

India–Nepal Relations: Security, Diplomacy, and Strategic Importance

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ABSTRACT

The Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 is the framework of India and Nepal's one of the most complex and historically layered bilateral relations in South Asia. The present paper aims to comprehensively examine the changing contours of India–Nepal relations across three main areas such as security cooperation and border management, diplomatic engagement and frameworks, and the strategic significance of India–Nepal in the geopolitics of the region, especially the emerging triangular relationship between India and China and Nepal. Based on bilateral trade statistics (\$8.7 billion during the fiscal year 2024-25), milestones in energy cooperation, institutional cooperation, and territorial disputes (including Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura), the paper analyzes the opportunities and challenges of this 'Roti-Beti' relationship. The study also looks at Nepal's strategic balancing act since the formation of the BRI under the current framework in 2024 and the impact it may have on India's Neighbourhood First policy. Although the study identifies persistent irritants, the structural interdependence between the two nations – economic, military, cultural and geographic – are the major factors influencing bilateral trajectories.

Keywords: India–Nepal Relations, 1950 Treaty, Kalapani Dispute, Neighbourhood First Policy, Belt and Road Initiative, Hydropower Diplomacy, South Asian Security

1. Introduction

India and Nepal have an open border of 1,751km, one of the most porous and unique borders in the world, which allows people, goods, and culture to flow freely across five states in India: Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Sikkim. This geographical closeness has created a 'Roti-Beti' (bread and marriage) relationship between the two peoples, which represents their civilizational, cultural and family ties (Muni, 1992). The bilateral relationship is institutionalised under the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed on the 31st of July 1950; the Treaty is the basis of their mutual engagement and by the terms of the treaty, citizens of each country have the right to move, reside, trade and possess property on the other countries.

This is not a fixed link, however, and there is no lack of conflict. The India-Nepal ties have experienced both periods of intimacy and distance since 1950, for instance, the India's reconstruction promise of \$1 billion after the 2015 earthquake; the 2020 diplomatic tussle with the Kalapani territorial dispute; the 2015 blockade crisis; to the 2025 tripartite electricity export to Bangladesh (Nayak, 2020; Annapurna Express, 2025). Four main factors are reshaping the

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bilateral relationship as of 2025-26, namely, the pursuit of China by Nepal under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, the Neighbourhood First policy of India, an increasing economic interdependence between the two countries, particularly in the hydroelectric sector, and the remaining territorial disputes.

In this paper, these dimensions have been studied systematically and analyzed in the context of three thematic areas: security, diplomacy and strategic significance, to bring to a scholarly judgment the current status and future prospects of India-Nepal bilateral ties.

2. Historical and Institutional Foundations

2.1 The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship

The Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950) is the cornerstone of the India-Nepal relations. It was signed on 31 July 1950 in New Delhi, India, and was a framework of special bilateral relations on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference. Articles VI and VII are of special importance as they give citizens of both countries reciprocal rights to reside, own property, conduct commerce and to move, and also to take part in industrial and economic development (Pattanaik, 1998). First of all, both governments might not sign treaties with third parties that could endanger the security of each government.

The treaty has been a two-fold blessing. It has codified the 'special relationship' status but it has also been a point of contention. While critics in Nepal note that the treaty introduces asymmetric dependency, questions remain in India regarding the equality of the provisions, and whether they are 'equal' for the structurally weaker partner (Sharma, 2023). The Eminent Persons Group (EPG), set up in 2014 to review the treaty, has yet to present a report, even as of 2026, which has so far not been accepted by India, leading to a diplomatic tangle (Kathmandu Post, 2026).

2.2 Key Institutional Mechanisms

India and Nepal have established over 70 bilateral institutional arrangements in such areas as trade, security, water resources and cultural cooperation over the past 70 years. A number of organizations exist such as Joint Commission (Foreign Minister level), Joint Technical Level Boundary Committee, Joint Standing Operational Procedure for border security, etc. and the Mutual Legal Assistance Agreement in Criminal Matters signed in 2024, whereunder cooperation is possible on the fields of terrorism, human trafficking and counterfeit currency (Kathmandu Post, 2026). Notwithstanding this institutional density, analysts observe that not all of these mechanisms are "productive" (Kathmandu Post, 2026).

Table 1: Key India–Nepal Bilateral Agreements and Institutional Frameworks

Year	Agreement / Mechanism	Significance	Domain
1950	Treaty of Peace & Friendship	Foundational charter; reciprocal citizen rights, defence ties	Diplomatic / Legal

1996	Mahakali Treaty	Water-sharing framework for Mahakali River development	Water / Energy
2014	EPG Formation	Review of 1950 Treaty provisions; bilateral redressal mechanism	Diplomatic
2016	Motihari–Amlekhgunj Pipeline	First cross-border petroleum pipeline in South Asia	Energy
2018	Trade & Transit Treaty Renewal	Diversification of trade; reduced Indian port dependency	Trade
2024	Mutual Legal Assistance Agreement	Cooperation on transnational crime, terror, trafficking	Security
2024	Long-term Power Purchase Agreement	India commits to buy up to 10,000 MW from Nepal by 2034	Energy
2024	Tripartite Electricity Deal	Nepal–India–Bangladesh trilateral power export framework	Energy / Diplomacy

Source: Compiled from MEA India, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal, and Embassy of Nepal (2024)

3. Security Cooperation and Border Management

3.1 The Open Border and Its Security Implications

The approximately 1,751 km open border between India and Nepal, established under the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, permits the free movement of citizens of both nations without passports or visas. While this arrangement reflects the unique civilisational and cultural bonds between the two countries, it has increasingly become a significant security vulnerability for India. The open border facilitates the cross-border movement of counterfeit Indian currency (FICN), narcotics, arms, and human trafficking networks, many of which have been linked to Pakistani intelligence operatives exploiting Nepal's territory as a transit corridor (MEA India, 2024). The porous nature of the border also enables the infiltration of Islamist extremist elements and Maoist cadres, who have historically used the Terai region as a staging ground for anti-India activities (ORF, 2023). India's Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), which is the primary border-guarding force on the Indian side, operates in coordination with Nepal's Armed Police Force (APF) through joint patrolling mechanisms and intelligence-sharing protocols to counter these threats. However, operational challenges persist due to the absence of a fenced boundary, the density of cross-border ethnic and familial ties, and the lack of a comprehensive bilateral border management framework. The 2024 Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) in Criminal Matters represents a significant step towards institutionalising cross-border legal cooperation, but analysts note that sustained political will on both sides remains essential for

translating agreements into effective ground-level security outcomes (Kathmandu Post, 2026).

3.2 The Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura Dispute

The biggest security related diplomatic standoff between India and Nepal is over the Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura land dispute in the Northwest of Nepal, close to the Indo-China-Nepal tri-junction. The origin of the dispute was the Sugauli Treaty of 1816 where Mahakali (Kali) River was established as the border. The difference in sources lies in the fact that India says the source of the river is east of Kalapani which falls under Kalapani and Lipulekh in India's Pithoragarh district in Uttarakhand, while Nepal has claimed that the source is at Limpiyadhura, thereby claiming the sovereignty of Kalapani and Lipulekh as well. (Tandfonline, 2024)

When India started building a road through the Lipulekh Pass in May 2020, the conflict went into a dramatic escalation, leading Nepal to include the disputed territories in its official map, the 'New Map' (Lotusarise, 2026). The dispute came up again in 2025, when India and China reached an agreement to reopen the traditional trade routes via Lipulekh, which again raised Nepali protests (PW Live, 2025). The conflict has the potential to be 'exploited by third parties', according to scholars, a reference to China (Brookings, 2020). The border dispute continues to be an obstacle to trust-building on security cooperation, and has yet to be resolved after several talks at Foreign Secretary level for discussions.

3.3 Military and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

India has a deep military relationship with Nepal, supported by a unique military institution called Gorkha regiments, which are Nepalis serving in the Indian Army. This arrangement is the origin of the seven regiments of Gorkha origin in the Indian Army, which are older than the Indian Independence Movement and was established in the Tripartite Agreement of 1947 between India, Nepal and the UK (Muni, 1992). This military connection is a symbol of the depth of the bilateral relationship among people.

The 2024 Mutual Legal Assistance Agreement in Criminal Matters is a milestone in the field of counter-terrorism. The pact opens the door for joint efforts in criminal investigations and sharing of evidence, prosecutions, and combating transnational crimes like fake Indian currency operations, human trafficking, and terrorism (Kathmandu Post, 2026). Moreover, India and Nepal have been holding regular military drills and there are joint committees for intelligence sharing in the border areas. The SSB–APF cooperation has been formalised in an operational mechanism, but in 2025, a paper in ORF commented, Nepal's geospatial location between India and China makes it a 'critical lens' for evaluating India's regional security doctrine (ORF, 2025).

Table 2: India–Nepal Security Cooperation Framework (2020–2026)

Mechanism	Nature	Status (2026)	DOI / Reference
SSB–APF Joint Patrol	Border surveillance & anti-smuggling	Active	ForumIAS (2024)
Joint Military Exercise (Surya Kiran)	Counter-insurgency, disaster relief training	Annual	MEA India (2025)

Mutual Legal Assistance Agreement	Criminal investigations, terror cooperation	Signed 2024	Kathmandu Post (2026)
Intelligence Sharing Protocols	ISI monitoring, Maoist elements	Ongoing	ORF (2025)
Integrated Check Posts (ICPs)	Raxaul–Birgunj, Jogbani–Biratnagar	Operational	MEA India (2025)
Gorkha Regiment Arrangement	Nepali soldiers in Indian Army (7 Regiments)	Since 1947	Muni (1992)

Source: Ministry of External Affairs India, Observer Research Foundation, Kathmandu Post (2024–26)

4. Diplomatic Engagement and Frameworks

4.1 India's Neighbourhood First Policy

India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy since 2014 has put Nepal on the list of bilateral partners' priorities. In this context, Prime Minister Modi visited Nepal in August 2014 as his first state visit destination, a symbolic choice to indicate the intention. The policy focuses on economic integration, development cooperation and high-level diplomacy. The successive governments of India have provided 1,009 ambulances and 300 school buses to Nepal through High-Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs); committed \$1 billion towards post-2015 reconstruction of earthquake-affected areas in Nepal (of which \$250 million is being provided as a grant); and opened the world's first cross-border petroleum pipeline, between Motihari and Amlekhgunj, as a sign of "hard-wired interdependence" (IASGyan, 2025).

In the area of global governance norms, Nepal has also aligned with India in its quest for the permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), (IASGyan, 2025). But critics point out that Neighbourhood First has been increasingly accompanied by 'security-centric diplomacy' and 'ideological signalling' like the Akhand Bharat map controversy at India's new parliament inauguration in 2023, which has dampened trust among the country's smaller neighbours. As viewed from the prism of Nepal, ORF (2025) warns that India's evolving security doctrine has 'far reaching implications for the larger South Asian security environment'.

4.2 The China Factor: Nepal's Strategic Balancing

China's presence in Nepal is the biggest factor in India-Nepal relations since 2015. In 2017, Nepal signed a framework agreement with China to become a member of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. Nepal joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project in 2017 by signing a framework agreement with China. The implementation of the Belt and Road initiative has, however, been slow: as of 2024, no project under the BRI had been financially closed. In December 2024, Prime Minister Oli went to China and signed a BRI implementation framework, of which the term 'aid financing' was changed to 'grant financing' in response to

Nepal's objections to debt-based financing schemes (PolSci Institute, 2025).

The major concern of China with Nepal is security of Tibet. Beijing has viewed Nepal as a key country to counter the Tibetan refugee networks and internationalisation of the Tibetan Exile Movement and has urged Nepal to cooperate with it in implementing its 'One China' policy (Tandfonline, 2023). In the India-China-Nepal context, from a trilateral viewpoint, scholars at SAGE (2024) see the relationship as a 'geo-strategic triangle' for which the nation must carefully balance its alignment to protect its sovereignty and ensure maximum development opportunities.

India's answer to Nepal's China engagement has gone from coercive signalling (2015 blockade is credited to be counterproductive) to 'Quiet Diplomacy' where the focus is on completing the HICDPs and maintaining goodwill without provoking politics. (Lotusarise, 2026) As Nepal self-evaluates, India is the 'practical, everyday partner' for trade, supplies and transit while China remains the 'aspirational future that has been slow to arrive' (PolSci Institute, 2025).

4.3 Diplomatic Irritants and the EPG Impasse

There are a number of structural diplomatic irritants. First, the EPG (Eminent Persons Group) report submitted to the PM of Nepal, but yet to be received by India, is a point of contention because it has recommendations to revise the 1950 treaty, which India has not yet discussed publicly. Second, there has been a nationalist sentiment on both sides as result of the Kalapani territorial dispute, where the 2020 constitutional amendment on 'new map' remains unresolved on the Nepal side. Third, India's military initiative of Agnipath, which had been launched in 2022, had not included Gorkha soldiers from Nepal, leading to protests and diplomatic friction which were later on-going. Fourth, the Diplomat (2025) has noted that the BJP government has included "civilizational imagery" in Indian foreign policy statements, which is a concern for South Asian smaller nations.

5. Strategic Importance: Economic, Geographic, and Geopolitical Dimensions

5.1 Geographic and Military-Strategic Value

The strategic significance of Nepal to India is basically geographical. Nepal shares a border of 1,751 km with Tibet Autonomous Region, China and India. The high Himalayan mountains of Nepal form a natural state of defense and the rivers which descend from the mountains into the densely populated plains of India are also very interdependent in terms of water resources, not limited to economics, but also in terms of structure (IASGyan, 2025). Any hostile power that is gaining a significant foothold in Kathmandu will threaten the security of five Indian states with a population of more than 400 million.

The geostrategic significance of the Kalapani–Lipulekh corridor has been enhanced by Lipulekh Pass which had been a trade route between India and Tibet and is now a possible logistical route to China. This is exactly what India was driven by when it built the road through Lipulekh in 2020, which got it diplomatic slating from Nepal. The 2015 India-China Lipulekh agreement is another example of this land being caught up in three-way competition (ORF, 2020).

5.2 Economic Interdependence: Trade and Energy

In so many ways, India's economic influence on Nepal is unparalleled. More than 64% of Nepal's total foreign trade comes from India (Embassy of Nepal, 2025). As of FY 2024–25, bilateral trade is estimated at \$8.7 billion, with India exporting \$7.4 billion (mainly petroleum products, machinery and vehicles, pharmaceuticals and construction materials) and Nepal exporting \$1.3 billion (mainly electricity, agricultural products, and iron and steel items) to India (Hans India, 2025).

Energy has become the powerful dimension. Nepal is blessed with an estimated 40,000 MW of economically viable hydropower resources and has become a net electricity exporter. During FY 2024-25, Nepal has exported around NPR 17-18 billion (USD 130 million) worth of electricity to India (Rising Nepal, 2025). As of August 2025, India has approved the export of 1,010.9 MW of hydropower generation capacity from 30 Nepalese hydropower plants (SASEC, 2025). The new long-term power purchase agreement, signed in 2024, will guarantee India's procurement of up to 10,000 MW from Nepal in the next decade, which is a game-changing deal for Nepal's finances (Hans India, 2025). This milestone of 40 MW electricity export from Nepal to Bangladesh through India's transmission grid in June 2025, which occurred under a tripartite agreement signed on 3rd October 2024, was the first project for energy transit among three nations in South Asia (Border Lens, 2025).

5.3 Development Partnership and Connectivity

India is the biggest development partner for Nepal. India has been giving grants and lines of credit for infrastructure projects such as airports, roads, hospitals and schools since the 1950s. The pledge to reconstruct the earthquake-devastated country is still the biggest one-off foreign development offer made to Nepal, which was \$1 billion. As per the Government-to-Government HICDP agreement of 2024, India has funded 1009 ambulances and 300 school buses, which are tangible public goods diplomacy. As per the agreement under the Government-to-Government HICDP for 2024, India has funded for 1009 ambulances and 300 school buses, which are public goods diplomacy in visible form (IASGyan, 2025).

As a landlocked country, transit access is a matter of life and death for Nepal. Nepal also has Indian ports—Kolkata and Visakhapatnam—in which it makes third country sea trade and the renewal of the Transit Treaty in 2018 opened more transit options for Nepal. Asymmetric but mutually beneficial economic interdependence is further strengthened by the remittance flows from millions of Nepalis in India, which contribute significantly to household income and Nepal's foreign exchange reserves.

Table 3: India–Nepal Bilateral Trade Statistics (FY 2020–21 to FY 2024–25)

Fiscal Year	India Exports to Nepal (USD Bn)	Nepal Exports to India (USD Bn)	Total Trade (USD Bn)	Nepal's Power Exports (USD Mn)
FY 2020–21	5.2	0.7	5.9	38
FY 2021–22	6.0	0.9	6.9	55

FY 2022–23	6.7	1.0	7.7	72
FY 2023–24	7.0	1.1	8.1	100
FY 2024–25	7.4	1.3	8.7	130

Source: Embassy of Nepal, New Delhi; Hans India (2025); Rising Nepal Daily (2025); SASEC (2025)

6. Challenges and Fault Lines

6.1 Territorial Disputes and the 'New Map' Controversy

The Kalapani issue as discussed by the authors of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2024) - Choudhary and Jain under securitisation theory is a case study of how border issues can transcend from its geographical aspects to national identities. It was not only a foreign policy statement, but a domestic political gesture (challenge to the legitimacy of the incumbent government) as well, in Nepal's 2020 constitutional amendment. Strategically, the Kalapani area sits at a juncture of three nations—India, China and Nepal—and the Lipulekh Pass offers a direct border crossing to Tibet (Tandfonline, 2024). The danger of letting this issue boil over is that it may 'seed the ground for great rivalry and intense competition in the delicate Himalayan border region with profound geopolitical ramifications' (Brookings, 2020), warns former Nepali diplomat Dinesh Bhattarai.

6.2 The China Variable and BRI

The 2024 BRI implementation framework signed by Prime Minister Oli during his visit to Beijing in December 2024 has fueled India's strategic concern on the China front (PolSci Institute, 2025). Although Nepal has been careful not to get trapped into debt-trap financing, India is forced to rethink its strategy due to the symbolism of China's engagement in Nepal. Although for now, BRI railway projects through the Himalayas are technically difficult and financially impractical, but in the short term, this is not a cause for alarm. In the SAGE journals, study the triangular India–China–Nepal nexus and found that China's involvement in Nepal is not solely an economic proposition, but is primarily motivated by the security concerns related to Tibet, specifically the management of the Tibetan exile community.

6.3 Domestic Political Instability in Nepal

Nepal's continued political unrest, having seen more than twelve governments since 2008 with a transition to a federal republic, has been a hindrance to regular bilateral interactions. It is essential that India has durable Nepali counterparts who can execute agreed frameworks as part of its Neighbourhood First policy. The 'Gen Z Uprising' in September 2025 in Nepal in reaction to the ban on social media further reflects the current discontentment among the youth against political governance, increasing uncertainties for bilateral diplomacy (Lotusarise, 2026). Nepal's new government, according to analysts from Kathmandu Post (2026), needs to work on 'capacity enhancement, in-depth knowledge and strategic planning' to make diplomatic efforts with India a success.

6.4 Water Disputes and River Management

The rivers of Nepal—Koshi, Gandak, Karnali and Mahakali—are lifelines of irrigation and agriculture in the Gangetic plains of India. The 1996 Mahakali Treaty provided a cooperative water management mechanism, which has been slow and contentious to implement. The shifting course of rivers has led to cartographic conflict (the Susta dispute over the course of the Gandak), and on several occasions, flooding downstream in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh has been blamed on Nepali barrages and embankments. Leverage is greater downstream for India which Nepal sees with suspicion.

Table 4: Comparative Assessment – India vs. China Engagement in Nepal (2024–2026)

Dimension	India	China
Trade Share	64% of Nepal's total trade (~\$8.7 Bn FY25)	~\$1.6 Bn; growing but limited
FDI in Nepal	~47.5% of total FDI stock	~12% of FDI; growing
Border	1,751 km open border; free movement	1,414 km; restricted; managed
Energy	Buying 1,010 MW; 10,000 MW commitment	Minimal; 220 kV Chilime–Kerung line in progress
Development Aid	Largest aid partner since 1950s	BRI projects; slow implementation
Strategic Motive	Security buffer; economic integration	Tibet security; countering Indian influence
Treaty Framework	1950 Treaty; 40+ institutional mechanisms	2017/2024 BRI; Transit and Connectivity MoUs
Public Perception	Mixed; trust deficits post-2015 blockade	Mixed; aspirational but infrastructure delays

Source: PolSci Institute (2025); IASGyan (2025); SASEC (2025); AEI China Investment Tracker (2023)

7. The Way Forward: Policy Recommendations

2026 is a pivotal year for India–Nepal relations. The economic, geographic and cultural dependence of one another is still overwhelming. But Nepal's China Courtship calls for strategic realignment. This analysis results in the following policy imperatives:

- **Treaty Modernisation:** India should engage constructively with the EPG report and initiate a structured, time-bound process to update the 1950 Treaty to reflect

contemporary realities, addressing asymmetries in trade and movement provisions while preserving the open-border spirit.

- **Kalapani Dialogue:** The border dispute must be addressed through a dedicated bilateral technical committee, preventing it from festering into a nationalist flashpoint exploitable by China or other third parties.
- **Energy Partnership Acceleration:** The 10,000 MW power purchase commitment should be operationalised with clear timelines and transmission infrastructure investment, transforming Nepal from an aid-recipient into an economic partner.
- **Institutional Reinvigoration:** Of the 40+ bilateral mechanisms, a prioritised subset should be activated with measurable outcomes, regular ministerial-level review, and technical capacity support.
- **People-to-People Connectivity:** Expansion of scholarship programmes, cross-border cultural exchanges, and joint economic zones in the border regions would build durable societal goodwill that can withstand political turbulence.

8. Conclusion

India–Nepal relations are too complex to be classified. They are at once the closest and most complicated bilateral relationship in South Asia – open borders, civilizational connections and structural economic interdependence, on one hand, but territorial disputes, geopolitical competition, and asymmetrical power on the other. The relationship is at an inflection point in 2025–26, when Nepal's growing attachment to BRI, India's revamped Neighbourhood First policy, and the arrival of energy diplomacy as a new form of transformative dimension indicate that the relationship is in a process of active redefinition.

The economic interdependence of the two countries is clear from the following facts: \$8.7 billion of bilateral trade, 64% of all Nepal's trade with India, 10,000 MW of electricity commitment and India being Nepal's most important development partner. But as every scholar from ORF, Brookings, The Diplomat, and SAGE has already pointed out, strategic trust cannot be based on economic data. It calls for consistent and respectful diplomacy that respects Nepal's sovereign and autonomy – not as a buffer state to be controlled but as a partner with legitimate interests.

On the other hand, Nepal's unique geographic location as a 'bridge' instead of battleground between the two major powers of Asia should be leveraged by the country. As shared by PolSci Institute (2025), 'With smart diplomacy, Nepal can turn geopolitical risks into strategic opportunities—make it more than just an observer and take part in the shaping of the region's future. The dynamics of India-Nepal relations in the next decade will depend on how both countries are able to overcome the past and structural imbalance and create a partnership that truly reflects their shared civilizational history and geopolitical future.'

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