



## President of India's Visit to Nepal

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The President of India, Pranab Mukherjee, concluded his three-day state visit to Nepal on November 04, 2016. He was the first Indian President to visit Nepal after a gap of 18 years. Prior to Pranab Mukherjee, R.K. Narayanan was the last Indian President to visit Nepal in May 1998. During his three-day visit to Nepal, President Mukherjee held talks with his counterpart Bidya Devi Bhandari, Vice-President Nanda Bahadur Pun, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and leaders of various political parties including the leaders of the National Congress and key opposition party CPN-UML. During the visit, besides the capital city Kathmandu, President Pranab Mukherjee visited Pokhara- a tourist city in the Gorkha belt, and Jankapur- a religious city in Madhes region.

This was a goodwill visit intended to take the relationship forward. During the visit, neither a Joint Statement was released, nor was MoU or any other agreement signed between the two countries. But, the visit was successful in improving the bilateral relationship that suffered a serious setback during pre-constitution days.

### **President on Constitution**

Stressing the need for involvement of all sections of society and taking care of the diverse sections of society, President Mukherjee urged Nepal to look at India's experience in the making of its constitution, but, also mentioned that it is up to Nepal to decide if any lesson can be learnt from it.<sup>i</sup> During his meeting with CPN-UML leaders, he reiterated India's commitment to engaging all sections of the society while implementing the constitution and also discussed the difficulties in the implementation of the constitution.<sup>ii</sup>

Delivering his 'Banquet speech' in Kathmandu on November 02, 2016, he said, "They (Nepali people) seek to achieve their objectives within a federal and democratic framework, taking on board all sections of society. They seek to accomplish a Constitution that responds to the needs of their diverse social fabric. We wish you all success in this noble endeavour."<sup>iii</sup> During

his speech at the Rashtriya Sabha Grih, Kathmandu, President Mukherjee retreated, “We wish the people and the Government of Nepal every success in the important task of implementing its constitution, taking on board all the sections of its society.”<sup>iv</sup>

### **The Janakpur Visit**

President Pranab Mukherjee visited Janakpur– an ancient religious city situated in the Terai region, offered prayers at Janaki Mata temple and attended a civic reception organized by Janakpur Municipal Corporation. Beside religious and spiritual allegiance, the visit is also being considered as an attempt to further strengthen India’s cultural and socio- economic bonding with Nepal, particularly with the Madhes region. Moreover, the visit to Janakpur reiterated India’s position on the constitution that it wants to take all sections of the society and parties on board in the “process of implementation of the constitution”.

During the civic reception in Janakpur, the president talked about ancient familial ties between Ayodhya and Janakpur, the importance of Janakpur as an ancient learning centre and “melting pot of diverse cultures and religions- Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism”. And, notably, he argued how the economic development of Janakpur or Madhes region is linked with the development of tourism, particularly the development of the Ramayana circuit. During his speech in Janakpur, he also stressed the need to pay adequate attention to the development of border infrastructure and connectivity for movement of people across the border.

### **Meeting with NC and CPN-UML leaders**

President Pranab Mukherjee met Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba, CPN-UML chairperson K.P. Sharma Oli, former Prime Minister and CPN-UML leader Madhav Kumar Nepal and other key political leaders and discussed the issues of mutual, bilateral and regional interests. The president’s meeting with the leaders of the key opposition party CPN-UML seems to be having diverse connotation. Was this an attempt to mollify CPN-UML to garner a ‘two-thirds’ majority to cross the barrier to amend the constitution for demarcation of the provincial boundaries? Many in Nepal and India believe that the meeting was also aimed to conciliate the CPN-UML to alter their current approach to politics which is based on anti-India sentiments and pro-China approach. Among the analysts, it was commonly perceived that the CPN-UML, at least, till the next national elections, would not prefer any departure from the current approach as it will help consolidate the support of CPN-UML in hilly and urban areas.

### **Commitment to support Nepal’s development priorities and post earthquake reconstruction**

President Pranab Mukherjee reiterated India’s commitment to support Nepal in its development priorities and post earthquake reconstruction works. Underlining the importance of the Indo-Nepal development partnership, President mentioned, “As Nepal’s closest neighbour, India takes pride in the achievements of the people of Nepal, and success of her development partnership with Nepal.”<sup>v</sup> President Mukherjee invited Nepali people to be a part of India’s “growth story,” saying that “India remains ready to extend all possible support in accordance with the requirements of the people and Government of Nepal.”<sup>vi</sup> The President stated that trade and

economic progress are the two key essentials pillars of socio-economic cooperation between the two countries. Underlining the importance of private sector in enhancing their economic engagement, he said “It is important that we encourage our respective private sectors to enhance their engagement.”<sup>vii</sup>

President Pranab Mukherjee underlined that “Government of India is also committed to assisting Nepal, as per its priorities, in post-earthquake reconstruction in the framework of the US \$1 billion assistance announced by it. This reconstruction will be taken up in the housing, infrastructure, health, education and cultural heritage sectors.”<sup>viii</sup>

### **President on Mutual Security Interests**

President Pranab Mukherjee stressed the need for consulting each other to safeguard mutual security interests. Speaking at the seminar organized by India Foundation-Neeti Anusandhan Pratishtan, he said, “As our security interests are interlinked, we must continue to consult and coordinate closely to safeguard our shared security interests.”<sup>ix</sup> Praising Gurkha’s contributions to the Indian Army in Pokhara, he said, “We are proud of the legendary valour and sacrifice of the Gurkha’s in the defence of India.”<sup>x</sup>

Given the porous border between the two countries, and its misuse of anti-Indian forces, India has been apprehensive about security at the Indo-Nepal border. During Nepali Prime Minister Prachanda’s visit to India in September 2016, the Prime Ministers of both countries discussed security issues, and the Nepali PM had assured India that Nepal will not let its territory to be used for anti-India activities.

### **The Pokhara Visit**

During his visit to Pokhara, President Pranab Mukherjee expressed gratitude towards Gurkha ex-servicemen of the Indian army for serving the Indian Army with commendable “courage and sincerity”. Addressing a congregation of the Gurkha ex-servicemen in Pokhara, Nepal, President Mukherjee said, “The ex-servicemen are the foundational pillars of the friendship between Nepal and India. The Indian Government and Indian Army are proud of the Gurkha soldiers and ex-servicemen. I, on behalf of Government of India, assure you that the Government of India will never step back in its efforts for the welfare of its ex-servicemen.”<sup>xi</sup>

It can be said that the visit was successful in further strengthening the relationship between the two countries ever without signing of any agreements or releasing any joint statement. The President’s rapport with the Nepali leaders across the political parties and his vast experience of dealing with Nepali affairs as an external affairs minister helped India to further consolidate the bonding between the two countries. Breaking protocol by Nepali President Bidhya Devi Bhandari to receive her Indian counterpart at Tribhuvan International Airport, Kathmandu was a special gesture. The President’s meetings with Nepali political leaders across parties were an attempt to create consensus on the issue of constitutional amendment. The itinerary for his Nepal visit itself reflects India’s endeavour to look beyond Kathmandu to consolidate its cultural, social and economic ties with Nepal. India and Nepal now need to push the bilateral economic and developmental agenda that was initiated after Prime Minister Modi’s first official visit to

Nepal in August 2014. There is a need for the implementation of the pending developmental and infrastructure projects without further delay.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

## **End Notes**

<sup>i</sup> Indian prez reiterates New Delhi's message, <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2016-11-04/indian-prez-reiterates-new-delhis-message.html>, 04 November 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Address by the President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the banquet hosted in his honour by the President of Nepal, H.E. Smt. Bidhya Devi Bhandari, <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/speeches-detail.htm?557>, 02 November 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Address by The president of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the civic reception, Rashtriya Sabha Griha (City Hall), Kathmandu, <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/speeches-detail.htm?558>, 03 November, 2016,

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Address by President at India Foundation- Neeti Anusandhan Pratishthan Nepal Seminar (November 03, 2016), [http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27568/Address\\_by\\_President\\_at\\_India\\_Foundation\\_Neeti\\_Anusandhan\\_Pratishthan\\_Nepal\\_Seminar\\_November\\_03\\_2016](http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27568/Address_by_President_at_India_Foundation_Neeti_Anusandhan_Pratishthan_Nepal_Seminar_November_03_2016), 03 November 2016.

<sup>viii</sup> Address by The president of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the civic reception, Rashtriya Sabha Griha (City Hall), Kathmandu, <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/speeches-detail.htm?558>, 03 November, 2016,

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Address by the President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee to the ex- servicemen of Indian Army at Pokhara, 04 November, 2016, <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/speeches-detail.htm?561>. 04 November 2016