minister of India for his third tenure after the victory of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the 18th Lok Sabha elections will not bring about much changes to India's policy of viewing Nepal.

Conclusion

With Mr. Narendra Modi's election as prime minister of India for a third term, there have been curiosity and concerns regarding what his policies toward Nepal would be like. Although the election results would have implications in India's domestic policies, it does not seem to have major impacts on its foreign policy and geopolitical dynamics. India's policy vis-à-vis Nepal may not change much as BJP continues to lead the government since the last decade. Therefore, continuity can be expected in its foreign policy with relation to Nepal. There are certain issues between Nepal and India which may find prominence in the days ahead. The advocates for restoration of Nepal as a Hindu state have been euphoric since BJP came to power a decade ago, and new issues might come to the fore with the installation of a coalition government in New Delhi in the changed context.

Mr. Modi was not in a position to ignore the bureaucracy during his first term while he remained entangled in domestic issues such as Article 370, Ram Temple, etc. during his second term. During this period, India expanded its cooperation with global powers while competing with China and other countries. The BJP had sole majority in the earlier tenure, and hence it had the final say in India's foreign policy. The current coalition consists of more than ten parties and although the BJP and Mr. Modi may not be the only deciding factors in India's foreign policy, he has already expressed his commitment to take his coalition partners into confidence to conduct his domestic and foreign policies.

