

The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2024

Revisiting the Yam and the Rocks

Nepal Between India and China

John Whelpton

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Back cover shows Mahesh Chandra Regmi in the audience at the inaugural lecture on 24 April, 2003. Photograph by Bikas Rauniar.

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Introduction

I would first like to thank Social Science Baha for the great honour of being invited to give this year's Mahesh Chandra Regmi Memorial Lecture, the first after the hiatus caused by the pandemic. At the same time, considering the reputation firstly of Regmi himself and also of the distinguished scholars who have given earlier lectures in this series. I have to admit some trepidation and can only hope that my own words today will not be too unworthy of them.

Everyone present will be aware of Mahesh Chandra Regmi's immense contribution to scholarship on Nepal, particularly in the field of economic history but also in the study of Gorkha's expansion in the years before 1814.¹ There is no need for me to go over his achievement in detail but I will just highlight how, in addition to his main research work, he performed an invaluable service for scholars with his Nepal Press Digest, a selection of extracts from the Nepali and English language newspapers published weekly from 1957 till 2001, which many of us relied on for many years as our main means of keeping track of events while observing from abroad. Even though the internet nowadays gives us instant access to the Nepali press from any part of the globe, I still miss the convenience of having a reliable and regular distillation of the main news points. When I first encountered the Digest, I imagined that Regmi made use of his assistants to do much of the work of compilation but I learnt on first meeting him in 1982 or 1983 that it was essentially

1 For a concise and objective account of Regmi's life and work see his obituary by Pratyoush Onta at <https://www.himalmag.com/comment/the-death-of-a-peoples-historian> (accessed 10/7/24).

a one-man show. It is a testimonial to his prodigious intellectual energy that he managed to do that on top of producing his many monographs.

I did not get to know Mahesh Chandra Regmi as well as some foreign researchers did but simply visited him in his office two or three times and last saw him a few months before his death when, wheelchair-bound, he attended the first of this lecture series in 2003. That slight acquaintance was, however, enough to observe a change in his personality over the last twenty years of his life. He had initially come across as rather dismissive of many other scholars and of concentration on anything other than land tenure and also as a little resentful that his own efforts had not been fully appreciated by his own countrymen. That last feature was perhaps partly a reaction to the resentment against private individuals or organisations tapping Western financial resources, an attitude still prevalent today and encapsulated in the phrase *dollar kheti*. Whatever the underlying causes of Regmi's original attitudes, he appeared very different in later years, telling me, for example, that he had begun thinking he had been wrong to disparage aspects of history other than his own original focus. Until Parkinson's disease began to take its toll, his intellectual powers remained and it was almost as if he grew in moral stature as his physical powers declined.

The Western scholar with whom Regmi was most closely linked was of course Leo Rose, whose *Nepal: Strategy for Survival* (1971) remains fundamental to discussion of the India-Nepal-China triangle, my own topic today.² Rose secured funding for Regmi's work in the 1960s until the Himalayan Border Countries Research Project, from which the money came, was closed down after the disclosure that it was itself funded by the US Defence Department. Like Regmi, Rose was someone whom I only met two or three times but on whose work I, like all Nepal scholars, have depended immensely. The two men were very different in personality, and the feature of Rose's

2 Also of continuing fundamental importance is *Democratic Innovations in Nepal*, the study of internal politics in post-1951 Nepal, which Rose co-authored with Bhuvan Lal Joshi.

character that made the strongest impression on me was his cheeky sense of humour. In appearance, what struck me most forcefully the first time we met was Rose's very South Asian appearance – an Indian friend and I sat for several minutes in the restaurant courtyard where we had arranged to meet him, convinced that the lone man sitting in the opposite corner must be an Indian. When I finally approached him, established his identity and apologised for our mistake, he told us how his complexion had made it easy for him to enter Pashupatinath temple wearing, as additional insurance, the *daura-sawal* which his Nepali companion had lent him. When I myself entered Pashupatinath, blundering into the main courtyard via a back entrance, my irredeemably *kuire* appearance meant I was swiftly put under citizens' arrest and frog-marched to the local police station.

Nepal: Strategy for Survival was the first scholarly book I read on Nepali history and, while it can be challenged on points of detail, the overall picture Rose painted of developments from unification till the 1960s is an accurate one. He explains how the country Prithvi Narayan Shah famously described as 'a yam between two rocks' preserved its independence by adroit manoeuvring between its two neighbours but also how relations with British India and then with independent India played an important role in Nepal's internal politics. He also showed how in geopolitical terms India was normally the more important factor, both because the economic links with the south were much greater than with the north and also because China's interest was in maintaining control on its own side of the Himalaya with no wish to assume responsibilities for what happened on the other. Today, I am going to say a little about the nature and the concerns of both India and China, to go briefly over the shifting pattern of Nepal's interaction with them and, finally, to ask if China's rising global importance and economic development in Tibet will fundamentally alter the old pattern as suggested in the title of an important recent study of Nepal-China relations, *All Roads Lead North* (Mulmi 2022).

Viewing the two rocks

As David Gellner rightly emphasised in his 2016 Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture, Nepal's similarity to and knowledge of India are much greater than its links to and understanding of China. So, I shall say rather more about the latter while still recapping some basic characteristics of the more familiar neighbour.

India, in contrast to both China and Nepal, is the product of what could be called external rather than internal imperialism: that is forced unification by a distant colonial power instead of by conquerors based in an area within the boundaries they created. The India that emerged as an independent nation in 1947 was, even more obviously than is the case with modern nations in general, the product of contingency, not of the primordial unity that the more fervent nationalists believe in. Immanuel Wallerstein, the world systems theorist, suggested that, if the French, rather than losing the Seven Years' War against Britain, had established lasting control of southern India, naming it Dravidia, and the East India Company, confined to the north had called its domain Hindustan, most people would have come to regard the division as a perfectly natural one.³ There are many other plausible counter-factual scenarios, such as Kanak Dixit's estimate that, with no colonisation of South Asia at all, 'in the 20th century the Subcontinent would probably have evolved as two-score or more nation-states' (Dixit 2013).

Amidst India's great cultural and linguistic diversity, the numerical predominance of speakers of Indo-Aryan languages (77%) and of Hindus (80%) stands out, but as elements of a core national identity, both language and religion are problematic. The Indian constitution, adopted in 1950, designated Hindi, the most widely spoken of the Indo-Aryan languages, as the country's official language with an associate role for English for 15 years. However, opposition, principally in Tamil Nadu and other southern states but also in Punjab, West Bengal and the north-east, has resulted in

3 Wallerstein 1991: 130, quoted in Krishna 2003.

the indefinite retention of the bilingual policy, with Hindi not even a compulsory subject in the education systems of several states, notably Tamil Nadu and Assam. In the religious sphere, the position of Hinduism as the religion of the majority has been offset by the commitment to the idea of a secular state, which is enshrined in the constitution but goes back to the period during the independence movement when Indian nationalists were hoping that the strongly Muslim areas in the north-west and north-east would join the Hindus in a state encompassing the whole of British India. The ruling party in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is intent on strengthening the role both of Hinduism and of Hindi, and clear majorities of Hindus agree that being Hindu (64 per cent) and speaking Hindi (59 per cent) are necessary in order to be 'truly Indian' (Pew Research 2021a; Biswas 2021). However, the party has not called explicitly for revision of the secular constitution and, in view of the strong feelings aroused, has had to proceed cautiously on the Hindi front.⁴

Across India's myriad religious and caste divides, the 2021 Pew survey revealed a general wish to maintain social barriers between groups, with large majorities of both Hindus and Muslims opposing interfaith marriages and just under two-thirds of all Indians considering it 'very important' to prevent inter-caste marriages (Pew Research 2021b). A similar survey in Nepal would probably yield similar results as regards marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits but show greater tolerance of inter-caste (or inter-ethnic) marriages generally, given the more flexible nature of Nepal's traditional caste hierarchy.⁵ However, in India's case, just as in Nepal's, strong

4 However, fear that, if they obtained a super-majority in parliament, they might seek to change the constitution might be one of the factors explaining their relatively poor performance in the 2024 election compared to 2019.

5 See Hitchcock (1979) for caste in Nepal and in particular the accommodation of intermarriage between *tagadhari* and *janajatis* and between Bahuns and Chhetris. Other important discussions of inter-caste marriage in Nepal are von Fürer-Haimendorf 1966, Caplan 1974, Levine 2006 and Biswakarma 2019. Even within India itself there are substantial regional variations in attitudes to inter-caste marriage, with, for example, 82 per cent of respondents in the central region saying it is very important to prevent it occurring for males but only 35 per cent in the South (Pew Research Center 2021b).

attachment to one's own sub-group can and does co-exist with a strong sense of identity with the modern nation state. When Lee Kwan Yew famously asserted that 'India...is not one nation but thirty-two different nations speaking 330 different dialects' (Allison et al: 54),⁶ he had a point but overlooked the way in which national identity is an historical process, changing over time. India, like Nepal and the USA, is, to use Frederick Douglas's useful phrase,⁷ a 'composite nation', and nation-building is a work in progress.

China's ethnic composition is in stark contrast to India's, since 90 per cent of the population are Han Chinese, who normally consider themselves and are viewed by others as a single ethnic group. The Han are not totally homogenous because different 'dialects' of Chinese differ from each other about as much as Italian from French and rather more than Hindi from Nepali. The divergence is, however, greater in everyday colloquial speech, since there is a standard written language which follows Mandarin/Putonghua in word order and choice of vocabulary, although the reading pronunciation traditionally differed from region to region. Linguistic differences are currently being reduced by the increasing use of Putonghua rather than the standard regional pronunciation in teaching children to read: this is general throughout most of the mainland and is also a trend in Hong Kong, where Cantonese has in the past been dominant in most areas of life.

As the medium of instruction example shows, homogeneity is partly the result of political action rather than simply of natural similarity. This process has continued since the establishment of a unified Han state at the end of the 3rd century BCE under Prithvi Narayan Shah's Chinese counterpart, First Emperor Qin Shi Huang, who standardised the writing system, weights and measures and

6 Earlier in the same interview, Lee said: 'India is not a real country. Instead, it is 32 separate nations that happen to be arrayed along the British rail line.'

7 Douglass, an ex-slave, who was the son of a plantation owner and a slave mother, was a prominent abolitionist before the American Civil War and afterwards a staunch advocate of racial equality and of immigration. His views are set out in many speeches, the best-known probably being the one delivered in Boston in 1867 against banning immigration from China.

coinage. From his time onwards, although there were frequent periods of disintegration, the idea that re-unification must follow was encapsulated in a well-known sentence from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the 14th-century historical novel that Mao Tse-Tung used to read under his desk when bored by the older Chinese classics on the school syllabus: 'Under heaven is a great tendency: after long-lasting division must come unity, after long-lasting unity must come division.' Since *tian xia* (under heaven) normally referred to the Chinese realm rather than areas beyond the margins of *zhong guo* (the Middle Kingdom), this can also be translated as 'The empire, long divided must unite, long united must divide'. Whatever the precise words chosen, this recurring cycle contrasts with the European pattern, where, once it was lost, the unity established under the Roman Empire was never fully re-established. As the best-known American historian of China put it, 'No political unifier after Charlemagne, no Bonaparte or Hitler, ever succeeded, partly because he was not expected to' (Fairbank 1986: 11).

Periodic disruption of the Chinese empire included conquest by foreign dynasties: the Mongols in the 13th-14th century failed to maintain control, whilst the Manchus, although long preserving a distinct ethnic identity, were essentially assimilated into Chinese culture, like the Normans in England. Continuity of language and of an elaborate administrative structure were thus maintained and the Chinese conception of themselves as both a civilisation and a political entity persisting through time was continuously reinforced. In contrast, foreign rulers in South Asia brought in new cultural elements which were less thoroughly assimilated.

Different in many ways, China and India are alike in a determination, evidently shared by a majority of their citizens, to maintain national unity and, despite their quite sincere denunciations of Western imperialism, to defend the borders established by Qing dynasty and British imperialism, respectively. For both countries, this stance includes maintaining claims to areas they do not actually control: India's official maps show both Aksai Chin, from which her forces were driven in 1962 and the section of Kashmir occupied by

Pakistan in 1947, whilst China insists that Taiwan, which the People's Republic of China has never governed,⁸ is a renegade province that must return to the motherland's embrace, despite the fact that a majority of its largely Han Chinese population clearly prefer to retain their de facto independence indefinitely.⁹

Outside what might be called India's 'quasi-ethnic' core (Hindu-majority areas speaking Indo-Aryan languages) there are groups that have shown separatist tendencies. The Dravidian National Movement, in theory representing the Telugu, Malayalam and Kanada as well as the Tamil community but in practice largely confined to Tamil Nadu, originally sought independence but, since the reorganisation of state boundaries on linguistic lines in the 1950s and the 1963 16th amendment to the Indian constitution banning secessionist parties from the electoral process, Tamil parties appear reconciled to remaining part of India and simply advocate for greater autonomy within the Indian Union. Demands for Khalistan, an independent Sikh state, led to an insurgency in Panjab in the 1980s but after this was suppressed by Indian security forces, Sikhs, like the Tamils, appear to have abandoned separatist ambitions whilst still strongly pursuing sectional aims.¹⁰ In contrast, ethnic insurgency remains a problem in the North-East as does the Maoist insurgency in a wide swathe of Indian territory down the eastern side of the country: the areas affected are mostly hill country occupied by non-Hindu, often Christian, groups.¹¹ The Indian state is strong enough

8 Taiwan was controlled by the Qing dynasty from 1683 till it was ceded to Japan in 1895. On Japan's defeat in 1945, the island was transferred to the Kuomintang-ruled Republic of China, which retained control there despite being driven from the mainland in 1949.

9 As discussed below, China also regards Arunachal Pradesh ('South Tibet') as rightfully part of China but the claim here is not so absolute and is regarded as negotiable.

10 Support for Khalistan is perhaps stronger in the Sikh diaspora, particularly in Canada.

11 Philippe Ramirez has suggested, with only slight exaggeration, that the combination of mountainous terrain and ethnic minorities makes insurgency almost inevitable. For the factors behind the Maoist insurgency which originated in the Western hills, see Nickson's prescient 1992 article.

to contain these threats, and in recent years has pushed insurgents back to their core areas, but is unable to eradicate them totally and concern over ongoing insurgencies as well as the possibility of others re-erupting was one reason for India facilitating the ‘mainstreaming’ of the Maoists in Nepal.

China, though its physical control of its territory is firmer than India’s, is also acutely sensitive over possible ethnic threats. In a similar way to the Khas expansion eastwards along the Himalayan foothills, the Han Chinese expanded southwards and westwards from an original home around the Yellow River. In the east of the country, although small minorities remain in certain pockets, the earlier population was partly eliminated but mainly assimilated: among evidence for this process is traces of a Tai-Kadai substratum in the Cantonese ‘dialect’ of Chinese spoken in Guangdong province and adjoining regions. To the West, however, the vast areas of Tibet, Xinjiang and Outer Mongolia, controlled by the Qing dynasty, retained considerable autonomy until the 1911 revolution after which Tibet became *de facto* independent and the other two regions attempted to break away. Outer Mongolia, with Soviet support, established itself as the People’s Republic of Mongolia, which China recognised as independent in 1946,¹² but Chinese authority was successfully reimposed in Xinjiang and Tibet. These two regions contain only a small proportion of China’s population but a much larger one of its total area, and unrest there, both real and anticipated, has remained a constant source of anxiety for the People’s Republic of China and an embarrassment to her internationally. It has been

12 The Kuomintang government, which retreated to Taiwan at the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, later rescinded that recognition but finally restored it in 2002 (Clark 2018). Many Chinese probably continue to feel that all of Mongolia should rightfully still be Chinese but accept that the situation on the ground cannot now be reversed. Within Inner Mongolia, which is technically an autonomous region of China, the Mongols themselves are now only 20 per cent of the population but there are occasional ethnic protests, including demonstrations in 2020 over a proposal to teach literature, history and politics in Putonghua rather than Mongolian. Since Communist rule ended in independent Mongolia, some have sought to define Mongolian identity in terms of hostility to China (Billé 2013).

argued that without the Dalai Lama's obtaining asylum in India after the suppression of the 1959 revolt, the border dispute between India and China would not have led to war in 1962 (Kemenade 2008: 221-22). More recently, the continuing inflow of Han Chinese settlers into Xinjiang and what is widely perceived as a policy of forced assimilation of the indigenous Uighur population has brought a never-ending stream of Western denunciations and Chinese rebuttals. It is difficult to reach an objective assessment of the feelings of ordinary Tibetans and Uighurs about all this because the Chinese government, in addition to cracking down, as does India, on overt separatist activity, also prohibits free information flows or any political organisation not under Communist Party control. Presumably amongst the great majority of Uighurs and Tibetans who have not joined protests some are content with their present situation, others want greater autonomy and yet others yearn in their hearts for complete independence but it would be a bold analyst who ventured to put figures on the categories. However, at least one Chinese scholar noted in December 2007 that that Chinese appeals to Tibetans to stop wearing furs and bird feathers had gone unheeded but that the same environmentalist appeal from the Dalai Lama was immediately complied with.¹³ It is also worth noting that in the only autonomous region where political parties opposed to the Beijing line have been permitted to operate, viz, Han-dominated Hong Kong, the last truly competitive election showed around 60 per cent support for the candidates demanding a Western-style liberal-democracy for the region.¹⁴

13 Hui Shishing, Director of South Asian Studies at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, quoted by Wilhelm van Kemenade (2008: 63). A Nepali friend found on a recent pilgrimage to Kailas that Tibetans contrasted their own situation with that of Nepal, telling him that, although Nepalis were poor, they were free and their culture was not oppressed.

14 Chris Keng, 'Hong Kong District Council election: Democrats take control of 17 out of 18 councils in landslide victory', *Hong Kong Free Press*, 25/11/19, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/11/25/hong-kong-district-council-election-democrats-take-control-17-18-councils-landslide-victory/> (accessed 27/7/24). The elections were held against the background of mas-

There is a conspicuous anomaly in China's policy towards its minorities. On the one hand, there are vigorous crackdowns on even the mildest independent ethnic assertiveness, including the arrest of hundreds of Uighur scholars with no known connection to Islamist or other extremist acts of violence.¹⁵ On the other hand, China's theoretical commitment to uphold the rights of its minorities is extremely liberal. Not only are there some 55 autonomous regions across the country, but the term used for such minorities, *minzu*, is the same one as employed for the Chinese people as a whole—*zhong hua minzu*. This is as if groups like the Tharu, the Limbu and the Newar were referred to in Nepali as *rastra* rather than *janajati*. The approach follows that adopted by the old Soviet Union and although, unlike the Soviet Union, China is not a federation vesting sovereignty in each constituent *minzu*, the terminology in itself could be interpreted as implying some right of self-determination. As was also the case in the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union, in China, self-determination, whether explicitly or implicitly recognised, is nullified by the Communist party's firm, centralised control. But the fear of ethnic-based demands escalating appears to be a real one and has led under Xi Jin Ping to an emphasis on *jiaorong* (blending) of minorities into mainstream Han culture, the approach favoured before 1949 by the Kuomintang government (Glasserman 2022). A number of Chinese intellectuals have been providing ideological justification for this approach, notably Xu Jilin, whose 2019 essay shows sympathy with Samuel Huntington's call for the re-assertion of America's core, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant identity (Huntington 2004).¹⁶ As will be discussed in more detail below, anxieties on this

sive protests against a bill providing for extradition of offenders from Hong Kong to mainland China.

15 The best-known example is Rahile Dawut, a leading researcher on traditional Uighur culture, who was arrested in 2017 and has been held incommunicado since then. She is believed to have lost her appeal last year against a sentence of life imprisonment on the charge of 'endangering state security'. <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/01/1202884185/in-china-a-uyghur-scholar-has-been-sentenced-to-life-in-prison> (accessed 23/7/24)

16 Leading Chinese anthropologist Ma Rong, who, like Xu, sees American

score partly explain China's apparent unhappiness with proposals for ethnically based federalism in Nepal.

The triangular relationship – from the earliest times to the Rana regime

Although there are worries about 'spillover' from Nepal affecting their own internal cohesion, the main concern of both India and China has always been geostrategic, focussed on possible military threats to their predominance on their own side of the Himalaya and, less often, advancing them beyond that barrier. Nepal was indeed in the past a direct military threat to Tibet, but has mainly been concerned with ensuring her own survival as an independent state and, at times, when the internal power struggle was particularly intense, seeking help from outside.

Before the emergence of Nepal as a unified state in the late 18th century, relations between the state or statelets of the Kathmandu Valley and the trans-Himalayan region were mostly confined to trade and cultural exchanges but in 649 CE, a Chinese envoy (王玄策, Wang Xuan-ce) was able to enlist military assistance both from Licchavi Nepal and from Tibet to avenge his ill-treatment at the hands of a North Indian ruler.¹⁷ That has remained the one instance to date of China applying armed force on the Indian plains. Force was, however, applied on the Kathmandu Valley from the south fairly frequently in the 12th to 14th centuries with raids by the Doyas from what is now the Maithili region and from the Muslim ruler of Bengal. In contrast, the most notable contacts with China were the arrival there of Arniko and his team of craftsmen and diplomatic

identity-politics as an example to be avoided, has argued that the term *zuqun* coined by Hong Kong and Taiwanese scholars as an equivalent to the English 'ethnic group' should be adopted instead of *minzu* to make it clear that China is only one nation (Ma 2017).

17 See Mulmi (2022: xv) for a recent, accessible account of Wang's mission. The most detailed discussion of relations between Nepal and China remains Manandhar 2004.

exchanges between the Rama family ruling Banepa and the Ming dynasty court.

Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquests took place just as the East India Company (EIC) was consolidating its control over the Gangetic plain and China's Qing dynasty was reaching the apogee of its power. The EIC, seeing the king's blockade of the Kathmandu Valley as a threat to their commercial interests, despatched the Kinloch Expedition in an abortive attempt to save Jay Prakash Malla. The episode boosted the new state's wariness of its southern neighbour but when Bahadur Shah's aggressive policy towards Tibet triggered a Chinese invasion, an appeal for assistance was made to the EIC. That put the British in an embarrassing situation because they were eager to develop trade with China and the upshot was the despatch of William Kirkpatrick to Kathmandu with the offer to act as a mediator.

In the event, the war was concluded before Kirkpatrick's arrival in 1793, with Nepal cowed but not comprehensively defeated as it had had the better of a final engagement near Nuwakot (Rose 1971: 63; Killigrew 1979; Michaels 2024). There has been endless controversy on whether the settlement amounted to acceptance of Chinese overlordship but it was, in fact, a purely nominal submission, rather akin to Prithvi Narayan Shah's acceptance of the title *bahadur shamsher jung* from what had become the largely powerless Mughal Emperor. The Chinese government at this time did not see themselves as one among a community of equal states but viewed their relationships as hierarchical with themselves in the higher position. In addition, the so-called tributary states could choose to stress their nominal subjugation when it suited them. The British in Kathmandu in the 19th century were somewhat irked by the elaborate show of deference with which the Emperor of China's letter was received after each quinquennial mission and, as late as 1902, Chandra Shamsher, in conversation with the British Resident, described the China-Nepal relationship as one of 'suzerainty'.¹⁸

18 Notes on an interview with Chandra Shamsher, 9/7/1902, Foreign Department Secret Proceedings-E, Sept. 1902, No.132, N.A.I, cited in Husain (1970: 273). There was at the time apprehension that Tibet might seek Russian

When Nepal clashed with the British in 1814-16, it sought to persuade the Chinese that the British were a threat to China as well as to Nepal. The emperor was unconvinced and had no interest in intervening again south of the Himalaya.¹⁹ At Nepal's request, he did write to the EIC asking them not to insist on having a Resident in Kathmandu but when the British offered to comply if the Chinese stationed a representative of their own there, he replied that that would not be necessary and the British duly maintained the Residency they had established a few months earlier. China showed the same lack of interest when Nepal asked for help on the eve of the First Anglo-Sikh War in 1845 (Whelpton 1991: 156).

In addition to these largely fruitless appeals for one neighbour's help against the other, factions within Nepal sometimes sought external assistance. In the first known instance, Bahadur Shah, who had been dismissed as regent by his nephew, King Rana Bahadur, in 1794, made approaches to the Ambans, China's representatives in Tibet, but, refusing to intervene, they reported the matter to the king, and Bahadur Shah was arrested. Subsequently, it was to the British that those under pressure turned. In 1800, when Rana Bahadur, after abdicating in favour of his infant son, attempted to reassert control he was forced to withdraw to Benares after which the ex-king and his opponents bid against each other for EIC support. In the late 1830s, as Bhimsen Thapa's domination of Nepali politics came under threat, he attempted unsuccessfully to move closer to the British. When the Pande faction, whose success the Resident, Brian Hodgson, had hoped for, appeared hostile to British interests, Hodgson engineered the appointment in 1840 of his new favourites in the so-called 'British Ministry', only to see his approach repudiated by a new governor-general.

Although British support sometimes proved valuable, it also

backing to become totally independent and Chandra told the Resident that, were that to happen, Nepal would no longer acknowledge China as her suzerain.

19 A recent, detailed account of China's attitude at that time is provided by Cowan (2024: 133-194).

offended the anti-*firangi* sentiments of much of the political elite and the army. For instance, the triumphant return to power of ex-king Rana Bahadur in 1804 was largely the result of a reaction against his opponents' agreement with the British and the reception of a British Resident in Kathmandu. Nevertheless, the temptation to seek the support of a powerful neighbour remained strong, and the contradiction involved was set out by Hodgson's successor as Resident, Henry Lawrence:

...since Bhimsen's decline and death there have been four parties aiming at the Ministry; the Pandeys, Gooroos, Choutras and Thappas; all and each, except the Pandeys, desire an offensive and defensive alliance with the Resident, even though they know that such confederacy would be directly opposed to the national feeling; but nevertheless the three last have by all means set themselves to effect such an alliance, and the Pandeys have only been prevented doing so, and stood for power on the national feeling, because they believed the late Resident pledged against them.²⁰

That was a little hard on Hodgson because he had not arbitrarily turned against Ranjang Pande and his faction but rather reacted to their prior playing of the anti-British card. Nonetheless the basic dynamics of the situation were as Lawrence had outlined then and, to a large degree, remain the same today. Ideally, from his own point of view, a Nepali politician could play both ends against the middle, appearing a strong nationalist to his own countrymen but to the southern power, whether Britain or India, as a guardian of its interests. Bhimsen Thapa was for a time able to pull this trick off but more usually politicians had to oscillate between the two stances. Since the end of the Rana regime in 1951, the tendency has been for those in opposition to oppose India and those in government to take a more accommodative approach. One has, however, also to be

20 Henry Lawrence, Resident's Diary, 15 October 1844.

aware that there has long been a tendency to assume greater southern involvement than actually occurred. Hodgson's undoubted support for his 'British ministry' in the 1840s has led many to conclude that the British were also involved in Jang Bahadur's seizure of power, despite the demolition of this view by archival research in recent decades (Whelpton 2005: 45). Somewhat similar suspicions of the southern hand were also seen in the belief in some quarters that India, rather than just failing to crack down vigorously enough on insurgents' use of her territory, actually instigated the Maoist rebellion from 1996 onwards (Shah, Saubhagya 2004; Shah, Bibek Kumar 2011; Whelpton 2013: 65-7).

Even at the height of the Qing dynasty's power, it had been clear that China had no interest in intervening in Nepali politics and by the middle of the 19th century, as China became increasingly enfeebled, it was also no longer able to act as a geopolitical counterbalance to the British, who were now masters of the entire subcontinent. The switch from balancing between the two powers to an alliance with British India is often seen as the work of the Ranas and in 1845, a year before his seizure of power, Jang Bahadur himself may have been instrumental in the decision to offer troops to the British against the Sikh kingdom of the Panjab,²¹ after Nepal's last known recorded appeal to China. However, China's unwillingness to act as a counterweight had already been seen when it failed to come to the aid of Burma during the Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-26 and Nepal's shift in policy was fundamentally dictated by the changing strategic environment rather than the preferences of a single family.

The strength of the new alignment was to deepen over time: Jang Bahadur himself, despite coming to the aid of the British during the Indian Mutiny and recovering the *naya muluk* as his reward, remained suspicious of them and was particularly unwilling to let the British

21 Pudma Jang Bahadur Rana, Jang Bahadur's son and biographer, claims that his father had been one of two ministers successfully arguing for support for the British against other *bharadars* who wanted to join the Sikhs (Rana, Pudma J.B. 1909: 64; Whelpton 1991: 166-7). Baburam Acharya (2013: 132-3) claims that, if the British had needed to take up the offer, Jang Bahadur would have led the expeditionary force, but his source for this is unknown.

recruit Gorkha soldiers for their own Indian army. His successor, Ranoddip Singh, yielded on that point, mainly out of fear that the British might support Jang Bahadur's sons, who had lost out in the power struggle after Jang's death. The same factor weighed on the Shamsher Ranas but over time they were also bound to the British by common opposition to the rising Indian nationalist movement and the small but growing number of Nepalis who shared their Indian counterparts' antipathy both to foreign domination and to autocracy.

Up until the middle of the 20th century the close partnership between Rana-Nepal and British India continued whilst China largely slipped out of the equation, even though the 'tribute' missions continued until the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911. There were, however, important developments regarding Tibet, over which China still claimed control, though its actual power to influence events there had been greatly reduced. During the Taiping Rebellion, which killed between 5 and 10 per cent of China's population, Jang Bahadur took advantage of the situation to go to war with Tibet in 1855, gaining through the peace agreement the following year extra-territorial rights for Nepali merchants in Lhasa although not obtaining the tracts of territory around Kuti and Kirong, which had been his principal objective. In 1904, the British, fearing Russian designs on Tibet, despatched the Younghusband Expedition, which secured extensive economic rights in the country and a commitment not to enter into relations with other foreign powers without British agreement. The British still acknowledged a vaguely defined Chinese protectorate over Tibet but were alarmed when the Qing attempted to impose firmer control there. The situation changed again with Sun Yat-sen's 1911 revolution and Tibet's own declaration of independence in 1913, after which Britain reached the Simla agreement with Tibet, agreeing on the border line in the North-East but explicitly recognising China's residual 'suzerainty'. Throughout the Younghusband episode and during the subsequent struggle between the Dalai Lama's government and the Chinese, Chandra Shamsher worked hand in hand with the British. Though aware of the damage that could be done to Kathmandu's

entrepot trade by the full opening of the Chumbi Valley route from Sikkim, he was both anxious to remain a trusted British ally and fearful that full control of Tibet by another major power would end British tolerance of Nepal's own independence.²²

Britain's recognition of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, rather than the independent status Tibet had herself declared in 1913, stemmed from the fear that to do so would antagonise both China and Russia. It has sometimes been speculated that, had Britain supported Tibet's own claim, the country might, like Outer Mongolia, have been able to sustain the *de facto* independence that was terminated by the Chinese invasion in 1950. However, a more important factor behind Tibet's inability to avoid incorporation into the People's Republic of China was the monastic establishment's rejection of the reformists' proposals in the 1920s, which included the establishment of a modern army (Goldstein 1989).

Whilst the stage was being set for Tibet's eventual loss of its *de facto* independence, Nepal's sovereign status was, of course, put beyond doubt by Great Britain's explicit acknowledgement of it in the 1923 friendship treaty. On the Chinese side, during the Qing dynasty's re-assertion of control in Tibet, there had been suggestions from one of the Ambans in Lhasa that both Tibet and Nepal were brothers under the tutelage of the Emperor. Following the establishment of the Republic of China, the new government's representative in Tibet invited Nepal to form a 'union with the Five Affiliated Races of China', an invitation Chandra Shamsher politely but firmly declined.²³ Whether or not Mao did say in a 1939 speech that Nepal was among the tributary states the Western imperialists had forcibly taken from China,²⁴ this claim was never included in

22 For discussion of Chandra's role in the Younghusband Expedition and for the background to the 1923 treaty between Nepal and Britain, see Whelpton 2023.

23 General Chung to Chandra Shamsher, February 1913 and Chandra's reply, 16 March 1913, Foreign Department Secret External, Aug. 1913, Nos. 24-50, cited by Husain (1970: 279-80).

24 The words allegedly spoken by Mao and quoted in various sources, including Shram (1963:257), cited in Ghandhi (1965:18) were: 'After having inflict-

any official document under either the Nationalist or Communist regimes.

From *saat saal* till today

The geo-strategic situation established with Tibet's 1913 declaration of independence, effective in practice though never recognised *de jure* by any other power, remained essentially the same until the Chinese Communists' victory in the civil war. Both Nepal and British India continued to enjoy the privileges that had been granted in Tibet under the agreements of 1856 and 1904, respectively. That situation was radically altered by the China's occupation of Eastern Tibet in October 1950, followed by the Tibetan government's acceptance in May 1951 of the Chinese demand that it acknowledge its status as a full and integral part of China. There were, of course, many in Tibet who welcomed Chinese assistance against oppressive features of the old order, but it is unlikely that they actually regarded themselves as Chinese. The Indian government, initially attempted to press for the retention of Tibetan's autonomy under 'suzerainty' but China continued to insist on China's full sovereignty over Tibet and India formally acknowledged this in the April 1954 Sino-Indian agreement.

There were in fact two opposing strategies open to India in the face of China's military presence in the Himalaya. One was the realpolitik approach advocated shortly before his death by Vallabhai Patel in his letter to Jawaharlal Nehru of 7 November 1950 (the same day as Gyanendra Shah's first coronation in Kathmandu). That would have involved a more robust approach on the Tibet issue and massive

ed military defeats on China, the imperialist countries forcibly took from her a large number of states tributary to China, as well as a part of her own territory. Japan appropriated Korea, Taiwan, the Ryukyu Islands, the Pescadores, and Port Arthur; England took Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, and Hongkong; France seized Annam; even a miserable little country like Portugal took Macao from us.' The official version printed in Mao's collected works omits Korea, Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, and Annam (viz. Vietnam) from the list (Wikipedia n.d.).

military reinforcement of the frontiers, and, whilst probably nothing India could have done would have prevented China's absorption of Tibet, it could probably have prevented the border war of 1962. Nehru's more idealist alternative, which Garver (2001:29) sees as 'perhaps [describable as] appeasement', might also have worked, but there were two difficulties. The first was that Nehru's romantic idea of China and India as ancient civilisations which could be partners in the leadership of Asia was not wholly reciprocated; whatever polite rhetoric the Chinese might have employed, their actual view of India was close to the rather jaundiced one expressed by Lee Kwan Yu (above pg. 4; Rao 2022). Secondly and more importantly, Nehru did not follow through completely. He befriended the PRC during the 1950s, when it was faced with US hostility and prevented from taking China's seat at the United Nations, which was still held by the Kuomintang government in Taiwan, but took a less-conciliatory line on the issue of borders. Like many Nepali legislators with the Limpiyadhura claim in 2020, he was sincerely convinced of the validity of a territorial claim which was, in fact, decidedly murky. This error was compounded by the failure to realise how weak India's forces in the disputed area were in comparison to China's.²⁵ The result was the disastrous 'forward policy' in Aksai Chin and the 1962 debacle, an episode which left most Indians feeling both betrayed, because of their earlier assistance to China, and also humiliated by the scale of their defeat. The result was that Patel's hard-nosed approach to dealing with China, a minority view in 1950, has remained for sixty years the one held by the Indian mainstream (Garver 2001: 29).

The replacement of Tibet by Nepal as buffer state on India's Himalayan frontier did, of course, evoke a hard-nosed Indian approach from the start. Mohan Shamsheer continued to resist Indian pressure for democratic reform, hoping that by offering

25 For details of the border dispute, see Kemenade (2008: 42, 49) and for an admission by a former Indian foreign secretary that Aksai Chin was a 'grey area' (Rao 2022: 402). Kemenade (2008: 40) also highlights the warning by Chief of Army Staff K.S. Thimayya that India's military strength in the region was no match for China's.

full co-operation on India's own security and economic issues, he could ensure continued tolerance of his regime. Accordingly, Nepali battalions were loaned to India whilst its own forces were engaged in Kashmir and Hyderabad and Mohan Shamsheer agreed to conditions in the July 1950 Treaties of Peace and Friendship and of Trade and Commerce which came close to establishing a military alliance and required Nepal to align its tariffs with India's. Nevertheless, India was convinced that the Rana regime was inherently unstable and that its continuance might lead democratic elements to seek support from China. Nehru consequently gave his backing to King Tribhuvan and the Nepali Congress's revolt and subsequently imposed the 'Delhi compromise', which installed the Congress-Rana coalition government. The exact nature of India's initial involvement in supporting the anti-Rana forces is disputed but its preponderance of power enabled it to engineer a settlement and it is also possible that concern over their own investments in India was one of the factors leading the Ranas to give in.²⁶

Resentment of Indian influence became widespread in the 1950s but Nepal remained firmly under Indian tutelage until the 1955 accession of King Mahendra and an attempted shift back towards Nepal's old strategy of using one neighbour to balance the other. That did not, however, alter the overwhelming economic dependence on links to the south as was seen following Mahendra's ousting of the elected Nepali Congress government in 1960. India turned a blind eye to raids launched from its territory by Congress insurgents and finally, in September 1962, after the king resisted Nehru's urging that he reach a compromise with his opponents, India imposed an undeclared blockade of Nepal. That would probably have forced Mahendra to negotiate, had not the Chinese attacks in Aksai Chin and the North-East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh)

26 The best account of the events and particularly of the diplomatic manoeuvring which prevented Western powers from recognising the infant King Gyanendra is provided by Rishikesh Shah (1990: II, 206-240). For a rebuttal of Ganesh Raj Sharma's claim that Nehru actually suggested rather than reluctantly acquiesced in an armed revolt, see Whelpton 2013: 71-72.

compelled India to mend fences immediately with the royal regime (Rose 1971). The Chinese military action was in response to India's 'forward patrolling' in Aksai Chin, not to any plea for help from Nepal. Mahendra had not played the China card: the card had played itself.

Over the next generation, India's geostrategic position within South Asia strengthened with its victory over Pakistan in the Bangladesh Liberation War and then the absorption of Sikkim in 1975. King Birendra reacted with his proposal before guests at his coronation that Nepal be declared a 'Zone of Peace'. Although that formula was accepted by the majority of countries, including China and Pakistan, India never endorsed it, seeing it as an attempt to nullify by stealth the security provisions of the 1950 treaty.

Towards the end of the decade, when Birendra had been further alarmed by India's 1987 intervention in Sri Lanka, he tried to tilt towards the north by signing a secret agreement with China for the sharing of intelligence, permitting Chinese personnel to work on projects near the southern border, and also placing an order for Chinese weapons. Those included anti-aircraft guns which India herself had been refusing to supply since the 1970s, arguing that Nepal had no need of them (Mulmi 2022: 136-9; Garver 2001: 151-2).²⁷ All that came on top of the failure to agree on new terms for trade and transit. When the existing treaties expired in 1989, Indian imposed another near-blockade. Birendra had apparently been

27 Mulmi provides the most detailed account of the arms issue, including Nepal's unsuccessful attempt in 1975 to secure similar equipment from the Americans, when the Nepal army's director of operations explained that an anti-aircraft capability was required 'to protect airports and some key installations against 'raids, highjackings (sic) or other aerial attack'. Mulmi also notes Nepal's concern with unauthorised Indian overflights, particularly during the 1974 operation against the Khampas in Mustang, and he reports the suggestion that the decision to supply weapons might not have been approved at the highest level of the Chinese government. Palace insider Vivek Kumar Shah (2018: 66-67) makes the anti-aircraft weapons the most crucial issue. Another irritant for India was the planned introduction of work permits for Indian citizens in Kathmandu but that was probably less important than previously assumed by the present writer (Whelpton 2005:112).

warned by the Chinese that they would not be able to replace India as Nepal's principal supplier but he refused to back down and the blockade was not fully lifted until Janandolan-I forced an end to the Panchayat regime in spring 1990. Opposition to the Panchayat system and to royal autocracy had long existed and it would almost certainly have ended even without Birendra's failed gambit. However, the whole episode illustrated the extent to which Nepal's southern link remained the more important one.

Fifteen years later, India's role again proved decisive when India reacted to Gyanendra's February 2005 takeover by suspending military assistance against the Maoists and facilitating the agreement between them and the Seven-Party Alliance. Gyanendra reached out to China, purchasing weapons from them and pressing for their admittance to SAARC as observers. Some within the Indian establishment did feel China and Pakistan could take dangerous advantage of India's hard line against royal autocracy (Chellaney 2005) but most analysts rightly thought that China, though making sympathetic noises, would not commit itself strongly to bailing the king out.

After the end of the monarchy, 2015-16 saw one more Indian attempt to use an undeclared blockade to put pressure on the Nepal government. The Indian government claimed that they acted only because truck drivers' safety was endangered because of ongoing protests by Madheshis against provisions in the 2015 Constitution. Apparently, without informing the agitating Madheshi organisations, India lifted the measures as soon as minor concessions on that issue had been made through the 1st amendment to the constitution in January 2016.²⁸ In the run-up to the promulgation of the constitution, India had in fact been pressing the government on behalf of the Madheshis but analysts were unclear if that was really the key concern. One suggestion was that Modi's government acted out of pique that Nepal had been listening too much to China's concerns on the constitution (Baral 2016) and another that they were

28 For a detailed account of the protests and the 'blockade', see Mørch 2023.

angry because despite a promise they thought they had received, the document did not re-establish Nepal as a Hindu state.²⁹

Whatever India's motivation, the failure of the 'blockade' to force major concessions and the agreement signed with China to provide one-third of Nepal's oil needs might suggest that a major shift in the balance of power has occurred. The importance of China has indeed increased, both with infrastructural developments in Tibet and with the growing visibility of Chinese tourists in Nepal,³⁰ but important limiting factors remain. First, road links from China can still not carry the same volume of goods as those from India. Second, transport from the economic heartland of China over the Tibetan plateau remains expensive and China's own interest remains primarily strategic: even the railway from Qinghai to Lhasa, though a marvel of engineering, would scarcely have been justifiable on economic grounds alone, particularly in view of the maintenance costs which may be incurred with the likely melting of the permafrost. So long as China feels its grip on Tibet is not threatened, it is doubtful if it would have the motivation to fund future projects such as the railway link from Rasuwa to Kathmandu, which is at the top of many Nepali leaders' wish list. Third, despite the adversarial relationship between China and India, trade between them is already much greater than between India and Nepal, with Chinese exports to the former in 2022 totalling USD 110 billion compared to USD 1.78 billion to Nepal.³¹

29 The view that the Hindu state issue was paramount was endorsed by Baburam Bhattarai (interview 6/8/24). Another prominent politician, speaking off the record, claimed to have been in the room when, shortly before the constitution was finalised, national leaders actually promised an Indian representative that Hinduism would regain its official status (information from Shrishti Rana).

30 For a vivid portrayal of the growing presence of China in Nepal, see Mulmi 2022. The romanticised view of Nepal common among young female Chinese tourists is described in Wu and Zhang 2021 and Gellner forthcoming.

31 The actual figure for exports to Nepal will be higher because of pervasive under-invoicing for tax purposes (Cowan 2013) but the Indian total may also be unreliable. The balance of trade with both countries is currently heavily in China's favour, with Chinese imports from Nepal and India in 2022 totalling USD 144 million and USD 1.15 billion, respectively, against exports to them of USD 1.78 and USD 110 billion (OEC 2024a and 2024b).

The potential for trade growth if real détente between China and India occurs is enormous and whatever sympathetic gestures it may make towards Nepal, China is not likely to give up the long-term economic prize unless its vital security interests are endangered.

The key factor in 2015-16 was not so much China's growing influence but India's decision to back a plains community within Nepal rather than, as in 1951, 1989 and 2005, siding with one major camp within the hill population of a hill-centric state. The result was to solidify the Pahadi population, whether Parbatiya/Khas-Arya or Janajati, against Indian interference and to increase the existing tendency amongst the more strident hill-nationalists to see the Madheshis as an Indian fifth column. This, in turn, softened the discontent that many amongst the hill Janajati felt over a federal structure which produced a Parbatiya majority in every province except No 2 (now Madhesh Province).³² In contrast, in earlier cases of Indian use of the economic weapon, the divisions among the Pahadis were sufficient for Nepal's own government rather than a foreign power to be seen as the prime culprit.

The lesson for India from the 2015-16 episode is, as Baral (2016) pointed out, that it should rely on its behind-the-scenes influence and avoid public showdowns. This influence remains pervasive and persistent and is neatly illustrated by the career of Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who started out as an anti-Indian firebrand: he was forced to resign as prime minister in 2009 partly because of India's opposition to his attempt to sack the Nepal Army chief. He was nevertheless accused this year of seeking Indian support so that he could remain in power despite the Maoists being only the third largest party in the House of Representatives (Dixit 2024). Whether or not this accusation is fair, there is no doubt that Dahal has learnt the importance of keeping on good terms with India.

China also exerts quiet influence though its role in internal politics has always been considerably less than India's. In Mao's time, when the People's Republic of China was in the business of

32 A point emphasised by Deepak Thapa (interview 7/9/17).

exporting revolution anywhere, it sent into Nepal both propaganda and some financial support for Communist groups. That coincided with the time when the royal regime was also giving covert backing to at least one Leftist faction, in the belief that that would weaken the Congress supporters, who it saw as the major threat (Whelpton 2013: 46). After Deng Xiao Ping came to power, China's policy was simply one of collaboration with whatever government was in charge in Kathmandu. In 2010, senior Maoist, Krishna Bahadur Mahara, was apparently recorded soliciting funds from a Chinese citizen to bribe parliamentarians, but the affair was not investigated, and no proof of Chinese government involvement was offered. As already mentioned, during the lengthy deliberations leading up to the 2015 Constitution, China apparently lobbied against states based on ethnicity or 'identity'. That might have been partly from simple fear of the 'demonstration effect' of real ethnic autonomy but more likely because of specific worries that federal units controlled by Sherpas and-or other Tibetoid groups could be influenced by the West and by the Dalai Lama.³³

After the promulgation of the constitution, it has been plausibly speculated that China also tried directly to influence the alignment of Nepali political parties. In July 2016, it probably tried in vain to dissuade Dahal from deserting the Oli government but then successfully encouraged the formation of an electoral alliance between the Maoists and the UML in autumn 2017 (Jha 2017). Hou Yanqi, China's ambassador from December 2019 to October 2022, was ultimately unable to keep Dahal and Oli working together but boosted China's soft power through her use of social media and by dancing and singing publicly in Nepali. Such gestures impressed many in Kathmandu and alarmed some in India, whilst also probably bringing more Chinese tourists to Nepal, but had little effect on the underlying balance of power. The situation for China remains, as an anonymous Nepali informant explained to Sam Cowan, ten years

33 Krishna Hachhethu (personal communication). One Maoist leader claimed in an interview that China had joined hands with Congress and the UML to thwart a full-throated federal agenda (information from Shrishti Rana).

ago: 'China wants to weaken India's dominance in Nepali affairs and to strengthen its own influence but it recognizes that the weight of history, culture, religion and language works against achieving this objective' (Cowan 2014).

Future prospects

It is unlikely that the border dispute between India and China will be formally resolved at any time in the near future even though giving *de jure* status to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), seems the obvious solution. India's relinquishing its claim to Aksai Chin in return for China's recognising Arunachal Pradesh as part of India was essentially the formula proposed by Zhou En-lai in the 1950s and later revived by Deng Xiao Ping. However, nationalist feeling in India would probably still resist such a concession on Ladakh whilst, since the 2000s the Chinese, though now recognising Sikkim as part of India, appear to have hardened their position over Arunachal. Perhaps with several new, well-developed and secure routes now available, Aksai Chin is not as strategically vital as it was, so it wants additional concessions from India before abandoning its own claim on 'South Tibet'. (Kemenade 2008: 51-2)

The ideal, long-term objective must be to get to an earlier situation which, as a former Indian foreign secretary writes, has been lost: 'The concept of frontier zones which historically provided for an "intermingling of peoples", allowing the retention of close integration across borders between communities in terms of language, customs and religion, has been lost.' Nirupama Rao (Rao 2022: 464). It is precisely that 'intermingling' which has been retained along Nepal's southern border but achieving it along the India-China border will be impossible until greater trust is achieved.

As for the evolution of the overall relationship between the two, John Garver suggested that if the gap between Chinese and Indian wealth and power continued to increase, India might eventually decide to align with her neighbour rather than continue an unequal

competition. However, whilst Russia might learn to live as China's junior partner, it is difficult to imagine India, whose population has now surpassed China's, agreeing to such an arrangement and, even it were to do so, the outcome would probably not be to Nepal's liking, as China might then simply decide to 'sub-contract' management of Nepal to India.

The hope for the immediate future is that India and China can leave the territorial dispute aside and concentrate on boosting other areas of their relationship. This would be to Nepal's benefit though it is unlikely that it could ever become the principal corridor between the two giants: improvements in infrastructure will continue, featuring roads rather than the proposed railway,³⁴ but, if commercial relations between India and China do really take off, the Chumbi Valley route over the Himalaya would still be more attractive than the Kathmandu one. It is also important to remember that, as argued above, China's interest in resisting Indian hegemony in South Asia collides with its economic interest in developing commercial links with the much bigger Indian market. Although China now does have the technical ability to supply goods to Nepal on a scale rivalling that of India, it is most unlikely to shoulder the immense cost of doing so unless its own fundamental interests were at stake.

For the harmonious development of Nepal's relationship with India, which, despite the rise of China, remains by far its most important bilateral one, the onus is on India, as the larger country, to show greater respect for Nepali sensitivities. This would include agreeing to a revision of the 1950 treaty, and taking a more relaxed attitude to her economic links with China. However, on the Nepal side, policy-making has to focus more on what India is likely to do rather than on what Nepal itself believes India ought to do. Nepali analysts constantly call upon India to set aside security worries and instead embrace the economic advantages of connecting India and China through Nepal. This is a reasonable long-term aspiration but it has to be recognised that the Indian establishment does still prioritise

34 Despite the agreement in principle reached in 2016, it is widely believed that the railway will never be built (Colley 2024).

the strategic dimension and, in the meantime, those concerns still need to be respected.³⁵

Turning to the wider, South Asian perspective, India's relations with all her neighbours, would benefit from more emphasis on soft power rather than on realpolitik. India's own ideological strength could lie in principled opposition to authoritarianism. Ironically, such a stance would involve decisively rejecting the path set out by Subash Chandra Bose in 1937:

Both Communism and Fascism believe in the supremacy of the State over the individual. Both denounce parliamentary democracy. Both believe in party rule. Both believe in the dictatorship of the party and in the ruthless suppression of all dissenting minorities. Both believe in a planned industrial reorganization of the country. These common traits will form the basis of the new synthesis. That synthesis is called by the writer 'Samyavada' – an Indian word, which means literally 'the doctrine of synthesis or equality.' It will be India's task to work out this synthesis. (Bose 1964:313-4, quoted in Montgomery [1994])

Whilst Bose himself has been endlessly lionised in post-independence India, most of what he stood for, with the exception of planned industrialisation, is the exact opposite of the values enshrined in the Indian constitution and his beliefs dovetail much better with the path taken by the PRC and by the Kuomintang, until the end of martial law on Taiwan. Bose's illiberal stance is unknown even to many well-educated Indians and, of course, India has constantly violated the liberal principles on which it claims to stand.³⁶ That can

35 This point was made recently by the Rastriya Swatantra Party's Swarnim Wagle, resulting in a predictable nationalist backlash (information from Naresh Koirala).

36 That applies to democracies in general and the tendency both in India and the West to preach rather than practise is highlighted in Estrada 2023, but what Samuel Huntington said about the USA ('America is not a lie, it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a

be seen in India's dealings with 'dissenting minorities' in Kashmir and elsewhere, in Indira Gandhi's 'Emergency' in the 1970s, and also in the authoritarian tendencies displayed under Modi since 2014. The present situation led one visiting Indian journalist to suggest that increasing government pressure in India, means that Nepal is now South Asia's most open society (Varadarajan 2023). It is, of course, very gratifying to see Nepal at the top of the league, but it is tragic when India seems to be trashing her own brand. India has been out-performed by China in a number of areas but enjoys one clear advantage in respect for pluralism and freedom of expression. Protecting that advantage should be a top priority both for Indians themselves and for India's well-wishers elsewhere.³⁷

To conclude with Nepal's own situation, it is right to hope and to argue for an India both truer to her own professed values and more understanding of her neighbours, but continuing geostrategic and economic realities have to be recognised and India dealt with as it is, rather than as Nepal wants it to be. A two-track approach therefore seems inevitable: in general debate between diplomats or members of civil society it is possible to press for a paradigm shift but in negotiations an accommodationist approach to India still makes political sense and I would not personally blame Dahal for the line he took in Delhi earlier this year.

hope.' [Huntington 1981]) applies also to India and the rest.

37 India, like Western countries, does frequently assert its own democratic credentials but this is of little value if the countries preaching democracy are not actually practising it. See the analysis in Estrada 2023.

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