



# The Role of NDA Governments in Shaping India-Nepal Strategic Relations in the 21st Century

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

India and Nepal, bound by deep historical, cultural, and geographical ties, have witnessed significant shifts in their bilateral relationship in the 21st century, particularly under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) governments led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The paper explores how the NDA's "Neighborhood First" policy and Modi's diplomatic outreach initially fostered renewed cooperation, people-to-people connections, and economic engagement, marked by high-profile visits and promises of non-interference in Nepal's sovereign affairs. However, the relationship has also faced acute challenges, including border disputes, perceptions of Indian interference, and the 2015 economic blockade, which fueled anti-India sentiment and strained diplomatic ties. The rise of China's influence in Nepal through investments and the Belt and Road Initiative has further complicated the strategic calculus, challenging India's traditional role in Nepal's domestic and foreign policy. The paper analyzes the evolving dynamics, the impact of external actors, and the persistent trust deficit, concluding that a comprehensive, cooperative approach—anchored in mutual respect and regular dialogue—is essential for maintaining stability and advancing strategic interests in the region. The study underscores the need for India to recalibrate its strategy to address Nepal's aspirations and external pressures in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

**Keywords:** India, Nepal, NDA, Relations, Impact, External actors, Challenges.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

India and Nepal, countries that border each other and have closely related cultures, have long enjoyed a special and stable relationship in the South Asian sphere (Mahar, 2024). The idea of two peoples is grounded in centuries of common history; religion, language and social traditions, and open borders have made daily sharing and family unions easy for both countries (Kharel, 2024). Historically, Nepal's geography between India and China has given it great strategic meaning, making it crucial to local power games (Chand, 2023). For India, its northern frontier with Nepal is highly important, as any problem in Nepal can easily affect India's security, due to the long, open border between them (Chhetry, 2021).

There has been a shift in the relationship over the past few years, with both positive and negative changes taking place (Rahman & Akter, 2023). Nepal's main trading partner and major source of foreign investment is India, which helps Nepal with its international trade routes and supports the building of big infrastructure such as the petroleum pipeline and the power plant on the Arun River (Kharel, 2024). Since the NDA took office in 2014 under Prime Minister Modi, high-level visits, new economic agreements, and the "Neighbourhood First" policy have helped repair trust and increase cooperation with our neighbours (Viquaruddin, 2018). India's true dedication to the partnership was apparent during Modi's frequent travel to Nepal and quick humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 situation (Mahar, 2024).

But the relationship has also gone through serious difficulties. A decade of economic blockade, arguments over borders like Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh-Kalapani, and suspicions of Indian involvement have ignited nationalist views in Nepal and caused people to lose trust (Mansoor & Pandey, 2019). At the same time, Nepal benefits from China's Belt and Road Initiative, which opens new economic and political channels for Kathmandu and contradicts traditional Indian influence on the region (Thapliyal, 2023)? The help China

gave to Nepal in terms of infrastructure and assistance during the pandemic convinced Nepal to consider new directions in foreign policy (Chand, 2023). As a result, India felt it necessary to reevaluate its own approach and provisions in Nepal (Kharel, 2024). Leaders of NDA governments have managed issues created by the past, rising rivalries around the world, and the fast-changing ambitions of Nepal (Mansoor & Pandey, 2019). The research examines the various roles of the NDA in building India-Nepal ties, starting from the past, considering present problems and keeping in mind regional developments to see if their upcoming relationship can be strong and rewarding for both sides.

## 1.2 OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the evolution of India-Nepal strategic relations in the 21st century, with a focus on the role of NDA governments.
2. To examine the impact of the NDA's "Neighborhood First" policy and main diplomatic initiatives on bilateral cooperation and trust-building between India and Nepal
3. To assess the challenges and setbacks in India-Nepal relations during NDA rule, including issues such as border disputes, the 2015 economic blockade, and perceptions of interference
4. To evaluate the influence of external actors, particularly China, on Nepal's foreign policy choices and its implications for India-Nepal relations
5. To identify the major factors contributing to both cooperation and friction in the bilateral relationship under NDA leadership.

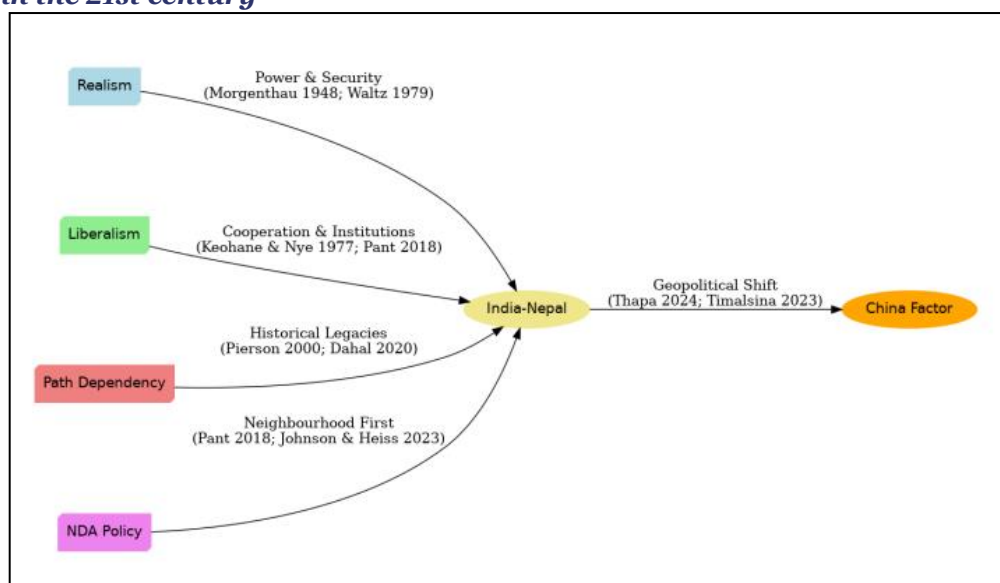
## 1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

For a long time, India and Nepal, two adjacent nations with strong historical, cultural, and strategic ties, have had a special relationship in South Asia. The relationship has come under more scrutiny in the twenty-first century, particularly under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) governments of India, which have attempted to reshape regional diplomacy through programs like the "Neighbourhood First" policy. Despite these initiatives to improve collaboration and understanding, there have been notable ups and downs in India-Nepal relations, with both times of intense tension and diplomatic goodwill. Long-standing issues like border conflicts, economic restrictions, and accusations of Indian meddling have damaged confidence and made bilateral relations more difficult. India's long-standing sway over the region is in jeopardy due to the increasing involvement of foreign parties, especially China, in Nepal's strategic affairs. The changing situation emphasizes how urgent it is to assess how NDA governments have shaped India-Nepal strategic ties, pinpoint the underlying reasons for recurrent conflicts, and investigate avenues for a more secure, mutually beneficial alliance in a geopolitical environment that is changing quickly.

## 1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The historical, cultural, and geographic ties that bind India and Nepal have been strengthened in the twenty-first century, particularly under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) governments in India. Applying the fundamental theories of international relations is crucial to comprehending the intricacies of the bilateral relationship. The pursuit of national interest, power, and security are emphasized as the main drivers of state behaviour in realism, as defined by Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Kenneth Waltz (1979) (Tabarcia, 2009; Koivisto, 2010). Scholars such as Sunil Thapa (2024) have highlighted India's strategic efforts to secure its borders and maintain regional dominance in the context of India-Nepal. These efforts frequently take the form of economic measures like blockades and political interventions. The conflicts between India's hegemonic tendencies and Nepal's attempts to assert its sovereignty—particularly when Nepal interacts with outside parties like China—are explained by the realist perspective (Nau, 2012). Supported by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977), liberalism emphasizes economic cooperation, interdependence, and institutional engagement (Keohane, 2001; Greg, 2024). Harsh V. Pant (2018), the NDA's "Neighbourhood First" policy and Modi's diplomatic outreach place a strong emphasis on people-to-people connections, economic initiatives, and cultural ties—all of which are liberal ideals meant to promote collaboration and mutual gain (Johnson & Heiss, 2023). But as Shrestha (2021) notes, these liberal mechanisms are constrained by enduring mistrust, unresolved border disputes, and political sensitivities, all of which frequently erode the possibility of further integration (Keohane, 2020).

### 1.1 Theoretical framework on Role of NDA governments in shaping India-Nepal strategic relations in the 21st century



Paul Pierson (2000) developed Path Dependency Theory, which Gaurav Raja Dahal (2020) applied to South Asian geopolitics. It emphasizes how past choices and ingrained patterns influence present policies and limit possibilities for the future (Mitra, 2013). Critical moments like the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, the Indian blockades in 1970, 1989, and 2015, and Nepal's political changes have all contributed to cycles of dependency and mistrust in the relationship between India and Nepal (Timalisina, 2023).

Dahal (2020) contends that these historical legacies still affect bilateral dynamics and restrict Nepal's capacity to fully assert independent foreign policy choices, even in light of the country's democratic advancements and attempts to diversify its foreign relations, especially through engagement with China (Poudel, 2013). Together, the theories paint a complex picture. India's security-focused and hegemonic stance, which frequently elicits opposition and mistrust in Nepal, can be explained by realism (Koivisto, 2010). Liberalism illuminates the cooperative structures and cultural connections that can fortify bonds but are often weakened by strategic and political distrust (Greg, 2024). The Path Dependency Theory emphasizes how past crises and historical trends perpetuate recurrent behaviours, making it challenging for both nations to escape deeply ingrained cycles of dependency and dominance (Mitra, 2013). These historical and structural limitations have not entirely been removed by the NDA government's policies, despite the introduction of fresh diplomatic initiatives and an emphasis on respect for Nepal's sovereignty (Johnson & Heiss, 2023). China's expanding influence in Nepal is making matters more complicated, posing a threat to India's long-standing role and calling for a reevaluation of strategy that takes into account Nepal's desires for independence and varied alliances as well as security considerations (Timalisina, 2023). In order to establish a more stable, just, and advantageous strategic partnership in the twenty-first century, India and Nepal must recognize and address these interconnected theoretical dimensions.

## 1.5 METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted a qualitative approach and descriptive and analytical methods to thoroughly investigate how NDA governments have shaped India-Nepal strategic relations in the twenty-first century. Using resources like official documents, media reports, and scholarly literature, descriptive research is used to methodically gather and present factual information on the historical background, significant events, diplomatic initiatives, and policy changes that define India-Nepal relations. This was supplemented by analytical research that used qualitative information from expert interviews, case studies, and thematic analysis of policy documents and academic works to interpret and assess the patterns, relationships, and underlying causes of changes in bilateral dynamics. The qualitative approach offered contextual depth and insight into the perceptions and motivations of main stakeholders, the combined methodology allowed for a nuanced understanding of both the visible trends and the deeper strategic, political, and historical factors influencing the bilateral relationship.

## 1.6 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1.6.1 Evolution of India-Nepal Strategic Relations under NDA Rule

In the 21st century, there has been a constant improvement as well as shifts in India-Nepal strategic relations, mainly guided by their traditional relations, present world politics and the leadership of the NDA government

(Ranjan, 2019; Sharma, 2010). The nations have an open border, a long history of sharing culture and religion and strong economic ties—India is Nepal's top trade partner, provides most foreign investment and is responsible for nearly all of Nepal's third-country trade (Dubey, 2018; Aryal & Bharti, 2023). The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship created a strong base for friendship, it also became seen as proof of inequality by many in Nepal, who sometimes called for the treaty to be looked at again (Singh, 2016).

Relations between India and Nepal in 21<sup>st</sup> century have changed a lot, largely due to moves made by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) governments (Kaura & Rani, 2020). The countries are linked by an open border and strong historical, cultural and economic relationships (Aryal, 2022). India is continually Nepal's main partner in trade and tops the list for foreign investment. In 2022-23 of the Nepali financial year, India accounted for 64.1% of Nepal's total trade, equaling \$8.85 billion, where imports from India were worth \$8.02 billion and \$839.62 million were received from Nepal. Edible oil, coffee, tea and jute are the main products Nepal sends to India, making it the country's biggest export market for all Nepalese goods (Pattanaik, 2016). In 2022, the country exported goods worth \$935.41 million to India, most of which were fats and oils, spices and iron and steel. Mineral fuels, iron and steel, machinery, vehicles and pharmaceuticals were the main categories under which India exported \$6.95 billion to Nepal in 2024. Nepal became India's 11th largest export destination under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA in 2021-2022, having risen from 28th in 2014 and Indian exports accounted for nearly a fifth of Nepal's total GDP (Das, 2016).

The NDA's "Neighbourhood First" approach gave top importance to linking neighbours, upgrading infrastructure and building relations between people (Sidhu & Godbole, 2015; Aryal & Bharti, 2023). Important projects were the Motihari-Amalekhgunj oil pipeline, integrated check points and the Arun-3 hydropower facility. India helps with education, health and rural infrastructure and its investment in Nepal is 33.5% of Nepal's total FDI, amounting to around \$670 million in 2022. Approximately 150 Indian companies operate in Nepal's manufacturing, services, and power sectors. Although many stakeholders have actively participated in strengthening bilateral ties, several challenges have arisen, including political disagreements, public distrust, and shifting regional dynamics (Ha, 2023). The 2015 economic blockade significantly contributed to Nepal's difficulties in drafting a new constitution, resulting in a sharp decline in public trust and a rise in nationalist sentiments (Singh, 2016). In 2020, territorial disputes over Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura prompted Nepal to amend its constitution and update its official maps. At the same time, growing Chinese economic involvement—making China Nepal's second-largest trading partner, with \$1.85 billion in trade—has reduced India's traditional influence in the region (Dubey, 2018). As of February 2024, Nepal's trade deficit stood at \$992.9 million, with the majority of goods still transported overland through India. In response to these developments, successive NDA governments have made it a priority to respect Nepal's sovereignty and have worked toward deepening diplomatic and trade relations (Kaura & Rani, 2020). Over the past century, economic cooperation, military tensions, and a shared aspiration for a mutually supportive relationship have shaped the India–Nepal partnership (Aryal et al., 2023).

### 1.6.2 Impact of the NDA's "Neighborhood First" Policy on Bilateral Ties

The NDA's "Neighborhood First" policy, entrenched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, has proven enormously effective in promoting bilateral cooperation and confidence between Nepal and India, albeit with mixed outcomes (Dubey 2018; Aryal and Bharti 2023). The policy aimed at promoting physical, digital, and people-to-people connectivity, enhancing trade and commerce, and establishing relationships on the platforms of respect, dialogue, peace, prosperity, and culture (Kaura and Rani 2020; Sidhu and Godbole 2015). Modi's outreach to Nepal was historic—he became the first Indian Prime Minister in 17 years to visit Nepal in 2014, signaling a new era of engagement (Ha 2023). His visits were marked by high-level diplomacy, including addressing Nepal's Parliament and signing crucial agreements such as the 5,600-MW Pancheshwar hydropower project and launching the RuPay card in Nepal (Aryal 2022; Das 2016).

India provided a 10,000 crore Nepalese rupees line of credit and backed large infrastructure schemes such as the Solu Corridor transmission line for power and various cross-border connectivity schemes (Pattanaik 2016; Ranjan 2019). India's development aid has been significant, with nearly 150 development projects in Nepal and Indian FDI contributing to around 30% of Nepal's foreign direct investment (Sharma 2010; Kaura and Rani 2020). Humanitarian aid, including India's quick response during the 2015 earthquake and COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy, also furthered India's reputation as a trusted partner (Aryal and Bharti 2023; Dubey 2018).

The policy also highlighted consultative, non-reciprocal, and result-oriented involvement, seeking to establish interdependencies that would enhance confidence building and resist foreign pressures, in particular from China (Ranjan 2019; Singh 2016). Difficulties, though, have continued. The blockade in 2015 during Nepal's transition to constitution severely tarnished India's reputation, instilling anti-India feelings and suspicion (Singh 2016; Ha 2023). Gradual pace of Indian projects relative to China's fast track, pending issues such as the Kalapani border conflict and assumptions regarding India's interventionist orientation have all continued to undermine complete manifestation of trust and cooperation (Das 2016; Sidhu and Godbole 2015). In spite of all these drawbacks, the "Neighborhood First" policy has managed to grow high-level political interaction, enhance connectivity, and enhance development cooperation, setting a greater foundation for future partnership (Kaura and Rani 2020; Aryal et al. 2023). However, the durability of cooperation and trust will



be based on India's capacity to resolve long-standing irritants, speed up the delivery of projects, and comply with Nepal's desire for increased autonomy and equilibrated foreign policy (Aryal 2022; Pattanaik 2016).

### 1.2 Impact of the NDA's "Neighborhood First" Policy on Bilateral Ties



#### 1.6.3 Challenges and Setbacks in India-Nepal Relations during NDA Tenure

Throughout the NDA era, India-Nepal relations have encountered a number of noteworthy obstacles and hardships, many of which have their origins in long-standing conflicts but have recently become more intense or taken on new forms (Ahmad & Roopnarain, 2021; Rae, 2021). The border conflict over the Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura tri-junction—an area of roughly 370 square kilometers in the northwest corner of Nepal that is currently administered by India as part of the Uttarakhand Pithoragarh district—has been one of the most divisive topics (Aryal & Bharti, 2023). Different interpretations of the 1815 Sugauli Treaty, which established the Kali River as Nepal's western border but did not identify which of the river's tributaries was the actual source, are the root of the dispute (Singh, 2016). India maintains that the river begins at Lipulekh, but Nepal asserts that Limpiyadhura is the source, bringing Kalapani and Lipulekh under its jurisdiction (Kaura & Rani, 2020; Aryal, 2022). The problem is made more difficult by the area's strategic importance as a route to the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage and an observation post (Pattanaik, 2016; Ranjan, 2019).

As India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh opened an 80-kilometer road from Dharchula to Lipulekh in 2020 with the goal of facilitating pilgrimages to Kailash Mansarovar in Tibet, tensions increased. Nepal fiercely objected, saying the road crossed disputed territory and went to earlier agreements to settle boundary disputes amicably (Dubey, 2018; Sidhu & Godbole, 2015). A constitutional amendment that included Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura as part of its territory was unanimously approved by Nepal's parliament in response. India rejected this move as an "artificial enlargement" of claims. The cartographic claim stoked nationalist feelings on both sides and resulted in a diplomatic impasse, with both nations restating their stances and the technical committee established in the 1990s mainly doing nothing in recent years (Das, 2016; Ha, 2023).

The economic blockade that took place in 2015 during Nepal's constitutional transition was another significant setback. Although India denied formally enforcing a blockade, protests in Nepal's Terai region and restrictions at border points severely disrupted fuel and essential goods, which many in Nepal believed was an act of Indian coercion (Sharma, 2010; Aryal & Bharti, 2023). Many saw India as meddling in Nepal's internal affairs, which resulted in a precipitous drop in trust, a rise in Nepalese nationalism, and widespread anti-India sentiment (Bhagwati, 2019; Chadda, 2022). The blockade had a significant humanitarian impact on the economy and day-to-day life. It also forced Nepal to broaden its foreign policy, particularly by fortifying its ties with China (Ashraf, 2022; BASISTHA, 2023).

Many Nepalis believe that India tries to influence Nepalese politics, especially when there is a constitutional change or a new government is being formed (Rae, 2021; Gopalakrishnan, 2006). Perceptions of Indian political meddling have remained strong. India's public comments regarding Nepal's internal affairs and its backing of particular political figures and organizations have contributed to these views (Rabbani, 2021; Ahmad & Roopnarain, 2021). Such activities have contributed to a chronic lack of trust and are frequently seen as undermining Nepal's sovereignty. Historical disputes, strategic interests, and changing regional dynamics have all interacted in a complex way during the NDA period. The economic blockade in 2015, the border disputes, especially those involving Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura, and persistent accusations of political meddling have all presented significant obstacles to bilateral relations. These setbacks have forced

both countries to reevaluate their approaches to communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution (Ha, 2023; Aryal, 2022). They have also raised nationalism and anti-India sentiment in Nepal and strained diplomatic relations (Ranjan, 2019; Aryal et al., 2023).

#### **1.6.4 China's Role and Its Impact on India-Nepal Strategic Dynamics**

China's engagement in Nepal over the last 20 years has profoundly changed the nation's foreign policy stance, particularly with regard to India (Barik & Laishram, 2024; Singh et al., 2023). Due to strong economic, cultural, and geographic ties, Nepal has historically leaned more towards India maintaining a precarious balance between its two enormous neighbours, China and India (Kharel, 2024; Nepal, 2021). But since the middle of the 2000s, and especially after Nepal's monarchy ended in 2008, China has significantly expanded its involvement, moving from a relationship that was primarily security-focused (with Tibet at its centre) to one that is now more strategic, economic, and political (Baniya, 2023; Pokhrel, 2021; Rehman, 2024).

The 1961 signing of the border treaty between China and Nepal and the formal start of diplomatic relations in 1955 are significant turning points (Barik & Laishram, 2024). But after 2008, China's involvement in Nepal increased in both pace and scope (Baniya, 2023). It actively supported Nepal's political stability and peace process, especially by interacting with the Maoist-led government (Pokhrel, 2021; Singh et al., 2023; Thapa, 2024b). Beijing's influence was further solidified in 2018 when the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) formed a government with a two-thirds majority, allegedly with Chinese encouragement (Barik & Laishram, 2024; Thapa, 2024a). China promoted party-to-party relations and offered direct assistance, including seminars on "Xi Jinping Thought" for Nepali communist leaders (Thapa, 2024a; Pokhrel, 2021).

A turning point was reached in 2019 when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Nepal, the first time a Chinese leader has visited the country in more than 20 years (Barik & Laishram, 2024; Lamichhane, 2023). China announced a Rs 56 billion grant for Nepal during this visit, and a number of agreements were signed, particularly regarding connectivity and infrastructure, including Nepal's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Rehman, 2024; Lamichhane, 2023). By 2023, Nepal was more in line with Beijing's fundamental interests concerning Taiwan and Tibet after its official language in joint statements changed from endorsing the "One China policy" to the more legally binding "One China principle" (Barik & Laishram, 2024; Thapa, 2024b).

#### **a) Impact on India-Nepal Relations**

The relationship between India and Nepal has changed as a result of the events in China. India used to be a major player in Nepal, supporting numerous large-scale infrastructure projects and guaranteeing important trade and transportation routes. However, some of India's power in the area has been diminished by China's involvement in Nepal's infrastructure development, such as studies of railway connections from Kathmandu to Chinese cities. Nepal now seeks to examine alternative policy options and boost independence outside of India by leveraging its close ties with China. The change has generated controversy. China's plans in South Asia, which could have an impact on regional influence and security, worry India. Nepal's relationship with India has deteriorated as it approaches China, giving Kathmandu more autonomy over its foreign policy. India's opposition to Nepal's participation in the BRI and related initiatives reflects its concerns about China's growing influence in the area. (Rehman, 2024; Lamichhane, 2023).

#### **b) Geopolitical and Strategic Implications**

Competition for influence now characterizes the relationship between China, India, and Nepal. India's conventional strategy of maintaining Nepal within its strategic orbit is coming under increasing pressure; China's proactive diplomacy and economic generosity have allowed Nepal to pursue a more independent foreign policy. Due to its location as a landlocked nation "sandwiched" between two giants, Nepal must balance the interests of both of its neighbours; however, the expanding Chinese influence has given Kathmandu more negotiating power to engage India on more equal terms (Barik & Laishram, 2024; Thapa, 2024b). Concerns about becoming overly dependent on either neighbour are also reflected in Nepal's internal discussions. Opportunities are presented by China's political and economic involvement, but there is also a risk of becoming embroiled in a great power competition. India is concerned about security as its traditional influence in Nepal is eroding, especially as outside actors establish themselves in the country's immediate neighbourhood. Nepal's foreign policy decisions have been significantly impacted by the involvement of external actors, particularly China, which has also changed the dynamics of India-Nepal relations. Though not without creating new complications and tensions in the region, China's strategic, economic, and political involvement since 2008 has allowed Nepal to diversify its alliances, lessen its reliance on India, and assert a more independent foreign policy. (Rehman, 2024).

### **Drivers of Cooperation and Conflict under NDA Leadership**

#### **Factors Driving Cooperation**

- **Neighbourhood First Policy:** Nepal has been at the forefront of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's NDA government's "Neighbourhood First" policy since it took office in 2014. A good start was created by Modi's historic August 2014 visit to Nepal, the first by an Indian prime minister in 17 years. Since then, he has

made five trips to Nepal, and Nepali leaders have made many trips to India, demonstrating ongoing diplomatic ties. (Ahmad & Roopnarain 2021)

- **Economic and Infrastructure Collaboration:** With more than 64% of all trade with Nepal, India continues to be the country's biggest trading partner (2023 data). More than \$1 billion in credit lines have been made available by India for projects related to connectivity, energy, and infrastructure. Notable initiatives include integrated checkpoints, cross-border railway links like the Jayanagar-Kurtha railway (in operation since 2022), and the Motihari-Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline (South Asia's first cross-border pipeline), which was inaugurated in 2019. (Ashraf, 2022).
- **Development and Humanitarian Assistance:** India promised \$1 billion to rebuild Nepal following the 2015 earthquake. Housing, schools, and medical facilities have all benefited from Indian aid. India also helps Nepal develop hydropower, such as the Arun-3 projects, which have a combined capacity of 900 MW. (Ha, 2023).
- **Cultural and Religious Ties:** There are strong cultural, religious, and interpersonal ties between India and Nepal. India has encouraged Buddhist circuit tourism and assisted in the restoration of historical sites, such as the Pashupatinath Temple. (Aryal, & Bharti, 2023).

### Factors Driving Friction

- **The 2015-16 Blockade:** India voiced concerns about the alleged marginalization of Madhesi and other groups following Nepal's adoption of its new constitution in September 2015. Fuel and medication shortages were severe in Nepal as a result of the subsequent unofficial blockade at the India-Nepal border. The incident exacerbated anti-Indian sentiment and seriously harmed India's reputation. (Kharel, 2024).
- **Border Disputes:** Territorial disputes are now a major source of contention. India published a new political map in November 2019 that included Nepal-claimed regions Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura. After India opened a road to Lipulekh in May 2020, Nepal published its own political map and changed its constitution to incorporate these areas. Both sides' nationalist rhetoric increased as a result of these actions, which also caused diplomatic deadlocks. (Kaura, & Rani, 2020).
- **Nepal's Growing Ties with China:** Nepal has signed several infrastructure agreements and actively diversified its foreign policy, joining China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2017. India is concerned about losing its strategic influence in Nepal as a result of China's expanding presence, which includes promises of trans-Himalayan connectivity. (Thapa, 2024).
- **Perceptions of Interference:** Many members of Nepal's public and political elite believe that India is meddling in internal matters, particularly when it comes to the constitution, federalism, and Madhesi rights. Bilateral trust has occasionally been strained due to the perception. (Nepal, 2021).

India-Nepal relations have seen strong collaboration in infrastructure, trade, and cultural exchanges during the NDA's tenure, supported by important projects and high-level visits. However, significant tensions—most notably the blockade from 2015 to 2016; border disputes; and Nepal's increasing engagement with China—have counterbalanced these positive developments. The relationship is still complicated, shaped by both common interests and enduring difficulties. To maintain stability and advancement, careful diplomacy and respect for one another are needed.

## 1.7 FINAL REFLECTIONS

1. Some long-standing problems persisted despite strategic initiatives, impacting regional stability and bilateral trust. Through high-level diplomatic contacts, the NDA governments were able to successfully build India-Nepal relations, encouraging collaboration, mutual trust, and understanding.
2. Although the "Neighbourhood First" policy greatly improved people-to-people relations by boosting connectivity, economic projects, and diplomatic visits, border disputes and suspicions of meddling continued to impede complete trust between India and Nepal.
3. The 2015 blockade, ongoing border disputes, and economic disruptions caused setbacks that made it difficult for their relationship to remain stable and cooperative; the NDA's efforts resulted in greater economic cooperation by giving infrastructure, trade, and energy projects priority.
4. By using investments and the Belt and Road Initiative, external factors—particularly China—have increased Nepal's strategic options. This has prompted a reevaluation of diplomatic strategies to maintain regional dominance by diversifying Nepal's foreign relations also complicating India's influence.
5. As a result of China's growing influence in Nepal through investments, infrastructure, and political involvement, India has modified its strategy by stepping up diplomatic outreach, highlighting respect for one another, and acknowledging Nepal's wish for autonomy in foreign policy decisions amidst regional power struggles.
6. Nepal's perception of India is still shaped by historical legacies like the 1950 Treaty and previous blockades, which breed cyclical mistrust and dependency perceptions. Building a long-lasting, mutually respectful strategic partnership under NDA policies is a major challenge.

7. Periodic tensions have arisen despite proactive diplomacy due to unresolved border issues, political sensitivities, and outside pressures. This emphasizes the significance of ongoing communication, measures to foster confidence, and respect for Nepal's sovereignty in order to preserve regional stability.
8. Although the NDA's emphasis on soft power, financial incentives, and cultural diplomacy has promoted interpersonal relationships, the growth of cooperation from cultural exchange to full-scale strategic partnership is constrained by strategic mistrust, unresolved conflicts, and outside forces.
9. A more varied foreign policy environment has resulted from external pressures from China and internal political changes in Nepal, forcing India to reevaluate its influence and strive for a balance that protects regional interests respecting Nepal's autonomous decisions.
10. Addressing the underlying causes of mistrust, putting in place reliable diplomatic procedures, and encouraging true respect for one another are all necessary for the future of India-Nepal relations to be sustainable. These measures include incorporating strategic, economic, and cultural elements into policies that promote stability, sovereignty, and regional harmony.

### 1.8 CONCLUSION

The relationship between India and Nepal is still a complicated interplay of collaboration, rivalry, and outside factors, having been significantly shaped by the policies of the NDA governments. Through high-level visits, infrastructure improvements, and people-to-people connectivity, the "Neighbourhood First" policy has significantly facilitated rapprochement; however, persistent problems like border disputes, perceptions of interference, and the 2015 blockade still threaten stability and trust. China's growing influence through investments and the Belt and Road Initiative has made the regional strategic environment even more complex, posing a challenge to India's long-standing role and necessitating a reassessment of its strategy towards Nepal. The participation of outside actors has increased regional tensions and unpredictability also allowing Nepal to broaden its alliances and demonstrate more independence. Relationship problems stemming from strategic mistrust, historical grievances, and shifting geopolitical pressures persist despite efforts to foster mutual respect and engagement. The experience under the NDA government emphasizes the need for a subtle, all-encompassing approach that respects Nepal's sovereignty, strikes a balance between diplomatic outreach and resolving outstanding issues, and actively controls outside influences, especially China's growing influence. Adopting policies that support Nepal's desires for autonomy and fair partnerships, cultivating trust, and embracing dialogue are all necessary to achieve long-term stability and advancement in India-Nepal relations. A stable, prosperous, and mutually beneficial partnership in the changing South Asian landscape depends on India's ability to adjust to new regional realities, maintain mutual respect, and foster a cooperative framework that addresses both historical grievances and new geopolitical challenges.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research is conducted independently without any financial or personal influence, ensuring an unbiased analysis and integrity in presenting the findings related to India-Nepal strategic relations in the 21st century under NDA governments.

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