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China-Nepal-India Triangulation

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This article is based on **“Xi’s Security Diplomacy”** that was published in The Indian Express on 15/10/2019. It talks about how China-Nepal convergence can affect India’s interest.

Recently, China's President Xi Jinping made a significant visit to Nepal, becoming the first Chinese President in over 20 years to visit the Himalayan country.

The visit seeks to accelerate the development of an ambitious trans-Himalayan corridor between China’s Tibet and Nepal (**China Nepal Economic Corridor**). However, it is China's **security diplomacy** that is more of a concern for India.

“Security Diplomacy” of China

Nepal’s northern border with China lies entirely with Tibet, China sees security cooperation with Nepal as critical in controlling the **Tibetan matters**.

- In this pursuit, China is following **security diplomacy vis-à-vis Nepal** (distinct from defense diplomacy).
- **Security diplomacy vs Defense diplomacy**
 - Security diplomacy seeks to expand engagement between the two countries, **not just in fields related to military engagement** but also to the police forces, intelligence agencies, border management organisations and law-enforcement authorities of the two nations.
 - In the case of neighbouring countries, security diplomacy leads to the dynamic interaction between internal political stability and the situation across the frontiers.
 - **Defence diplomacy** may include military exchanges, military sales, joint exercises, humanitarian disasters response training etc.
- The Chinese President visit also envisages signing of the **Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters** and an early conclusion of the **Treaty on Extradition**.
- China also promised to enhance the capacities of Nepal’s law enforcement agencies.

China Nepal Economic Corridor

In 2017, Nepal signed up to **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, that sought to create highways, airports and other infrastructure in the country.

Through **China Nepal Economic Corridor**, Nepal seeks to end Indian dominance over its trade routes by increasing connectivity with China.

- Earlier China proposed a trilateral **India-Nepal-China economic corridor**, which sought to provide multidimensional connectivity through the Himalayas.
- However, **India rejected this proposal** on account of \$50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as it passes through the disputed territory of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK).

India's Concerns

- **India's concern is that**, given the **difference in the strategic weight** of China and Nepal, **security diplomacy can be used as a tool by China** to interfere in the internal affairs of Nepal.
- Since **Nepal acts as a buffer state for India**, seeing it slip into China's sphere of influence, will not be in India's strategic interest.
- Also, China's interest in "security diplomacy" is not limited to Nepal.
- **China Nepal Economic Corridor** can lead to **China dumping consumer goods** through Nepal which will worsen India's trade balance with China further.

Way Forward

- **China's deep pockets** make it difficult for India to control the expansion of China's influence in India's neighbourhood.
 - Thus, it is perhaps better to rethink about refusing the Chinese offer to build infrastructure in India which can help India's overall trade and investment.
 - In this context, India can bargain with China about opening up its services for Indian IT workers and have freer access to Chinese markets for Indian goods.
- India must not deny every Chinese investment in infrastructure because of CPEC.
 - India must **revise** its stance on **India-Nepal-China economic corridor**.
 - The corridor provides a likelihood of greater tourism and people to people contact which is important for bridging the trust deficit that exists today between India and China.
 - It will also lead to the rapid development of one of the poorest regions in the world which lie in Nepal and parts of northern and northeastern India.

- Nepal has sought to increase connectivity with China since a blockade along its border with India resulted in several months of acute shortage of fuel and medicine in 2015 and 2016.

Though India has all the right of such blockade, however, **India must refrain** from such blockades as it **affects India's credibility** in eyes of Nepali citizens.

India should act as a bridge rather than a blockade in realizing Nepal's dream of becoming a land-linked country from a land-locked one.

Drishti Mains Question

India's continuous refrain from strategic convergence with China might not prove to be a good strategy. Analyse in the context of China-Nepal-India Triangulation.