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## POST-2015 INDIA-NEPAL RELATIONS AND CHINA FACTOR IN SOUTH ASIA

**ABSTRACT** The India-Nepal relationship has always been regarded as a distinctive one because of strong cultural, political, and civil ties. The unannounced economic blockade imposed by India in 2015, however, takes the India-Nepal relationship to a cult. The misplayed neighbourhood policy of India after 2015 moved Nepal towards its northern neighbour. Likewise, for India, Nepal is equally very strategic to China as one of the signatories and the core component of the 'Belt and Road Initiative'. Thus, the Indian-Nepal partnership bitterness and multilevel Chinese participation in Nepal is the same scenario for India's overall neighbourhood policy misconduct and China's growth in South Asia. This study examines the major events that occurred in Nepal after 2015, encouraging distancing relationships with India and closeness to China.

**Keywords:** South Asia, India, China, Nepal, Neighbourhood Policy, Foreign Policy

## INTRODUCTION

Nepal-India relations have seen so many ups and downs over time, but the undeclared economic blockade enforced by India in 2015 provided, nationalist political front an agenda to play anti-India politics. In Nepal, people led the social movement after 2015, such as #back\_off\_India has become a new normal. India and Nepal began to avoid each other instead of minimizing the rage, which continues to fuel the anti-sentiments between both. India's neck-to-neck rivalry with China in the Asia and Pacific region made India see its neighbours from a Chinese perspective rather than inclining with its 'Neighbourhood First' approach. After India revoked 'Article 370' regarding 'India Occupied Kashmir', from the constitution, India released a new administrative map that includes the disputed land between Nepal and India. Few months after the publication of the map, India's Home Minister, Rajnath Singh, inaugurated a road to Kailash Mansarovar, which passes through the same disputed territory and was constructed without consultation with Nepal. As a result, the relations between these countries keep escalating in the opposite direction.

Ideally, Nepal-India relations are based on 'Panchaseel Theory'.<sup>1</sup> First, signed between India and China, Panchaseel theory is five principles of coexistence. According to the Ministry of External Affairs of India, Panchsheel provides the intellectual basis for this emerging foreign interaction paradigm; enable all nations to work together for peace and prosperity while retaining their nationality, identity and spirit and personality. However, India has been accused of extreme intervention in Nepal's internal affairs neglecting the principle of non-intervention. Shah believe that India's itself pushed Nepal toward the only left alternative that is China.<sup>2</sup> According to Shah, the prevalent anti-India sentiment has resulted in the people generally preferring China, which seeks to improve trade relations with South Asian countries, has shown ample interest in Nepal.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, scholars have seen India-Nepal relations after 2015 from various perspectives. Prof. Tripathi has tried to explain Nepal-India relations just from the border perspective.<sup>4</sup> He explained that the blockade of the Indo-Nepal border has had ramifications on the bilateral relations because of the socio-cultural proximity of the Madheshi group with India. His articles argue how the border is completely shaping the relations between Nepal and India. On the other hand, scholars like Lama<sup>5</sup> have tried to explain the role of treaties in making Nepal excessively dependent on India and that as a factor

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of External Affairs of India: [http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/191\\_panchsheel.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/191_panchsheel.pdf), 20 February 2021.

<sup>2</sup> F. Shah, "Nepal's Balancing Act", *Foreign Affairs*, 25 February 2016, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-02-25/nepals-balancing-act>, 20 February 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> D. Tripathi, "Influence of Borders on Bilateral Ties in South Asia: A Study of Contemporary India-Nepal Relations", *International Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2/3 (2019).

<sup>5</sup> N. Lama, "Re-negotiating the Mahakali Treaty in the Changing Geopolitics of Nepal", *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2019).

to generate anti-Indian sentiment in Nepal. The political analyst of Nepal, Wagle simply lay blame on the rise of nationalism and populism on both sides that played the role in the rise of bitterness in the relations.<sup>6</sup> Especially after the 2020 border issue between India and Nepal, the Indian administration started to apply the Chinese involvement in Nepalese behaviour. Signalling toward China, Indian Army chief General M.M Naravane said *There has never been any problem in the past. There is reason to believe that they might have raised the issues at the behest of someone else...*<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the editor of the leading newspaper of Nepal Baral wrote to *The Wire*, that ‘the argument by Naravane was both imprecise and insulting.’<sup>8</sup> The truth is that the government took India over Lipulekh because there was tremendous pressure from the public to do so; China had no part in this issue at all. Most Nepalis are, in truth, as angry at India as they are at China over recent developments as China and India dually agreed to construct a road through trijunction without the consultation with Nepal. Although Nepal-India’s relations have seen many ups and downs in their bilateral relations previously, this time due to the increasing Chinese involvement in the situation is different. Thus, it is necessary to assess post-2015 India-Nepal relations considering China’s involvement.

To access this research, aim to address two main questions: i) What factors played a major role to shape India-Nepal relations after 2015? ii) How India-Nepal relations resemble the rise of China in South Asia? A preliminary understating of the paper is that India’s inconsistency on its Nepal policy caused bilateral tension which can be accessed through some of the major events that happened after 2015. Additionally, being one of the signatories and the essential part of China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, Nepal is gaining a vital position in China’s engagement in the region. Thus, the rise of Chinese involvement in Nepal represents an overall rise of China in South Asia.

## POSITIONING INDIA-NEPAL RELATIONS

Long before formalizing the relations through the ‘India-Nepal Peace Treaty of 1950’, both counties share the civilization, religion, culture, and proximity. In the past 75 years, Nepal has gone through so many political changes and India as a close neighbour has provided possible aid on those political changes. But, while getting involved in political aid, India also has given room for speculation among certain groups in Nepal. Thus, India has been accused as a political micro-manager involved in Government swapping and inter-party provocation, in Nepal. India’s neighbourhood policy expert

<sup>6</sup> G.S. Wagle, “On Nationalism and Populism”, *My Republica*, 26 August 2018, at <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/on-nationalism-and-populism/>, 7 May 2021.

<sup>7</sup> In an interaction at a defence think-tank, Gen Naravane said. Read more at: [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/nepal-objected-to-indias-road-to-lipulekh-at-someone-elses-behest-army-chief/articleshow/75757277.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/nepal-objected-to-indias-road-to-lipulekh-at-someone-elses-behest-army-chief/articleshow/75757277.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst), 8 May 2021.

<sup>8</sup> B. Baral, “India Should Realise China Has Nothing to Do with Nepal’s Stand on Lipulekh”, *The Wire*, 19 May 2020, at <https://thewire.in/south-asia/nepal-india-lipulekh-china>, 1 May 2021.

Xavier wrote that *India must learn how to abstain on a national level, reversing decades of deep involvement. The temptation of New Delhi to micromanage governments in Kathmandu has often proved counter-productive and continues to waste the resources of diplomacy and intelligence.*<sup>9</sup> However, there are always two sides while analysing India-Nepal relations. First, India's perception toward Nepal and second, Nepal perception toward India. Likewise, due to the rise of Chinese engagement in the region, it is also necessary to consider China as a variable on bilateral relation between India and Nepal.

### India's perspective of Nepal Relation

India considers the relation with Nepal, a 'Special Relation'. The two countries share an open border that symbolized deep socio-cultural and economic integration. India's neighbourhood policy is based on the 'Gujral Doctrine'<sup>10</sup> that promotes non-reciprocal relations with its small neighbouring countries. In the case of Nepal, India's policy concerns mainly two dynamics. First, Nepal holds a big space on India's National Security concern. The probability that any power would easily access the Indian mainland via Nepal's northern borders is high, as the Indo-Nepal borders are not separated by any natural barrier and are accessible easily.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Nepal that is not politically and economically secure would be more vulnerable to such an eventuality and as a result, Nepal can (internally and externally) adopt policies that would be detrimental to India's security interests. Likewise, Behera writes, any breakdown of law and order in Nepal has no serious effect on any except for India.<sup>12</sup> India shares a 1,470-kilometre-long open border with Nepal and Nepal's geostrategic position between, China and India cause clear concerns about India's national security. Shukla also argues that considering the 1950s Tibet annexation by China and the 1962 Indo-Sino war made the scenario more important for India to secure their influence in Nepal to mitigate possible infiltration from the northern Himalayas.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> C. Xavier, "India Must Learn How to Abstain in Nepal, Resist Temptation to Micromanage", *The Print*, 4 December 2017, at <https://theprint.in/opinion/india-nepal-resist-temptation-to-micromanage/19847/>, 7 May 2021.

<sup>10</sup> First spelled by India's External Affairs Minister and later became Prime Minister I. K. Gujral that have five principles. first, with neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, India does not ask for reciprocity, but gives and accommodates what it can in good faith and trust; second, no South Asian country should allow its territory to be used against the interest of another country of the region; third, no country should interfere in the internal affairs of another; fourth, all South Asian countries must respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; and, finally, they should settle all their disputes through peaceful bilateral negotiations. More: P. Murthy, "The Gujral Doctrine and Beyond", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1999), pp. 639-652.

<sup>11</sup> P. Murthy, "India and Nepal: Security and Economic Dimensions", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 23, no. 9 (1999).

<sup>12</sup> A. Behera, *Changing Perception in a Globalizing World: With Special Reference to India*, New Delhi 2013.

<sup>13</sup> D. Shukla, "India-Nepal Relations: Problems and Prospects", *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 67, no. 2 (2006), at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856222>, 6 May 2021.

Secondly, India as a regional hegemon Nepal is strategically important for India to sustain its regional influence. According to modern days, international relations theorist, John S. Mearsheimer, *state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states*<sup>14</sup> in the system and India certainly is the dominant state in South Asia. Thus, India tries to follow any measures to sustain its dominance in South Asia including Nepal.

### Nepal's Perspective of India Relations

For almost seven decades Nepal foreign relations are based on Non-Alignment Policy.<sup>15</sup> And its primary goal, undeniably, is to preserve the country's independence and to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, with national security and socio-economic growth as the highest priorities in its activities and relations with neighbours and the world.<sup>16</sup> In term of relations with India, Nepal considers the relations incredibly unique and socio-culturally linked. But during the time, the image of India in Nepal carries different meaning depending upon the internal political scenarios. Shrestha argues that political alliance with India was used by political parties at the helm to galvanize their political influence at home. Such attitude and actions significantly negated the drawbacks of the common people in Nepal's national interests.

In the past 70 years, Nepal has gone through major political changes including civil war, anti-government revolution, constitution writing, regime change, replacing the monarchy with a republic. Interestingly, India has played a significant role in all the uprising and resolution. Mishra writes, *Nepal's interaction with the rest of the world and the search for peace and economic growth will not bear much fruit without India's cooperation. This enables Delhi to play a deceptive role to serve the interests of India in Nepali politics*.<sup>17</sup> Giving the example of Maoist insurgency and the role of India in that movement, Mishra presented various doubtful evidence on India's involvement, fuelling the movement and later taking a leading position to resolve the situation. India's neighbourhood policy and behaviours can be reflected in Minister of External Affairs of India, S. Jaishankar's speech about 'Misadventure of Sri Lanka'.<sup>18</sup> Politically India-Nepal relations echoes two general assumptions. First, Nepalese political leaders have used India as a factor to gain political or personal gain in Nepal. Second, while involving in Nepal's internal affairs, India has provided room for speculation which have a major impact on civil level perceptions regarding India in Nepal.

<sup>14</sup> J.J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Founded in 1961, NAM tried to "establish an alternative course in world politics that would not lead to the pawning of Member States in the conflicts between the major powers." <https://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/non-aligned-movement-nam/>, 6 May 2021.

<sup>16</sup> M. Shrestha, *Transforming Foreign Affairs of Nepal*, Kathmandu 2015.

<sup>17</sup> R. Mishra, "India's Role in Nepal's Maoist Insurgency", *Asian Survey*, vol. 44, no. 5 (2004).

<sup>18</sup> A. Subramaniam, "The One Speech That Explains India's New Strategic Thinking", *The Diplomat*, 5 December 2019, at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/the-one-speech-that-explains-indias-new-strategic-thinking/>, 7 May 2021.

Nepal-India civil relations is defined as 'Roti-Beti' relations that translates to Food (*Roti*) and marital relations (*Beti*). Nepal is mostly dependent on India on daily used goods and the lower regional belt of Nepal have family relations with each other due to cultural similarities and accessibility. With the reference to this uniqueness, prof. Muni argues that Nepal-India is *the world's closest neighbours*,<sup>19</sup> which now under the question. The economic blockade, media propaganda and India's hesitation to consider Nepal as an equally sovereign country are few variables that have major implications on the bilateral relation. Professor Muni agrees that the lack of long-term policy perspective, interventionist and insensitive diplomatic conduct, the diversity of domestic stakeholders, and the involvement of aggressive external players such as China, Pakistan and the United States resulted in India's failures in Nepal.<sup>20</sup> As Professor Muni said it not only about lack of consistent policy from the Indian side but also Nepal's long run India-China dilemma. Despite having increased anti-Indian sentiments, Nepal was reluctant to lean over China completely, however, since the time of King Mahendra closeness to China has been used as a soft message to India.<sup>21</sup> But the economic blockade of 2015 provided an opening for both, China, and Nepal to cooperate in the various sector which is primarily India's area of concentration.

### China Factor in Nepal-India Relations

Nepal-China relations have a strong historical base, and since China initiated its BRI, Chinese investments have flooded Nepal continuously, including the 2431 km Lanzhou-Shigatse, Shigatse-Kerung (564 km), and Kerung-Rasawagadhi train services, as well as many hydropower projects: Budhigandaki and West Seti projects. However, until 2015, the government of Nepal's geopolitical stance and political perception concerning the massive Chinese BRI ventures remained unclear, and the scholarly world doubted the government of Nepal's political justification for accepting or rejecting the BRI supported by China. In May 2017 Deputy Prime Minister of Nepal led his country's delegation to the Belt and Road Forum in China, a few days after Kathmandu joined the Belt and Road Initiative. During 2015-17 China became the number one foreign direct investor in Nepal. Likewise, military cooperation between Nepal and China is also finding momentum.<sup>22</sup> Bringing the other side of the story, Solanki argues that New Delhi cannot equal the financial firepower of Beijing, but it is by far the most important trading partner of Nepal and without a passport or visa, millions of Nepalese

<sup>19</sup> S. Muni, "Lipu Lekh: The Past, Present and Future of the Nepal-India Stand-off", *Hindustan Times*, 22 May 2020, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/lipu-lekh-the-past-present-and-future-of-the-nepal-india-stand-off-analysis/story-wy3OvSD0G0nktGQTOIp2I.html>, 6 May 2021.

<sup>20</sup> S.D. Muni, "India's Nepal Policy", in D.M. Malone, C.R. Mohan, S. Raghavan (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of India's Foreign Policy*, Oxford 2015.

<sup>21</sup> P. Jaiswal, "Caught in the India-China Rivalry: Policy Options for Nepal", *IPCS*, 1 March 2014, at [http://www.ipcs.org/issue\\_select.php?recNo=556](http://www.ipcs.org/issue_select.php?recNo=556), 5 May 2021.

<sup>22</sup> V. Solanki, "China's Advance in Nepal", *IJSS*, 2 February 2018, at <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2018/02/china-nepal>, 6 May 2021.

live, work, and own properties in India or vice versa. The author also explains that *although the advance of China allows Nepal to decrease its dependency on India, balancing ties with two giant neighbours will be the main geopolitical challenge for the government of the country.*<sup>23</sup>

The focus of Nepalese politics is turning toward China, and BRI programs are largely aimed at improving cross-border connectivity by fostering a more stable relationship between the two countries. This is evidenced by a joint statement issued shortly after Prime Minister Oli visits China, on which both countries agreed 'to priorities the implementations of the connectivity-related BRI-MOUs as it relates to ports, roads, rail and air links and overall communications activities within the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network.'<sup>24</sup>

Nepal remains an important section of China's overall South Asian policy. Considering proximity with Tibet and the number of Tibetan refugees, Nepal is strategic for China from a security perspective too. The Himalayan state already started to reflect the power struggle between China and India.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Nepal also needs to strictly establish a policy to deal with both of its neighbours equally. Group of research of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Nepal presented the actual geopolitical status of Nepal by stating 'Buffer Toward a Bridge'. Admitting the geographical hostility of Nepal researchers argue that Nepal should now work toward becoming the bridge between China and India rather than playing hide and seek with each other.<sup>26</sup>

## POST-2015 INDIA-NEPAL RELATIONS

### Economic Blockade of 2015

Ending the decade long transition of Nepal, on September 20, 2015, during a special ceremony at the Constitution Assembly (CA) Hall in New Baneshwor, Kathmandu, President Ram Baran Yadav promulgated the 2015 Constitution of Nepal. The CA-II was dissolved with the adoption of the constitution, turning the existing CA-Legislative Parliament into a Parliament of the Legislature only.<sup>27</sup> Although the constitution bill was endorsed by more than two-thirds of the majority of the constitution assembly, a group of representatives, the Madhesi community, were unhappy with some of the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> G.D. Freitas, "State Visit to China Triggers a Bumper Crop of Nepalese BRI Projects" (para. 1-2), *Belt and Road*, 13 February 2018, at <https://beltandroad.hktdc.com/en/insights/state-visit-china-triggers-bumper-crop-nepalese-bri-projects>, 7 May 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Lama 2013.

<sup>26</sup> R. Adhikari, Y. Chaulagain, T. Dhakal, S. Subedi, *From a Buffer towards a Bridge Nepal's New Foreign Policy Agenda*, Kathmandu 2013.

<sup>27</sup> IDEA, *Nepal's Constitution Building Process: 2006-2015 Progress, Challenges, and Contributions of International Community*, Stockholm 2015, at <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/nepals-constitution-building-process-2006-2015.pdf>, 5 May 2021.

provision accommodated in the new constitution, mostly related to the division of the states under new federalism and citizenship bill.

On the other hand, the promulgation of the constitution offended India's expectations too. India's leading newspaper, India Express wrote some news based on the reaction made by the Ministry of External Affairs of India, titled 'Make Seven Changes to Your Constitution: India tells Nepal'.<sup>28</sup> That raised serious concerns about what interest that India has in Nepal's constitution? It can be argued that due to the proximity that India shares with group those are dissatisfied with the new constitution, India has taken a preventive stance to avoid the spillover impact in their territory. Further, strengthen the argument Nepal's affairs expert BBC writes, *Nepal's political leader has assured to address the concerns of those people but that did not happen*.<sup>29</sup> However, utilizing the soft support of India, the Madhesi leader walked to checkpoints between India and Nepal and block the whole supply system that caused the biggest humanitarian crisis in Nepal.

New Delhi officially denies the blockage showing the small number of freight trucks passing through, but petroleum, medicine and earthquake relief material imports have been choked, nevertheless. New Delhi wants to see peace in its northern neighbour, Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar (*S. Jaishankar is now a Minister of External Affairs in India*) made a last-ditch effort to convince Nepal's rulers to buy time to resolve Madhesi's demands<sup>30</sup> however that circular a different meaning among Nepalese mindsets. Professor Muni mentioned that it is a *clear message to Nepalese on India's involvement in promulgation process*.<sup>31</sup> During the period Delhi seems conflicted about whether to accept or not accept their role in 'unofficial blockade', however, both sides did not put much of an effort to end the suffering of Nepalese who already have suffered through 7.8 Magnitude's earthquake which killed more than 9000 people and huge loss on economy. Bell argues that *by leveraging the swell of nationalist indignation that the blockade has understandably generated in Nepal, the same politicians who were close to Delhi are now hoping to improve their ambitions through the crisis*.<sup>32</sup> Based on the observation made by Bell one can argue that the current Nepalese government is the outcome of it. On the other hand, Budhathoki argues, that the blockade has visibly presented the hegemonic nature of India at the civil level and Nepalese considered it as an attack on the sovereignty of an independent

<sup>28</sup> India Express on 24 Septemebr 2015 wrote make seven changes to your constitution. More at <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/neighbours/make-seven-changes-to-your-constitution-address-madhesi-concerns-india-to-nepal/>, 6 May 2021.

<sup>29</sup> SD Muni on India's Interest on Nepal's constitution talking with BBC; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34313280>, 6 May 2021.

<sup>30</sup> K. Dixit, "India and Nepal Must End Their Border Dispute", *Time*, 17 November 2015, at <https://time.com/4115801/nepal-india-border-blockade-madhes/>, 4 May 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> T. Bell, "Analysis: Blockade Politics in Nepal", *Aljazeera*, 9 October 2015, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/09/analysis-blockade-politics-in-nepal/>, 2 May 2021.



nation.<sup>33</sup> The nationalism based political rise and visible involvement of India fuelled the anti-Indian sentiment in Nepal. Likewise, China grabs the opportunity to penetrate Nepal, utilizing the void in relations between India and Nepal.

Evaluating China's Post-Earthquake response, Gurung and Shakya wrote that, China has responded with search-and-rescue teams, medical supplies, and other assistance and most importantly Taiwan's offer to support rescuers was declined by Kathmandu as Nepal strongly support the one-China policy<sup>34</sup>. Before blocked China has already become a major investor with 90% shareholder of overall FDI inflows in Nepal,<sup>35</sup> however, the blockade allowed them to embed their economic interest with the internal politics of Nepal.<sup>36</sup>

### Article 370 Revocation

Article 370 of the Indian Constitution has given 'temporary provision' granting a special autonomous status within the Indian Union to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. According to Article 370(1)(b), in consultation with the Government of the State, *the Union Parliament can make laws for the State only on certain issues stated in the Instrument of Accession, namely security, foreign relations and communications*.<sup>37</sup> By revoking article 370 India brought J&K under the 'Union Territory' that eliminate the autonomous status from the state. Aftermath the revocation of Article 370 India published updated maps on the first week of November 2019. It provoked the Nepalese sentiments as the new map consists of disputed land between Nepal and India. Nepalese took to social media supporting the government's argument that Kalapani belonged to Nepal with hashtags #BackoffIndia and #Kalapani trending on Twitter. Kalapani is a 35 square kilometres (13.5 square-miles) area in the far-western region of Nepal. Once acting as a trading route between India and what is now southwest China, after New Delhi has withdrawn its border forces following its war with China (in 1962), the strategic region was 'occupied' by India.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> A. Budhathoki, "Nepal Cranks up Anti-India Politics with Cross-border Marriage Bill", *Nikkei Asia*, 30 June 2020, at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Nepal-cranks-up-anti-India-politics-with-cross-border-marriage-bill>, 3 May 2021.

<sup>34</sup> A. Gurung, T. Shakya, "Was Nepal a Soft Power Victory for China?", *Foreign Policy*, 1 May 2015, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/01/nepal-china-earthquake-aid-taiwan-power/>, 4 May 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Based on Xinhua News report: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/07/c\\_138535703.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/07/c_138535703.htm), 7 May 2021.

<sup>36</sup> K. Bhattarai, "China's Growing Political Clout in Nepal", *The Diplomat*, 22 May 2020, at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/chinas-growing-political-clout-in-nepal/>, 7 May 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Library of Congress: <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2019/10/falqs-article-370-and-the-removal-of-jammu-and-kashmir-special-status/>, 6 May 2021.

<sup>38</sup> India's updated political map stirs controversy in Nepal (2019): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/8/indias-updated-political-map-stirs-controversy-in-nepal>, 7 May 2021.

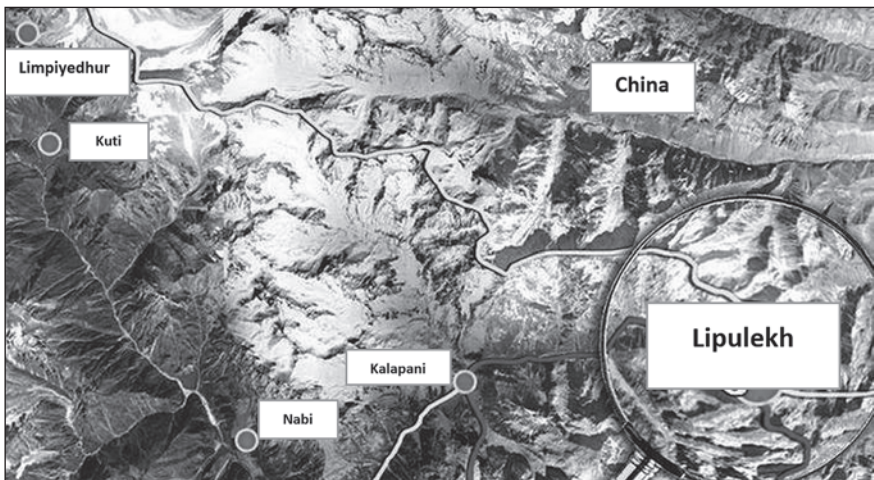


Nepalese citizens protesting the Government of India in Kathmandu. Pic: Navesh Chitrakar

### Revival of Kalapani-Lipulekh Dispute

*Delighted to inaugurate the Link Road to Mansarovar Yatra today. The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) achieved road connectivity from Dharchhula to Lipulekh (China Border) known as Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra Route. Also flagged off a convoy of vehicles from Pithoragarh to Gunji through video conferencing.*

Mr Rajnath Singh, Defense Minister of India



Source: <https://www.change.org/p/kalapani-belong-to-nepal-situate-as-part-of-vyasa-valley-of-darchhula-district-of-western-mahakali-not-of-india> , 7 May 2021

Post-article 370 Nepal-India relations was already facing major challenges. On top of that defence Minister Rajnath Singh unveil an 80 KM road project that passes through the disputed land to Mansarovar which is in the Tibet region and have high importance for Hindu pilgrimages. Karki<sup>39</sup> writes for *The Wire* that, after India inaugurated a road connecting India to China via Lipulek, as part of the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage route, without consulting Nepal, tensions between the two nations deepened further. He added that *this is an example of bullying its smaller neighbour by a more powerful government*. Kalapani-Lipulekh dispute is one of the historical disputes based on the 'Sugauli Treaty'<sup>40</sup> signed by the East India Company and Nepal. The treaty defined the western border of Nepal with India separated by the 'Kali River. In general, the dispute based on the two definitions about the origin of the river where Nepal and India differ the understanding. During the 1962 Indo-China war, India deployed security forces in this area. Kalapani was considered a 'secure zone' for the stationing Indian forces, as its high altitude of 20, 276 feet was *effective protection against the Chinese*.<sup>41</sup> China also recognized Kalapani as India's territory at that time. Nepal, however, held elections in the region in 1959 and, until 1961, received land revenue from its citizens.<sup>42</sup> Foreign Minister of Nepal Mr Pradeep Gyawali mentioned that, besides the Sugauli Treaty of 1816, that established Nepal's western border with India, there was no other agreement, and that agreement specifically states that those three areas belong to Nepal.<sup>43</sup>

In response, Nepal released its revised map in June 2020, showing the contested areas within Nepal and, infuriated India. The Lower House of the Parliament of Nepal unanimously passed the historical Second Constitution Amendment Bill that revised the official map. The whole series took almost 8 months from India publishing a map to Nepal publishing their version of the map, and there was not any effort from both sides to discuss or mitigate the situation. The official reaction of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs was, *the artificial extension of arguments is not founded on historical evidence or reality and is not sustainable. The holding of discussions on pending border problems is also violative of our current understanding*.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> B. Karki, "Why is India Eager to Talk Borders with China but Not Nepal?", *The Wire*, 16 June 2020, at <https://thewire.in/south-asia/india-china-nepal-border>, 5 May 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Sugauli Treaty, (March 4, 1816), which concluded the Anglo-Nepalese (Gurkha) War (1814-16) between the Gurkha chiefs of Nepal and the British Indian government. Nepal renounced all claims to the disputed Tarai, or lowland country, by the treaty and ceded its conquests west of the River Kali and extending to the River Sutlej. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Sagauli>, 7 May 2021.

<sup>41</sup> L.K. Baral, U.P. Pyakurel, *Nepal-India Open Borders: Problems and Prospects*, New Delhi 2015.

<sup>42</sup> H.B. Jha, "Addressing the Kalapani Issue between Nepal and India", *Observer Research Foundation*, 20 December 2019, at <http://www.orfonline.org/expertspeak/addressing-the-kalapani-issue-between-nepal-and-india-59377/>, 5 May 2021.

<sup>43</sup> A. Ethirajan, "India and China: How Nepal's New Map is Stirring Old Rivalries", *BBC News*, 10 June 2020, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52967452>, 4 May 2021.

<sup>44</sup> K. Bhattacharjee, "Nepal Passes Amendment on New Map", *The Hindu*, 14 June 2020, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/nepal-parliaments-lower-house-unanimously-passes-bill-to-re-draw-political-map/article31821242.ece>, 3 May 2021.

However, the statement made by the ministry contradicts Nepal's understanding, as Nepal accused India of blocking all the official channels to talk about the situation regarding maps, highway, or border disputes. On the other hand, since May 2020 relations between India and China have deteriorated and the two world powers are facing each other along their contested border in the Himalayan region. The root cause is an ill-defined, 3,440 km (2,100-mile)-long frontier contested by both nations and more than 30 soldiers lost their lives in tussles<sup>45</sup>. Surprisingly, India made a swift effort to engaged in multi-level dialogue to deescalate the situation that includes military, organizational, secretary and ministry level dialogues.<sup>46</sup> On the contrary, India seems passive to discuss the border disputes with Nepal rather media, military, politician, and the government was busy defining Nepal's move as manipulation of China. The political editor of The Annapurna Express, Mr Kamal Dev Bhattarai, explains that *it is inappropriate to say that Nepal is being instigated by China*. Instead, Nepal feels that unilateral decisions are being made on Nepali territories by two giant neighbours, India, and China as both signed an agreement in 2015 to open a corridor through the disputed land without the consent of Nepal.<sup>47</sup>

### Citizenship Act 2020

One of the major concerns that India shown in 2015 related to the new constitution of Nepal was about the provision of citizenship. Southern Nepal and India's Northern states have a special relationship that is coined as a 'Roti-Beti' that includes a major marital exchange between communities that are in the border area. As per the Citizenship Act of Nepal 2006, foreign women after getting married to Nepalese men are automatically eligible to get citizenship under clause no 5.1. While a foreign man marrying Nepalese women must spend a minimum of 15 years in Nepal to be eligible to acquire the naturalized citizenship.<sup>48</sup> There are many examples where the woman born and raised in the Indian state Bihar got married to a Nepali man have reached to various constitutional position in Nepal. However, the citizen amendment bill which got endorsed by the majority vote brought a provision that a foreigner married to a Nepalese man has a waiting period of seven years. Additionally, this provision has constrained that those women who became citizens of Nepal under the new 'Citizenship Act' will not be eligible to contest themselves in any constitutional position. Indian media and

<sup>45</sup> BBC on India-China border row: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53062484>, 7 May 2021.

<sup>46</sup> E. Roche, „India, China to Engage in Dialogue on Monday to Resolve Border Row”, *Mint*, 11 October 2020, at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/india-china-to-engage-in-dialogue-on-monday-to-resolve-border-row-11602407337304.html>, 6 May 2021.

<sup>47</sup> “Nepal Map Row: Has India Provoked Kathmandu or is China Instigating Trouble for New Delhi?”, *The Print*, 21 May 2020, at <https://theprint.in/talk-point/nepal-map-row-has-india-provoked-kathmandu-or-is-china-instigating-trouble-for-new-delhi/426470/>, 30 October 2020.

<sup>48</sup> G. Mohan, “Nepal's New Citizenship Proposal to Impact India-Nepal 'roti-beti' Ties”, *IndiaToday*, 22 June 2020, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/nepal-citizenship-proposal-impact-india-nepal-roti-beti-ties-1691480-2020-06-22>, 5 May 2021.

the concerned representative have commented on this Citizenship Act as ‘Regressive’ and ‘Discriminatory’ for women. Although India’s Indian Citizenship Act of 1955 also says, *A person who is married to a citizen of India and is ordinarily resident of India for seven years before making an application for registration.*<sup>49</sup>

## INDIA IN SOUTH ASIA

In regards to India and its South Asian relations, two sides of the story can be found, an Indian version and a small states version. India claims to be a responsible big brother of the region and other small states consider India a micro-manager. Once Bhabani Sen Gupta wrote, “The Indian elephant cannot transform itself into a mouse. If South Asia is to get itself out of the crippling binds of conflicts and cleavages, the six will have to accept the bigness of the seventh. And the seventh, that is India, will have to prove to the six that big can indeed be beautiful.”<sup>50</sup> However, the situation has not changed much since Gupta wrote the column in *India Today* back in 1984, the South Asian dilemma of adjusting with elephant and elephant’s effort to be beautiful is still the same.

Stressing on post-pandemic recovery Mukhopadhaya and Kurian<sup>51</sup> put forward the argument on why India needs to lead from the front considering the golden opportunity for India to shine. While contradicting the thought ‘The Wire’ wrote that due to various factor India itself is beyond help and some of the South Asian small states are doing far better than India.<sup>52</sup> On the contrary, due to the aggressive interventions of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who supported Bangladesh in its 1971 Liberation War, approved the detonation of a nuclear device in Pokhran in 1974, allegedly annexed Sikkim in 1975, and was accused of helping the Tamil Tiger rebels in Sri Lanka, India’s South Asian neighbours have been wary of India’s foreign policy targets since the 1970s.<sup>53</sup>

In South Asia, India has gone through the dilemma of and hegemony and reluctant leadership. Bhasin<sup>54</sup> argues that: *As examples of India’s hegemonic authority in the region,*

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Bhabani Sen Gupta was Renowned Political Analyst of South Asia. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/guest-column/story/19840430-tamil-sinhala-conflict-is-not-india-creation-803002-1984-04-30>, 7 May 2021.

<sup>51</sup> G. Mukhopadhaya, N. Kurian, “India Must Take the Lead in South Asia”, *Hindustan Times*, 25 August 2020, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/india-must-take-the-lead-in-south-asia-analysis/story-pr5Pp9DIWAHdXI8T154UBM.html>, 6 May 2021.

<sup>52</sup> D. Basu, P. Srivastava, “COVID-19 in South Asia: India Lags Behind Pak on Stimulus, Lanka on Overall Performance”, *The Wire*, 19 May 2020, at <https://thewire.in/political-economy/covid-19-in-south-asia-india-lags-behind-pak-on-stimulus-lanka-on-overall-performance>, 2 May 2021.

<sup>53</sup> V. Arora, “Just How Popular Is India in South Asia Really?”, *The Diplomat*, 22 March 2016, at <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/just-how-popular-is-india-in-south-asia-really/>, 1 May 2021.

<sup>54</sup> M. Bhasin, “India’s Role in South Asia – Perceived Hegemony or Reluctant Leadership?”, *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, vol. 3, no. 4 (2008), at <https://www.globalindiafoundation.org/MadhaviBhasin.pdf>, 1 May 2021.

*Indian policies concerning the independence movement in Bangladesh in 1971, the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka in 1987 and the attempted military coup in the Maldives in 1988 are cited. Also, diplomatic statements, such as the comment of the Indian Government on the worsening conditions in Balochistan and the advice of the Government of Pakistan to exercise restraint, have been interpreted as India's intervention.* At the same time, India's hegemonic leadership of the region are challenged by various factors. India's internal socio-economic issues, communal conflicts, cold relations with neighbours, and its inability to presume that foreign policies address the needs of small states in their immediate vicinity are some of the challenges pointed out by Amagain.<sup>55</sup> Based on the democratic governance system and non-interference neighbourhood policy Delhi tried to define their South Asian intervention as a 'Liberal Approach' but on contrary, Destradi,<sup>56</sup> questioned India's ability to promote and sustain democracy in its neighbourhood. He has analysed the significant role that India played in the peace and democratization process in Nepal in 2005-2008, asking whether this constitutes a deviation from the conventional non-interference policy of New Delhi in the internal affairs of its neighbours and a step towards a more assertive approach to democracy promotion.

Nevertheless, it is hard to identify consistency in India's policy toward South Asia.<sup>57</sup> India neighbourhood policy reflects the Nehru doctrine. The agenda of Nehru was praised as *a balanced combination of idealism and enlightened self-interest, mixing anti-imperialism, liberal internationalism, neutralism, neo-Marxism and Gandhism.*<sup>58</sup> Post-2015 India's stance toward Nepal also reflects a similar pattern.

## CHINA AND SOUTH ASIA

Besides India and Bhutan, six south Asian countries are the signatories of China's Belt and Road Initiatives. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka signed to be a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>59</sup> Despite India's core foreign policy is based on the 'Neighbourhood First Policy' article by Sharma,<sup>60</sup> argues that India is losing its South Asian neighbours one by one to China and the

<sup>55</sup> S. Amagain, "Regional Hegemony in South Asia: A Study of Nepal-India Relation", Norwegian University Of Life Science, 2016, at <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2435232>.

<sup>56</sup> S. Destradi, "India as a Democracy Promoter? New Delhi's Involvement in Nepal's Return to Democracy", *Democratization*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>57</sup> S.K. Aryal, "India's Neighbourhood First Policy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> A.K. Behuria, S.S. Pattanaik, A. Gupta, "Does India Have a Neighbourhood Policy?", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>59</sup> Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): <https://green-bri.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri>.

<sup>60</sup> V. Sharma, "India's Lack of Respect for Its South Asian Neighbours is Now Mutual", *The Wire*, 20 August 2020, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-south-asia-neighbours-foreign-policy-respect>, 6 May 2021.

author stated that India's lack of respect for its small neighbours is the major reason behind that.

Similarly, there is a differentiation in the understanding of neighbourhood for China and India. As per 'Kautilya's Arthashastra (Economy)',<sup>61</sup> the first circle of the neighbourhood are enemies and the enemies of the enemies (*that means the second circle of the neighbourhood or extended neighbourhood*) are friends. On the other hand, former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao stated at the National People's Congress in March 2007 *to win a friend from afar, one needs to have good relations with his close neighbours.*<sup>62</sup>

Additionally, China deepening financial engagement with South Asian small states boosting asymmetric dependency. India's leading think tank organization, Gateway house, prepare the country profile of India's neighbours based on Chinese influence. It respectively says, *Maldives: Investments Undermine Democracy, Pakistan: A Reckless Mortgage, Bangladesh: Controlling Financial Infrastructure, Sri Lanka: Debt-trapped, Nepal: Exploiting the Elite.*<sup>63</sup> It also argued that China's economic engagement in the region shadowed their political interests that directly undermine India's position in the region. On the contrary, scholars like Ranjan,<sup>64</sup> Wagner<sup>65</sup> and Bose<sup>66</sup> argue that India's big brother attitude and negligence on neighbourhood policy itself gave China space in South Asia. But scholar like TV Paul<sup>67</sup> argues that *in a period of accelerated economic globalization, China and India offered a window of opportunity for small states to optimize their returns from both without significantly disturbing their relationship with either.*

## CONCLUSION

BBC<sup>68</sup> made a report in December 2015 that includes how the blockade impacted Nepal in six different ways. The reports accommodated from the environmental impact to the economic impact of the blockade that justifies the heavy dependency of Nepal on India. However, the blockade came in the aftermath of April 2015's massive earthquake

<sup>61</sup> Kautilya was the advisor to ancient India's emperor Chandragupta Maurya. He wrote a book titled *Arthashastra* which is considered as manuscript of India's economic and foreign policy written in 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. More can be read at: <http://southasia.ucla.edu/history-politics/ancient-india/kautilya-and-arthashastra/>.

<sup>62</sup> C.F. Bergsten, E. Cary (eds.), *The China Balance Sheet in 2007 and Beyond*, Washington D.C. 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Based on the country profile made by Gateway house. Detailed article can be accessed from <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/chinese-investments-in-indias-neighbourhood/>, 7 May 2021.

<sup>64</sup> A. Ranjan, *India in South Asia: Challenges and Management*, Singapore 2019.

<sup>65</sup> C. Wagner, "The Role of India and China in South Asia", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2016).

<sup>66</sup> T. Bose, "India, China and the Neighbourhood in South Asia", *The India Forum*, 7 August 2020, at <https://www.theindiaforum.in/letters/india-china-and-neighbourhood-south-asia>, 3 May 2021.

<sup>67</sup> T.V. Paul, "When Balance of Power Meets Globalization: China, India and the Small States of South Asia", *Politics*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>68</sup> BBC, "How the Blockade is Affecting Nepal", *BBC News*, 2015, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35041366>, 2 May 2021.

that has majorly destroyed 30 percentage of Nepal. So, it hit the sentimental side of Nepalese and allow politicians to turn this into a nationalistic politics and at the same time giving space for China to present itself as a replacement for India. Since then, the popularity, influence, investment, and proactiveness of China in Nepal has increased rapidly. Besides Nepal, China's relationship with Pakistan has always remained cordial and other smaller South Asian nations are gradually moving closer to China and seeing Beijing as an option in contrast with New Delhi's single-handed dependence.<sup>69</sup> India's foreign policy expert Prof. Ganguly<sup>70</sup> wrote that Narendra Modi came to power promising to prioritize relations with countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and others. China is harnessing its inability to do so.

Going through major incidents from 2015 to mid-2020 there are few takeaways we can draw. Firstly, sending a foreign secretary-level delegate to delay the promulgation of the constitution and the economic blockade right after the failed attempt, somehow displayed as retaliation from the Indian side out of dissatisfaction. Additionally, letting it go for almost six months that leads the whole country into a humanitarian crisis was portrayed as a 'Right-wing Nationalism' from Nepal and 'Big Brother Arrogance' from Indian sides. Secondly, Nepal is equally strategic for China due to various factors that primarily, includes accessible point from Nepal to China, Tibetan refugees in Nepal and potential threat and interest regarding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, the 2015 blockade gives China a perfect excuse to present it as a more wise, reliable, and less micro-managing partner for Nepal. Thirdly, while China's engagement in Nepal is increasing in pace, China equally, is rising in other small states in South Asia so it's a pattern and the study made on Nepal-India relations and the rise of China can be implied to other small States-India relations as well.

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<sup>69</sup> T. Shabbir, "Rising China and Its South Asian Neighbors: Evolving Dynamics and the Outlook", *Policy Perspectives*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2017).

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