

Professor Yadu Nath Khanal Lecture Series

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Nepal-India Relations: Prospects and Pathways

Professor C. Raja Mohan



Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kathmandu

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NEPAL INDIA RELATIONS: PROSPECTS AND PATHWAYS

Professor C. Raja Mohan

INTRODUCTION

It's a special honour to deliver this year's Prof. Yadu Nath Khanal Lecture. Let me thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for offering me this privilege.

I am, however, daunted by the fact that I am an Indian citizen talking about our bilateral relationship to Nepal's foreign policy community and its leadership. The complex history of our relationship, the multiple sensitivities in the discourse on the relationship, and the range of issues in contention today make my task challenging. But as a scholar of Indian foreign policy, long-time observer of Delhi's neighbourhood policy and South Asia's international relations, I hope I can offer a dispassionate analysis of the prospects and pathways for a more productive Nepal-India relations. My focus today is not on the minutiae of the immediate issues of the bilateral relationship; I would disappoint those looking for me to respond to the headlines these days on Nepal-India relations. I would like to focus instead on the broad structural challenges of the relationship and offer an assessment of how we might be able to transcend them.

I will begin with a brief review of the global order and follow it up with an assessment of the changing regional dynamics. I will then reflect on the burden of history on our relationship, the geography that binds us, the challenges of managing proximity and deep interdependence, and conclude with a reflection on the importance of putting pragmatism above ideology in resetting our relations.

CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER

I would like to present the possibilities for a deeper relationship between Nepal and India in the broader context of the changing global order--political, economic, and strategic. Why do we want to look at the global situation in a session to discuss bilateral relations between Nepal and India? No bilateral relationship, however intense and close it might be, can be pursued in isolation from the rest of the world. To be sure local specificities, of history and geography, are entrenched and enduring in any bilateral relationship. But they acquire an ever-changing expression and character under the influence of the global trends. Even a preliminary reflection of the situation suggests how central was the changing relationship between the United States, Soviet Union, and China in shaping the relations between Nepal and India. Today we are, arguably, in a similar moment of major shifts in great power relations. Similarly, the regional dynamic in Asia continues to provide critical context for the engagement between Kathmandu and Delhi.

The last few years have seen a profound change in the international system. Three features stand out. The first is the return of great power rivalry. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact at the turn of the 1990s marked the end of the Cold War and an important inflexion point in the history of great power relations. For more than four decades, the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union enveloped all dimensions of human activity in the second half of the 20th century. The demise of the Soviet Union marked a profound shift in the global balance of power in favour of the United States that had no peer competitor in the ‘unipolar moment’. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the disintegration of a great power that had great influence not only in Europe but across the world. The Soviet collapse also discredited the communist economic and political ideas

which had powerful appeal since the middle of the 19th century. The triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism was viewed as the end of history and political contestation over the organization of modern societies.

But it did not take long for the unipolar moment to dissipate. The rapid rise of China in the 21st century and its assertion has presented the United States a peer competitor in Asia and the world. Although Russia is much weaker than the United States, it has demonstrated sufficient capability to destabilize the security order in Europe and challenge the Western powers in multiple global theatres, including Africa. Moscow continues to be an attractive partner for India and others in Asia. To make matters complicated, China and Russia announced a ‘partnership without limits’ in 2022 and are testing the Western ability to manage the global order. The contest between the West on the one hand and the Sino-Russian entente on the other are compelling much of the world to rethink their great power relations. Nepal and India have operated in a relatively stable international system since the turn of the 1990s. We had the luxury of taking the world for granted. Today Kathmandu and Delhi have no option but to recalibrate their worldview and adjust their foreign policies to deal with a rapidly changing great power relations.

Adding to this challenge is a second factor—growing strain on the framework of globalization that decision makers in Kathmandu and Delhi have thought was irreversible. Irrespective of their traditional ideologies, all political groups that have governed the two countries since the dawn of the 1990s had adapted, willy nilly, to the imperatives of economic globalization. They must now come to terms with a new phase in the global economy in which the first and second largest economies—the US and China—are retreating from globalization and rearranging their economies. This in turn has put enormous pressure on the World Trade Organization (WTO) that was set up

in 1995 with great expectations to move the international system towards an agreed set of rules governing trans-border commerce. China's entry into the WTO in 2001, championed by the US, had set the stage for a rapid economic integration of the world. Today the US and China are locked in an economic conflict that reinforces their geopolitical rivalry. Countries like India and Nepal, that would prefer a single set of global economic rules, will now have to deal with an increasingly fragmented global economic system that will demand making hard political choices on preferred commercial partnerships.

Reinforcing the first two challenges is a third global development, the technological revolution—especially in the domains of artificial intelligence, outer space, and biotechnology—that promises to profoundly alter the structure of the global economy. AI and the digital revolution are also promising to make a number of traditional professions, including white collar ones, unsustainable as it helps automate a large number of functions. AI meanwhile is changing the nature of political organization and mobilization making open and plural democracies like Nepal and India far more vulnerable to technological manipulation. This in turn forces countries, large and small, to make major decisions on restructuring their economies and protecting them from the new challenges of disinformation and fake news.

The return of great power rivalry, resurgence of geoeconomics, and the revolution in technology does not necessarily mean we face a bleak international environment. It is certainly different from the world that emerged in the 1990s; but it also offers interesting possibilities for those nations that are conscious of the changing global dynamic, are flexible enough to adapt to the new possibilities arising from the changing global order. We now turn to the regional order that is rapidly evolving under the influence of global changes.

THE NEW REGIONAL ORDER

Most regions of the world and their institutional structures have been deeply affected by the new global dynamic we have reviewed. South Asia is no exception. Several broad changes in the region are easily identified. First is the impact of the new great power rivalry on the region. For centuries now, it is the dynamic of conflict and cooperation among the European powers that shaped the political and economic evolution of the rest of the world. The twentieth century saw the rise of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers that overshadowed the European powers of the nineteenth century. Europe, however, remained the principal theatre of the geopolitical contest between the United States and the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century. To be sure, there was vigorous superpower rivalry in other regions of the world, including the Subcontinent; but they were not the decisive theatres in the conflict.

Today, the situation is different. Despite the return of war to the heart of Europe, it is Asia that is now the principal theatre of conflict in the world. This is not surprising since the rise of China as a great power has profoundly altered the hierarchy of global power and put Beijing as the dominant power in Asia and a global competitor to the US and the West. Although Russia has challenged the territorial order in Europe established after 1991, the US National Security Strategy of 2022 sees China as the main challenger to the US-led world order. For more than four decades since the early 1970s, the relationship between the US and China had steadily expanded; their common interest to counter Moscow endured until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Deng Xiaoping's second wave of reforms in the 1990s led to an explosive expansion of commercial and technological cooperation between China and the United States.

That era has now come to an end as Washington seeks to de-risk its economic ties and is encouraging its allies in Europe and Asia to do the same. To counter an increasingly powerful and assertive China, the US is boosting its military presence in the Western Pacific, revitalising its traditional alliances with Australia, Japan, and the Philippines. It is also building new strategic partnerships with non-allies like India, Vietnam, Indonesia and other regional actors as part of an effort to build a regional coalition to balance China. With Asia emerging as the main arena of great power rivalry, the Subcontinent is being drawn in more directly into the conflict between the United States and China. Unlike Russia that was not a physical neighbour of South Asia, China is. This turns the Subcontinent and its waters a contested frontline zone between the US and China.

A second major change is the fact that the unfolding rivalry between the United States and China has been accompanied by a renewed conflict between Delhi and Beijing in recent years. America's deepening conflict with China has coincided with Delhi's deteriorating relations with Beijing. A series of military crises—in 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2020—have led to the dismantling of the regime of peace and tranquillity on the disputed frontier that was established in the early 1990s following Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988. In this era—a structure of stable border provided the basis for the steady expansion of bilateral relations. That period is now behind us, thanks to the breakdown of the border management mechanisms and the growing distrust between Delhi and Beijing. The armed forces of India and China are locked in a military stand-off in eastern Ladakh for nearly four years. Even more important, there is a semi-permanent military build-up all along the Indo-Tibetan frontier that could result in clashes at any point and time.

The intensifying contradictions with China have seen India recalibrate its great power relations and finesse its traditional strategy of non-alignment. India today is closer than ever before to

the United States; yet, Delhi has a substantive and growing trade ties with Beijing. India has also sought to retain a strong relationship with Russia and has stepped up its engagement with Europe and Japan. As India deals with the principal contradiction between US and China, its South Asian neighbours must deal with the twin rivalries—Sino-US and Sino-Indian. Any assessment of these rivalries will suggest that they are here to stay and coping with them will be a major preoccupation for all the countries of South Asia. Pakistan, which has had good relations with both the US and China has to deal with the conflict between them as well as the surprising strategic bonhomie between Delhi and Washington. Land-locked Nepal has had to engage with the new maritime geography called the Indo-Pacific and the strategies associated with it. The island states of South Asia, Sri Lanka and Maldives, are spending considerable part of their diplomatic and political energies in coping with the shifting triangular dynamic between the US, China, and India.

Finally, the return of great power rivalry presents a paradox for South Asia. Contestation between US and China has made it difficult for the main regional forum ASEAN—the Association of South East Asian Nations—to fulfil its mandate for regional security and stability. New institutions have come up in Asia. The Quad, the AUKUS, the Chip 4, and the ‘squad’ are a few examples of the proliferating minilateral institutions that are now rising in our region. Unlike the ASEAN, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation has not been an effective forum in promoting regional integration. Yet the intensifying great power rivalry and the breakdown of the global economic order built after 1991 demand greater regional cooperation. The institutional format is perhaps less important today than the practical expansion of regional cooperation through whichever means possible—bilateral, sub-regional and trans-regional. Rather than bemoan the failure of SAARC and lament the lack of regional

cooperation in South Asia we could cheer the slow but certain expansion of regional connectivity and trade volumes. Bangladesh and Nepal for example are among the top trade partners for India. It would seem entirely possible to build practically on these emerging possibilities.

BILATERAL CHALLENGES

The review of the changing global and regional orders brings us to assessing the present challenges and future possibilities of the Nepal-India relationship. As I mentioned earlier, I do not wish to get down into the weeds of the bilateral relationship. The range of issues at hand are diverse and some of them have proved to be intractable. What I hope to do in the rest of the lecture is to examine the structural challenges in several domains—including history, geography, economics and ideology.

BURDEN OF HISTORY

History is always a good teacher in understanding the current state of any phenomenon. But history can also be a burden that shackles our thinking and prevents us from responding to contemporary challenges. Learning the right lessons from history must be balanced with a capacity to unlearn some of the history to make progress. History has long been a major constraint on Nepal-India relations, especially for Delhi. A lot of it has to do with the legacy of the British Raj that was premised on an ‘exclusive relationship’ with the Kingdom of Nepal. This framework was reaffirmed in the 1950 Treaty of eternal friendship by India and Nepal. That approach, however, was unsustainable in the post-British era. A growing sense of national identity and reduced fears of a threat from Maoist China made the treaty less acceptable to Nepal’s leaders. But India clung onto the notion of an ‘exclusive sphere of influence’ in South Asia even as the ground reality made it impossible to realise.

The partition of the Subcontinent, India's quarrels with the West on regional issues, and the emergence of a coherent China after a prolonged fratricidal civil war fundamentally altered the regional geopolitics that made it impossible to preserve the Raj legacy in the Himalayas. That legacy involved three security treaties signed during 1949-50 with Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal. The ambiguity about India's relationship with Sikkim was resolved with its integration into India in 1975. India revised the treaty with Bhutan in 2006 to make it modern and in sync with the 21st century realities. But the treaty with Nepal remains in a limbo, despite the demand in Nepal for its revision if not abrogation and Delhi's apparent willingness to review it. Here we are with an instrument, whose security provisions have long become inoperative, but remains the symbol of an unequal relationship between Kathmandu and Delhi.

On the face of it, there is a strong case, indeed, for a new treaty between the two nations that reflects the contemporary shared interests of the two countries. Since the two governments are not negotiating a new version, I have a suggestion. May be some of the think tanks in the two countries could get together and draft a treaty from first principles. That could provide a more practical discussion of the kind of formal arrangement that could benefit both countries. But others would say a treaty by no means is a pre-requisite to good relations. The question is not about drafting a new text, but learning to build a live and productive relationship that is in the interest of the two peoples.

Meanwhile, in Delhi there is a growing recognition among realists that India's regional influence in the region will come from material capabilities and effective policies rather than holding to a piece of paper. It is also acutely conscious that the Subcontinent—which is globalized and widely connected—can no longer be India's exclusive sphere of influence. It sees the growing role of China is a natural consequence of its rise as a great power and its proximity to South

Asia. India has no desire to wish away this reality. Although some current global literature on geopolitics does talk about the return of ‘spheres of influence’, maintaining such exclusive zones has become increasingly hard. Moscow, for example, is trying to reconstruct the lost sphere of influence in Central Europe; but its war against Kyiv has turned Ukraine into a real nation that is unlikely to ever go back into the fold of Moscow. Other states in Central Europe are drawing closer to the West in trying to secure themselves against Russian expansionism. Protectorates is a notion from the era of empires and has little relevance in the 21st century.

BORDERS—OPEN AND CLOSED

Some view geography as tyranny and others as destiny. Instead of perceiving geography as an unalterable constraint, sensible statecraft will try and work with it to maximize the opportunities for progress. Bad policies can make an even favourable geography into a problem. Sensible policies in contrast can help overcome the limitations of geography. Consider for example India. Although it had a long coastline, it had little use for sea until the 1990s. Having chosen inward-oriented state socialism as its developmental policy after independence, Delhi turned India into a ‘land-locked’ nation at the heart of the Indian Ocean. Kathmandu, in contrast, was among the first in the Subcontinent to experiment with an open economy, for a while at least.

In Nepal, there is much angst about its ‘land-locked’ nature and its location between two large Asian giants. This condition is not unique to Nepal; the history of international relations is replete with examples of nations that have felt squeezed by its neighbours. South Korea, for example, sees itself as a ‘shrimp among whales.’ It has done quite well for itself despite the precarious geography it lives in. Singapore, a city state, with no resources of its own has turned its location at the maritime junction of the Indian and Pacific Oceans into

an enormous business opportunity. Mongolia, sandwiched between Russia and China, has built a vast network of international relations by reaching out to what it calls a ‘third neighbour policy’—centred around conscious diversification of foreign policy interaction.

As we look ahead, Nepal and India must pay attention to the idea of geo-economics. Across the world, the idea of uncritical globalization is yielding to a focus on ‘economic security’ ‘near-shoring’ and ‘friend shoring’, and the development of trusted geographies. As the global economic system erected after the Cold War goes through major change, trading with neighbours has become more important than ever. In Delhi at least there is growing recognition of this as Bangladesh and Nepal emerge as major markets for India. This underlines the extraordinary importance of an open border for the future of our relationship. Not all legacies, such as the 1950 treaty are worth preserving. Some are and the open border is one of them. Its benefits have become more important in the current global context. Many in the world are eager to create open borders but struggle with the task.

Delhi and Kathmandu must not only value the legacy of an open border but also build on it. India, I believe, has a special responsibility. Independent India’s economic strategy had for decades focused on import substitution and under-emphasized the importance of trade for national development and prosperity. The situation reversed three decades ago; India is eager to expand its economic footprint globally and there is a special emphasis on trade and connectivity. But India’s agenda on transforming the open border with Nepal into a zone of commerce and the people-to-people interaction remains unfinished; recent years have seen some improvement; but there is a lot that can be done on the front of trade promotion, trade facilitation and the modernisation of the border infrastructure on the Indian side.

In both countries, there often have been temptations to weaponize the border; either consciously or unconsciously, with terrible consequences. Helping adversaries of the other misuse the open border raises calls for closing the border on one side; and closing the border to extract political concessions has produced enormous backlash against the ‘blockade’ and deepened the mistrust of India. It is also important to note the asymmetric nature of Nepal’s two frontiers. If Nepal’s north is sparsely populated, its southern frontier is one of the most densely populated zones in the world. The question then is not about choosing between the two. But build on all the available opportunities on both frontiers. For Kathmandu and Delhi, transforming border on the southern slopes and foothills of the Himalayas into a genuine zone of connectivity should be at the top of national priorities.

GEOPOLITICS OF PROXIMITY

Managing relations with neighbours is always the essence of foreign policy. After all, borders are where one nation’s sovereignty ends and another’s begins. Even with the best of intentions, the challenge of managing territorial disputes, border security, river-water sharing, minorities with links across the border, sub-national interaction, and environmental protection, is a demanding one. Neighbourhood ties demand continuous tending that involves resolution of issues and preventing the emergence of new disputes. This involves building trust through sustained interaction at all levels—from the highest political level at the federal level to the local authorities. No one in Delhi or Kathmandu can claim that we have excelled at this task. I want to underline two inter-related issues that have continuously complicated the Nepal-India relationship and deepened distrust. One is about the small state imperative of seeking autonomy from a large and overwhelming neighbour. The other is the responsibility of the larger state for reassuring the smaller neighbour, respecting its political sensitivities and concerns over sovereignty and intervention.

Living in the shadow of a large neighbour inevitably produces the demand for a measure of strategic autonomy in the smaller state. And when the bigger state is seen as threatening, the logical next step is to try and balance the larger power with the help of a third. This is not the condition unique to India's neighbours, but quite common to all major regions. Through much of Latin America, resentment against the US domination has been endemic. In Europe, the fear of Germany and Russia through the last two centuries has seen their neighbours seek autonomy and or balance. In Asia, fear of an expansionist China drives many into the arms of the US.

But the art of seeking autonomy and balance is a complicated one. India, whose territorial disputes with China have been reignited, is careful in choosing how far to go with the United States. While Delhi seeks to enhance its security against Beijing, India is careful to stay within limits and avoid provoking China. That is one reason, India is not willing to make the Quad a military alliance or seek greater US support in managing its border security in the Himalayas. Ukraine caught between EU and NATO on the one hand and Russia on the other is paying a high price for mismanaging this delicate dance between two large and competing powers. We could argue endlessly about whether Ukraine provoked Russia to intervene, or if Moscow's policies nudged Kyiv closer to the West. The fact, however, is the damage to both sides has been extensive. Probing the limits of what is permissible then is a recipe for disaster.

It will be interesting to see how the current conflict between China and the Philippines works out. Is President Ferd Marcos making his situation worse by turning to the US for help or is it building long-term deterrence against Beijing? The situation in the Philippines also tells us there is no single national perspective to the problem of managing disputes with a larger neighbour. Marcos's predecessor Duterte chose to embrace Beijing rather than fight China over the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. In other words, internal

political divergence on how to address external challenges could be quite consequential. We have seen this go to the extreme in the case of Maldives, where the domestic political leadership has oscillated wildly from ‘India First’ to ‘India Out’. To be sure, Maldives has the sovereign right to make its choices, but violent swings in foreign policy orientation produce costs of their own; they also increase the incentive for external powers to align with ‘friendly formations’ within the small state. Building a domestic consensus on how to deal with the world is critical for stability and progress of small states.

IMPORTANCE OF REASSURANCE

Small countries do pay a big price for mismanaging the relationship with a larger neighbour, especially when they seek the help of another power to balance it. In the end the margin of error for the larger power is big and can afford to take risks. Even more important the big powers have other interests and will be happy to sacrifice the interests of the smaller states in pursuit of other or larger goals. When it chose to confront Russia, Ukraine was probably confident of enduring Western support. Two and a half years into the war, there are deep divisions within the West and within each of them on how far to go on Ukraine. This does not mean the big powers do not have costs. A large state that fails at reassuring its neighbours could push them into a countervailing coalition. Prudence is a virtue not only for the smaller state but also for the larger one.

In occupying eastern Ukraine, Russia has helped expand the NATO alliance. It is also paying a huge price in terms of manpower, military equipment, and loss of friendly partners in Europe. Similarly, whenever China was assertive, it pushed its East Asian neighbours into the US arms. Fear of Mao’s China drove many Asian states into anti-communist alliances in the first decades of the Cold War. When

China's rise was seen as benign under Deng Xiaoping there was little imperative to counter Beijing. But as the assertive era under Xi began, we have seen China's neighbours turn to the United States for protection.

Regional institutions have often helped larger powers avoid this problem of neighbours seeking balance. After the Second World War, Germany and Japan subordinated their sovereignty to larger institutions—the European Union in the case of Germany and the US bilateral alliance in the case of Japan—to rebuild their ties with the neighbours. In South East Asia, the largest country, Indonesia chose to adopt a low profile to make the ASEAN work. In Latin America, Washington opted for greater economic integration with its immediate neighbours to transcend at least some of the challenges arising from its dominance over the region. Russia's effort to build a Eurasian Economic Union consisting of the former republics of the Soviet Union has not worked. Variations in history and politics in different regions produce varied outcomes in the efforts to create regional institutions that mitigate the natural tensions between neighbours.

In South Asia for a variety of reasons, the SAARC has not taken off. Pakistan's reluctance to facilitate regional economic integration until its bilateral issues with India are sorted out is one of those. This is not to criticise Pakistan, which has a sovereign right to choose its economic trajectory, but to suggest that SAARC is unlikely to become effective any time soon. To reassure its neighbours, who would welcome any regional format to engage with India, Delhi must develop other institutional mechanisms. The trans-regional BIMSTEC forum in which both Nepal and India are members is one; the sub-regional BBIN is another. While the former has some distance to go, the latter seems to have more promise.

But in the end, India will have to find bilateral and unilateral means to reassure its neighbours. One important measure would be to end the intervention in the internal affairs of neighbours. One reason the Raj policy succeeded in the region was a clear bargain with the smaller neighbours—a policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs while collaborating on external security. The conditions today are vastly different; but the cost benefit calculus of these interventions suggests avoiding them might be more prudent. An Indian policy of non-intervention is not a favour to its neighbours, but to itself. Because by meddling in the internal affairs, Delhi becomes a party to the local disputes and takes its focus away from building mutually beneficial and long-term relationships. Experience with India's interventions in the neighbourhood are making Delhi aware of the limitations of external actors in shaping the complex internal politics of even the smallest states.

To be sure, the deep interpenetration of two societies makes it hard for Delhi to resist the pressures to intervene. While Delhi must avoid interventions, its neighbours must do more to 'intervene' in India. I believe it is in the interest of Kathmandu to widen the interface of engagement with the Indian society. Over the last few years, the interface has narrowed down to a few government officials in the Embassy, MEA and the PMO. Nepal must begin to focus on a broader engagement with the Indian society, including its armed forces, business community, political parties, state governments, media, and civil society groups. This precisely is what India does in the United States to develop a broader constituency of support for Delhi's ties with Washington. Like the US, India too is self-referential with much less bandwidth in the government to devote full attention to any bilateral relationship, however important. A more intensive and wider outreach from Nepal would be beneficial for India by acting as a potential balancer against impulsive and ill-considered activity by a small set of decision makers in Delhi.

IDEOLOGY AND INTERESTS

In conclusion, I would emphasize the importance of discarding ideology in favour of a pragmatic pursuit of national interests by Nepal and India to elevate their ties to a higher level. Ideologies have often done much damage to the ability of Delhi to judge the external world, especially the great power relations and their consequences for India. Commitment to a specific type of developmental ideology led to India's relative economic decline in the first decades after independence. Independent India's expansive idealism and the internationalist ideology led to profound miscalculations in Delhi's international relations in the second half of the twentieth century. Some of them have persisted into the 21st century Indian foreign policy. Consider the heavy weather that the UPA government made of the historic civil nuclear initiative with the US during 2005-08. In Nepal too internationalist ideology has often come in the way of the pragmatic pursuit of external relations. Recall the political turbulence in approving the US millennium challenge grant in Nepal.

Both Delhi and Kathmandu have much to learn from Beijing, whose record since the creation of the People's Republic of China has shown an overall tilt towards putting pragmatism above proclaimed communist ideology. Beijing has shifted effortlessly from one close alignment to another-with Russia in the 1950s and 2000s and the US in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Even as it challenges US primacy in Asia today, Beijing continues to engage the US and Europe and woo Western capital and technology for its growth. Beijing had no problem welcoming investments from Japan, its former coloniser, in transforming its infrastructure in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

Today, Nepal and India are facing a perilous moment in global affairs that is being sucked into a great power rivalry. It is also a moment of opportunity. It promises greater political agency for smaller countries

and rising powers with the will to take advantage through careful diagnosis and pragmatic engagement. Marxists often call us to dispassionately assess the concrete conditions of the external world. It is a valuable instruction that could facilitate a better appreciation of the correlation of global and regional forces without the blinkers of preconceived ideological notions. India can't build a productive relationship with Nepal on the basis of sentiment—religious or otherwise—or a nostalgia for the Raj legacy in the Subcontinent. It has every incentive to modernise the bilateral relationship with Nepal on the basis of pragmatism. An interest-based approach in Kathmandu could cut through a lot of accumulated clutter on its relations with Delhi. It is possible to imagine that a 'Nepal First' strategy in Kathmandu and a "neighbourhood first" policy in Delhi can be brought into greater harmony and produce vast benefits for our peoples. Whatever might be our current challenges, there is much room for Kathmandu and Delhi to travel together, hopefully, into the future.

Many thanks for your kind attention.

Keynote Speaker

Professor C. Raja Mohan



Professor C. Raja Mohan is a former Director of Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and currently a Visiting Research Professor there. Earlier he served as a Professor of South Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Prof. Mohan is one of India's leading commentators on India's foreign policy. He has been associated with several think tanks such as the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, the Centre for Policy Research and the Observer Research Foundation. He was also the founding director of Carnegie India, New Delhi and set up the Asia Society Policy Institute in New Delhi. He was the Henry Alfred Kissinger Chair in International Affairs at the United States Library of Congress, Washington DC, from 2009 to 2010. He served on India's National Security Advisory Board. He led the Indian Chapter of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs from 1999 to 2006.

Prof. Mohan's research interests include Asian geopolitics, Indian foreign and security policies, and the global governance of new technologies. He writes a regular column for *Foreign Policy* the *Indian Express* and was earlier the Strategic Affairs Editor for *The Hindu newspaper*, Chennai. Among his recent books are *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (2013), *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence* (2015), and *The New Asian Geopolitics: Military Power and Regional Order* (2021).

About Professor Yadu Nath Khanal



Born in Tanahun district of Nepal in August 1913, Professor Yadu Nath Khanal served as Nepal's Foreign Secretary twice (1961-62 and 1967-70) and as Ambassador to China, India and the United States, in addition to taking up various other public responsibilities.

Professor Khanal's contribution to the development and intellectualization of Nepal's foreign policy and contribution to the conduct of diplomacy at crucial times have been proven to be pragmatic and important guideposts to the nation. Professor Khanal demonstrated the sharpness of judgement on how Nepal could successfully pursue its vital national interests amidst many constraints and uncertainties. He endeavoured to establish the foundation of a professional, specialized and well-nurtured foreign service. He has left an indelible mark on the diplomatic outlook of Nepal and has been an inspiration to the practitioners of diplomacy even today.

Beyond the domain of diplomacy and foreign policy, Professor Khanal was an erudite scholar of Sanskrit and Nepali literature and prolific writer with profound knowledge and understanding of eastern philosophy. He has left behind some of the most impactful books and reflections on foreign policy and diplomacy as well as in Nepali and Sanskrit literature. His scholarly contributions have found place in renowned national and international journals. He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Law degree by Claremont University of California in 1974 and an honorary D. Lit by Tribhuvan University in 1997. Professor Khanal passed away in 2004.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched Professor Yadu Nath Khanal Lecture Series in 2022 as a tribute to his distinguished service to the nation.