

Impact of 2015 Earthquake on the Shifts in Internal and International Relations of Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The devastation generated by the 2015 Nepal Gorkha earthquake greatly affected the country's politics and security, impacting the lives of around 8 million individuals with 9000 recorded deaths, more than 22 thousand injured. Thousands of private houses, public building, cultural heritages and critical infrastructures were damaged. More than 30 districts of Nepal felt the surmounting consequences of the terrible aftershocks. The aim of the paper is to evaluate the shifts within the domestic discourse in Nepal's political happenings and also to look at the role of global actors in the humanitarian efforts in the country, filling the gaps left by state actors in the kerfuffle. The Constitution and the call for assistance by the central government were important in guaranteeing a certain kind of post-disaster stability and restoring as well as uplifting public morale and belief in the state systems. Adopting a qualitative method, through an analytical lens the study looked at the overall impact of the quake on Nepal's politics and the trends of bilateral, regional and global assistance, focusing on the major donor agencies and the role of Nepal's neighbouring states. There were several new developments and outlooks with regards to both state interests and the framework of disaster response. The paper also recognizes the importance of regional integration either by means of institutional instruments or through some other measure alongside a cohesive internal policy arrangement amongst the parties for future strategies aiming at effective disaster reduction and response.

Keywords: Assistance, disaster response, domestic politics, earthquake, Nepal.

INTRODUCTION

Nepal is the 11th most earthquake prone country in the world, and the 2015 earthquake was one of the biggest natural disasters the state has faced since 1934 (PDNA, 2015). The country's vulnerability to such incidents is accentuated owing to its demographic and socio-economic conditions. The April 25, 2015 earthquake had its epicentre in Barpak, Gorkha,

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and as per the *PDNA* (2015) prepared by the National Planning Commission Nepal, post-disaster, the quake and aftershocks resulted in around 8,790 deaths, 22,300 injuries, altogether affecting more than 8 million people, marking 14 out of 75 districts in the country as the “worst-affected” and 17 as “partially-affected.”

Public and private infrastructures, including homes, schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, hydropower plants, water supply system, and trekking routes were ruined. *PDNA* also assessed the damage done to the cultural sites, preserved monuments and centuries-old buildings, including seven UNESCO World Heritage sites, concluding that the cost of reconstruction and further preservation would reach approximately USD 6.7 billion. The earthquake had multidimensional effects. Politically, it created a significant pressure on political parties to draft and implement a constitution, assuring stability. Economically, it had an adverse effect on an already fragile economy. On March, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) had predicted a 4.6 percent growth for the fiscal year 2015 and post the quake, the new projection showcased a sharp decline, at 4.2 percent (Sapkota, 2015). The *PDNA*, updated in 2019, also assessed that the economic losses amounted to USD 9.4 Billion and the total economic losses were estimated at one third of Nepal’s GDP (National Reconstruction Authority, 2023). The World Bank projected in the fiscal year 2015-16, that an additional “2.5 to 3.5 percent of the population” - 700,000 people, had been pushed into poverty (PDNA, 2015).

The Government of Nepal as a response organized the International Conference on Nepal’s Reconstruction (ICNR, 2015) two months after the earthquake (25 June) to generate international support for reconstruction (GoN, MoFA, 2016). The aim of ICNR was to acquire support from identified global partners for reconstruction. According to the Ministry of Finance, there were a total of “58 countries and agencies participated the conference” (MoF, 2015). Foreign Ministers from various countries, as well as delegations from major international organizations took part in the event (MoF, 2015). Aid pledges totalled USD 4.4 million from donor communities and partners for rebuilding (NRA, 2023). The largest pledge came from India with USD 1 billion, followed by China’s pledge of RMB 3 billion (US\$ 483 million) (MOFA, 2016). ADB pledged USD 600 million, World Bank, Japan, USA, EU and UK pledged 500, 260, 130, 117 and 110 million respectively (MoF, 2015)

The National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) later established on December 2015 was authorised to manage the entire process, overseeing coordination of the reconstruction projects that foreign government agencies were handling, additionally directing work of development partners, donors, volunteers, civil society organizations (CSOs), local authorities and private actors (NRA, 2023). The article attempts to

look at the changes within the domestic scenario caused by the quake and how the presence of actors from the global community helped to level out the situation on the ground through aid, regardless of autonomous interests – emphasizing the significance of good will in international relations. It is a study of how the Constitution was as much a response by the Nepali government to soothe public morale post-quake as the call for international assistance, and how both were meaningful for public safety and safeguarding their morale in the state's institutions.

DATA AND METHODS

The nation-wide chaos that resulted from the earthquake somewhat led to the formation of a pivotal document in the form of the Constitution, while the situation on ground was almost of despair, where while national efforts were important, global assistance somewhat allowed for the country to obtain some form of stability. The study was conceptualized with the intent to showcase the role of disasters in creating new political spaces in national politics and look at the ways in how policies directed two ways – one was the effort to politically stabilize the country by adopting a formal process to promulgate the Constitution and the other to call for international assistance to sort out the devastations that would have otherwise been a deterrent to the overall effort to ensure an impression of peace.

The documents that were incorporated are based on the immediate response accorded by the states, in consideration – statements of the persons of interest, i.e., government bodies, state representatives in relation especially to internal dynamics, as well as the response shaped in the wake of the disaster and the takes presented by the state and non-state actors regarding the various forms and means of international assistance. It has included state publications like reports, official press briefs, and the likes for the primary phase and built on the ideas with literature from verified and widely recognized articles, media outlets and formal reports from governmental and non-governmental bodies.

The paper has adopted a qualitative method whereby there has been a rigorous study of the literature and information has been taken from verified bodies of work, in order to substantiate the claims made. It is based on available documents and data within the period of disaster response and is valid in the scope of the study, as such that it relegates what the scenario was structured as in the political purview of the nation's resilience and capability, which saw some changes in the following years with regards to disaster preparedness. The research combines various methods within the qualitative data collection method. It looks back on the development of political manoeuvres and steps of the government bodies in ensuring

morale and relief by collecting and comparing information from the reports and statements state actors of how the situation was processed on the immediate aftermath of the quake, by an intensive review of literature. It undertook a form of content analysis in looking at how certain words and concepts like assistance and interests were framed in formal documents as well as media outlets.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Impact on National Politics

In the first constituent election in 2008, the former revolutionary party, UCPN (Maoist) became the largest party in parliament and led the government. The first constituent assembly ended the 240 year-long monarchy, recognizing Nepal as a republic state. The UCPN (Maoist) led government could not rule long due to its confrontation with the Nepal Army and the assembly could not frame the constitution in the stipulated time because of the disagreement between major political parties on issues of federalism, form of governance, election model, etc (Mocko & Penjore, 2015). As a result, the second constitution election took place in 2013. The election was held by the bureaucratic government led by the Chief Justice as the political parties with increasing distrust in each other could not form their consensus government. The political parties were debating to finalize the long-standing issues in the second constituent assembly when the 2015 earthquake occurred and diverted their attention to the devastations, delaying efforts on the constitution-making process. However, the earthquake created pressure on them to sort out their differences faster and come to an agreement, while focusing on reconstruction.

With an urgency to begin reconstruction after the quake, Nepal's major political parties prepared a 16-point agreement on June 2015 opting for a resolution to their disagreements, moving towards finalizing the constitutional writing process and rebuilding the earthquake affected nation (Bhattarai, 2015). Many political leaders remarked along the line of the agreement that the constitutional deadlock had ended and they would focus on rebuilding (Mocko & Penjore, 2015, p. 211), resulting in the preliminary draft of the constitution. The massive earthquake of April 25 played a major role to accelerate the process. Regarding the issues of federalism, it was proposed and decided to divide the country into eight federal states. The rushed process, however, did mean that some states, particularly certain ethnic and indigenous communities in the Terai, did not agree with the reasons behind the demarcation of

the federal boundaries, and rose in protest asking for immediate revisions (Bhattarai, 2015).

Furthermore, before the earthquake, the Communist Party of Nepal (UML), the second largest party in the country, was in favour of directly elected prime ministerial system. Similarly, the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) as the main opposition stood the against parliamentary form of governance. The UCPN (Maoist) on the other hand was demanding the mixed electoral model with 50 percent directly elected and 50 percent proportionally elected in the lower house of the parliament. After the earthquake, the CPN (UML) left their demand for directly elected prime ministerial system. And the UCPN (Maoist) gave up their stance and agreed to the parliamentary system and they also agreed with the model of 60 percent directly elected and 40 percent proportionally elected. It proceeded to define the current power structure in Nepal.

Due to lack of elected representatives in the local government bodies, issue rose with regards to the coordination required for the distribution of relief materials and rehabilitating the earthquake victims. With the realization, the absence of local representatives was resulting in unwanted disturbances, the political leaders decided to hold the local election (Shrestha & Pathranarakul, 2018). The election of local government had not been conducted since 1997.

Four of Nepal's largest political parties came to table to sign an agreement (Bhattarai, 2015) mere 45 days post the disaster, and after a little more than three months on September 20, the constitution was drafted (Hutt, 2020, p. 380). Accordingly, the process that was delayed for more seven years took over 100 days to be inked (Hutt, 2020). The preparation of the document took place in a setting of "resurgent post-earthquake patriotism" and call for "national unity" (Hutt, 2020).

While the document initially proceeded with a 22-point agreement between UCPN-M, NC and UML, dated May 15, 2012, it required for compromises to be made on vital issues that faced disagreements from numerous sides (Hutt, 2020). These differences were mostly centered on the "form of government (presidential vs parliamentary; bicameral vs unicameral); the judiciary (constitutional court vs Supreme Court); electoral systems", and so on. Hence, despite four extensions to its term of office and the installation and dismissal of five different coalition governments, the first CA failed to produce a constitution and was dissolved in May 2012 (CRC, 2015). There was also caution around the general agreement among politicians that the disaster could possibly result in intensified levels interference from foreign actors, because the state appeared weak (Hutt, 2020).

The NC, UML, UCPN-M and Madhesi Janadhikar Forum – Loktantrik then moved

swiftly on June 8, 2015 to develop and publish a 16-Point Agreement that could give the groundwork towards implementing the constitution in a ‘fast track’ manner (Bhattarai, 2015). As per the agreement, the constitution would define a federal structure demarcated by the federal commission, with eight provinces named by a majority vote on the provincial assembly based on five criteria of identity and four criteria of capability (Bhattarai, 2015). The form of government had been a point of contention for some time, but the UCPN(M) had proceeded to register a note of dissent later on instead of actively opposing it. There was a settlement to work taking forward the essence of the agreement, with the local bodies being elected at the earliest (Hutt, 2020).

Within the domestic political interests, Pushpa Kamal Dahal was quick to defend his party in the signing of the 16-Point agreement, as argued by Hutt (2020), noting the June 13 interview he conducted with Online Khabar (p. 389), crediting the “People’s War” and the Maoists involvement within it for the enshrined ideas of secularism, federalism and inclusivity. He also noted that in the face of discontent within public sentiments towards the agitations in the state, the “earthquake gave the Maoists a ‘good excuse’ to change their position and compromise in the content of the constitution, on the understanding that it would thereby be promulgated speedily, leading to the break-up of the ruling coalition” (p. 390).

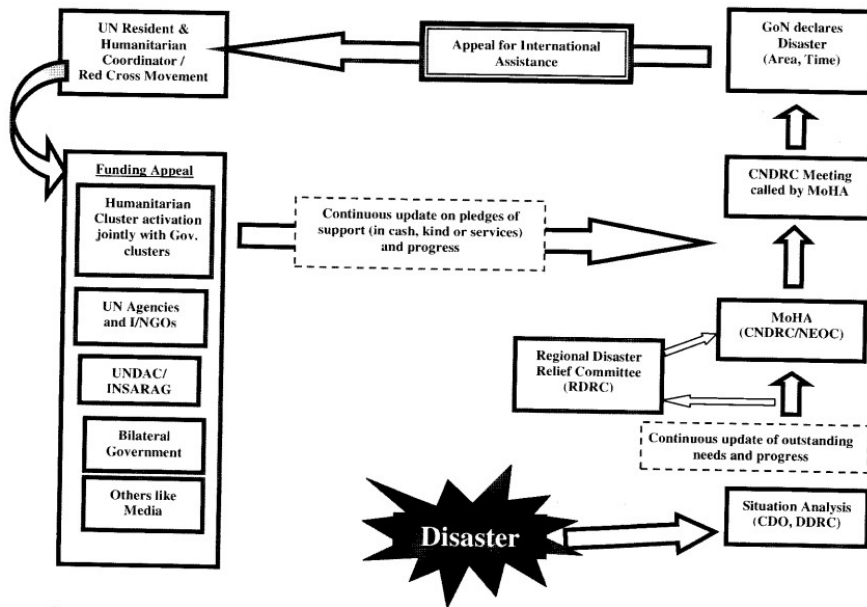
The Maoists moved nearer to the NC and UML positions as a consequence of the compromise deal of June 8, 2015 (Strasheim & Bogati 2016). The Chinese government was thought to have strongly opposed identity-based federalism as it feared a spill over of such ideas across Nepal’s border to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and had hinted to the Nepali government to avoid such designs (p. 8). Just five months after quake, the long-delayed constitution was promulgated with a sizeable majority of the constitution assembly (Ruszczuk & Robinson, 2018, p. 4). The other part of the government response to the natural disaster came in the form of the *National Disaster Response Framework* (NDRF) that assimilated the prospects and limits of international assistance in domestic response, helping to set the role of the central government in responding to such threats.

Call for Assistance: International Response and Role in Assuring Stability

The *National Disaster Response Framework* (NDRF) published on July 2013 was a tool for coordinating the earthquake response, facilitating decisions and instruction from the central government (Ministry of Home Affairs (MoFA), 2013), during the process. This gave cause for the national state apparatuses to integrate global assistance within their efforts:

Figure 1

National and International Assistance and Coordination Structure



Source: NDRF, 2013, p. 5.

As illustrated in the figure, under directive 4 titled *International Assistance for Disaster Response*, GoN can request for international assistance in times of great crisis. The GoN can put forth an appeal to foreign governments, institutions, global agencies like the Red Cross Movement and the UN Humanitarian Coordinator as well as national and foreign citizens for assistance “in terms of cash or services to respond to disaster through concerted national efforts and intensified regional co-operation” (p. 4).

The cabinet post identifying emergency areas appealed to international communities for assistance, declaring custom exemption to relief goods and visa fee exemption to the search and rescue (SAR) Team members and humanitarian actors. The UN model agreement was taken as a base (MoHA, 2015). In response to the Nepali government’s appeal, 34 countries gathered their resources and provided the much-needed support (GoN, MoHA, 2015).

Over time, 134 international SAR team from these countries answered to Nepal’s request for help. According to the PDNA (2015), there were “for SAR, 4,236 helicopter flights were used (GoN/private, with 7,558 persons rescued by air and 4,689 persons rescued by land.” Similarly, for SAR activities almost 90 percent of the security forces were directed towards it. Altogether, “22,500 civil servants, 65,059 staff of the Nepal Army, 41, 776 staff of Nepal

Police and 24,775 staff of the Armed Police Force, as well as 4,000 government and private health workers were mobilized to aid rescue and relief efforts” (PDNA, 2015).

Straightaway, the Nepalese Army moved towards establishing the Multi National Military Coordination Centre (MNMCC), helping in the organization of the international SAR that provided their services in the form of multinational military assistance (NA, 2015). Out of the many kinds of military assistance, air support was crucial, particularly because of the blocked and inaccessible routes that Nepal had trouble accessing through its limited air power.

The foreign military teams consisted of engineers, air support personnel, medical professionals and SAR experts from 18 different countries: Algeria, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Canada, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Poland, Singapore, Spain, Sri Lanka, Thailand, UK, and USA (NA, 2015). Their assets comprised of 23 helicopters – India provided 13, China gave 3 and the U.S. provided 7. A total 966 tons of relief materials were delivered by foreign aircraft, and the medical teams delivered care to 27,390 people (NA, 2015). SAR teams saved 19 individuals and pulled out 135 bodies from the ruins (NA, 2015).

India, first to respond, dispatched a team that landed within hours of the disaster (PDNA, 2015), and made a substantial pledge during the International Conference in Nepal’s Reconstruction organized in Kathmandu on June 25, 2015, to accumulate support for the post-quake reconstruction projects. Similarly, Nepal received immediate help and support from its northern neighbour China, and other South Asian countries Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan.

Teams from 14 countries with 1966 persons landed in Nepal withing the 72 hours of the disaster, and the rest came within a week (MoHA 2015). India had sent 23 military choppers and one C-17 aircraft, while teams from the U.S. and China were posted in Nepal for the entire period of the relief processes (NA, 2015). Relief came in the form of USD 483 million through China, USD 600 million through ADB, USD 260 million from Japan, USD130 million from the United States, and from World Bank through USD 500 million and European Union’s USD 112 million for reconstruction (Sharma & Barry, 2015).

The broader humanitarian community also worked in Nepal considerably in that time. The UN bodies, ICRC, IFRC, MSF, Oxfam, World Vision, CARE International, International Medical Corps, and Save the Children provided assistance (Cook et al., 2016, p. 6). Amongst these institutions, several had worked in Nepal with their own local resources, and this was important when coordinating operations and workforces from afield.

A month post-quake, the World Food Programme (WFP) provided “3,100 metric tonnes

of relief goods such as shelter, medical supplies, food, water, sanitary and hygiene goods” (Cook, Shrestha & Htet, 2016), excluding bilateral donations of other governments. The ADB (2022), similarly, while leveraging its resources with other donors gave USD 165 million in emergency loans, and emphasized coordination amongst national institutions, alongside its commitment to the 2005 Paris Declaration rebuilt schools, improved access under the “build back better” initiative, and contributed to reconstruction efforts.

With the inclusion of the support given by the different countries, there were around 87 medical teams prepared for treating the injured (MoHA, 2015). The National Emergency Operational Center was also operationalized and the Government of Nepal adopted ‘one door policy’ for relief distribution. Joined coordination was established with domestic and global groups, CSOs and private actors, with great priority given to “shelter, food, medicine and linking response to early recovery” (MoHA, 2015).

The tremendous response by the international community underlined the concern and goodwill for Nepal. This outpour was noteworthy, especially with regard to the valued physical assistance that saved a great number of lives, as well as the public confidence that was restored in the presence of presence of well-prepared international teams. By July 15, 2015, the teams, in coordination with the NA, had managed to rescue 19 people, gave medical aid to 27,390, evacuated 3,493 by air and gave 966 tons of relief materials (NA, 2015). Although the Nepal government widely accepted international assistance (of 4.4 USD billion), it did refuse aid on some occasions, like from Taiwan and most notably its refusal of the UK Chinook helicopters from the UK (Hutt, 2020).

The sections below further highlight the role and assistance offered by the neighbouring countries and the South Asian states as a whole:

Neighbouring Countries: India and China

Within a few hours of the quake, an Indian Air Force aircraft had landed to provide aid and further provisions were supplied through aircrafts carrying relief and mobile hospital. Materials and aids were also sent through the roads. Titled as “Operation Maitri,” one C-130J and IL-76, as well as with two C-17 aircrafts were deployed carrying 46.5 tons of relief, and along with came a team of 295 from the National Disaster Response Force (UDRF) (NA, 2015). They had managed to evacuate 5400 Indian and 30 foreign nationals, and 18 helicopters were also sent as a part of the operation (Chand, 2017). The Prime Minister’s Disaster Relief Fund was also mobilized and several state and non-state actors gave support in terms of their own capabilities (MoFA, 2016).

India sent the Indian National Disaster Response Force, Indian Air Force, Indian Army Medical Corps (PDNA 2015) as well as a SAR team, medical teams, medicines, and other emergency relief materials to Kathmandu (MoFA, 2016). It also sent additional support by means of 13 military airplanes, 3 civilian aircraft and 6 helicopters, alongside “10 tonnes of blankets, 50 tonnes of water and 22 tonnes of food,” to aid the earthquake victims (BBC, 2015).

Nepal-India relations have been identified by the close historical and socio-cultural ties, with economic interdependence along the open border. Responding to the request put forth by the Government of Nepal during the ‘Donor Conference,’ the Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj had commented that “Nepal and India are joined in both joys and sorrows” (MoFA, 2016). Then, India announced the biggest offer of USD “1 billion in grants and low-interest loans to Nepal,” comprised of grant (1/4th) and concessional loan (MoFA, 2016). The role of Indian during the disaster and post-disaster period was significant.

However, as India has often been charged with following the policy of ‘semi-colonialism’ and ‘expansionism’ in Nepal, several Nepali politicians have raised concerns regarding the political high-handedness and ‘micro-management’ of India upon Nepal’s domestic politics (Biswas, 2015). Similarly, during the disaster period, the role of Indian media was criticised in Nepal through social media for being insensitive and inhumane to the victims of the disaster. On 3rd May 2015, the hashtag #Go Home Indian Media was trending worldwide on Twitter (Times of India, 2015). The people of Nepal appreciated the Indian assistance during the crisis, but blame was directed towards the Indian news networks for their insensitiveness towards the victims. Due to this, the significant support of India during the crisis has often been overshadowed. There was also the matter of China and its growing presence in Nepal during and post the reconstruction phase that had India proactively engaged in the Nepal’s inner politics.

On the other side, China sent a big team for disaster relief. The first operation was conducted by a team of 40 rescuers, 10 medical professional and 12 seismic experts, and immediately USD 3.3 million was pledged as an emergency relief fund (MoFA, 2016). Nepal was also promised 186 tons of relief materials alongside 55 soldiers from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) (Chand, 2017). Post-reconstruction commitment given by China amounted to USD 483 million (Chand, 2017). Apart from this, was USD 3.2 million immediate disaster relief, and the dispatchment of a team of 500 professionals from the People’s Armed Police for road repairing (MoFA, 2016). While Beijing largely did not operate through a humanitarian

aid policy document, its involvement was a part of its rising international emergency relief efforts, running convergently with other key aid providers (UNDP, 2015).

Nepal received considerable support from the Chinese government and its people. Beijing dispatched relief materials, medical supplies and rescue equipment through its aircrafts and substantial assistance was also received from the Provinces, Autonomous and Special Administrative Regions of China (MoFA, 2016). As per MoFA (2016), “China pledged 3 billion RMB grant for the post-earthquake reconstruction programmes.”

Though, within the context of interests and with geostrategic consideration in mind, the Chinese presence came with some concerns. For instance, there was speculation within media networks that Taiwanese offer of SAR teams was refused due to Chinese pressure (Chand, 2017).

Similarly, other South Asian countries provided humanitarian relief support following the earthquake. Pakistan provided emergency relief materials like four C-130 aircraft with 30-bed hospital, specialists, tents, blankets and a SAR team to Nepal (MoFA, 2016). Likewise, Bangladesh responded by sending “a BAF Lockheed C-130B aircraft with 10 tonnes of relief materials, including tents, dry food, water, and blankets carrying a 34-member team consisting of 6 military medical teams” (Times of India, 2015). Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and the health minister also landed in Kathmandu with the medical team to showcase solidarity between the two countries (MoFA, 2016). The Government of Sri Lanka provided emergency relief by sending special air force carrying emergency relief materials, alongside specialist physicians and medicines (MoFA, 2016).

However, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could not be of much support. The SAARC Disaster Management Centre was made to establish and consolidate the regional disaster management system to reduce risks and improve response and recovery management. The disaster revealed the failure of SAARC in addressing such crisis. The region is vulnerable to disaster due to many reasons including socio-economic challenges, growth in technological fields, increasing and uncoordinated urbanization, as well as environmental risks and hazards. The centre was set up to address these issues. However, SAARC leaders could not activate and mobilize the centre due to interests and disagreements.

CONCLUSIONS

Beyond national politics was the importance of assistance and relief offered by neighbouring states – India and China – and countries like Japan, the US, South Asian nations,

as well as from donor communities and global institutions. The significance of an integrated approach was seen during the process. Also, for a developing state like Nepal, the support was essential in the relief and rescue operations and for reconstruction. Though states and institutions operate within their own interests, the aid and assistance offered signified the goodwill that Nepal accumulated throughout the years. While formal and proper integration within the region was still missing, there was a sense of cooperation that helped Nepal when its own resources were limited, and so, global powers, and institutions also found ways to expand their influence in such matters. Efforts of humanitarian relief efforts are used as tools of persuasion and disaster relief operations can be leveraged as a mean of securing strategic and political interest. Similar play of interests could be observed in the midst of humanitarian responses with some states, particularly those in the region, moving forth in their operations with certain interests.

The matter aside, the quake served as an opportunity to assess national capability regarding disaster response and management. There was decidedly a lack of coordination amongst various government bodies during the planning and execution of the national operations apparent even before the incident. Nepal is inherently vulnerable to such disasters and the quake served as a reminder of its sensitive position in the geographical planes.

There is also a concern dealing with regional responses and its importance. While individual countries and multilateral institutions provided aid and relief, the lack of integration within South Asia was quite visible. The ineffective SAARC mechanisms need to be addressed for a systematic response, and even if not through the regional body, there needs to be some form of viable integrated approach for support and assistance between the countries to deal with any such disasters in the future.

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