

FROM ROTI AND BETI TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS: EXPLORING INDIA-NEPAL RELATIONS

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Introduction

India and Nepal share a unique relationship often described as "Roti and Beti," signifying shared bonds of food and matrimony rooted in the historic Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed in 1950. Despite these solid cultural and historical ties, the relationship has faced various challenges over the decades. The shifting political landscape, particularly Nepal's oscillation between India and China, has added complexity to this bilateral relationship. This paper aims to comprehensively analyze the current state of India-Nepal relations, highlighting key issues, challenges, and potential areas for future cooperation. By understanding the multifaceted nature of these relations, policymakers can better navigate the intricate dynamics and foster more cooperative and mutually beneficial partnerships.

India-Nepal Relations: An Overview

India and Nepal established a "special relationship" by signing the historic Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950. Because of the same customs and cultural ties that unite the two nations, this unique relationship is frequently referred to as the relationship of "Roti and Beti" [shared bonds of food and matrimony] (Gupta, 2021). The 104-year-old despotic Rana oligarchy came to an end in 1951. Under Jawaharlal Nehru's mediation, King Tribhuvan Shah, the Nepali Congress, and the Rana Rulers reached an agreement in Delhi and decided to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly. During this time, there were tight ties with India. King Mahendra succeeded King Tribhuvan in 1955. He moved the foreign policy closer to China and away from India. Diplomatic ties were established with China in 1956. Nonetheless, Nepal adhered to an equidistance policy during the 1962 India-China War, and this course of action was continued afterward. The confinement of the Indo-Nepal border occurred in 1987 due to Nepal's pro-China policies under Rajiv Gandhi. This enhanced India's reputation as a big brother in the region. India-Nepal ties suffered in the 1990s and 2000s due to the Nepali government's refusal to support India in its conflict with Maoist. Later, once Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachand" rose to prominence as a politician and served as Nepal's prime minister, the country refused to assist India since Prachand was of Maoist

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descent and desired to reduce the use of force. India and Nepal had positive relations when the Nepali Congress was in power. The significant snag between India and Nepal emerged during the Madhesi people's protest against the newly approved constitution because they disagreed with its citizenship requirements. To combat Chinese influence, Indian Prime Minister Modi recently travelled to Nepal to Lumbini, the location of Gautam Buddha's birth, on the celebration of Buddha Purnima. Scholars welcomed this Buddhist diplomacy since, in recent decades, China has been actively establishing Buddhist tourist infrastructure sites in Nepal, such as the international airport at Lumbini, to expand its influence there (Devi, 2024).

METHODS:

The article uses a qualitative methodology to examine the various aspects of India-Nepal relations by combining historical analysis, case studies, and an assessment of current events. Among the methodology's components are.

Historical Analysis: Reviewing the historical context of India-Nepal relations, focusing on significant treaties, agreements, and political events that have shaped the bilateral relationship.

Case Studies: Examining specific incidents such as the 2015 economic blockade, border disputes (e.g., Kalapani and Susta issues), and China's increasing involvement in Nepal.

Current Events Review: Analyzing recent developments in trade, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic engagements between India, Nepal, and China.

Document Analysis: Assessing official documents, treaties, government reports, and scholarly articles to provide a comprehensive overview of the issues and challenges in India-Nepal relations.

Data sources include academic journals, government publications, news articles, and reports from international organizations. The analysis aims to identify patterns, challenges, and opportunities in the bilateral relationship and suggest potential strategies for improvement.

KEY ISSUES IN INDIA-NEPAL RELATIONS

Despite their close historical and cultural links, relations between India and Nepal are challenging. Prolonged border conflicts, trade and economic disparities, security and political concerns influenced by outside forces, and difficulties in cross-cultural and interpersonal interactions are some significant problems. These concerns must be understood to reduce tensions and improve collaboration between the two countries.

Border Disputes:

This has led to an estimate in Nepal that there are up to 54 disputed places along the boundary, spanning an area of almost 60,000 hectares. Among these, the ones about Tanakpur (222 ha), Mechi (1,600 ha), Susta (14,860 ha), Kalapani (37,840 ha), and Pashupati Nagar stand out because both India and Nepal claim portions of these regions. Officially speaking, only Susta and Kalapani are contested (Das, 2008). For India, Nepal has long been a crucial strategic ally. It borders five Indian states [Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Sikkim] at 1100 km (Suwedy, 2022).

Kalapani issue: In May 2020, the government of Nepal undertook an unprecedented move by releasing a new map of the nation. This map included not only the 60 square kilometers of territory (Kalapani) on the country's western border, which Nepal had first claimed in 1996 and over which the two countries had held fruitless discussions. It also added 330 square kilometers by unilaterally altering the Kali River tributary, the border between the two countries as established in the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, which established the border between Nepal and the East India Company. The updated map was unveiled as a proposed constitutional amendment on May 20, 2020, and was overwhelmingly ratified. President Bidhiya Devi Bhandari signed it into law on June 18, 2020. The growing wave of Nepali nationalism swept aside notions that such an irreversible step would reduce any space for negotiations with India. The majority of the opposing parties also supported the amendment with their votes. Nepal reopened its request for bilateral talks on the Kalapani problem after India released new maps in November last year, marking Jammu and Kashmir's new status as two distinct union territories: Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir. The Indian response was muted because the new map merely addressed the internal alignment of a provincial boundary and made no changes to the border with Nepal. Later, India proposed that talks may happen if the COVID-19 problem was resolved and regular travel between the two nations resumed. Given that the road crosses through Kalapani, Nepal saw it as an attempt by India to annex Kalapani in May 2020 (Sood, 2020).

Susta Issue: Gandak, as established in Article 3 of the Treaty of Sagauli, is the international border separating India and Nepal. When the treaty was signed, Susta was located on the right bank of the Gandak/Kalyani River under Nepalese territorial sovereignty. However, the river's flow eventually shifted, and Susta now falls on the left bank of the Indian-controlled Gandak River. The Gandak/Kalyani River's altered path led to the Susta territory dispute (Govil, 2022).

Economic and Trade Relations:

Both India and Nepal provide tariff and other duty adjustments on necessary and

produced items imported from each other under the terms of the 1971 Bilateral Trade Treaty (amended in 1991, 1993, 1996, 2002, 2009). Some of these treaties' main features are Primary goods: under the 2009 treaty, both nations extended their mutual duty-free access to imports of 14 primary goods to 16 more goods in 1991. However, several agricultural items are subject to import taxes in Nepal (Dutta et al., 2020). Following the failure of diplomatic and political negotiations, India adopted a more assertive stance to gain more significant clout. On September 21, 2015, it [unofficially] imposed an economic blockade. This is the most overt manifestation of India's discontent with Nepal's political leadership. The blockade was never an official action; India consistently denied any involvement and blamed the political instability in the Terai region for the situation. There were many disruptions in the flow of most necessities, including petroleum products, along the border between India and Nepal (Bhattarai, 2018).

Water sharing and Hydropower projects:

The two neighbors, bilateral relationship between India and Nepal, includes shared freshwater resources, common cultural concepts, and geographical boundaries. Many abundant rivers have their source in the Himalayas, including the four major Ganges tributaries, Sapta Gandaki, Sapta Kosi, Mahakali, and Karnali. These eventually reach the Bay of Bengal after winding through the plains and valleys of Nepal and India's level subtropical plains. Both the rich Indo-Gangetic plains of India and the low-lying regions of Nepal benefit from irrigation thanks to these rivers. India has been attempting to use its position in Nepal's hydroelectric power industry to improve investment prospects and strengthen its economy. The two nations have cooperated on several projects (Nayak, 2022). The two nations decided to cooperate on the water during the prime minister of Nepal's visit to India in April 2018. Although there was no concrete result from the bilateral meetings, discussions occurred. Hydro-developments can potentially improve relations between the two countries, but they are limited. The more significant difference in Nepal's perspective on sharing water resources with India stems from various national narratives and restricted profit margins (Dutta et al., 2020).

Political and Security Concerns:

Influence of External Powers: India and Nepal are two nations connected by an intricate network of relationships and affiliations spanning political, historical, sociocultural, economic, and geostrategic spheres. Chinese interests and policies in Nepal have evolved along with the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Chinese interests in Nepal used to be restricted to protect their security from problems originating in Tibet and to bring in some money through bilateral trade. China, meanwhile, has recently expressed a desire to gradually

lessen India's dominant position in Nepal by exerting more influence there. Because of this, China, in contrast to its previous "pro-establishment" policy, has taken a proactive and interventionist stance in Nepal. India offered in April 2018 to build an electrified rail connection with Indian aid to link Raxaul, India, with Kathmandu. China, on the other hand, is stepping up its aviation connectivity in Nepal. Air travel connects Nepal to Beijing, Shanghai, Lhasa, Guangzhou, Kunming, Chengdu, and Xi'an. Still, only a few Indian cities-Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and occasionally Varanasi and Bangalore-are accessible by air. With the opening of two new international airports in Lumbini and Pokhara, additional Chinese cities are expected to be connected to Nepal shortly after that (Jaiswal, 2023).

Internal Political Instability in Nepal: After the country's civil war ended in 2006, Nepal experienced nine years of transitional government before adopting its new constitution on September 20, 2015. The old unitary state with decentralized local representation was replaced by a federal democratic republic with three levels of government, local, provincial, and federal, under the new constitution. 2017 saw the first elections for the recently created municipal, provincial, and national legislatures. Left-leaning parties, comprising the largest group of ex-Maoist rebels, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), and the CPN (UML), gained a majority in the federal and six provincial parliaments.

However, conflicts within the coalition resulted in the collapse of the legislature and widespread protests in 2020 and 2021. On the proposal of then-Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, then-President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved the House of Representatives on December 20, 2020, and called early general elections for April and May of 2021. Critics of Prime Minister Oli accused him of corruption, mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic, and switching Nepal's longstanding partner India's support to China, even as the prime minister insisted that new elections were necessary to resolve internal disputes within the ruling NCP. Thousands of people protested daily after the parliament was dissolved, calling for the decision to be declared unconstitutional. The protests persisted during the first part of 2021 (Bhattarai & Roy, 2022).

PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE COOPERATION:

India and Nepal can enhance their future collaboration by engaging in political and diplomatic activities and increasing cultural and educational contacts despite their current hurdles. Both nations can create a more durable and advantageous alliance by concentrating on these areas.

Strengthening Bilateral Dialogues and Mechanism:

BIMSTEC and BBIN as Platforms for Enhanced Cooperation: All SAARC leaders were invited to Shri Narendra Modi's 2014 swearing-in ceremony as part of his significant

attempts to revitalize regional cooperation during his first term as prime minister. Subsequent Pakistani terror acts, however, weakened this initiative. Modi invited BIMSTEC countries in 2019, indicating a strategic change in his approach to this group. BIMSTEC provides Nepal with enhanced marine trade prospects and access to Southeast Asia, centered around the 'Bay of Bengal as a shared neighborhood. This can draw Buddhist pilgrims from Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and other Southeast Asian nations, increasing Nepal's exports and bolstering its tourist industry. BIMSTEC promotes collaboration in hydropower and cross-border river transportation to develop further economic connections between India and Nepal. BIMSTEC can act as a launching pad for Nepal's involvement in the Indo-Pacific region, which is a rapidly developing dynamic growth engine. Significant potential exists for sub-regional collaboration among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN). BBIN, resurrected in 2014 after being founded in the 1990s, focuses on trade, transit, water, and energy cooperation. This collaboration is demonstrated by the 2015 signing of the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement, which primarily facilitates multi-modal transportation via land, air, and waterways. By lowering expenses and carbon emissions, this integration can improve economic connectedness. One example of the possibility for regional energy cooperation is Nepal's power purchase agreement with Bangladesh to import 500 MW of electricity from the Upper Karnali Hydropower Project, created by India's GMR Group. Furthermore, incorporating Southeast Asian nations onto the BBIN power grid may unite the market and further integrate the area. The inaugural EU-India Global Gateway summit in 2023 exemplifies the European Union's involvement and highlights the importance of these projects on a global scale. However, issues, including poor border infrastructure and ineffective logistics, must be resolved to achieve BBIN collaboration fully.

Strengthening Bilateral Ties through Regional Connectivity:

Nepal must be connected to Indian states such as Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Sikkim. These states have historical, cultural, and economic ties to Nepal and extensive borders. Important transit routes like Jogbani and Raxaul facilitate important trade and mobility. Enhancing connectivity and collaboration are initiatives like the cross-border oil pipeline between Motihari and Amlekhgunj and the first broad gauge passenger rail service between Bihar and Nepal. In outcome, relations between India and Nepal may be significantly improved by utilising regional connections and strengthening bilateral discussions and mechanisms through organisations like BBIN and BIMSTEC. Regular high-level gatherings, organized conversations, and cooperative projects are crucial to solving issues and building a solid partnership (Saran, 2023).

Cultural and Educational Exchange:

The term "cultural and educational exchange" describes the intentional attempts made by nations to share and benefit from one another's educational and cultural experiences. This can include several initiatives and activities to foster international cooperation, respect, and understanding.

Cultural Exchange:

Arts and Heritage: The foundation of India and Nepal's relationship has been their strong historical and cultural links. The ancient links are highlighted by historical allusions like the marriage of Lord Rama to Goddess Sita from Janakpur and the Kirats' appearance in the Mahabharata. This shared heritage can be celebrated by planning cultural festivals, art shows, and performances with participation from artists from both nations. Joint cultural initiatives, for instance, can foster mutual respect in places with strong historical and religious linkages, such as Varanasi and Kathmandu.

Cultural Heritage Preservation: Working together to preserve and promote critical historical places and customs is essential. One example of a collaborative effort may be the preservation of Lumbini, the birthplace of Prince Siddhartha (Buddha), and Sarnath, the site of his Nirvana. This encourages travel and educational trips in addition to paying respect to the past.

Media and Film: Further strengthening links can be achieved by cooperatively producing documentaries, films, and other media representing common cultural values and narratives. To illustrate the entwined history, narratives such as those of the Koirala family and their participation in the Indian and Nepali freedom campaigns can be emphasized.

Tourism: Encouraging travel via cultural exchange initiatives helps strengthen interpersonal ties. This can be facilitated by setting up tourist information offices and designated routes, like the Lumbini-Bodhgaya or Ramayana circuits. For example, introducing air travel between Ayodhya, Janakpur, and Kathmandu would increase religious tourism.

Educational Exchange:

Student Exchange Programme: Study abroad programs expose students to various educational systems and worldwide experiences. For Nepali students in the past, places like Banaras Hindu University have been crucial. Improving these initiatives can carry on this custom.

Scholarships and Fellowships: Academic relationships can be strengthened by providing fellowships and scholarships to researchers and students. At Indian universities

like BHU and JNU, setting aside quotas for Nepali students can help advance educational prospects.

Faculty Exchange and JOINT Research: Knowledge in shared interest can be advanced by supporting cooperative research projects and facilitating teacher-researcher exchange programs. For example, collaborative research on cyber security, disaster management, and cross-border environmental challenges can benefit both countries.

Language and Cultural Studies: Establishing language learning facilities and cultural studies courses can promote better communication and understanding. University research and study centers for common languages such as Hindi, Maithili, and Nepali can help advance cultural literacy (Mathur, 2023).

CHALLENGES TO ENHANCING BILATERAL RELATIONS:

Given some critical obstacles, improving India-Nepal relations on a bilateral basis will not be easy. Historical tensions, geopolitical dynamics, and outside influences cause difficulties promoting a more cordial and cooperative relationship.

Anti-India Activities from the Soil of Nepal:

Anti-Indian sentiments and activities that stem from Nepal have long been a problem. Protests, political rhetoric, and occasionally lending support to organizations that oppose Indian interests are examples of these acts. The perception of Indian meddling in Nepal's internal affairs frequently feeds these feelings, straining relations and creating mistrust between the two countries.

Maoist Influence: Maoism has historically been backed by anti-Indian forces, and Maoists in Nepal frequently adopt a vehemently anti-Indian position. The Maoists' appeal has been attributed mainly to this anti-Indian feeling. It is difficult for India to negotiate with them or participate in peace initiatives because of their hostility towards India.

Extremist linkages: Maoists, the LTTE, and some Islamic fundamentalist groups who operate in Nepal via Pakistan's ISI have a history of collaboration. These organizations operate against India's interests by escalating anti-Indian sentiment and supporting the insurgency in Nepal.

Strategic Implications: Nepal's connections with China and Pakistan may strengthen due to the worsening Indo-Nepal relations. Growing antagonism between India and Nepal could encourage Chinese intervention, strategically disadvantaging India as a buffer state between China and India. India is highly concerned about its security in light of China's possible entrance into Nepal (Gupta, 2009).

India's Big Brother Attitude towards Nepal:

There is conflict because of India's alleged "big brother" perspective, which is manifested in its hegemonic status and occasionally oppressive laws. Nepal feels its sovereignty is violated or its interests are neglected, and these incidents feed this perception. Nepal wants to declare independence and oppose perceived hegemony, yet the ensuing hostility might obstruct diplomatic and cooperative attempts.

Framing and Perception: Nepalese people object to the stereotype that Nepal is India's "younger brother," widely used in Indian politics and the media. This language, often used by journalists, academia, and seasoned Indian politicians, is viewed as condescending and disrespectful of Nepal's sovereignty. Nepalese oppose the idea that India can be the "big brother" only because of its larger physical size and object to India's "micromanagement."

Historical Incidents: Historical occurrences like India's two-month-long blockade of Nepal in 2015 have worsened these beliefs. This blockade was a reaction to Nepal adopting a new constitution that India disapproved of; it shut off the supply of medicine, fuel, and other necessities. India encouraged opposition elements in Nepal's southern area. It exerted pressure to change the constitution, even though it had been approved by most of the country's democratically elected Constituent Assembly.

Economic Blockades: The blockade of 2015 is similar to another incident in 1989-1990 when India closed 13 of the 15 transit ports along its border as a punishment for Nepal buying arms from China. Many Nepalese see these acts as blatantly interfering with the domestic affairs of an independent, sovereign nation and as imperialist. Bilateral ties are severely strained by the belief that India is acting with "imperial hubris."

Diplomatic Tensions: India's policies, such as the economic blockades, show a lack of respect for the democratic decisions made by the Nepali people and serve to confirm the country's perceived hegemonic power. This has complicated diplomatic efforts and collaboration, causing deep-seated hostility and animosity in Nepal (Suwedy, 2022).

External Influence, such as China's Growing Presence in Nepal:

Another significant issue is China's increasing influence in Nepal. China's influence in Nepal has grown due to its diplomatic efforts, economic assistance, and infrastructure development. Due to this change in Nepal's foreign policy dynamics, India faces a problem. It must manage the intricate trilateral connections and deal with worries about losing its historical sway over the country.

India has historically been the leading donor to Nepal's development requirements, including initiatives for numerous roads, irrigation systems, electricity, and water supplies

and projects like Tribhuvan Airport, Tribhuvan Highway, and Tribhuvan University. China has, nevertheless, recently increased its presence in Nepal through connectivity and large-scale economic initiatives. For instance, China has built highways, convention centers, and hospitals. It has also conducted feasibility studies to connect its Qinghai railway-which connects Beijing and Shigatse via Lhasa-with Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Lumbini.

This Chinese participation coincides with India's efforts to expand rail access to five locations along the border between India and Nepal, including:

Certainly! Here is the information presented in table form:

India-Nepal Border Point	Indian Side	Nepalese Side
1. Raxaul	Raxaul	Birgunj
2. Jogbani	Jogbani	Biratnagar
3. Jayanagar	Jayanagar	Bardibas
4. Nautanwa	Nautanwa	Nepalgunj
5. New Jalpaiguri	New Jalpaiguri	Kakarbhitta

This table highlights the five points along the India-Nepal border where India is working to extend its railway connectivity.

Despite this, India remains Nepal's most important trading partner, making up 62% of all trade in FY 2019-20 instead of China's 14%. After the US and the UK, India was Nepal's third-largest partner by disbursement in bilateral development aid in FY 2019-20, with China coming in fourth. China and India, however, compete fiercely, especially as Chinese businesses frequently win the majority of building projects in Nepal by submitting the lowest bids (Jaiswal, 2023).

DISCUSSION:

The analysis presents a detailed picture of the historical relationship between India and Nepal in light of current issues. Relationships are nevertheless under stress due to political, economic, and security issues, necessitating careful diplomatic maneuvering. Building confidence, improving connectedness, and addressing shared interests through ongoing communication and cooperative frameworks are the keys to future collaboration.

CONCLUSION:

The relationship between India and Nepal is at a crossroads, characterized by deep cultural ties and significant geopolitical challenges. Improving bilateral relations is severely hampered by China's growing influence on Nepal, continuous border conflicts, and internal political instability. However, future collaboration is still possible, considering initiatives for

regional connectivity, improved bilateral dialogue, and cultural and educational exchanges. Nepal and India can establish a more resilient and mutually beneficial relationship by resolving past conflicts and adjusting to the changing geopolitical environment. A more secure and cooperative future can be achieved by taking strategic steps like utilizing regional cooperation platforms like BBIN and BIMSTEC and concentrating on shared interests in commerce, water sharing, and cultural assets.

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