The Trans-Himalayan railway: ‘Bridge’ or burden to China’s South Asian ambition

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Abstract

Although discussion about connecting Chinese railways to Nepal borders first surfaced in the year 1973, it couldn’t make any headway until the political change of 2006 in Nepal, when the idea of linking Tibet with Kathmandu resurfaced again. However, political instability in Nepal further thwarted it, at least until Nepal faced the Indian blockade in 2015 and had to look for ways to diversify its trade and transit. Thus, for Nepal, China’s railways offer an escape from its dependence on India for trade and transit. But, for Beijing, it offers a strategic gateway to enter South Asia, which is India’s conventional sphere of influence. Although Nepal and its northern neighbor China have agreed to connect Nepal's capital Kathmandu with the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China through railways, the materialization of such a game-changer is not free from challenges. Against the same backdrop, the objective of this study is to discover various challenges faced by the trans-Himalayan railways including political, bureaucratic, economic, and environmental challenges, and to concurrently identify how the geopolitical challenge tops the list, halting Nepal’s ambition to ‘bridge’ India and China and instead aggravating the possibility of becoming a burden to both the Asian giants. While the available literature on China and South Asia is mostly concentrated on Belt and Road (BRI) projects, ‘debt trap’ narratives, and geopolitical rivalry between India and China, this study would be a new attempt to understand how China’s aim to get connected with South Asia via land is not free of impediments. Using the qualitative method, this study reviews the geopolitical challenges confronted by the trans-Himalayan railway in the context of territorial disputes between India and China in the Himalayan region and the U.S.-Indian strategic partnership to contain the rise of China and its ambitious connectivity projects.

Keywords

Tran-Himalayan Railways, South Asia, BRI, India, China, Nepal
Introduction

While rail rolls towards the East:

Speak with a smile on your face, my friend;

It’s a short life;

These lines, extracted from a popular folk song sung by Bhupal Rai and Shakti Shrestha, mention a Nepali migrant worker departing in a railway bidding adieu to his beloved. Despite the deficiency of railways as a major transportation network in Nepal, one’s fascination with railways is still noticed in various Nepali folklores and songs. Hostile terrain, lack of political will, and a dearth of funding capability have always ensured that Nepal is deprived of train facilities except for the cross-border Janakpur-Jayanagar railway service adjoining Nepal’s terai belt with the Indian bordering town of Bihar. The 35km railway was built for the first time in 1937 as a cargo line to ferry timber from Nepal to British India. In Nepal, railway pledges are often exploited as the political rhetoric to increase vote banks. China’s Tran-Himalayan railway, which aims to connect Lhasa in Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) with Nepal’s capital Kathmandu, is also often used as geopolitical rhetoric to bargain more from the policymakers in New Delhi. Because India has always perceived Nepal as its traditional sphere of influence and the increasing Chinese presence in Nepal has already displeased New Delhi. Today, Nepal’s northern neighbor China is in strategic competition with the United States (US) while the southern neighbor has increased its strategic partnership with the US, as the increasing presence of China in Nepal through aids, investments, and connectivity projects have augmented geopolitical challenges for Nepal. In such an adverse context, while Nepal’s ambition to benefit economically by bridging India and China geographically is already impacted, delays in materializing the trans-Himalayan railway due to various factors (which this study aims to reveal) may further brand Nepal’s geographical location as a ‘burden’ instead of a bridge.

While Beijing has pierced the economic spectrum of South Asia by offering financial support to the infrastructural projects in the region and by buttressing trade and investment nexuses, China has attempted to adjust the power relations in the region, which has conventionally been in the Indian sphere of influence. Notwithstanding China’s strategic forays, Beijing is yet to “prove its economic involvement entailing win-win outcomes”. While China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has also drawn severe criticism, including the allegations of “debt trap” and “erosion of sovereignty,” Nepal’s fascination with Chinese railways hasn’t diminished, which, once materialized, not only has the potential to reduce Nepal’s asymmetric dependence on India for trade and transit but also invites severe geopolitical challenge with China’s strategic forays in the South Asian region.

Although Nepal joined the BRI in 2017, it hasn’t implemented any BRI projects so far. The Chinese aids and investments in Nepal today are outside of the BRI framework because Nepal hasn’t yet submitted its implementation plan. It seems as if the strategically placed country between India and China used its entry into the BRI as a geopolitical tool over the past five years to fulfill its twin objectives: firstly, to minimize Indian influence in Nepal and, secondly, to balance US interest in Nepal through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project. In doing so, China’s South Asian ambition has been delayed. But most of the available literature on BRI and Nepal has either highlighted the likely benefits of BRI projects to advance Nepal’s search for prosperity and development or has cautioned the Himalayan country of the probable debt trap. As such, an absence of studies on the challenges to the materialization of the trans-Himalayan railway project indicates the knowledge gap, which this study aims to fulfill. Most of the existing literature either concentrates on China’s increasing presence in South Asia and its impact on India’s traditional sphere of influence, or on the changing dynamics of Himalayan geopolitics. Hence, as China’s expanding interest in South Asia is being understood and analysed variously, it is timely and pertinent to examine how China’s yearning to enter South Asia by building a railway through Nepal is already dawdling because of economic, political, geological, and geopolitical challenges.

China’s scheme to get connected with South Asia through the trans-Himalayan railways is not a fresh endeavour. The idea of linking Kathmandu with Lhasa via railway originated for the

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1 Pradip Giri, Deliberations in Federal Parliament of Nepal. June 3, 2018
2 Giri, Deliberations
3 Vijay Gokhale, Paper Launch- India’s Fog of Misunderstanding Surrounding Nepal-China Relations. Carnegie India. October 26, 2021
4 Senate of the United States, “Strategic Competition Act,” 2021
5 BBC, US-India 2+2 Crucial Defence Deal Signed, October 27, 2020
6 Gokhale, Paper Launch

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10 Jain, “China’s Economic Expansion in South Asia,” 21
11 Dhani Ram Sharma, published statement in The Kathmandu Post, August 27, 2021
13 Jain, “China’s Economic Expansion in South Asia,”
first time during the 1973 meeting between Mao Zedong and King Birendra. Later, the railway project fleetingly surfaced in 2008 but got the stimulus only after the 2015 Indian blockade on Nepal, obliging Kathmandu to diversify the trade routes. In 2018, the feasibility study for the BRI railway from Kerung to Kathmandu and then to Pokhara and Lumbini was completed in the year 2018. But, no substantial progress has been achieved, which is not only because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and political uncertainty in Kathmandu but more because of the changing dynamics in Himalayan geopolitics.

While chasing its long-standing aspiration to get connected with the South Asian region via land, China has already introduced the idea of “land-linked” Nepal, which is, however, a sharp departure from the established manner of perceiving Nepal as a land-locked country. China has reckoned the achievability of extending the Sichuan-TAR railway up to Nepal’s capital through the cities of Ya’an in western Sichuan; Qamdo in eastern Tibet; Lhasa, which is the capital of Tibet; and Shigatse, the second largest city in Tibet. In the same line, Chinese President Xi Jinping, during his 2019 visit to Nepal stated that China will help Nepal in fulfilling its “dream of becoming a land-linked country from a landlocked one.” But the idea of “land-linked” is more limited to discourse and is exploited as political rhetoric in Nepal to ward off Indian influence in the Himalayan country. While the funding modality of the proposed railway continues to remain uncertain, how has Beijing’s ambition to get connected to South Asian market delayed? How have geopolitical vulnerabilities further thwarted China’s plan in the same manner as bureaucratic, economic, and environmental challenges have procrastinated China’s long-lasting interest to get connected with South Asian region via railways? These are the key research questions that this study has raised. But the explicit objective of this study lies in exploring how geopolitical challenges have further thwarted China’s perception toward the trans-Himalayan railway and particularly the concept of “land-linked Nepal” and the strategic advantage of such discourse for China to enter South Asia. In the same way, author’s interactions with Indian foreign policy experts, security analysts, professors from 2017 to 2020 on India’s responses against trans-Himalayan railway have benefited to understand the geopolitical challenges to trans-Himalayan railway. Author’s frequent visit as a consultant to the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), a semi-autonomous think tank under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Nepal, provided him an access to talk with former diplomats and senior foreign policy experts on the issue of funding modality and geopolitical challenges. While the author hosted two programs attended by a former prime minister and former foreign minister in 2018 and 2019 respectively, he got an opportunity to raise the questions on funding modality.

In the same manner, Xi Jinping thought has been analysed through the lens of deductive reasoning, as one of the driving forces of China’s great power ambition against the backdrop of the perception of China-led Belt and Road Initiative against the backdrop of the perception of China-led Belt and Road Initiative. But the idea of “land-linked” is more limited to discourse and is exploited as political rhetoric in Nepal to ward off Indian influence in the Himalayan country. While the funding modality of the proposed railway continues to remain uncertain, how has Beijing’s ambition to get connected to South Asian market delayed? How have geopolitical vulnerabilities further thwarted China’s plan in the same manner as bureaucratic, economic, and environmental challenges have procrastinated China’s long-lasting interest to get connected with South Asian region via railways? These are the key research questions that this study has raised. But the explicit objective of this study lies in exploring how geopolitical challenges have further thwarted China’s perception toward the trans-Himalayan railway and particularly the concept of “land-linked Nepal” and the strategic advantage of such discourse for China to enter South Asia. In the same way, author’s interactions with Indian foreign policy experts, security analysts, professors from 2017 to 2020 on India’s responses against trans-Himalayan railway have benefited to understand the geopolitical challenges to trans-Himalayan railway. Author’s frequent visit as a consultant to the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), a semi-autonomous think tank under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Nepal, provided him an access to talk with former diplomats and senior foreign policy experts on the issue of funding modality and geopolitical challenges. While the author hosted two programs attended by a former prime minister and former foreign minister in 2018 and 2019 respectively, he got an opportunity to raise the questions on funding modality.

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Geo-political challenges have been highlighted by using deductive reasoning. Firstly, the influence of geography on foreign policy is discussed. Secondly, details are presented on how Nepal has strategized its geography. The relevance of India’s Himalayan Frontier theory and its evolution in India’s foreign policy towards Nepal has been highlighted. Nehru’s 1950 speech has been analysed while Mao’s “five finger” statement is also interpreted to understand the strategic significance of the Himalayas for both the countries and through which the

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16 Nepali Times. “No Light at the End of Trans-Himalayan Train Tunnel,” June 30, 2021
18 Gaurav Bhattarai, “Bridge or ‘Burden to China’s South Asian Ambitions? Republica,” September 8, 2021
19 Gopal Sharma, “Nepal pushes to end dependency on India with China rail, tunnel deals,” Reuters, October 13, 2019
20 Roshan S Nepal, “China to help make Nepal land-linked: Xi,” The Himalayan Times, October 13, 2019
proposed railway passes. News reports on the strategic partnership between India and the United States have been analysed to shed light on the changing dynamics of Himalayan geopolitics. QUAD, IPS and B3W have been referred. To emphasize how ‘bridge’ discourse echoes Nepal’s coping strategy, the author discusses the evolution of Nepal’s coping strategy by referring to the statements made by former kings and former prime ministers of Nepal. Speeches, press releases, joint communiques have also been used as the primary sources of information. As the data are non-numerical, with the help of interpretive analysis, the author interprets the words, statements, speeches, and interviews of the policy makers and foreign policy experts to understand their meanings. The author has also used the information obtained after participating in the BRI Conference of 12th September 2018, which was organized by the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy (DIRD) in Kathmandu. While listening to the experiences of Vietnam, China, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Singapore on BRI projects, the country-wise experiences were advantageous for the author in categorizing different challenges associated with the proposed railway.

As soon as the various challenges to the proposed trans-Himalayan railway emerging from both the primary and secondary sources of data were identified, the author used both the inductive and deductive methods, moving back and forth between concepts and data, interpretation, and description. With the help of inductive reasoning, the study moves back and forth between the themes (debt trap, funding modality, political instability, geopolitics, environmental issues) and the database (organized information through multiple sources on different facets of proposed trans-Himalayan railways) until a broad set of themes is realised. Then, with the help of deductive reasoning, author looks back at the available data from the perspective of themes (for instance, data on political transition and political instability in Nepal are analysed from the thematic perspective of political challenges to the trans-Himalayan railway).

The entire research process is emergent as the research began to change with the collection of data. Although the initial plan of the study was to identify the challenges to the proposed trans-Himalayan railways, the collection of data encouraged the author to assess ‘bridge’ discourse from the available data. As such, author established a holistic picture of the study by developing a multifaceted picture of the issue under investigation. Consequently, various challenges to the proposed railway emerge posing potential risks to Nepal in being a ‘burden,’ not a bridge to its immediate neighbours.

Data analysis on challenges to proposed trans-Himalayan railway progressed concurrently with the data collection on the same section. Still, author “winnowed” the data on geopolitical vulnerabilities as he focused more on the Himalayan frontier. Data on challenges to the proposed railway (which were available in different forms, as speeches, statements, government reports, joint communiqué communications, press releases, news reports) have been coded by converting collected information into a set of meaningful and organized categories. With the help of coding, data on debt trap, funding modality, political transition, environmental challenges, ‘bridge discourse’ are linked with interrelated themes and concepts that eventually reinforce the key argument of the study. Coding was done by assigning codes to the challenges and clustering them until they were turned to categories to conduct a preliminary analysis. Recoding of the challenges to the trans-Himalayan railway was done as new data emerged. Findings were validated by examining evidence and converging different sources of data. Colleagues and experts were shared key findings verbally to authenticate the findings.

China’s great power ambition
Beijing’s desire to enter South Asia via railway should be understood from China’s great power ambition, which in the words of Chinese President Xi Jinping is a “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” which aims to strengthen itself internally and claim larger influence on the global stage21. In 2017, while delivering a speech in the 19th Party Congress, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that “China will deepen relations with its neighbors in accordance with the principle of amity and mutual benefits”22. As one of China’s neighbors, Nepal was also lured by China’s proposal of cross-border connectivity and mega infrastructure development and investment programs. Yet, the economic face of the project reinforces China’s geopolitical goal: the strategic encirclement of India by taking India’s immediate neighbors into confidence23.

Today, China is creating its own history, with its economic miracles and rejuvenating powers. In that sense, its version of history (whether beginning or even the ‘end of history’) may not be understood only from the western lens. In 1989, political scientist Francis Fukuyama published The End of History and the Last Man, a book arguing that, with the US-led capitalism overpowering USSR-led Communism, not only did the history of ideological struggle between them came to an end but also that the liberal capitalism was deemed as the last resort. For Fukuyama, the liberal democracy constituted the “endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution”24 and the “final form of human government”,25 and as such, constituted the “end of history”26. He wrote: “liberal democracy conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently communism?”27.

22 Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” Speech Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017
25 Fukuyama, xi
26 Fukuyama, xi
27 ibid
Although the collapse of the Berlin Wall and disintegration of the Soviet Union reinforced Fukuyama’s thesis; and even though China’s commitment to market reforms during Deng Xiaoping’s Southern tour was analysed from the same standpoint, Beijing forged its own path, instead of transcending into a liberal democracy, and resolved to create its own history. Now, Beijing has already survived ‘the end of history’ hypothesis (as China has managed to escape the fate of USSR and predictions of economic breakdown and domestic revolt)\textsuperscript{28} and has risen to the status of an economic powerhouse. As such, China has been assertive enough to fulfil its national interest in the region and beyond. Surmising China’s development models (massive state-led investments in infrastructure – ports, roads, railways, electricity, and airports – which expedite industrial development), Francis Fukuyama appeared a changed man in January 2016, when he wrote an article for \textit{The Project Syndicate} titled as ‘exporting the Chinese model’\textsuperscript{29}. In the same article, he not only refuted his 1989 predictions but also stated: “If One Belt One Road meets Chinese planners’ expectations, the whole of Eurasia, from Indonesia to Poland will be transformed in the coming generation”\textsuperscript{30}. Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 announced: “One Belt, One Road,”\textsuperscript{31} (understood as Belt and Road Initiatives, today) which aims to connect China to Central Asia and thence to Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia, through different trade routes \textit{via} land and sea. Although the United States was also engaged in building road networks and massive infrastructure projects back in the 1950s and 60s, today America has less to offer to the developing worlds in connectivity and cross-border connectivity projects, like what China is doing under the BRI. As such, Beijing is pursuing its great power ambition through the connectivity projects, which has also found a place also in Xi Jinping Thought, a new official political doctrine for China as an outline for consolidating and strengthening power at the national and international level\textsuperscript{32}. Xi Jinping Thought promotes the supremacy of the Communist Party and reiterates that a powerful and unified China can be attained only if the Communist Party is firmly in control of China\textsuperscript{33}. The 19\textsuperscript{th} Convention of the Communist Party of China in 2017 accepted Xi Jinping Thought as its guiding principle. It was unanimously passed by the 2,287 delegates to the party congress. The Xi Jinping Thought emphasizes on:

“Ensuring Party leadership over all work; Committing to a people-centred approach; Continuing to comprehensively deepen reform; Adopting a new vision for development; Seeing that the people run the country; Ensuring every dimension of governance is law-based; Upholding core socialist values; Ensuring and improving living standards through development; Ensuring harmony between humans and nature; Pursuing a holistic approach to national security; Upholding absolute Party leadership over the people’s forces; Upholding the principle of “one country, two systems” and promoting national reunification; Promoting the building of a community with a shared future for humanity; Exercising full and rigorous governance over the Party\textsuperscript{34}.

Beijing’s interest to enter South Asia \textit{via} land is undeniably attached with its great power ambition because Beijing knows the art of luring its immediate neighborhood while embarking on the great power status\textsuperscript{35}. Nepal, along with other small countries in South Asia, is today enticed by China’s flagship project. After the political change of 2006, Nepali leaders, as an attempt to cope with the gigantic neighborhood in the changed political context, variously expressed their aspirations to draw benefits from the spectacular development in the neighborhood. Strategizing Nepal’s geography, some Maoist leaders from Nepal proposed a trilateral partnership between China, India, and Nepal, while others hinted at Nepal’s strategic location to bridge both the neighbors. Although China took Nepal’s proposal of bridging the two countries, economically, in a positive manner, India stood reluctant. After Nepal joined China-led Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) in 2017, China calibrated Nepal’s erstwhile proposal of bridging two emerging economies and branded Nepal’s geography as a ‘strategic gateway’\textsuperscript{36} to enter South Asia. Beijing’s interest in Nepal got more pronounced following the 2019 visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Nepal. In the visit, which was the first of its kind in more than two decades, China’s emphasis on transit and connectivity projects to fulfill its South Asian ambition was fathomable\textsuperscript{37}. Geographically speaking, Bhutan’s location remains more favourable to China’s aspiration in getting connected to South Asia. But Bhutan is not prepared to develop diplomatic relations with China by escaping the former’s strategic ties with India\textsuperscript{38}. Thus, China is taking refuge in a 1,415-km Himalayan border between Nepal and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, which is linked to different regions of South Asia through 312 Himalayan passes. While Nepal’s Himalayan region provides 184 routes to enter Tibet,\textsuperscript{39} China’s interest and ambition to get connected with South Asia \textit{via} Nepal is explicable in the context of

\textsuperscript{28} Matt Schiavenza, “ How China Survived the End of History,” \textit{Asia Society}, June 7, 2018
\textsuperscript{29} Francis Fukuyama, “ Exporting the Chinese Model,” \textit{Project Syndicate}, Jan 12, 2016
\textsuperscript{30} Francis Fukuyama, “ Exporting the Chinese Model”
\textsuperscript{31} Wu Jiao and Zhang Yunbi, “ Xi proposes a ‘new Silk Road’ with Central Asia,” \textit{China Daily}, September 8, 2013
\textsuperscript{32} BBC, ‘ China Schools: ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ introduced into curriculum’ August 25, 2021
\textsuperscript{34} China Daily, “ Full text of Xi Jinping’s report at 19th CPC National Congress,” November 4, 2017
\textsuperscript{36} Li Tao, “From Yam to Bridge,” \textit{The Kathmandu Post}, February 3, 2017
\textsuperscript{37} Bhadra Sharma and Kai Schultz, “Xi Jinping Comes to Nepal Bearing Investments, and India Is Watching,” \textit{The New York Times}, October 12, 2019,
\textsuperscript{39} Tao, “From Yam to Bridge”
Trans-Himalayan railways: challenges and implications
General understanding of the intricacies associated with the trans-Himalayan railway is limited to the discussion over the geological challenges owing to the hostile terrain and the economic cost it incurs. Political uncertainties in Nepal are often not highlighted as the challenge, which has played an important role in delaying the project. At the top of all the challenges, stand the geopolitical challenge, which has not only delayed the project but may also thwart Nepal’s connectivity-driven development strategy of becoming a bridge between the two economic giants, and may eventually tag Nepal’s geographical location as a burden. Thus, this study lists out the various challenges including economic, geological, environmental, and political, faced by the trans-Himalayan railway. As a major impediment, the geopolitical challenge has been separately elaborated.

Economic challenges: Although funding modality is at the heart of mega infrastructure like the trans-Himalayan railway, it is not yet ascertained, causing a delay in its materialization. The Department of Railways (DoR) of Nepal in the August of 2018 had estimated the cost for the construction of the Kathmandu-Kerung railway at around Rs. 257 billion. While Nepal expects to materialize the project with Chinese grants owing to the ‘debt trap’ allegations faced by China’s BRI projects, China has maintained a silence over it. Former Prime Minister of Nepal, Madhav Kumar Nepal confirmed to the author on April 15, 2018, that the major political players in Kathmandu have reached the consensus that the railway traversing through the intricate geological terrain cannot be constructed with the help of Chinese loans and have demanded grants owing to the ‘debt trap’ narratives triggered by the implementation of BRI projects in the Asian and African regions. Although China has the capability to construct the cross-border railway in grants, Beijing has remained silent over Nepal’s demand which has caused further delays in the materialization of China’s South Asian railway. As 72.25 km of the railway falls on the Nepali side, and approximately 98.5 percent of the railway crossing the hostile terrain would be either tunnels or bridges, the trans-Himalayan railway project, according to DoR, is expected to cost Rs. 3.55 billion per kilometer. The estimated amount indicates the possibility for Nepal to manage the required investment amount from different multilateral agencies to construct the railway on its side and avoid the threat of a ‘debt trap’. But policymakers in Kathmandu know that more than Nepal, it’s China that needs a trans-Himalayan railway to get connected with the South Asian region via land. Thus, while China-led BRI projects are confronting ‘debt trap’ allegations, power elites in Nepal consider it an apt opportunity to seek a grant from Beijing and construct the railway. However, Beijing’s uncertainty has delayed the extension of the Chinese railway to Nepal borders.

Previously, the railway was scheduled to reach China-Nepal borders in Kerung by 2020, but Beijing cited the outbreak of COVID-19 as a prime cause of the delay. However, until China extends its railways to Nepal borders, the construction on the Nepali side is unlikely to start. China has just started to carry out the study for the detailed project report (DPR) on its own side from the Sigatase to Nepal borders. But such a study on Nepal’s side hasn’t started yet although it was expected to take place once the circumstances shaped by COVID-19 return to normal. Kathmandu has sought the full funding of the DPR of the Kathmandu-Kerung railway from Beijing as it is expected to cost around Rs. 35 billion. Earlier, the pre-feasibility study of the proposed railway was also conducted on a Chinese grant. In 2018, the report of the pre-feasibility study was submitted to Nepal by the National Railway Authority of China. Now, after the completion of the DPR, the funding modality could also be ascertained. However, the delays in completing the DPR have further postponed the materialization of the trans-Himalayan railway.

On the issue of a likely debt trap, Nepal has already cherry-picked a safe side by developing a national consensus that the Chinese railway cannot be constructed with the loan and has sought Chinese grants to materialize the project. In a program organized by the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Tribhuvan University, Former Foreign Minister of Nepal Pradeep Gyawali stated that Nepal cannot invest such a huge amount on a single project. As such, “we request China to construct the trans-Himalayan railway on grant, instead of loan”. Thus, in the Nepali context, although a debt trap doesn’t stand as an economic challenge at present, it has more to do with the uncertainty over the modality of the funding, as Kathmandu should be able to weigh the geopolitical value that the Chinese railway carries and whether the small country located between India and China is ready to bear its geopolitical implication amidst the Sino-Indian contestation in the Himalayas and Sino-US rivalry globally. Despite the national consensus Nepal has built not to accept the trans-Himalayan railways in loans,

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40 The Kathmandu Post, “Kathmandu-Kerung railway: Project to cost Rs. 257 billion, August 20, 2018
41 The Kathmandu Post, “Kathmandu-Kerung railway”
the western world, including the United States has already admonished Nepal to escape the probable ‘debt trap’\textsuperscript{48} reportedly emanating from China’s flagship project. The counselling offered by the US to Nepal should be understood not only in the context of rising international trepidations over the issue of debt trap in the Maldives, acquisition of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and land seizure in Africa\textsuperscript{49}, but also as an attempt to halt Nepal’s increasing proximity with its sole competitor, China, to whom ‘debt trap’ allegations are mere rumors and propaganda designed by the western world to contain its rise\textsuperscript{50}.

In the April of 2019, when the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation\textsuperscript{51} was held in Beijing, talks and discussion mentioned the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network and Nepal-China Cross Border Railway Projects\textsuperscript{52}. But, as informed to the author by the foreign ministry officials, the joint communiqué issued at the end of the forum mentioned nothing about the funding modality of the railway project, making the future of the cross-border railway uncertain and further delaying China’s ambition to connect with South Asia. China’s indecision over the funding modality should able be understood in the context of a global pandemic that impacted China’s funding capability of the BRI projects until the end of 2020,\textsuperscript{53} and questions were also raised over Beijing’s ability to fund the cross-border railway projects in the grant as policymakers in Nepal has desired.

**Political challenges:** As an infant republic located between the largest democracy, India, to the south, and a Communist China, to the north, any kind of political turbulence inside Nepal increases the level of strain and exertion in accommodating the interest of two Asian powers. This is because Sino-Indian relation is not driven only by the elements of conflict. Here, the author may recall the May 2016 statement made by Prof. Dai Yonghong at the Institute of South Asian Studies in Sichuan University of China that “Sino-Indian relations, also has the component of cooperation and competition”\textsuperscript{54}. Although the Xi-Modi Wuhan meeting of 2018 and Chennai connect of 2019 aimed to stabilize the relations between India and China, their relationship has been variously riveted by border problems, struggle for global governance, and contest for regional supremacy, which has resulted in a spectacular rivalry of the 21st century. In the context of the competitive-cooperative-conflictual relationship between India and China\textsuperscript{55}, a political fiasco in Nepal may impact their incompatible interest in the Himalayan country.

After the promulgation of a new constitution in 2015, Nepal was anticipated to escape the protracted transition, which Kathmandu endured for a long time, and the recent political debate over the issue of endorsing US-sponsored MCC project from the parliament has once again sensationalized Nepal’s political milieu, sending ripples to the neighboring countries. Although Nepal’s connectivity-driven development strategy intends to draw benefits by materializing the multidimensional connectivity network, including railways, airways, roadways, waterways, petroleum, optical fibers, gas pipelines, and electricity transmission lines with its neighbors,\textsuperscript{56} both the nuclear-armed countries have their own strategic and security interest in Nepal. Today, they have entered a geopolitical and strategic rivalry and are competing against each other in every field\textsuperscript{57}. When it comes to Nepal, their rivalry is visible in political, economic, strategic, and geopolitical realms. But, as Nepal gets involved in its own domestic matters, their divergent interests and concerns in Nepal may not be fulfilled in a timely manner. China’s South Asia ambition through the trans-Himalayan railway is facing the same fate. While China’s uncertainty over the funding modality has already delayed the project, new political developments in Nepal have further procrastinated it.

History is evident to how political uncertainty in Nepal has impacted the economic and strategic concerns of its two neighbors. In conversation with the author on 15\textsuperscript{th} of April 2017 at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Professor Emeritus S.D Muni mentioned Nepal’s political instability impacting the interest of the two neighbors. Following the political change of 2006, the protracted transition in Nepal saw the anti-China demonstration in the cities of Kathmandu which angered Beijing. In the same manner, due to political uncertainty in Nepal, the open and porous borderlands between Nepal and India were exploited to smuggle Indian counterfeit currency and as a haven to the terrorists and criminal groups. Although the nature and extent of political uncertainty are relatively less volatile than what Nepal endured after the political change of 2006 (which abolished monarchy from Nepal) to the year 2015 (when Nepal promulgated its new constitution), China’s ambition to get connected with the South Asian market through the trans-Himalayan railway is already bearing the brunt of the political fiasco. The perceptible lobby of the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi in thwarting Nepal’s attempt to endorse the US-sponsored MCC project\textsuperscript{58} and her persistent attempt

\textsuperscript{48} The Himalayan Times, “US officials warn China’s BRI could lead to debt trap, undermine sovereignty,” November 11, 2018


\textsuperscript{50} Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, “Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-trap Diplomacy’ How Recipient Countries Shape China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” Chatham House, August 2020,

\textsuperscript{51} Belt and Road Forum, “Xi Jinping Chairs and Addresses the Leaders’ Roundtable of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Co-operation,” July 17, 2019

\textsuperscript{52} Santosh Ghimire, “Belt and Road Forum Joint Communique incorporates connectivity projects for Nepal under BRI,” Republica, April 27, 2019

\textsuperscript{53} Frank Mouritz, “Implications of the COVID-19,” 115–124

\textsuperscript{54} Dai Yonghong, Classroom lecture, May 12, 2016


\textsuperscript{56} Institute of Foreign Affairs, “Reflections on Nepal’ Foreign Policy- 2020,” January 21, 2020

\textsuperscript{57} Mahendra P. Lama, Foreign Policy and Security Seminar: Nepal India and the Himalayan Connectivity, Brookings, January 21, 2020

\textsuperscript{58} Ramesh Kumar, “China Lobbying Against MCC,” Nepali Times, December 23, 2021
to keep the communist party of Nepal intact prior to its split in 2020 indicate China’s interest to foil every move that Americans are making to invest in China’s neighborhood and keep its vicinity politically stable\textsuperscript{59}. Despite China’s good image and harmonious relations with all the political parties in Nepal—democratic, leftist, nationalist, royalists, and Madhesh-based—China’s longstanding desire to materialize the trans-Himalayan railway hasn’t succeeded.

Beijing got an opportunity to reinvent the 1973 idea of connecting Lhasa with Kathmandu via railway in 2016 when Nepal signed a transit and transportation agreement with China in the wake of the Indian blockade on the landlocked country. China traditionally confided in the monarchy to fulfill its interest. But, with the abolition of monarchy in Nepal in 2008, China started to work with the political parties in Nepal. In 2015, Nepal promulgated its new constitution which India welcomed with a blockade. China not only welcomed Nepal’s constitution but also found an apt opportunity to lure Nepal towards the BRI connectivity projects in the context of deteriorating Nepal-India relations. When Nepal officially joined the BRI in 2017, it rekindled China’s trans-Himalayan ambition. Impelled by the same aspiration, Beijing conducted a pre-feasibility study report of the Kathmandu-Kerung railway in 2018\textsuperscript{60}. Also, during the 2019 visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Nepal, he publicly stated that the materialization of the trans-Himalayan railway helps Nepal to attain the status of a land-linked country between India and China\textsuperscript{61}. The fraternal ties established by former Prime Minister K. P. Oli between the Chinese Communist Party and the then ruling Communist Party of Nepal boosted the spirit of connecting the two countries with railways. But, following his struggle inside the party and not to let his decisive grip inside the party and national politics fade away, Oli had to take the help of New Delhi. His rapprochement with India was perceived by the five former prime ministers of Nepal as a ploy to invite ‘foreign interference’\textsuperscript{62}. While New Delhi has always been disappointed since Nepal started developing ties with China by signing the BRI, which the former always protested, China’s trans-Himalayan railway has been facing bureaucratic hassles, uncertainties, and a lack of political coordination over funding modality. China responded to Oli’s rapprochement by not dispatching the invitation to Nepal for the Boao Forum for Asia conference in 2021\textsuperscript{63}. The absence of Nepal—the founding member of the Boao Forum—visibly indicated China’s disappointment over the new development in Nepali politics.

Despite being an architect of the merger of the three largest communist parties in Nepal—Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) and the Maoist Center—in 2018 to establish a unified communist party, the Chinese Communist Party couldn’t keep it intact. Attracted by the political and economic development in China, the unified communist party in Nepal also organized a symposium on Xi Jinping Thought in Kathmandu\textsuperscript{64}. The constant communication and interaction between the two parties increased political proximity between them and materialized the visit of the Chinese President to Nepal. Xi’s visit to Nepal was the first state visit by the Chinese president after Jing Zemin’s visit in 1996. His visit further boosted spirit to materialize the trans-Himalayan railway. Nevertheless, things started to go haywire following the split of the unified Communist Party of Nepal. Even the series of parleys initiated by Chinese Ambassador Hou Yanqi, departing from Beijing’s usual policy of non-interference in Nepal’s domestic politics, didn’t yield positive outcomes\textsuperscript{65}. Following the spirit of the communist party, Oli’s rapprochement with New Delhi came as a major setback to China and its South Asia ambition.

Although all the political parties in Nepal share a common view that the trans-Himalayan railway help in diversifying Nepal’s trade and increasing the flow of Chinese tourists to Nepal, the perception of Madhesh-based parties may differ any time owing to their proximity with the Indian politicians which was aptly visible during the 2015 blockade. Although China has developed good relations with all the Madhesh-based parties and Chinese investment, too, has increased in the Terai region of Nepal, where India claims to have its ‘roti-beti’ (bread and blood) relations because of the open borders, the perception of Madhesh-based parties towards the trans-Himalayan railway is driven firstly, by the Indian interest and involvement in Terai; and secondly, by the scale of Indian support to their political career in Nepali politics. Furthermore, the global image of the BRI as an ‘expansionist’ project, entailing the vulnerability of ‘debt traps’ and the threat of ‘sovereignty erosion’ may further aggravate political challenges in the South Asian countries like Nepal, where China is viewed more as a geopolitical rival to New Delhi. Thus, political challenges and political uncertainties in Nepal could be one of the reasons for the leadership in Beijing not being able to ascertain the funding modality of the trans-Himalayan railway.

\textbf{Geoengineering and environmental challenges:} Hostile environment and geoengineering difficulties increase the cost of the project and invite uncertainties that further delay China’s South Asian ambition. According to the 2018 pre-feasibility report\textsuperscript{66}, topography, weather, tectonics, hydrology, and cost

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\textsuperscript{59} \textit{The Kathmandu Post}, “Chinese ambassador meets Dahal, two days after calling on President Bhandari,” December 24, 2020

\textsuperscript{60} Republica, “Chinese side submits preliminary study report for Kerung-Kathmandu Railway,” December 11, 2018

\textsuperscript{61} Eleanor Albert, “From ‘Land-locked’ to ‘Land- linked’: China’s Xi Goes to Nepal, The Diplomat, October 15, 2019

\textsuperscript{62} Press Statement. Issued by five former prime ministers of Nepal, Sher Bahadur Deuba, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Madhav Kumar Nepa, Jhivanath Khanal and Baburam Bhattari on June 12, 2021

\textsuperscript{63} Anil Giri, “China misses out Nepal as it hosts Boao annual conference,” The Kathmandu Post, April 20, 2021

\textsuperscript{64} Republica, “Ahead of China Prez Visit NCP embraces Xi Jinping Thought,” September 24, 2019

\textsuperscript{65} Dipesh Shahi, “Is China now micro-managing Nepal politics?” Nepali Times, May 5, 2020

\textsuperscript{66} Ramesh Bhusal, “Which Way will the Tibet-Nepal railway go?” Nepali Times, July 5, 2019
are identified as the major challenges to the materialization of the trans-Himalayan railway linking Tibet with Kathmandu. The harsh Himalayan terrain, through which the railway must travel, cannot be penetrated without resorting to multifarious structural engineering. At the top of it all, serious threats may work against the geoengeineering itself in the context of the seismic activities impacting the slope stability in the seismic zone. After all, the proposed railway travels through a geological fault line, where the Indian plate meets with the Eurasian plate for the Himalayan formation. Threats created by the geophysical setting are further aggravated by geological problems triggered by rockfalls, debris flows, avalanches, and landslides which further defer the construction of the trans-Himalayan railway.

While the railway runs through two national parks in Langtang and Shivapuri, its construction cannot escape the environmental concerns and bio-diversity issues. Environmentally, Nepal has pledged to attain net-zero emissions by 2050. But China’s mega infrastructure projects are drawing severe criticism globally, for not paying the required attention to environmental concerns. In such an adverse condition, both countries haven’t found an agreeable solution to address the environmental challenges confronted by the trans-Himalayan railway.

Topographic difficulties, geological complexities, seismicity, and environmental concerns are going to make the construction of the railway, proposed to descend from 4,000 meters in Tibet to 14,00 meters in Kathmandu via bridges and tunnels, more grueling and intricate. Thus, appropriate technological initiatives and scientific approaches, as suggested by the prefeasibility report submitted by the Chinese Railway Administration, should drive the geo-engineering intricacies for the successful materialization of the cross-border railways through the tremor-prone Himalayan region. While addressing a press conference in May 2019, the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi also called for utilizing an innovative and scientific method while constructing the proposed railway that travels through the inhospitable terrain. But, while mitigating the risks by the geological and environmental challenges, the project’s cost will go up.

Thus, the use of scientific, technical, and multifarious geoengeineering techniques is associated with the financial side. Yet funding modality has not been ascertained by both sides. In such a context, the proposed railway has become more symbolic than bearing an actual economic value. Although Nepal initially aspired to get connected with Chinese ports through railways to reduce its dependence on India, the increasing trade deficit and bourgeoning dependence on India indicate how the trans-Himalayan railway.

Geopolitical challenges: Geography has a profound influence on foreign policy priorities, decisions, and behavior because it is the most permanent. The land we dwell in has “shaped us, shaped the wars, the power, and politics.” Geographical variations exist across the world. As such, forests have their own importance as mountains do and deserts have their own significance as rivers do. Hence, geopolitics analyses the role of geographical factors in international affairs because the foreign policy choices made by the leaders and policymakers are largely shaped by the physical context. Nepal has variously strategized its geography in different periods of time. With the unification of Nepal in the 18th century, Nepal’s founding father Prithivi Narayan Shah identified Nepal as ‘yam’ between two boulders. Throughout the period of colonialism, Nepal was perceived as the buffer between China and British India. While the concept of buffer became more outdated with the end of the cold war and in the period of globalization, Nepal looked for ways to draw benefits from the economic miracle in the immediate neighborhood by strategizing its geography with the metaphor of ‘bridge’ between the two countries. Nepal’s entry into China’s BRI was driven by Nepal’s coping strategy in the context of the rise of China. Today, while BRI projects in Nepal are not getting the required momentum, it is adequate to analyze the proposed trans-Himalayan railway, commonly known as the BRI railway, from the geopolitical lens.

Having discussed the economic, political, geological, and environmental challenges faced by the proposed cross-border railways, it is also important to shed light on the geopolitical challenge, because of which the idea that was conceived in 1973 has not been yet materialized. Until China had garnered the required experiences to turn hostile geography into a habitable place with the support of technological know-how, mega infrastructure, and connectivity projects revolutionizing its cities, the Himalayas standing between Nepal and China were impenetrable. Today, China has both the will, interest, and capabilities. Still, what precludes Beijing from materializing it? It’s the Himalayas that have shaped the policy choices of Indian

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69 Anil Giri, “Kathmandu- Kerung railway chugs ahead as China tables report,” The Kathmandu Post, April 5, 2022
70 Hou Yanqi, “Press Conference” Embassy of People’s Republic of China, May 23, 2019
75 L. F. Stillier, Prithvinarayan Shah in the light of Dibya Upadesh (Kathmandu: Himalaya Book Centre, 1968)
policymakers in New Delhi because India has always perceived the Himalayas as its defense frontier. Any attempts, either through the mega infrastructure or in other ways, to penetrate the Himalayas in South Asia are deemed by New Delhi as hostile to its interest. India’s Himalayan Frontier Theory is one of the major sources of its discontentment towards the BRI projects, particularly towards the proposed trans-Himalayan railway. The origin of India’s discomfort vis-à-vis Nepal lies in a third country’s influence in the Himalayan country. New Delhi inherited this strategy from the British colonizers. Although Nepal was never colonized, the British East India Company exploited the Treaty of Sugauni, signed in 1816 after the defeat of Nepal in the Anglo-Nepal war, to prevent Nepal from developing relations with any other countries in its strategic and economic affairs. Following the independence of India in 1947, New Delhi couldn’t come out of the colonial worldview in its neighborhood policy as, after the emergence of Communist China in 1949 and annexation of Tibet in 1951, India’s security interest in Nepal’s Himalayan region had renewed. In the same context, India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru even stated in the Indian Parliament on December 6, 1950, that:

“From time immemorial, the Himalayas have provided us with a magnificent frontier…we cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also the principal barrier to India. Therefore, such as we appreciate the independence of Nepal, we cannot allow anything to go wrong in Nepal or permit that barrier to be crossed or weakened as that would also be a risk to our security.”

New Delhi had even dispatched a military mission to Nepal’s northern border with an aim to monitor the Chinese activities in Tibet. Although they withdrew from the different places in Nepal in the late 1960s, India has still stationed its troops in the Kalapani-Lipulekh section of Nepal’s north-eastern frontier. The importance of the Himalayas for India can also be realized from how the China-India war of 1962 was confined to the Himalayan borders and from the episode of Indian annexation of the Himalayan state of Sikkim in 1973. Indo-Pak tensions over Kashmir and India’s reservation over the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) running through Kashmir also indicate how Nehru’s Himalayan frontier theory still rules the psyche of Indian foreign policymakers.

Today, while China is willing to increase its presence in the South Asian region through aid and investment, New Delhi has once again realized the relevance of Himalayan frontiers. The construction of the Mansarovar route from India’s Uttarakhand to China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in 2020 through Lipulekh, which is a disputed territory between Nepal and India, indicated the relevance of Himalayan frontiers for New Delhi in the wake of China’s strategic forays in the region. Although the route is labeled as a pilgrimage route, ‘Kailash Mansarovar Yatra’ (KMY), it was inaugurated without Nepal’s consent. China’s strategic approach towards the Himalayas is not much different, which can be inferred from the way Chairman Mao Zedong had termed Tibet as the palm of China, and Nepal, Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan, and the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) as its five fingers. The Sino-Indian war of 1962 attested to how the Himalayas have shaped their policy choices. Today, while both the countries are pursuing great power ambitions, the Himalayas remain one of the predominant factors in shaping their politics, powers, and, most importantly, neighborhood policies. China and India encountered a military standoff in Doklam (a disputed trijunction between India, China, and Bhutan) in 2017. The two Asian giants also faced a skirmish that killed 20 Indian soldiers in the Galwan valley in 2020. Thus, the Sino-Indian contestation in the Himalayas is quite visible. In such a context, China’s ambition to extend its railway to Nepal’s capital Kathmandu won’t remain free of the geopolitical impediments, which is, today, perceptible in Nepal’s failure to accommodate the interest of major powers. For instance, while Nepal has already signed a China-led BRI, Nepal’s indecision over the US-sponsored MCC project has raised a question over Nepal’s foreign policy of “amity with all and enmity with none”. When Nepal signed the 500-million project for electricity lines and roads with the United States in 2017, the compact hadn’t aroused any controversy and was believed to be easily endorsed by the parliament. But, when its linkage with the Indo-Pacific strategy (IPS) was discovered, controversies began to air in the Nepali political spectrum although the US embassy in Kathmandu has stated that MCC has no linkage with the military component. Still, Nepal’s political fraternity remains divided over whether to ratify the MCC from the parliament or not. The US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu even “threatened” the top political leaders in Nepal that Washington will review its ties with Nepal in the wake of its failure to ratify the MCC compact from the parliament by February 28, 2022. Washington even believed that China had a role in Nepal’s indecision over the compact. Although the US Ambassador to Nepal Randy Berry Beijing refuted such allegations, Beijing took no less time to accuse the

80 The Kathmandu Post, “Amity with all, enmity with none,” July 11, 2018
82 Annapurna Express, “ US Assistant Secretary Lu warns of reviewing ties with Nepal if MCC is not endorsed,” February 11, 2022
83 Prashant Jha, “US believes China behind delay of $500m grant project in Nepal,” The Hindustan Times, February 14, 2022
US of using ‘coercive diplomacy’ against Nepal. While both the United States and China are competing for their influence in Nepal, the trans-Himalayan railway will not be free of the geopolitical ramifications. In the same manner, when Nepal had protested India’s Mansarovar route in 2020, arguing that the strategic route passes through Nepali territory, the Indian Army Chief Naravane stated that Nepal was acting “at the behest of someone else”, an indirect reference to China because the Nepal-India border problems had coincided with the Sino-Indian border skirmishes in the Himalayan region of Galwan. Today, when Nepal’s independent acts and autonomous decisions are being perceived as the upshot of increasing Chinese presence in Nepal, it is obvious that the trans-Himalayan railway will not remain free from the geopolitical challenges in the wake of Sino-Indian contestation and Sino-US strategic competition.

Driven by the Himalayan frontier theory, New Delhi always portrays its relations with Nepal as ‘special’, despite the increasing anti-Indian sentiments in Nepal. The history of labeling its relations with India as special goes back to the days to Indian Prime Minister Nehru, as with the help of which he wanted Nepal to coordinate its foreign and defense policies with India. But, as soon as Nepal opened itself to the outside world with the policy of diversification and established its diplomatic relations with China, India saw it as an erosion of its mutual security arrangement with Nepal. Indian policy makers were further vexed when China was allowed to build roads connecting the capital of Nepal with the Chinese borders in the 1960s. In the context of the construction of the road, Chairman Mao stated “Once these roads are opened, India may be a bit more respectable towards you.” Mao’s statement clearly indicates the presence of geopolitical value in any kind of cross-border connectivity between Nepal and China, either its roadways or railways.

The changing dynamics of international and regional politics has today posed a geopolitical risk to the trans-Himalayan connectivity projects. While quadrilateral dialogue (QUAD) encourages the strategic partnership between the US, Japan, Australia, and India to contain the rise of China, the IPS reinforces the same objective. The partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States has been established with the same intent. In the proposal of Build Back Better World (B3W), an idea to contain the China-led BRI could be sensed. In such a context, Nepal cannot entirely avoid the implication of the policies adopted by the QUAD members, who are the major development partners for Nepal, to contain the rise of China because of its geopolitical location. While the Kerung-Kathmandu railway has invited the collective vigilance of QUAD members towards Nepal, the 2+2 dialogue between India and the United States in 2020 to improve their defense ties and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) signed between them in the same year to exchange aeronautical data and geospatial information is aimed at containing China, which has further aggravated the Himalayan geopolitics. Against the same backdrop, Nepal’s strategy to cope with the rise of China through the bridge discourse has failed, particularly owing to India’s reluctance.

Bridge or burden

Nepali strategists and foreign policy analysts are often heard extolling Nepal’s geographical location. The rise of China and the strategic partnership between the QUAD member countries to contain Beijing’s increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific region has once again strategized Nepal’s geography. Following the political change of 2006 in Nepal, Kathmandu floated the proposal of ‘bridging’ India and China, owing to its geographical location and citing Nepal’s connectivity-driven development strategy to draw benefits from the spectacular economic performance of the two Asian giants. New Delhi understood Nepal’s proposal as the strategy of the decision-makers in Kathmandu to cope with the rise of China and expressed its reservation over the same, while China further encouraged Nepal’s proposal as Beijing reckons the proposal was in line to fulfill its South Asia ambition. But Nepal and China haven’t been able to materialize the idea of ‘bridge’ into a reality because of its confinement to discourse and, as such, it has gained more of a geopolitical value than the actual realization. But, against the backdrop of the implication of strategic competition between the United States and China and the territorial conflict between India and China on the Himalayan region, Nepal’s proposal of a ‘bridge’ may invite further burden by intricating Nepal’s inescapability in accommodating the incompatible interests of major powers.

The evolution of bridge discourse in Nepal indicates Kathmandu’s ambition to equalize Indian interest in Nepal, which New Delhi considers as its sphere of influence. As such, Nepal’s proposal of ‘bridge’ has never fascinated India. In 1973, King Birendra had stated that “Nepal is not a part of the [Indian] subcontinent; it is really that part of Asia which touches both China and India.” Thus, Nepal’s idea of ‘bridge’ as an act of balancing is not a fresh concept. King Birendra was aware of increasing Indian interest in the region following the emergence of Bangladesh out of Pakistan with the Indian support and, most importantly, after the annexation of Sikkim into India in 1973, Nepal looked for ways to balance Indian influence. The Himalayan country thus found in its geographical location

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84 Republica. “China accuses US of Employing ‘Coercive Diplomacy’ on MCC Grant Agreement, February 18, 2022
85 M Naravane, Webinar organized by the Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, May 15, 2020
89 BBC, “G7 Summit: Spending Plan to rival China adopted,” June 12, 2021
90 King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah, Interview with Newsweek, September 10, 1973
that it has a powerful China on its north which has already fought a border war with India in 1962. Today, Nepal’s proposal of the bridge also carries Kathmandu’s desire to tap geopolitical opportunities. But, in doing so, amidst the changing balance of power at the regional and global level, geopolitical vulnerabilities, and security threats compounded by the sense of distrust in bilateral relations may brand Nepal as a ‘burden’ instead of a ‘bridge’.

Like his brother Birendra, the former king of Nepal, Gyanendra Shah also remained hopeful of Nepal’s geographical location. Although his authoritarian government was supported by China until it was ousted by the 2006 public protest, after participating in the Afro-Asian Summit in Jakarta in 2005, he stated about Nepal’s interest to be an economic transit point between India and China⁹¹. His statement should be understood in the context of King Gyanendra’s attempt to bring China into the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation as an observer state in the Dhaka Summit in 2004. While New Delhi and Washington had already condemned his despotic moves, Gyandenra had sought refuge in the Chinese Communist Party to protect his regime back home. Following the political change of 2006, which was brokered by New Delhi by bringing former Maoist insurgents into mainstream politics, Indian influence in Nepali politics was endless. Thus, to balance it, the former Prime Minister of Nepal Pushpa Kamal Dahal made the proposal of a trilateral partnership including India, China, and Nepal, during his visit to India in 2010. He floated the same proposal during his visit to Beijing in April 2013. While Sino-India relations are not only influenced by the possibility of economic cooperation but also by the territorial conflict in the Himalayan borders and act of competition in the different multilateral forums, New Delhi instantly expressed its displeasure towards Prachanda’s proposal; New Delhi was not in a mood to compromise or share its conventional influence in Nepal with its geopolitical rival, China. In 2012, another former Prime Minister of Nepal Baburam Bhattarai had also emphasized Nepal’s capability to be a ‘vibrant’ bridge between India and China. But, while strategizing Nepal’s geography in the context of growing economic relations between India and China, power elites in Nepal shouldn’t dismiss the component of conflict in the Sino-Indian relations. Nepal’s failure to understand it today has metamorphosed the proposal of ‘bridge’ into a reality of ‘burden’ chiefly owing to the geopolitical vulnerabilities triggered by the changing power relations.

Unlike the prime ministers before him, whose emphases on strategizing Nepal’s geography were confined to speeches and statements made in Kathmandu, New Delhi, and Beijing, Khadga Prasad Oli, another former prime minister of Nepal took a step ahead by signing the treaty of transit and transportation in 2016 with China in the wake of Indian blockade on Nepal that provided Nepal access to Tianjin port in China. It gave birth to another new discourse of ‘land-linked’ Nepal, citing the access of the Himalayan country to both Indian and Chinese ports. Despite New Delhi’s reluctance, Kathmandu and Beijing kept on engaging the ‘bridge’ discourse. For instance, former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal again floated the ‘bridge’ proposal to his Indian and Chinese counterparts on the side-line meeting of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Outreach Summit in October 2016 in Goâ. But in 2017, when New Delhi and Beijing came eye-to-eye in a disputed trijunction on the Himalayan plateau of Doklam in Bhutan, Kathmandu realized how geographical proximity between the two Asian giants is not only an opportunity to bridge them but also a threat of becoming a burden to their great power ambitions. Bhutan’s geography taught a good lesson to the power elites in Kathmandu as China and India had a military standoff over the construction of roads in disputed territory in the Himalayan region. In 2015, when Nepal had just endured a massive earthquake, India and China, without Nepal’s consent, had decided to use the disputed territory of Lipulekh to promote the trade between the two Asian giants. While India and China have been competing in the Himalayan region, the trans-Himalayan railway shouldn’t be only understood from the prospect of connectivity but also from the perspective of geopolitical challenge which may brand Nepal’s geographical location as a burden instead of a bridge.

According to historian John Whelpton, “Many is Nepal hope that Nepal’s dependence on India might be radically reduced through further economic development in Tibet and by restoring the old trade route from India to Tibet via Kathmandu.”⁹² But without India and China on board, such an arrangement is not likely. Although the trans-Himalayan railway may give India access to Tibet like the railway offers access to South Asia for China, Nepal hasn’t been able to take India into confidence while Indian decision-makers see China’s hand in the bridge proposal. In the same manner, neither any discussion about the bridge discourse or trilateral partnership has taken place at the political level nor the ministry of foreign affairs in Nepal has initiated a discussion about it. Without institutionalization and its confinement to discourse indicate only at its geopolitical value aimed at diminishing Indian influence in Nepal. But geopolitical setbacks and strategic impediments in the context of Nepal being vulnerable to great power rivalry in the context of MCC and regional rivalry in the wake of Sino-Indian territorial conflict, may brand Nepal only as a ‘burden’ instead of a bridge. Although few studies have highlighted on the economic and strategic benefits for Nepal in bridging the two emerging economies, this study is more confined on categorizing the challenges faced by the proposed trans-Himalayan railway, which has been already branded by the power elites in Nepal as an effective instrument to bridge India and China. But, while doing so, no adequate studies have been carried out, either from the side of the state agencies or non-governmental bodies to evaluate Nepal’s capabilities in bridging them. Thus, the objective pursued

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⁹¹ Pragya Shrestha, “Traversing the Middle Kingdom,” Nepali Times, September 22, 2005

by the inquiry and methodology used in this study remain sharply restricted in finding answers to how challenges faced by the trans-Himalayan railway have posed a threat of being burden, not bridge between the two powerful neighbors. However, the results discussed in this study should be considered and interpreted cautiously in the light of certain limitations. There are three major limitations which could be addressed in the future studies. First is the methodological limitation, particularly in regards to limited access to data and dearth of prior research which has influenced the justification and choices made in the study. Although the data used in this study are from the period from 2016 to 2021, there were insufficient sample size to conduct a statistical measurement. Secondly, adhering to exploratory research design has its own drawback of elasticity and being susceptible to instant changes. Thirdly, it is characterized by difficulty in examining the causality as the study is largely driven by judgments and opinions.

**Conclusion**

Despite of the methodological limitation, this qualitative study has realized the burgeoning geopolitical implications and security threats impacting Nepal’s foreign policy choices and behavior in dealing with both of its neighbors. Results indicate that before trans-Himalayan railway is widely perceived as a harbinger of such threats, policy makers in Nepal need to calculate the risks and menace associated with it, going beyond the political rhetoric. This study dismantles all kinds of daydreaming that power elites in Nepal have hitherto installed in the minds of Nepali public in relation to the trans-Himalayan railway. In doing so, it has been discovered that China’s ambition in getting connected with South Asia may eventually jeopardizes Nepal’s location as a ‘burden,’ in the context of Sino-US strategic competition and Sino-Indian territorial conflict deepened by geopolitical competition in South Asia. While the economic challenge to the South Asian railway hints at the uncertainty regarding the funding modality of the project, erosion of Nepali sovereignty can’t be denied owing to the parleys and lobbies that a Chinese ambassador and dignitaries from China undertook to keep the unified communist party of Nepal intact. The political uncertainty in Kathmandu has already frustrated the leaders of the Chinese communist party regarding the delays of the railway. Although Nepal too sees the materialization of the railway as an instrument to ward off Indian influence, Kathmandu is also concerned about the increasing Chinese influence, which only increases Nepal’s unending nuisance in accommodating the incompatible interest of the major powers. Repeated instances of failing to accommodate them may brand Nepal as a burden. While elaborating on the challenges faced by Chinese railway, this study has recognized geoenengineering and environmental challenges as surmountable, despite of the hostile terrain and unfavorable geography. China’s expertise in constructing high speed rails in harsh topography is evidence. But the geopolitical value of trans-Himalayan railway cannot be denied.

Even the instances of delays and procrastination, which have been sporadically intervened by the pre-feasibility report, DPR updates, statements, and speeches about its materialization, are exploited by Kathmandu and Beijing as the symbolic means to offset Indian influence in Nepal. While the idea of materializing China-Nepal railways resurfaced in the wake of the Indian blockade in Nepal, its geopolitical challenge cannot be ruled out. It tops the list.

In the study, the proposal of bridge floated by the power elites of Nepal in different periods of time, to India and China, is not understood only as the economic aspiration of Nepal but more as a geopolitical ambition of the strategically located country. Thus, while Nepal’s geographical location has once again received strategic significance today in the context of the rise of China and the way strategic partnerships are being devised to contain China, geopolitical vulnerabilities have been further intensified by the trans-Himalayan railway, which may tag Nepal as a burden, instead of a bridge.

In such an adverse context, how should Nepal proceed? Will Nepal’s foreign policy of non-alignment that is more limited to papers and as a ritual be of any help? Is Nepal in a position to restore trust and harmony in the Sino-India relations as Nepal’s historical legacy in dispute management has been limited to Sino-Tibetan and British-Tibetan conflict in the 19th and 20th centuries? Today, duplicity in Nepal’s foreign policy has become a commonplace activity, which only creates more distrust and prepares an environment for Nepal to become a ‘burden’ to both of its neighbors. Thus, it is a prerequisite for Nepal to develop convergence in its foreign policy objectives and behaviors instead of unnecessarily strategizing its geography with assorted discourses which only create skepticism and suspicions in the relations. Precisely, it is the upshot of Nepal’s small state syndrome that the power elites in Kathmandu aim to get rid of without establishing appropriate foreign policy institutions. Although Nepal has a splendid history of its foreign policy institutions dating back to the late 18th century, unusual divergence in foreign policy objectives and behavior deepened by duplicity in foreign policy priorities to protect one regime/government back home always pose a threat of being a burden to both of its neighbors. The trans-Himalayan railway is an apt example in that line, which is being exploited by Nepal only to strategize its geography with an attempt to minimize Indian influence in Nepal. Had Nepal perceived the railway more in economic terms to reduce economic dependency with India, policymakers in Nepal should have busied themselves in preparing the list of goods and services to be traded with China once the railway touches the Kerung borders.

**Data availability**

No data are associated with this article.