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Nepal India Relations: Issues and Prospects

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Abstract

The present article tends to explore the contexts of Nepal-India relations consisting of issues and future possibilities. The Nepal-India relationship is based on common geography, history and culture, which is one of the pillars of South Asian diplomacy. Linkages between the peoples of the two countries are strong, borders are open and socio-economic linkages are strong. But the relationship has at times been plagued by unresolved border conflicts, economic blockades, water resource management and shifting geopolitical considerations. The key issues are the trade disparities, the Kalapani border dispute and Nepal's desire for increased autonomy in foreign policy. Besides, India's claimed meddling in Nepal's domestic affairs has often stoked nationalist feelings in Nepal, marring the relations between the two states. But both countries also recognize that there is a lot of space for further cooperation, especially in the fields of trade, tourism, cross-border infrastructure and hydro-power development. The concurrent inauguration of hydropower plants and better connectivity through roads and railroads are examples of commitment to mutual progress. The regional and global changes, especially the rise of China in South Asia, further underline the need for recalibrating the Nepal-India alliance on the basis of equality and mutual respect. It is of paramount importance to convert obstacles into opportunity to build confidence,

develop institutional frameworks, and resolve outstanding issues through dialogue. Ultimately, a pragmatic and forward-looking approach to maintaining and growing Nepal-India relations in the twenty-first century must be grounded in an appreciation of the sovereignty and ambitions of both countries.

Keywords: foreign policy, regional dynamics, hydropower cooperation, border issues, Nepal-India ties

Introduction

India-Nepal relations are deep-rooted and multi-dimensional. They are deeply rooted in the geography, history and culture. These two South Asian neighbours have had free borders, religious relations and similar cultural customs for years. According to Baral (2019), a number of these customs were laid forth in the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Nepal and India, which allowed for unrestricted movement of people and products and reiterated the historical ties that existed before present-day political agreements. Similarly, the two countries celebrate festivals such as Dashain and Tihar and possess strong linguistic and familial ties particularly in the border areas (Jha, 2015). Religious pilgrimage is a very important custom and millions of devotees from Nepal and India visit sacred places such as Pashupatinath in Kathmandu and Varanasi in India each year. The spiritual encounters foster bilateral alliances and mutual respect (Singh, 2020). International wedding traditions have also been crucial in sustaining intergenerational ties. Frequent political confrontations do occur yet the time-honored customs between Nepal and India are the foundation of their unique interdependent relationship (Baral, 2019).

Nepal and India have traditionally been closing to each other because of their proximity, common socio-religious traditions and cultural linkages. An open border between the two countries has been in place for a long time that has facilitated the movement of people, products and ideas between the two countries (Baral, 2012). This link is very old and has been described in Indian epics Mahabharat and Ramayan in connection to Nepal. The expanding impact of Buddhism and Hinduism further strengthened the cultural and religious linkages of the region (Whelpton, 2005). The modern history of Nepal-India ties began in 1815-1816 when Nepal and the British East India Company signed the Sugauli Treaty demarcating the boundary of present-day Nepal (Rose, 1971). Bilateral relations increased following the independence of India in

1947 and the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship provided for security and economic cooperation (Adhikari, 2018). Nepal and India have had a long history and rich culture and have strong diplomatic relations. The society has witnessed that Nepal and India are no exception to the phases of cooperation and conflict over the years following the changed contexts of political, economic and regional security concerns (Chaudhary, 2020). But there are some conflicts over commercial and border issues (Sharma, 2019).

India and Nepal have a historical relationship deeply rooted in their same cultural background. The common boundary of almost 1700 kilometers has also led to a major interaction of culture, language and religion (Jha, 2018). There are many communities on both sides of the border include the Madhesi, Tharu and Maithili which have established sociocultural linkages crossing national borders (Singh, 2017). Religious links have been a very important factor in the shaping of Nepal-India relations. Common festivities, rituals and pilgrimage routes have been born out of the prominent religions of the two nations, Buddhism and Hinduism, such as the holy city of Varanasi in India and the sacred Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu (Sharma, 2020). It has generated a unified civilizational ethos. Another important aspect is language. The languages commonly spoken in the border belt are Maithili, Bhojpuri and Nepali. It helps in interpersonal communication and intercultural understanding (Sinha, 2019). Moreover, marriages have also improved social cohesion and trust between the two nationalities (Ghimire, 2021). The periodic political and economic troubles have not been able to break the culture link between Nepal and India which has proved the longevity of their relationship. The common identities and cultural proximity are still very much vital in sustaining interpersonal interactions which in turn encourages collaboration and good-will at local level. Nepal and India have a long-established relationship with strong historical, cultural and economic ties. However, other challenges have marred bilateral relations, including commercial disparities, political misunderstandings and border disputes.

The unresolved concerns, the ongoing blockades and the unresolved border dispute in Kalapani have led to mutual distrust and popular animosity (Pant, 2020). Furthermore, Nepal's landlocked status and reliance on India for trade and transportation has at times been associated with fragility and imbalance in the bilateral relationship (Sharma, 2019). Nepal's attempts to expand its overseas links, notably its deepening relationship with China, could impact the long-

standing India-Nepal relationship (Bhattarai, 2021). The promise of better ties between the two countries when they remove these barriers mostly depend on constructive communication, respect for each other's sovereignty and readiness to debate difficult matters tactfully (Adhikari, 2022). These concerns need to be addressed for peace, development and regional cooperation to endure in South Asia. Nepal and India share a complicated and multi-dimensional relationship which is shaped by a range of geographical, cultural, historical and economic factors. Nepal and India have a close relationship; however, the relationship between the two countries has been inconsistent because of border disputes, trade imbalances, political interference, and strategic interests of both countries (Adhikari, 2020; Pant, 2021). Recent developments such as disputed boundary demarcations and shifting regional alliances have exacerbated the problem but also opened up new opportunities for cooperation. However, there are very few thorough studies that deal with the basic issues and seek for longer term potential for development, cooperation and mutual trust. This research aimed to evaluate the key difficulties that affect the Nepal-India relationship for a more stable and mutually beneficial alliance.

Literature Review

Nepal and India have long-standing cultural, social and economic ties, but a number of difficult issues have sometimes damaged their relations. The border concerns, especially the Kalapani, Lipulekh and Susta sectors are one of the primary reasons of the tensions. The two countries have recently produced new political maps, which have raised nationalist sentiments on both sides and have led to charges of expansion (Sharma, 2020). Another important issue is the question of unequal treaties and imbalances of power. Nepal has often claimed that bilateral accords such as the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship violate its sovereignty and are heavily tilted in favour of India. In Nepalese politics there have been suggestions for altering the deal (Bhattarai, 2018). Transit and trade have also been points of conflict. Nepal is a landlocked country that depends largely on the Indian ports for its foreign trade. Frequent and disruptive events as the 2015-2016 unofficial border blockade, damaged the economy of Nepal and heightened the people's hostility against India (Baral, 2017). Water management is another hot issue. There are a number of transboundary rivers between the two countries and disagreements over flood management, dam development and water sharing have been going on for decades. Lack of detailed agreements limits collaboration on hydroelectric projects (Jha, 2019). But both

the countries continue to realize the need of maintaining friendly and good connections. Dialogue and diplomatic engagement remain the preferred method of problem resolution, reflecting the deep human relationships that underpin the bilateral partnership.

Relations between Nepal and India are at a stage where practical cooperation and centuries old friendship have high potential for the future. India continues to be Nepal's largest economic partner and a major source of investment and remittance (Sharma, 2021), reflecting a long-standing dependence and the scope for further integration. Recent endeavors have produced a succession of favorable benefits for both countries including better commercial infrastructure, cross border train projects and energy cooperation, in particular hydropower. One of the major developments in the energy industry is the growing capacity of Nepal to export electricity to India, thus enabling win-win partnerships for sustainable development and regional stability (Pant, 2022). Nepal-India relations have always been people to people and cultural links: Dr. Ranjan Bhattarai Open borders, common faith and language contacts and familial ties strengthen these connections. Such informal relationships create goodwill, travel and grass-root level cooperation which operate as a buffer in challenging diplomatic situations (Jha, 2020).

Cooperation in the fields of public health, education and cultural preservation can enhance these relationships and help to establish lasting mutual understanding and trust between the peoples of the two countries. Both countries see the benefits of cooperation on border security, disaster management and transnational crime strategically. The outcomes have been more secured due to joint exercises, regular military exchanges and intelligence sharing (Bhattarai, 2021). But challenges persist. mostly because of fear of interference in domestic matters and border problems The creation of the diplomatic institutions like Nepal – India Joint Commission has helped to reduce the tension by providing an open platform for discussion and expression of issues for both the parties (Thapa, 2023). The future of Nepal-India relations depends on the ability of the two governments to resolve complicated matters with the greatest stress on mutual respect and sovereignty. Opportunities for collaboration to venture into new areas like tourism, internet commerce and climate change adaptation The Nepal-India relationship has a bright future and has enormous potential to boost growth and collaboration in the coming years through positive engagement of both sides (Pant, 2022).

The literature on Nepal-India relations is substantial, but there are many unaddressed issues both on chronic problems and new chances. The current research is largely focused on the political ties of the two countries, territorial issues and historical linkages (Muni, 2016; Baral, 2019). However, a detailed empirical analysis of shifting socio-economic dynamics in South Asia is missing, especially in the context of globalization and changing geostrategic ambitions (Pant, 2020). For example, there is less information on the effect of India's economic policies on Nepal's growth path, especially in terms of trade imbalances and the construction of infrastructure close to the border. And, while the security aspect and water sharing issues have been explored by scholars (Singh, 2017), there is not much research on non-traditional security threats such environmental difficulties, migration and international crime. More research is needed to know the role of subnational actors including local governments, companies and civil society organizations in influencing bilateral ties (Jha, 2018). Moreover, most of the study on people-to-people connectivity and cultural exchanges are oriented on macro-level diplomatic narratives and frequently lack a holistic grasp of the grassroots perspective. Finally, a serious scholarly assessment is still missing despite the highly hopeful policy statements on the possibilities for future partnership in the fields of energy, tourism and digital connection. To obtain a holistic view of Nepal-India relations and to contribute to the development of sustainable policy solutions, multidisciplinary research incorporating political, economic and sociocultural dimensions are needed (Sharma & Thapa, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Nepal-India relations are complicated, based on a history, geography and changing politics. According to Pathak (2018) and Bhattarai (2016), the open border and strong socio-cultural ties facilitate cooperation but also pose problems linked to migration and security. Theoretical frameworks such as realism (Adhikari, 2020) reveal Nepal's foreign policy concerns over sovereignty and territorial integrity, notably during disputes such as the Kalapani border problem. Constructivist approaches highlight the part played by shared cultural identities and the impact of nationalist sentiments which are growing in both countries and which can either reduce or enlarge the gap (Sharma, 2019). Upreti (2012) notes that the economic over-dependence of Nepal on Indian markets and transit routes produces asymmetrical relationships and often leads to conflicts on autonomy and self-determination. The liberalist methods have suggested that the

multilateral forums and conversation as advocated by Nepali politicians are important instruments for conflict resolution and regional integration (Dahal, 2015). Nepali scholarship, notwithstanding periodic friction, continually points to the need for properly calibrated engagement, mutual respect and pragmatic diplomacy for a healthy Nepal-India relationship, which is vital for regional peace and development.

Methodology

This qualitative study on Nepal-India relations utilizes the document analysis methodology to analyze the dynamics of the past and present of the two countries. The study is based on a systematic review and interpretation of governmental agreements, official communications, policy papers, historical records, media, scholarly publications and other primary and secondary sources. Each report is scrutinized for comparable themes, shifts in policy and the evolution of the bilateral discussion. Thematic coding helps in uncovering the patterns and storyline that define the link and understanding in depth significant topics such as border conflicts, trade, cultural exchange, and political cooperation. The results are valid since each document is assessed for relevance and reliability. This is a detailed and contextualized account of Nepal-India relations based on evidence from written records and viewpoints of scholars.

Thematic Analysis

Issues of Nepal India Relations

The extensive border between India and Nepal has resulted in close interaction between individuals, trade and cultural exchange for decades. But it has also caused a lot of bilateral concerns and difficulties. International crime such as smuggling of illegal trade and people trafficking is very difficult to combat. The relaxed border restrictions have enabled criminal networks to operate, creating security issues for both countries (Sharma, 2020). Another problem is personal mobility. Open borders mean free movement of people but also make it more difficult to track and control migrants. This leads to social and demographic problems, especially inside border communities. Free migration is feared by some political groups of Nepal to jeopardize local job possibilities and strain public resources (Adhikari, 2019). Also, the open border sometimes comes into sharp focus during political turmoil like border battles or economic blockades. For example, the diplomatic relations have been sometimes strained over the discrepancies in the territorial limits of localities like Kalapani, Lipulekh and Susta (Jha, 2021).

Communities easily cross the border, which creates complications occasionally with local tensions and misinformation. Yet both countries regard the border as having strategic and historical significance. The issues of security and management have been discussed in the context of security and management issues (Embassy of India, Kathmandu, 2022). But the co-operation has to be sustained, measures done to foster confidence and confront the challenges posed by the open border. Nepal and India share history and culture, yet the relationship has seen numerous ups and downs due to many factors. One of the major sources of tension are the border disputes, which include the Kalapani, Lipulekh and the Susta regions. Sometimes these conflicts have developed when a government has undertaken particular specific actions that the other country has perceived as unilateral or intrusive (Singh, 2020). Disputes over borders can create mistrust and tensions and have a major impact on the attitudes of a society. Another good source of tension is the feeling that you are butting in on someone else's private business. India has flagged the issue of security and stability in the Himalayan region in the context of China's growing power. However, Nepal has often accused India of undue interference in its political affairs (Adhikari, 2021). These issues have led to strains in bilateral relations, and at times, public protests and diplomatic stand-offs. Economics is a very large aspect of the relationship.

Nepal depends heavily on India for trade and transit practically. Sometimes, India has leveraged this dependency to serve its goals, such as the unofficial embargo in 2015 (Sharma, 2017). The relationship has pushed Nepal to seek more economic independence and a wider pool of corporate partners. Finally, the two most major areas of conflict are the management of water resources and the sharing of transboundary rivers. The two countries frequently accuse one another of non-cooperation and conspiracy and there are recurrent disagreements on dam development, flood management and equitable sharing of water resources (Pant, 2018). The remaining concerns continue to impact trust and cooperation between the two countries. Border issues, economic dependence, political misunderstandings and national sensitivities have often jeopardized the historically strong relations between Nepal and India. Both countries, however, must give considerable emphasis to respect for each other, open communication and cooperative problem solving in order to transcend these problems.

Regular diplomatic contact means problems are dealt with proactively rather than reactively and open lines of communication can help dispel misunderstandings and develop

confidence. Economic cooperation can be re-imagined beyond aid and trade imbalance. Joint ventures in hydropower, tourism and cross-border infrastructure could foster economic interdependence between the two countries for the benefit of their citizens. Educational exchanges, cultural events and tourism projects will enhance people-to-people linkages and further strengthen the social bonds between the two countries. Border issues should be also solved peacefully and on the basis of previous treaties. Joint border commissions, neutral observers when needed and mutual respect for each other's sovereignty can turn irritants into possibilities for long-term stability. By adopting such methods, Nepal and India can alter their bilateral relationship from one that is mostly conflictual to one that is cooperative and partnership-based in the region.

Prospects of Nepal India Relations

Nepal and India share a long history and cultural and economic links that have shaped their bilateral relations for many a year. They could maintain their cooperation in the future, especially in the fields of people-to-people communication, hydropower, trade and transportation (Chaudhary, 2021). The two countries have agreed to deepen their collaboration through frequent diplomatic discussions and high-level visits to discuss common concerns and enhance regional stability (Sharma, 2020). Trade relations are expected to strengthen with India, Nepal's biggest trading partner and a major source of foreign investment. Infrastructure development can have a role for the mutual growth, particularly in the field of cross border rail and road connectivity and energy cooperation (Adhikari & Mishra, 2022). Nepal can be a regional energy hub for sustainable development and both economies can be benefited from the cooperation in hydropower projects (Karki, 2019).

Practically political tensions and border restrictions are barriers to cooperation (Bhattarai, 2023). To overcome these difficulties extensive communication and respect for previous commitments would be required for long term progress. Regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Collaboration (SAARC) are taking on an ever more significant role in working together on more general issues like as disaster management and climate change (Shrestha, 2021). With the common interest of Nepal and India, the future of relations between the two nations seems promising as long as the channels of communication are kept open and both the countries keep their respective interests in mind. If the diplomacy and

cooperation on the critical issues succeeds, the bilateral relationship can be a model for regional cooperation in South Asia.

Nepal and India have significant geographical, cultural and historical linkages which provide a solid footing for the bilateral relations between the two countries. The two countries should make open and persistent diplomatic engagement a key priority to strengthen relations. Track-two diplomacy, joint commissions and frequent high-level visits all help to resolve conflicts, create confidence and new areas of collaboration. Open communication and reciprocal respect for each other's sovereignty and sensitivities will foster cooperation and political confidence. There's so much chance for both sides to thrive through working together economically. "The two countries can also create new opportunities by encouraging investment in key sectors like hydropower, tourism and agriculture, facilitating cross-border trade and speeding up customs clearance. Projects of collaborative infrastructure such as highways, railroads and border crossings will not only promote connectedness but also personal relationships and local economy. The dissemination of information and creation of special economic zones will likely lead to faster economic integration. Another important area of cooperation is the management of water resources.

The two countries also share some of the major river systems and can interact on issues of flood management, irrigation and generation of power. Joint research, data exchange and the creation of early warning systems can help prevent disasters and ensure the sustainable use of shared water resources, benefitting millions of people on both sides. Security cooperation continues to be a key element in the stability of both countries. Intelligence sharing, collaborative training programs and regular interaction among the security agencies might help prevent cross-border crimes, smuggling and terrorism. Good border management will foster peace and security on the shared boundary, via the use of technology and engagement of the community. Last but not least, community-based projects, cultural events and educational exchanges to promote understanding and tolerance will build interpersonal links. The two countries will improve their relations through scholarships for students, cultural preservation projects and cooperation in sports and the arts. Based on their mutual values and interests, Nepal and India can create a strong and forward-looking partnership for the future.

Discussion

It is a great opportunity to use a number of international relations theories to make sense of the existing issues and likely future changes between Nepal and India. The bilateral interactions between the two states are still dominated by the realist theoretical paradigm which emphasizes the importance of state interests, security and power relations. Nepal has always been an important part in India's strategic calculations given its landlocked situation between two regional heavyweights, China and India. The protection of the Northern border and the protection of regional dominance can be described within the paradigm of realism in analyzing India's policy towards Nepal (Baral, 2012). This angle often creates problems when Nepal seeks to be more independent in its foreign policy or strengthen ties with China, as was evident during the 2015-16 border blockade. The liberal philosophy, by contrast, is hopeful in its outlook and focuses on the possibility of cooperation, interdependence and institutional engagement. As per liberal theorist (Sharma, 2018), "Nepal and India have strong cultural, historical and economic links which can be utilized to resolve conflicts and promote mutual development". The liberal focus on interconnection is evident by the open border, the many people-to-people relationships, and collaborative ventures such as trade agreements and hydropower development. But the occurrence of border and trade conflicts such as the Kalapani incident points to the limitations of liberalism in the absence of strong and just institutional frameworks.

The constructivist worldview is an illustration of how identity, perceptions and history shape bilateral partnerships. The drafting of treaties such as the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship and the ongoing discourse on national sovereignty and territorial integrity is profoundly interwoven in the development of national identities by political elites and civic society of both countries (Thapa, 2020). Mutual hostility and occasional outbreaks of nationalism can prevent diplomatic solutions and foster an atmosphere in which genuine compromise is unattainable. It is the interplay of these theoretical frameworks which will determine the future chances of greater Nepal-India ties. Addressing realist security concerns, improving liberal institutional linkages and establishing a common constructivist conception of identity and values may provide a more secure and effective collaboration. Sustainable success requires respect for sovereignty, commitment to communication and awareness of each other's home requirements and past experiences.

Nepali view is that India and Nepal have an intimate historical relationship, with the odd war. Nepal generally sees its relationship with India in terms of national identity and sovereignty. It raises alarm over the Indian meddling in the domestic affairs of Nepal (Adhikari, 2018). Trade embargoes, border conflicts and discriminatory treatment under treaties such as the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship have occasionally strained bilateral relations (Muni, 2016). Nepali academics and politicians typically call for a more equitable relationship of respect and non-interference and emphasize Nepal's right to seek a variety of international alliances and conduct its foreign policy on its own (Poudel, 2020). India views its ties with Nepal as strategically important because of a common history, culture and open borders (Baral, 2020). India views Nepal as a crucial partner in its security architecture and a vital element of its "Neighborhood First" policy (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). Indian observers also cite historical friendliness, people-to-people ties and commercial relationships between the two countries. However, India is wary of Nepal's growing engagement with other countries, especially China, as this may undermine India's historical regional primacy (Pant, 2019). Indian authorities constantly call for deeper engagement, development assistance and infrastructure connectivity to keep the relationship with Nepal on good terms.

Conclusion

In short, Nepal and India have a unique and complex relationship due to shared history, culture and geography. The two countries have a long history of relationship between them and have had many challenges including border skirmishes, trade imbalances and occasional political differences. If not addressed gently and respectfully, such concerns could threaten the growth and cooperation both countries want. But there are still great opportunities of Nepal-India relations. There is significant prospect in collaboration in fields of trade, infrastructure development, energy cooperation and people to people ties. Better links, more economic integration and open communication may benefit the two countries. Nepal and India can overcome the present problems and develop a better and a more resilient cooperation for the future by focusing on common interests and respecting each other's sovereignty. In the end, sustained engagement, confidence-building measures and a forward-looking strategy will be needed to achieve the full potential of Nepal-India relations. Nepal India ties are still traditionally favored by the historical, cultural and economic links of long standing. Both

countries have much to gain from tighter cooperation in trade, hydropower development, infrastructural connectivity and regional security. India is Nepal's largest trading partner and a major source of investment and there are many opportunities to further economic integration. Renewable energy and cross-border infrastructure projects are another area where cooperation may speed up progress on both sides. Certainly, there are problems, such as border disputes and occasional political misunderstandings. But the solid foundation of people-to-people exchanges and tireless diplomatic efforts are there for the future growth of bilateral relations.

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