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Role of the Belt and Road Initiative in Redefining Nepal's Geopolitical Position between India and China

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ABSTRACT

Nepal's participation in Belt and Road Initiative has significantly introduced a new dimension in its geopolitical positioning between India and China, raising concerns about how connectivity impacts the autonomy and leverage of smaller states caught in Great Power Competition. Existing literature have largely analyzed Nepal's involvement in BRI through economic and infrastructural perspectives, and have frequently overlooked its profound geopolitical, and perceptual significance especially in the context that Nepal has been historically functioning under asymmetric dependencies. To address this gap, this study reframes BRI as a catalyst for geopolitical redefinition and argues that Nepal's involvement in BRI represents a strategic and discursive shift rather than merely an economic pursuit, wherein infrastructures function as a medium for geopolitical advances. This paper examines how BRI enhances Nepal's symbolic agency, spatial centrality, and diplomatic maneuverability in the shifting dynamics of regional politics. It contributes to small state theory by demonstrating how a nation can generate symbolic and strategic value from connectivity initiatives, even in absence of the significant economic gains. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative and analytical approach, drawing on secondary sources including policy documents, reports and comparative case studies. The analysis is framed through structural realism, hedging theory, small state diplomacy, connectivity politics, and critical geopolitics, supplemented by insights from Himalayan Frontier Theory. The findings highlight that Nepal's engagement with the BRI extends beyond economic alignment, and is accompanied by evolving material and discursive dimensions in Nepal's geopolitical positioning, both internally and externally.

Introduction

Nepal's geopolitical identity has undergone a strategic redefinition from a fixed buffer state between India and China to a more dynamic actor, consistently seeking to adapt regional circumstances in its favor to enhance its strategic relevance and connectivity options (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2018). This strategic redefinition has been facilitated by two major agreements with China: among others, - the Transit and Transportation Agreement and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreements. Although the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the BRI

was formally signed in 2017, the 2016 Transit and Transportation Agreement—concluded in the aftermath of the 2015 blockade—was already shaped by intense discourse surrounding the BRI and was undertaken with aspirations for future BRI-led connectivity infrastructures.

The redefinition of Nepal's geopolitical position implies a series of dynamic actions and efforts that bring fundamental changes to its strategic roles, perceptions, and leverage both internally and externally. This redefinition does not always follow a linear path of advancement or decline; rather it embodies continuous efforts at strategic recalibration through which Nepal negotiates its position amid various internal and external shifting environments. In this regard, Nepal presents a particular relevant case for the study of such geopolitical shifts. Nestled between India and China, two economic giants and nuclear powers, marked by regular standoffs, Nepal remains at the center of their rivalry, making it suitable case to evaluate such strategic redefinition. India's economic and infrastructural predominance along with Nepal's structural limitations has long produced an asymmetric dependence of the latter on former (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2018). In this context, Nepal's engagement with the BRI has introduced new connectivity schemes that provides strategic routes and leverage alternatives beyond traditional India-centric approaches (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2018).

Against this backdrop, the main argument of this paper is that Nepal's involvement in the BRI represents not merely infrastructural initiatives and economic aspirations, but a perceptual and diplomatic transformation, in which symbolic meanings and narratives outweigh economic considerations. However, much of the existing literature remains confined to tangible and economic aspects, neglecting the shifts in perceptions, diplomacy and narratives that exist with such engagement. This paper aims to address this gap by analyzing how the discourse, symbolic positioning and perception shape Nepal's geopolitical identity. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative analytical approach, drawing on secondary sources including policy documents, reports and comparative case studies surrounding connectivity initiatives. The analysis is framed around three dimensions, namely strategic behavior, spatial and economic dimensions, and diplomatic and perceptual shifts. Comparative case studies of selected projects around the globe are employed to situate Nepal's BRI involvement to confirm small and middle-countries' responses in general rather than analyzing them in their own perspective. The framework of the paper integrates a chronological review with thematic analysis, drawing upon official policy documents, scholarly works and comparative geopolitical reasoning to analyze how Nepal's geopolitical identity is shaped by connectivity politics. The analysis is theoretically grounded in structural realism, hedging theory and small state diplomacy, connectivity politics, and critical geopolitics, contextualized by insights from Himalayan Frontier Theory.

While the BRI's tangible implementation in Nepal remains at an early and uncertain stage, numerous challenges—particularly regarding transparency and economic viability—may persist even after its implementation. In this context, this paper is an attempt to illuminate the initiative's potential strategic impact. This paper, therefore shifts the focus from empirical or technical evaluation toward the perceptual and strategic realms through which this initiative can be understood as reshaping Nepal's geopolitical role. For this reason, the article adopts an anticipatory lens that treats the initiative as an evolving framework rather than a completed enterprise. Structurally, the paper is divided into five sections. Following the introduction,

the second section highlights the theoretical and conceptual framework, third section reviews Nepal's traditional geopolitical order along with Nepal's engagement with the BRI; the fourth section analyzes how Nepal's participation in the BRI brought differences in strategic discourses, perception and diplomacy (analysis and discussion), and the final section concludes with key policy recommendations.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To examine how the BRI is redefining Nepal's geopolitical position between India and China, the theoretical foundation of this paper synthesizes various relevant international relations theories and concepts. The core of Nepal's evolving strategy can be understood through the interplay of three factors: its structural position between two giants, the agency of its political leadership, and the constraints and opportunities presented by its physical geography (Baral, 2022). This section employs multiple relevant theories, with each highlighting dimension which the other might overlook. Together, these theories provide a lens through which Nepal's constrained autonomy amidst systemic pressures and great power rivalries, as well as how it strategically engages with both the neighbors can be understood.

Structural Realism

Structural realism, also called neorealism, as articulated by Kenneth Waltz in 1979, argues that the primary determinant of state behavior is the anarchic structure of the international system, where states seek survival (security) through power balancing. Smaller states are constrained by systemic pressure originating from stronger neighbors rather than by internal factors (Quinn & Gibson, 2017). Within South Asia, the India-China rivalry has formed a regional subsystem in which Nepal is situated as a small state with limited agency but significant strategic value (M. Thapa, 2025).

Leo E. Rose, even before the term neorealism was articulated by Kenneth Waltz in 1979, described about the foreign policy and strategies Nepal adopted for survival in ways that aligned with neorealist principles. In *Nepal: Strategy for Survival*, he highlights how Nepal, as a buffer state, strategically balanced its two neighbors, India and China, to avoid domination by either. This hedging strategy, developing relations with one to counter the influence of other, was not Nepal's autonomous choice but a structural compulsion because of the then regional anarchic conditions (Rose, 1971). Powerful states are always competing to establish their hegemony in the region and smaller states like Nepal must align their policies not according to autonomous preferences but to avoid provoking stronger powers. In South Asia, China's BRI and India's initiatives under its Neighborhood First Policy increasingly compete with each other. This competition stems from India viewing the BRI as a challenge to its primacy in the region and China viewing Indian projects as limiting its legitimate strategic reach (Pant, 2018). From a neorealism perspective, this rivalry is clearly a zero-sum dynamic, where relative gains are calculated and any strategic gain for one power is taken as the loss for the other (Waltz, 1979). From neorealist point of view, Nepal's alignment with the BRI can be interpreted as an adaptive response to asymmetric dependence rather than an autonomous choice; whether this redefinition enhances Nepal's value within the regional order ultimately depends on its diplomatic capacity and internal governance.

Hedging Theory and Small State Diplomacy

While structural constraints and an anarchic environment dominate, leadership, especially of small states, adopts hedging strategies. Hedging is an insurance-seeking policy under conditions of high uncertainty and high stakes; a rational strategy that avoids taking sides or becoming locked into a rigid alignment. It involves a calibrated mix of balancing and bandwagoning designed to minimize strategic risk (Kuik, 2021). This strategy has long shaped Nepal's foreign policy, enabling it to maintain strong traditional ties with India, while gradually deepening ties with China. For example, since the time of the founder of modern Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah, Nepal's foreign policy has been guided by 'Yam Theory' that incorporates maintaining friendly relations with northern as well as southern powers (Joshi, 2023). Similarly, Nepal has pursued a policy of non-alignment since the Bandung Conference of 1955, as well as policies of equidistance and equi-proximity, to safeguard its sovereignty and survival (Baral, 2022). This strategy seems to be the most viable option for small state like Nepal, as it seeks to maximize benefits while simultaneously guarding against threats from both rising powers through diplomacy, economic pragmatism and multilateral engagement to offset its material limitations between India and China (Dahal, 2021). Nepal's participation in the BRI aligns with its hedging policy, which seeks diversification and autonomy and views connectivity not merely as infrastructure but as a strategic tool between India and China (Dahal, 2021).

Connectivity Politics and Critical Geopolitics

Connectivity politics, along with critical geopolitics interprets the infrastructure projects not just as developmental tools but as instruments of power that reshape geographical spaces and diplomatic narratives (Paudel, 2022). In this way, these theories explain that connectivity projects such as China-led BRI and India-led various projects under regional initiatives serve dual purposes: enhancing connectivity and extending geopolitical influence in accordance with their strategic interests. From this point of view, Nepal is not just a passive beneficiary of the regional connectivity initiatives but an important spatial actor that occupies and governs the Himalayan frontier as the areas of sovereign landscape and strategic significance capable of reshaping regional configurations and generating strategic leverage (Paudel, 2022). However, such engagement may introduce various vulnerabilities, affecting domestic politics, economic stability, and increasing exposure to regional power competition. Nepal's participation in the BRI and other connectivity projects should therefore be understood within this context.

Himalayan Frontier Theory

The Himalayan Frontier Theory is a conceptual construct rather than a formally authored theory, highlighting the Himalayas not only as passive buffer but, as a dynamic frontier that influence to shape political, security, diplomatic relations in the region. Historically, both the neighbors have acknowledged the Himalayas as a region of strategic significance. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru described the Himalayas as 'natural frontier' while Chairman Mao Zedong referred to them as the 'roof of the world' underscoring their strategic significance (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2018; Rose, 1971). This theory clarifies how Nepal's foreign policy remains structurally constrained by its geography, compelling it to maintain strategically balanced relations with both the neighbors. In the context of the BRI, this theory offers a critical lens

for analyzing how BRI led infrastructure projects are actively redefining Nepal's spatial and strategic significance.

Nepal's Traditional Geopolitical Context and Engagement with BRI

The purpose of this section is to briefly overview the geopolitical developments of Nepal, from its traditional buffer role to participation in the BRI. It presents factual information in sequence for easy understanding, offering a foundation for the analytical discussion in subsequent sections.

Pre-BRI Geopolitical Order

Nepal—a homeland of populations belonging to both South and East Asia rather than exclusively to either—is reflected in its demographic composition, which includes dominant Caucasoid groups migrating from the southern plains and Mongoloid groups migrating from Tibet and Southeast Asia, is a small nation whose identity has long been defined by two powerful civilizations – India and China (Rose, 1971). Nepal adopted various cautious policies to ensure survival and preserve statehood and served as a buffer state between the British Raj in the south and Qing Empire in the north (Adhikari, 2018). Following the Nepal-China war of 1791-1793, both the countries maintained ritualistic ties through periodic diplomatic exchanges, reinforcing the narrative of Nepal's recognition of Chinese suzerainty (Rose, 1971). To the south, the formal relationship of Nepal with British Raj including the demarcation of southern border began after the 1816 Sugauli Treaty (Rose, 1971) following which Nepal was drawn into India's strategic periphery (Adhikari, 2018).

Nepal's geopolitical balancing became more challenging after India's independence in 1947, and establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949. Nepal found itself comfortable leaning toward India due to open borders, geographic proximity, economic and infrastructural interdependence (Rana, 1971); consequently, its policy alignment favored India. Nepal's formal relationship with independent India began in 1947, and the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty institutionalized an India-centric policy that enabled India to retain strategic preeminence over Nepal, reflecting continuities from the British Raj period (Dahal, 2018; Adhikari, 2018). China, on the other hand, acted cautiously, given India's strong influence over Nepal. Diplomatic relation between Nepal and China were established, and Peace and Friendship Treaty was signed in 1956. Nepal's special privileges in Tibet were abrogated, and two countries successfully reached boundary settlement by 1961; an agreement to connect Kathmandu with Tibet through construction of the Kodari Highway was concluded in 1961 (Rose, 1971).

Regardless of the specific dates of formal diplomacy, Nepal has maintained a cordial relations with both these countries since centuries (Dahal, 2018). As Dahal (2018) observes "Nepal has multitude of relations with these two neighboring nations-ranging from social, cultural, religious, geo-political, and economic to diplomatic relations. These relations have grown through different ups and downs, and transformed from simple, linear relation to complex, weird relations" (p. 47). However, in this long period of time, relation between Nepal and India has remained quite asymmetric (Budhathoki, 2024) and Nepal has been dependent on the Indian economy and transit activities (Dahal, 2011). India's influence remained effective

to shape policies in Nepal, that were not necessarily aligned with Nepal's interests (Johny, 2024). Nepal's foreign policy behavior became increasingly India-centric in the form of special relations both before and after the British Raj (Muni, 1973). Despite maintaining the principle of *amity with all, enmity with none*, Nepal's geopolitical agency remained constrained by structural asymmetry. The Himalayas functioned simultaneously both as a barrier and protector, limiting connectivity with the north (Dahal, 2019; MOFA, 2020) and thus, reinforcing India's role as Nepal's gateway to the outside world. In this regard, Dahal's explanation "There is more mutual trust and less or no disagreement in Nepal–China relations but there are less mutual trust and more disputes in Nepal–India relation (Dahal, 2018, p. 58) clarifies that relation with China are characterized by trust and harmony, while relations with India are marked by political tensions and disputes".

Transition Phase: 2015 Blockade and Strategic Diversification

The unofficial blockade of 2015, proved to be a turning point, prompting Nepali leaders and policymakers to seek alternative trade and transit options through China to avoid similar situations in the future (Dahal, 2018). In this regard, K.C. and Bhattarai (2018) highlight that, many of the people in Nepal aspire to reduce asymmetric dependence on India by reviving old trade route from India to Tibet via Kathmandu, ultimately linking the route to Indian and Chinese road and rail systems, although Nepal faces significant geographical constraints to trading with Tibet (as seen during the 2015 Indian blockade).

The crisis brought in forefront the need of a strategic reevaluation of Nepal's foreign policy orientation, leading to a significant shift in its approach (Bell, 2015, as cited in Pant, 2025). At that moment, China was offering rapid humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to Nepal, demonstrating a tangible alternative partnership. These development deepened Nepal's engagement with China, driven by its desire to reduce dependency on India and search for alternate trade routes with China (Pant, 2025). Subsequently, on 21 March 2016, Nepal signed the Transit and Transportation Agreement with China. This agreement, consisting of ten key points formally acknowledged Nepal's right, as a landlocked country to access the sea and to use Chinese territory for transit (Baniya, 2023). To operationalize the agreement, an implementational protocol was prepared by September 2018 and was signed on April 2019 during the visit of President Bidhya Devi Bhandari to China. This protocol granted Nepal access to four Chinese seaports and three land ports for third-country trade. Both countries also identified and agreed on six transborder overland trading points to facilitate trade (Baniya, 2023). Thus, the blockade forced a strategic reorientation in Nepal's foreign policy, prompting a pragmatic geopolitical shift that led to several key agreements—including the BRI—aimed at enabling alternative trade routes.

Nepal's Engagement with BRI

Following the dual shocks of the 2015 earthquake and the unofficial blockade, and after paving the way through signing the Agreement on Transit and Transportation with China, Nepal was positioned for deeper infrastructural cooperation, which was later formalized through the agreement in BRI. Finally, on 12 May 2017, Nepal and China, signed the MOU on the BRI opening new avenues for bilateral cooperation in mutually agreed areas (Kushwaha, 2024). It

was a landmark agreement in Nepal-China relations, symbolizing Nepal's official commitment of its participation in the initiative and its aspirations to connect with transcontinental network of connectivity spanning multiple continents.

Following the MOU, Nepal proposed a list of 35 projects to be developed under BRI; however, at the request of the Chinese side to reduce the list to single digits, the final number was trimmed to nine by 2019 (Giri, 2019). Further progress from 2019 to 2023 was delayed due to several factors including financial modality, COVID – 19 pandemic, Nepal's changing political landscape and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Kumar, 2024). Despite these setbacks, both countries, made sustained efforts to advance project implementation through regular dialogues, joint statements, China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) project negotiations and other diplomatic mechanisms. Chinese side emphasized mutual beneficial terms along with high quality projects, whereas, the Nepali side remained concerned about concessional financing, transparency, project-bidding issues etc. These efforts ultimately culminated in the 2024 Framework for Belt and Road Cooperation (Cooperation Framework) (Government of Nepal & Government of the People's Republic of China, 2023; *Kathmandu Post*, 2024).

The Cooperation Framework, signed on 4 December 2024 in Beijing, marked a significant milestone for Nepal to be a part of global connectivity. After years of consultations and negotiations since the 2017, the framework sought to address key issues including selection of projects and implementation procedure (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal (MOFA), 2024). It reaffirmed the longstanding friendship and prior cooperation, emphasized principles such as joint consultation for common development, pragmatic cooperation for meaningful effects and improving policy environment for increased investment, and identified five key areas of cooperation (*Setopati*, 2024). Finally, it preliminarily identified several potential projects for joint implementation between the two sides as outlined below (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal (MOFA), 2024):

Infrastructure, Urban Development Projects

1. Tokha-Chhahare Tunnel
2. Hilsa-Simikot Road Project
3. Kimathanka-Khandbari Road and Kimathanka Bridge and Integrated Check Post Project
4. Nepali section of the China-Nepal Cross-Border Railway Project
5. Amargadhi City Hall Project

Energy Project

1. Jilong-Rasuwadgadi-Chilime 220 KV Cross Border Power Transmission Line

Education and Health

1. Madan Bhandari University of Science and Technology
2. Kathmandu Scientific Center and Science Museum

Industrial and Trade Diversification

1. China Nepal Friendship Industrial Park

Sports Infrastructure

1. Jhapa Sports and Athletics Complex

Regarding the latest progress update of these projects, the Chinese technical team has completed drone and geotechnical surveys for the flagship Kathmandu-Kerung Railway and is awaiting government approval to conduct an aerial survey by helicopter (*काठमाण्डू-केरुङ रेलमार्गको हेलिकप्टर बाट सर्भे प्रस्ताव, २०२५*). In addition, both sides have agreed to expedite work on the Tokha-Chhahare tunnel and the Hilsa-Simikot road projects. Similarly, Nepal has submitted concept notes on remaining projects to Chinese side and pre-feasibility studies will commence once approved (Giri, 2025).

Despite Nepal's early agreement to the BRI initiative, the process of implementation of those negotiations has remained limited. This imitation is primarily attributable to Nepal's internal political and bureaucratic constraints rather than bilateral disagreement. Fragmented political consensus, bureaucratic inertia, and persistent capacity deficits have significantly slowed down the implementation of the BRI in Nepal. These constraints have affected negotiation over financial modalities and overall implementation, limiting Nepal's ability to translate BRI related commitments into tangible outcomes (Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy (CESIF) Nepal, 2024). The case of Pokhara International Airport, which Nepal presented as own national infrastructure project, but which was unilaterally designated by China as a BRI project (Giri, 2023), showcase the broader Nepali context in which such strategic projects are implemented. This project, which has now been completed, was hindered by prolonged administrative process, low level coordination, and subsequent allegations of procurement irregularities (Mulmi et al., 2023).

Analysis and Discussion: Redefining Nepal's Geopolitical Position

This section examines how Nepal's engagement with the BRI is redefining its geopolitical position between India and China. Applying the theoretical lenses of hedging strategy, critical geopolitics and small state diplomacy, this discussion interprets Nepal's behavior not merely in economic terms but as a strategic adaptation to regional power dynamics.

Strategic Behavior: Hedging and Balancing as Instruments of Redefinition

Nepal's participation in the BRI represents a cautious strategic recalibration of its foreign policy, embodying a hybrid approach that combines hedging and balancing as its primary strategic tools (Johnny, 2024). This reflects Nepal's engagement with China as a strategic counterweight to mitigate its overdependence on India, without seeking to replace India entirely. Through the signing of the BRI and participating in various India-led projects, Nepal demonstrates its intent to cooperate with both the neighboring countries based on its national interests (Pulipaka et al., 2018; Khanal, 2019). The significance of this move lies not just in Nepal's joining Chinese economic and infrastructural projects, but also in a fundamental shift in its foreign policy. The implications of this shift are far-reaching. It has enabled Nepal to enhance its strategic autonomy and diplomatic leverage. Nepal's traditional strategic behavior characterized by asymmetric dependency on India, bandwagoning or accommodation, and limited geographical leverages, has shifted toward diversified interdependence, balancing

and far-reaching geographical leverages. This behavior has enabled Nepal to actively shape its external environment, in contrast to earlier periods when it remained largely passive and heavily influenced by a single external power. This redefinition signifies that Nepal can now pursue dialogue and cooperation from a position of increased strength, using its relationship with one neighbor as leverage in its engagement with other. In this way, Nepal increasingly present itself as an active balancer rather than passive buffer, thereby reducing vulnerability to coercion from any side. Furthermore, Nepal's participation in the BRI has not only redefined its geostrategic position but has also contributed to the emergence of a more multipolar framework in South Asia including Himalayan region (C.B. Thapa, 2025). shaping a move more inclusive, collaborative and for pluralistic future. However, vulnerabilities persist. Weak coordination or deepening political divisions can render hedging strategies inconsistent, potentially alienating both neighbors and reducing external support. Moreover, excessive dependence on any single country poses risks to national sovereignty.

Evidence from international context reveal that while some countries have successfully utilized similar projects for strategic gain, others have faced significant sovereign risks. Pakistan's engagement with China through China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) illustrates a successful strategic redefinition of Pakistan's geographic position. After the project, Pakistan was repositioned as a pivotal connector linking South and Central Asia and Middle East via Gwadar Port and overland routes (Yaseen et al., 2024). This reflects a hedging strategy that balances Indian and U.S. pressures through economic alignment with China. In contrast, Malaysia's renegotiations of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) demonstrate that strategic redefinition, in the absence of transparency and accountability may undermine strategic autonomy and sovereignty (Kuik & Lai, 2025). These examples indicate that strategic diversification is most effective when supported by internal discipline, accountability and national consensus.

Across these cases, similar socio-economic concerns have emerged, illustrating how large-scale projects are debated and implemented. In Pakistan, despite scale and potential, CPEC has generated intense public and political debate. Supporters regard it as a "once-in-a-generation" opportunity, whereas critics raise concerns regarding transparency, debt sustainability, uneven distribution of economic benefits (internally), environmental degradation and erosion of national sovereignty (Afzal et al., 2025). Similarly, ECRL provoked public concerns over inflated costs, rising debt, opaque contracting, leading to political backlash (Fei, n.d.), and eventual project renegotiation. Nepal's engagement with BRI is similarly, influenced by political instability, internal opposition (Johny, 2024), geopolitical tensions, debt related anxieties (Joshi & Adhikari, 2025), and significant environmental sustainability challenges in the ecologically fragile Himalayan region (Pandey & Subedi, 2020). Given the parallels observed in Nepal, Pakistan and in Malaysia, Nepal's strategic behavior is likely to follow a cautious hedging approach, aimed at avoiding dependency and safeguarding sovereignty—lessons learned from the criticisms faced elsewhere.

From the perspective of strategic behavior, this subsection underscores that Nepal's participation in the BRI represents a transition from passive neutrality to deliberate hedging strategy. This strategy transforms former vulnerabilities into strategic strengths, enhancing

Nepal's diplomatic flexibility and bargaining leverage. CPEC serves as a hedging and balancing tool for Pakistan both countering Indian regional influence and, through alignment with China, mitigating extra regional pressures from U.S. and allies (Akram et al., 2025). Similarly, Mahathir Mohamad's suspension (rather than cancellation) of ECRL, in response to fiscal and debt challenges and to ensure domestic political accountability (Cheng–Chwee, 2020). followed by subsequent renegotiations, illustrates a strategic and adaptive approach—what can be termed “adaptive hedging”. Likewise, Nepal's engagement with the BRI constitute a broader hedging strategy adopted to achieve the goal of non-alignment policy (Johny, 2024). With judicious planning, negotiation, and execution, BRI in Nepal has the potential to serve as an instrument for both substantial economic transformation and for diversification of external relations. However, due to domestic capacity constraints, Nepal's engagement with BRI has functioned primarily as a mechanism for strategic repositioning and external diversification, rather than for immediate economic transformation. Thus, while Nepal's BRI engagement has strengthened its autonomy, careful measures are required to ensure that these gains are not undermined by associated structural vulnerabilities.

Spatial and Economic Dimensions: Connectivity and the Reconfiguration of Space

The spatial and economic dimensions of Nepal's engagement with the BRI demonstrate a strategic pivot, leveraging cross-border connectivity to transform its historically passive geography into a conduit for regional integration. Historically, Nepal's trade and economic orientation has been heavily dependent on India, which controlled markets, supply chains and revenue flow in own advantage. This economic overdependence on India particularly after 1951 (Dahal, 2011, as cited in Johny, 2024) has far reaching impacts that extend beyond economy, jeopardizing national security, sovereignty and national dignity (Paudel, 2022). India has at times drawn upon this dependency to shape its engagement with Nepal (Karna et al., 2022). Nepal's participation in the BRI connectivity challenges its spatial asymmetry by transforming the country to be a connective corridor – that too, not limited to India and China, but extending across South and Central Asia and more. This means that Nepal now has opportunity to transform its geography linking it to enhanced global market access with BRI's multi-modal connectivity schemes, thereby converting its landlocked constraints into a vibrant economic bridge (Baniya, 2023). The initiative's emphasis, as framed in Cooperation Framework 2024, on infrastructures projects such as cross-border railway project, energy project, industrial and trade diversification project (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal (MOFA), 2024) carries both material and symbolic significances. In this way, BRI repositions Nepal from a peripheral economy to a potential transit and logistics hub within an emerging trans-Himalayan economic zone. As Miller (2022) highlights, "by cutting a swath through the Himalayas, the BRI would make Nepal a transit economy or the southern conduit for trade between China and South Asia" (p. 17). Similar to Mackinder identification of the pivotal “Heartland,” the Himalayan connectivity highlights that geography itself becomes politicized: those who control access, infrastructure, and economic flows wield significant influence over regional economic destinies (Mackinder, 2004. For Nepal, therefore, the BRI offers an opportunity for strategic empowerment and economic transformation – changing its historical isolation into multidirectional linkages and diversified partnership. Thus, the BRI redefines

Nepal's economic geography not just by building links, but by compelling a reconsideration of how space, trade and sovereignty intersect in a rapidly shifting regional order. However, various risks remain. The strategic significance of these projects exposes Nepal to potential vulnerabilities: poorly integrated infrastructure may become a liability, and connectivity without competitiveness risks creating a new form of dependency.

Comparative cases reveal that within spatial and economic dimension of connectivity, how infrastructure projects can either redefine or constrain a country's geography. The case of Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway (ADR) project demonstrates that strategically integrated infrastructure, aligned with sound economic principles—including a clear understanding of demand along with good institutional coordination can successfully transform spatial dynamics and alter a country's geopolitical map within the region. (Global Infrastructure Hub, 2021). The project significantly reduced transportation costs—a major challenge for landlocked Ethiopia—by directly linking inland production zones to Djibouti Port and connecting key industrial parks to the export route. Its success was directly attributed to accurate demand assessment, efficient port connectivity, and alignment with national industrial strategy, effectively transforming Ethiopia's landlocked economy into a dynamic logistic hub (Global Infrastructure Hub, 2021). Similarly, the Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) demonstrates that inadequate consideration of economic viability can prevent infrastructure projects from achieving their intended spatial transformation. In SRG project, overestimated freight demand along with substantial debt were key factors contributing to underutilization of the infrastructures built, leading to low revenue and fiscal strain (Otele, 2023).

In both Ethiopia and in Kenya, public concerns emerged regarding debt and corruption, long term sustainability of the projects. In Kenya, these concerns primarily related to debt and corruption, long term sustainability of the project (Bouraima et al., 2023) and revenue shortfalls because of overestimated freight demand during planning phase (Otele, 2023). In Ethiopia, concerns centered on debt sustainability, operational losses, and uneven realization of the projected economic spillovers (Chen, 2021). These concerns are highly relevant with Nepal as well, where similar debt anxieties intersect with environmental vulnerabilities in the ecologically fragile Himalayan region. In this context, Nepal must address the constraints of its landlocked economy by developing targeted BRI corridors that promote financial sustainability and strengthen domestic capacity, thereby mitigating risks of debt accumulation and spatial imbalances.

Through the lens of spatial and economic dimensions, this subsection emphasizes that BRI infrastructure projects, such as the China–Nepal Cross-Border Railway, are gradually transforming Nepal into a transit hub by enhancing cross-border trade autonomy, reducing reliance on transit routes through a single neighbor, and positioning Nepal as a key factor in emerging regional connectivity networks. The Ethiopian ADR provided backbone for linking the landlocked country to major regional port in Djibouti (Chen, 2021), transforming its passive border into an active conduits of trade. Similarly, the Kenyan SGR improved connectivity for both passenger and freight establishing Kenya as a strategic logistical gateway in the region. However, due to compounding challenges—including financial constraints, limited cross-border integration and lower freight volume and revenue shortfall—the project did not realize

its full potential to act as a regional transit hub (Chen, 2021). In Nepal, BRI engagement has strategically advanced and improved connectivity, positioning the Himalayas as a transit hub; however, the realization of tangible outcomes will ultimately depend on how effectively the country addresses its domestic capacity constraints in the future.

Diplomatic and Perceptual Shifts: From Buffer to Bridge in Regional Order

The diplomatic and perceptual shifts of Nepal caused by BRI are rooted in both how the country perceives itself and how others perceive it. The bilateral agreement reached during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal in 2019, which established the implementation of BRI projects within the framework of the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network (THMDCN) to contribute to Nepal's development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019), enabled Nepal—historically perceived as a buffer state separating two major powers—to present itself as an active bridge between these two civilizations. BRI's influence extends beyond infrastructure, functioning as a platform for Nepal's soft power platform that enhances its international visibility. Nepal's foreign policy has long been characterized by a strategy of balanced diplomacy, and participation in the BRI has strengthened its perception of neutrality in global arena. This approach demonstrates that alignment with one power need not entail the exclusion of others. Nepal's BRI journey from 2017 emphasized high quality infrastructure development while reaffirming principles of mutual respect and sovereignty and territorial integrity (Government of Nepal; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). During this period, Nepal also negotiated and signed multiple agreements with India, including the Raxaul–Kathmandu cross-border railway, cross-border energy projects, integrated check-post initiatives, and hydropower projects (Embassy of India Kathmandu, Nepal, n.d.). By engaging simultaneously with both the neighboring countries, Nepal has succeeded to cultivating a reputation for strategic neutrality. The implication of these developments is significant, particularly in the perceptual realm. For a country like Nepal, the persistent risk has been being perceived as lacking real options; participation in the BRI has enabled Nepal to project agency, thereby redefining its role as a facilitator rather than merely a frontier. However, this perceptual redefinition remains delicate, as any perceived bias could revive the old 'buffer' narrative. Consequently, the primary diplomatic benefit of the BRI lies in its capacity to enhance Nepal's credibility on the international stage. Thus, the redefinition of Nepal's geopolitical position is as much perceptual and narrative-driven as it is territorial or economic.

Regional examples provide practical lessons that Nepal can draw upon. Maldives' collaboration on large-scale BRI connectivity projects initially enhanced its international visibility and diplomatic influence, enabling the country to exert a level of regional leverage previously unattainable (Custer, 2022). However, due to severe political divisions and transparency deficits, these geopolitical gains were later eroded, indicating that, in the absence of institutional trust, even high-visibility projects cannot be sustained (Custer, 2022). Similarly, Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port Project demonstrates how international perceptions can collapse rapidly in response to domestic and external controversies. Although initially considered significant for regional connectivity, the port's debt-financed construction and opaque 99-year

lease generated domestic polarization and international scrutiny, highlighting the project as a cautionary example in the politics of transparency and trust (Gangte, 2020).

In Sri Lanka, the Hambantota Port project provoked widespread public skepticism over rising debt burdens, economic viability and broader concerns over transparency and governance. Ultimately, the debt burden became so severe that Sri Lankan government was compelled to handover the port to Chinese company (Wibisono, 2019). Similarly, in the Maldives, public concerns centered on rising debt, sustainability, and the failure to generate sufficient economic spillovers (Custer, 2022). Although BRI infrastructure projects brought tangible benefits to the Maldives, they also provoked significant socio-economic debates, shaping domestic perceptions of the initiative. The experiences of both countries underscore the need for Nepal to adopt a cautious approach, addressing debt anxieties, and internal polarization, to take a cautious approach to avoid unnecessary public resentment and external dependence.

From the perspective of diplomatic and perceptual shifts, Nepal's engagement with the BRI has generated substantial diplomatic and perceptual benefits, broadened its foreign policy scope and signaled a strong, independent stance through diversified external engagement. Furthermore, by engaging with both—Chinese BRI and India led initiatives, Nepal has reaffirmed its neutral character and has rebranded its image from a passive buffer to an active bridge enhancing visibility and legitimacy in the region. The cases of Maldives and Sri Lanka demonstrate that such projects can substantially enhance diplomatic and perceptual capacities, illustrating that smaller states can function as pivotal actors. However, the Sri Lankan experience underscores that unsustainable debt and opaque negotiations can lead to strategic failure, highlighting the importance of maintaining strategic autonomy.

Beyond its strategic, economic, and diplomatic dimensions, Nepal's engagement with the BRI has also intersected with emerging concerns regarding security and disaster resilience in the Himalayan region. Situated along the border with Tibet, these regions have historically faced both security and disaster-related challenges, which Nepal has addressed through effective civil-military coordination. In this context, the Nepali Army has been playing a crucial role in maintaining border security, safeguarding critical infrastructure, and enhancing disaster preparedness and response capacities. Contemporary security dynamics indicate that these regions are increasingly vulnerable to non-traditional threats, including landslides and climate-induced disasters such as glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs). Nepali Army's sustained role in border management, infrastructure protection, and disaster management in the region underscores that the BRI extends beyond diplomatic and economic dimensions intersecting with Nepal's broader national security and resilience modality.

Nepal's BRI engagement must also be understood within the broader strategic environment, including initiatives such as the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy and India's regional projects. Nepal is no longer constrained to engaging with a single major power. Nepal's strategic environment is now characterized by overlapping and competing connectivity, security, and development agendas (Baniya, 2023). Rather than committing unilaterally to any single framework, Nepal strategically engages multiple stakeholders within this triangular setting to maintain autonomy and expand its strategic choices. Amid heightened debates over debt risks and strategic leverage, Nepal's measured participation demonstrates that it is not

passively drawn into any initiative, but is instead exercising deliberate strategic choices to expand its options while avoiding exclusive alignment (Baniya, 2023).

Collectively, the analyses of strategic behavior, spatial-economic dimensions, and diplomatic-perceptual shifts indicate that Nepal's engagement with the BRI has primarily served to enhance its strategic autonomy, positional leverage, and diplomatic visibility, rather than to deliver immediate material gains. The engagement has enabled Nepal to diversify its external relations, thereby mitigating asymmetric dependencies while remaining consistent with broader foreign policy orientation. Furthermore, this engagement has advanced Nepal's connectivity narratives by integrating the Himalayas into broader transit networks, enhancing its spatial centrality. Finally, the engagement has elevated Nepal's diplomatic visibility and perceptual standing, portraying it as balanced, and autonomous actor capable of engaging major powers while maintaining its neutral character. These achievements should be understood in the context of a landlocked nation that has historically operated under constrained geopolitical flexibility, often locked in asymmetric dependence on a single neighbor and frequently subjected to coercion limiting its autonomy. In this context, even the existence of an alternative, regardless of its immediate economic feasibility, constitutes a symbolic assertion of autonomy. Collectively, these observations confirm that Nepal's geopolitical position is redefined both materially, in tangible terms, and discursively, in statecraft. Critical step next is to translate these opportunities into durable and sustainable economic outcomes, thereby avoiding a mere substitution of one form of dependency for another.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This paper has examined Nepal's engagement with the BRI using interconnected lenses like strategic behavior, spatial and economic dimensions, and diplomatic and perceptual shifts. The analysis highlights how Nepal has leveraged BRI to strengthen its autonomy, diversified external partnership, and repositioned itself favorably within the changing power dynamics rather than evaluating solely on economic returns.

From the perspective of strategic behavior, Nepal's engagement with the BRI demonstrates a hedging tactic, a common strategy for small state navigating structural asymmetries. By simultaneously engaging in Chinese BRI projects and Indian-led initiatives—such as the Tibet-Kerung and Raxaul-Kathmandu cross-border railways—Nepal has deliberately exercised hedging, thereby enhancing its strategic flexibility in navigating between these two great powers. Through engagement with both the countries, while maintaining policy flexibility and avoiding exclusive alignment, Nepal has successfully diversified its external relations and thus, reduced dependency, mitigated asymmetric dependency, all without altering its foreign policy orientation. However, these strategic gains have been constrained by domestic limitations, which have restricted the translation of this engagement into tangible outcomes.

From diplomatic and spatial perspectives, the BRI has reframed Nepal's geographic significance, positioning the Himalayas as a potential transit hub within broader regional connectivity networks. This engagement offers Nepal the opportunity to transform its traditional passive buffer role into that of an active regional connector, thereby enhancing its geopolitical relevance. Nevertheless, Nepal's domestic constraints have limited the full realization of this transformation in Nepal's economic geography.

Similarly, through the lens of diplomatic and perceptual shifts, Nepal's BRI engagement has enhanced its international image as a neutral and autonomous actor, capable of engaging major powers while maintaining strategic equilibrium. By facilitating the BRI projects through Himalayas and transforming the region into vibrant transit hub, Nepal has become integrated into a new regional geopolitical order, demonstrating that in South Asia, balance of power extends beyond territorial control and defense to include connectivity and perception strategies. However, these gains are not self-sustaining and remain contingent upon effectively addressing Nepal's domestic structural constraints.

In conclusion, the findings frame Nepal's BRI engagement as a deliberate and strategic initiative that has yielded significant perceptual and autonomy-related benefits, rather than immediate economic gains. These findings underscore the necessity of a dual-track policy approach: first, to consolidate and enhance the strategic gains achieved, and second, to systematically address domestic constraints that limit Nepal's capacity for long-term spatial and economic transformation. Based on the discussions, comparative analysis, and findings of this paper, following policy recommendations are proposed to consolidate strategic, spatial and perceptual gains, while addressing the structural constraints:

1. Nepal should institutionalize its participation in the BRI within a coherent national connectivity framework, that clearly reflect its hedging strategy. This will ensure policy continuity across changing domestic, political, and institutional contexts, thereby preventing ad hoc or fragmented decisions.
2. Nepal should cautiously prioritize selected projects, ensuring that each aligns with the country's institutional, financial and technical capacities. Rather than expanding the project portfolio, emphasis should be placed on completing the projects already identified in the 2024 Cooperation Framework efficiently and within the stipulated timelines, minimizing structural risks and safeguarding Nepal's strategic autonomy.
3. Nepal should invest in strengthening coordination among all relevant institutions including ministries, regulatory agencies, and project-implementing bodies so that strategic and symbolic gains from BRI participation can be converted into tangible outcome.
4. Nepal should maintain a high level of transparency in project negotiations, financing arrangements, and implementation procedures. Stakeholders from all relevant sectors should be involved, and the public should be regularly informed of key developments. Such transparency is crucial for internal legitimacy and for protecting the diplomatic gains derived from balanced engagement with major powers.
5. Given the ecological fragility of the Himalayas, Nepal must prioritize rigorous environmental safeguards and conduct comprehensive spatial impact assessments. This will ensure that the redefinition of the country's geographic and strategic position does not compromise ecological sustainability or local livelihoods.
6. Nepal should continue leveraging its engagement with the BRI as a strategic instrument to project itself as a cooperative, autonomous, and neutral actor.

Maintaining perceptual balance and credibility is as critical as achieving concrete material outcomes.

7. Nepal may carefully pursue issue-based trilateral cooperation with India and China in pragmatic domains, such as trade facilitation, disaster response, and resilience-building. Framing such initiatives as practical coordination rather than strategic alignment allows Nepal to maintain diplomatic centrality while avoiding zero-sum competition in the region.

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