

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The gridlock of the Trans-Himalayan railway: China's strategic calculations about Nepal

Gaurav Bhattarai

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

### Abstract

Although discussion about connecting Chinese railways to Nepal borders first surfaced in the year 1973, it could not 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

**Corresponding author:** Gaurav Bhattarai ([gaurav.bhattarai@dird.tu.edu.np](mailto:gaurav.bhattarai@dird.tu.edu.np))

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## 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 state 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 political rhetoric to increase vote banks.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> Because India has always perceived Nepal as its traditional sphere of influence and the increasing Chinese presence in Nepal has already displeased New Delhi.<sup>3</sup> Today, Nepal's northern neighbor China is in strategic competition with the United States (US)<sup>4</sup> while the southern neighbor has increased its strategic partnership with the US,<sup>5</sup> as the increasing presence of China in Nepal through aids, investments, and connectivity projects<sup>6</sup> 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 chasing its long-standing aspiration to get connected with the South Asian region *via* land, China has already introduced the idea of "land-linked"<sup>7</sup> 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,

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<sup>1</sup> P. Giri, "Deliberations in Federal Parliament of Nepal," June 3, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Giri, Deliberations.

<sup>3</sup> V. Gokhale, "Paper Launch-India's Fog of Misunderstanding Surrounding Nepal-China Relations," *Carnegie India*, October 26, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Senate of the United States, "Strategic Competition Act," 2021.

<sup>5</sup> BBC, "US-India 2+2 Crucial Defence Deal Signed," October 27, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Gokhale, Paper Launch.

<sup>7</sup> R.S. Nepal, "China to help make Nepal land-linked: Xi," *The Himalayan Times*, October 13, 2019.

the second largest city in Tibet.<sup>8</sup> 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”.<sup>7</sup> 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. Today, China has both the will, interest, and capabilities. Still, what precludes Beijing from materializing it? Why has China not materialized the trans-Himalayan railway in spite of this railway’s great importance for China to enhance its strategic influence/interest in South Asia in general and in Nepal in particular? 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 challenge tops all the other challenges (economic, environmental, geological, and political) against the realization of China’s trans-Himalayan railway, and how these challenges simultaneously pose a risk to Nepal’s coping strategy as indicated by its interest to bridge the two economic giants and may brand the landlocked country as a ‘burden’ instead.

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.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding China’s strategic forays, Beijing is yet to “prove its economic involvement entailing win-win outcomes”.<sup>10</sup> While China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has also drawn severe criticism, including the allegations of “debt trap” and “erosion of sovereignty,”<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> G. Sharma, “Nepal pushes to end dependency on India with China rail, tunnel deals,” *Reuters*, October 13, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> S.S. Bindra, “Chinese Strategy in South Asia,” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 70, no. 4 (2009): 1163–1178.

<sup>10</sup> R. Jain, “China’s Economic Expansion in South Asia: Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 31, no. 1/2 (2018): 21–36.

<sup>11</sup> T. Mobley, “The Belt and Road Initiative: Insights from China’s Backyard,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (2019): 52–72.

<sup>12</sup> Jain, “China’s Economic Expansion in South Asia,” 21.

Although Nepal joined the BRI in 2017, it hasn't implemented any BRI projects so far.<sup>13</sup> 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 ambition to get connected to South Asia through railways has been delayed. But most of the available literature on BRI and Nepal have either highlighted the likely benefits of BRI projects to advance Nepal's search for prosperity and development<sup>14</sup> or has cautioned the Himalayan country of the probable debt trap.<sup>15</sup> 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,<sup>16</sup> or on the changing dynamics of Himalayan geopolitics.<sup>17</sup> 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 first time during the 1973 meeting between Mao Zedong and King Birendra.<sup>18</sup> Without any substantial discussion in 80s and 90s, 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<sup>19</sup> and political uncertainty in Kathmandu but more because of the changing dynamics in Himalayan geopolitics.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> D.R. Sharma, published statement in *The Kathmandu Post*, August 27, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> K.C. Khadga and G. Bhattarai, "Nepal's Search for Prosperity through Transit Diplomacy," *Journal of International Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Jain, "China's Economic Expansion in South Asia."

<sup>16</sup> T. Shabbir, "Rising China and Its South Asian Neighbors: Evolving Dynamics and the Outlook," *Policy Perspectives* 14, no. 2 (2017): 137–52.

<sup>17</sup> S. Smith, "Politics, Pleasure, and Difference in the Intimate City: Himalayan Students Remake the Future," *Cultural Geographies* 24, no. 4 (2017): 573–88.

<sup>18</sup> "No Light at the End of Trans-Himalayan Train Tunnel," *Nepali Times*, June 30, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> F. Mouritz, "Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 115–24.

<sup>20</sup> G. Bhattarai, "Bridge or 'Burden to China's South Asian Ambitions?'" *Republica*, September 8, 2021.

## Methods

In fulfilling the same objective, this qualitative study examines the general and policy debate over the possibility of materializing the trans-Himalayan railways with the help of data and information available from various sources. While the first-hand data (primary data) were received through what Bernard says as 'natural conversation'<sup>21</sup> method or what Patton believes as 'unstructured interviews'<sup>22</sup> with foreign policy experts, economists and analysts from Nepal, India, and China in different periods of time from 2016 to 2022, the secondary data have been obtained from the newspaper reports, op-ed articles, academic journals, and books. The author's research fellowship at Sichuan University from April-July 2016 turned out to be methodologically important in understanding Chinese academicians' perception of 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, the author's interactions with Indian foreign policy experts, security analysts, and professors from 2017 to 2020 on India's responses against the trans-Himalayan railway have benefitted to understand the geopolitical challenges to the trans-Himalayan railway. The author's frequent visits 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 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 use the informal research method of raising questions on funding modality of the proposed trans-Himalayan railway. In the same manner, China's rise has been analysed through the theoretical lens of Offensive Realism to understand China's great power ambition and situate trans-Himalayan railways in the same perspective.

Data from the Department of Railway of Nepal has been presented to discuss the economic challenges. Also, the statements delivered by former prime minister and former foreign minister have been analysed in the context of 'debt trap' narratives. Inputs given by the foreign ministry officials after the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation have been referred while shedding light on the economic challenges. To discuss the political challenges, the author has referred to the statements made by Chinese and Indian academicians in 2016 and 2017 respectively, and their perception of Nepal's political transition. Press statements issued by five former prime ministers of Nepal on 'foreign intervention' has been critically discussed. Increasing role of China has been analysed by referring to the available news reports. The pre-feasibility report of 2018 for the Kerung-Kathmandu railway has been referred

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<sup>21</sup> H.R. Bernard, *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (5th ed.) (AltaMira Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> M.Q. Patton, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (Sage, 2002).

to identify the geological challenges. Statements of Chinese ambassador to Nepal have been cited to understand China's aspiration in overcoming inhospitable terrain.

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 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 communique 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 (organised information through multiple sources on different facades 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 communique 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 stage.<sup>23</sup> In 2017, while delivering a speech in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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".<sup>24</sup> 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 confidence.<sup>25</sup>

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

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<sup>23</sup> M. Mohanty, "Xi Jinping and the "Chinese Dream," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 38 (2013): 34–40.

<sup>24</sup> X. 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.

<sup>25</sup> J. Ashraf, "String of Pearls and China's Emerging Strategic Culture," *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 4 (2017): 166–81.

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”<sup>26</sup> and the “final form of human government”;<sup>27</sup> and as such, constituted the “end of history”.<sup>28</sup> He wrote: “liberal democracy conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently communism”.<sup>29</sup> 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)<sup>30</sup> 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 *The Project Syndicate* titled as ‘exporting the Chinese model’.<sup>31</sup> 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”.<sup>32</sup> Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 announced: “One Belt, One Road,”<sup>33</sup> (understood as Belt and Road Initiative, today) which aims to connect China to Central Asia and thence to Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia, through different trade routes *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.<sup>34</sup> Xi Jinping Thought promotes the supremacy of

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<sup>26</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

<sup>28</sup> Fukuyama, xi.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> M. Schiavenza, “How China Survived the End of History,” *Asia Society*, June 7, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> F. Fukuyama, “Exporting the Chinese Model,” *Project Syndicate*, Jan 12, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> F. Fukuyama, “Exporting the Chinese Model.”

<sup>33</sup> W. Jiao and Z. Yunbi, “Xi proposes a ‘new Silk Road’ with Central Asia,” *China Daily*, September 8, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> “China Schools: ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ introduced into curriculum,” *BBC*, August 25, 2021.



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.<sup>35</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> 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”.<sup>36</sup>

Beijing's interest to enter South Asia *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.<sup>37</sup> 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’<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> Geographically speaking, Bhutan's location remains more favourable to China's aspiration in getting connected to South Asia. But Bhutan is not prepared to

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<sup>35</sup> J. Garrick and Y.C. Bennett, “‘Xi Jinping Thought’: Realisation of the Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation?” *China Perspectives* 113, no. 1–2 (2018): 99–106.

<sup>36</sup> “Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress,” *China Daily*, November 4, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> M. Clark, “The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Grand Strategy?” *Asia Policy* no. 24 (2017): 71–79.

<sup>38</sup> L. Tao, “From Yam to Bridge,” *The Kathmandu Post*, February 3, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> B. Sharma and K. Schultz, “Xi Jinping Comes to Nepal Bearing Investments, and India Is Watching,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 2019.

develop diplomatic relations with China by escaping the former's strategic ties with India.<sup>40</sup> 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,<sup>41</sup> China's interest and ambition to get connected with South Asia *via* Nepal is explicable in the context of China's increasing involvement in building major connectivity infrastructure in the Himalayan country. But, the prospects and potential of such projects do not remain free of challenges, which this study aims to unfold by highlighting how the geopolitical challenge tops the list of challenges against the materialization of the proposed trans-Himalayan railway project that may brand the Himalayan country as 'burden' instead of a bridge.

Unlike Fukuyama's interpretation of China's rise, John Mearsheimer perceives China's rise as a major source of threat to US supremacy. His theory of Offensive Realism predicts security competition between China and its rivals.<sup>42</sup> Thus, geopolitical challenges faced by the trans-Himalayan railway should be understood in the context of the security competition between the United States and China globally and the rivalry between India and China regionally. Numerous literatures are available on the great power ambitions. What tops the list is the power transition theory or the Offensive Realism which predicts that China's rise comes with the probability of a major conflict with its rivals. In John Mearsheimer's words, Fukuyama's theory is completely flawed.<sup>43</sup> To Mearsheimer, although China has been fully integrated into the global economic system or economic interdependence has been developed between China and the Western world especially the United States, China's political system has not changed toward democracy at all. On the contrary, the Chinese Communist Party has strengthened its one-party authoritarian rule thanks to the decades-long economic growth since such growth has enhanced the legitimacy of its rule. Thus, Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism may appear a more appropriate theory to account for China's policy decision-making on the fact of this railway.<sup>44</sup> That is, China will rationally calculate whether or not the construction of this railway will be able to facilitate its goal to maximize its power/interest in Nepal and South Asia, economically and strategically. Notably, China has not responded to Nepal's request for a grant rather than a loan to build this railway. This shows that China seeks not only strategic interest but also economic interest. Simply put, the gridlock of this railway can be largely attributed to China's own cost and benefit calculation.

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<sup>40</sup> A. Sarki, "India-Bhutan Relations," *Journal of International Issues*, Kapur Surya Foundation, 23, no. 4 (2019).

<sup>41</sup> Tao, "From Yam to Bridge."

<sup>42</sup> G.Y. Jalil, "China's Rise: Offensive or Defensive Realism." *Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019): 41–58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48544287>.

<sup>43</sup> J.J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160–62.

<sup>44</sup> J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (W.W. Norton and Company, 2001).

What differentiates Mearsheimer's theory of Offensive Realism from Kenneth Waltz's Defensive Realism is Mearsheimer's emphasis on states' ceaseless pursuit of power unlike Waltz's argument on balance-of-power constraining state's power maximizing behavior.<sup>45</sup> Assessing China's emphasis on role of the military capabilities in its rise and global power ambitions, Mearsheimer's approach appear justifiable.<sup>46</sup> At the heart of Offensive Realism lies the belief that "the ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system."<sup>47</sup> Today, while China is anticipated to tread on the same path by becoming a regional hegemon in Asia, China-led BRI projects are also perceived as Beijing's strategies to achieve the same goal. After all, China's BRI intends to "amass strategic influence while deftly avoiding direct competition with the United States."<sup>48</sup> Thus, from the Offensive Realist perspective, BRI augments China's clout and interest in the Asian region, which may "end up in an intense security competition with the United States and its neighbors."<sup>44</sup> As such, the realists underscore the security implications of China's BRI and take no less time to predict the future characterized by the inevitability of Sino-US conflicts and competitions. Against the same backdrop of the realist interpretation of the BRI projects, while China is paying more heed to neighborhood diplomacy, it is pertinent to analyse the geopolitical challenges faced by the trans-Himalayan railways through the lens of Offensive Realism.

## 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 the various challenges including economic, geological, environmental, political and geopolitical 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

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<sup>45</sup> K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

<sup>46</sup> B. Zhang, "Xi Jinping, 'Pragmatic' Offensive Realism and China's Rise," *Global Asia* 9, no. 2 (June 2014).

<sup>47</sup> J.J. Mearsheimer, "Can China Rise Peacefully?" *The National Interest*, October 25, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>.

<sup>48</sup> J. Wuthnow, *Chinese Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Rationales, Risks, and Implications* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2017).

August of 2018 had estimated the cost for the construction of the Kathmandu-Kerung railway at around NRs. 257 billion.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> In spite of China's interest, will, and capability, Beijing's uncertainty over the funding modality has mysteriously delayed the extension of the Chinese railway to Nepal's 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 Sigatse 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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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

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<sup>49</sup> "Kathmandu-Kerung railway: Project to cost Rs. 257 billion," *The Kathmandu Post*, August 20, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> "Kathmandu-Kerung railway," *The Kathmandu Post*.

<sup>51</sup> Bhattarai, "Bridge or 'Burden.'"

<sup>52</sup> "China Proceeds Ahead With Study Of Kathmandu-Kerung Railway," *The Rising Nepal*, 31 August, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> A. Giri, "Rs 35 billion and 2 years is what it takes to get detailed project report of Kathmandu-Kerung railway," *The Kathmandu Post*, March 18, 2019.

China.<sup>54</sup> 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.

Although China's share in Nepal's foreign debts has increased from 1.93 percent in 2016–2017 to 3.39 percent in 2020–2021, Nepal owes the majority of its debts to multilateral donors including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.<sup>55</sup> In the context of the trans-Himalayan railway, 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.<sup>56</sup> 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”.<sup>57</sup> 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, the western world, including the United States has already admonished Nepal to escape the probable ‘debt trap’<sup>58</sup> 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,<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> “Chinese side submits preliminary study report for Kerung-Kathmandu Railway,” *Republica*, December 11, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Public Debt Management Office(PDMO), “Nepal public Debt Bulletin,” Year 1, Vol. 1, July 16, 2020–January 13, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> “Opposition parties warn govt against debt trap,” *Republica*, October 12, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> P. Gyawali, “Guest Lecture at the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy,” Tribhuvan University, July 16, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> “US officials warn China's BRI could lead to debt trap, undermine sovereignty,” *The Himalayan Times*, November 11, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> K.C. Khadga and G. Bhattarai, “Nepal Amid Sino-India Contestation,” in *Crossing the Himalayas*, eds. N. Peng, G. Ali and Y. Zhang (Singapore: Springer, 2021).

<sup>60</sup> L. Jones and S. Hameiri, *Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-trap Diplomacy’ How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative* (Chatham House, August 2020).

In the April of 2019, when the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation<sup>61</sup> was held in Beijing, talks and discussion mentioned the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network and Nepal-China Cross Border Railway Projects.<sup>62</sup> But, as informed to the author by the foreign ministry officials, the joint communique 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 be understood in the context of a global pandemic that impacted China's funding capability of the BRI projects until the end of 2020,<sup>63</sup> 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, east and west 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. It also has the component of cooperation and competition".<sup>64</sup> 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,<sup>65</sup> 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 debacle 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,<sup>66</sup> both the

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<sup>61</sup> Belt and Road Forum, "Xi Jinping Chairs and Addresses the Leaders' Roundtable of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation," July 17, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> S. Ghimire, "Belt and Road Forum Joint Communique incorporates connectivity projects for Nepal under BRI," *Republica*, April 27, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> F. Mouritz, "Implications of the COVID-19," 115–24.

<sup>64</sup> G. Bhattarai, "What does Sino-Indian Dispute Mean for Nepal," (E-International Relation, August 2, 2020).

<sup>65</sup> B. Ghoshal, "India and China: Towards a Competitive-Cooperative Relationship?" Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Institute of Foreign Affairs, "Reflections on Nepal' Foreign Policy- 2020," June 2021.



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.<sup>67</sup> 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<sup>th</sup> 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 including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Indian Mujahideen (IM). 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<sup>68</sup> and her persistent attempt 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.<sup>69</sup> Despite China's good image and harmonious relations with all the political parties in Nepal—democratic, leftist, nationalist, royalists, and Madhesh-based—China's long-standing 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, against which

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<sup>67</sup> M.P. Lama, *Foreign Policy and Security Seminar: Nepal India and the Himalayan Connectivity* (Brookings, January 21, 2020).

<sup>68</sup> R. Kumar, "China Lobbying Against MCC," *Nepali Times*, December 23, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> "Chinese ambassador meets Dahal, two days after calling on President Bhandari," *The Kathmandu Post*, December 24, 2020.

India expressed its reservation 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.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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'.<sup>72</sup> While New Delhi has always been discomfited 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.<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup> 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.

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<sup>70</sup> "Chinese side submits preliminary study report for Kerung-Kathmandu Railway," *Republica*, December 11, 2018.

<sup>71</sup> E. Albert, "From 'Land-locked' to 'Land-linked': China's Xi Goes to Nepal," *The Diplomat*, October 15, 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Press Statement, Issued by five former prime ministers of Nepal, S.B. Deuba, P.K. Dahal, M.K. Nepal, J. Khanal and B. Bhattarai on June 12, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> A. Giri, "China misses out Nepal as it hosts Boao annual conference," *The Kathmandu Post*, April 20, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> "Ahead of China Prez Visit NCP embraces Xi Jinping Thought," *Republica*, September 24, 2019.

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.<sup>75</sup> 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.

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,<sup>76</sup> topography, weather, tectonics, hydrology, and cost 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 geoengineering itself in the context of the seismic activities impacting the slope stability in the seismic zone. After all, the proposed railway, which is still deprived of a scientific study, 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 biodiversity issues. Environmentally, Nepal has pledged to attain net-zero emissions by 2050.<sup>77</sup> But

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<sup>75</sup> D. Shahi, "Is China now micro-managing Nepal politics?" *Nepali Times*, May 5, 2020.

<sup>76</sup> R. Bhusal, "Which Way will the Tibet-Nepal railway go?" *Nepali Times*, July 5, 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Government of Nepal, "Second Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC)," December 8, 2020.

China's mega infrastructure projects are drawing severe criticism globally, for not paying the required attention to environmental concerns.<sup>78</sup> 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 pre-feasibility report submitted by the Chinese Railway Administration,<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> But, while mitigating the risks prompted by the geological and environmental challenges, the project's cost will go up.

Thus, the use of scientific, technical, and multifarious geoengineering 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 burgeoning dependence on India indicate how the trans-Himalayan railway is reckoned by both the countries--Nepal and China-- as a mere geopolitical tool in the context of Sino-Indian rivalry and Sino-US strategic competition, rather than seeking actual economic benefits from the railway. The same geopolitical dimension, attached with the trans-Himalayan railway may instigate newer tensions and conflicts, which may only brand Nepal's geographical location and its diplomatic overtures as a burden, in sharp contrast to Nepal's expectation to bridge the two economic giants.

Geopolitical challenges: Geography has a profound influence on foreign policy priorities, decisions, and behavior<sup>81</sup> because it is the most permanent.<sup>82</sup> The land we dwell in has "shaped us, shaped the wars, the power, and politics."<sup>83</sup> Geographical

<sup>78</sup> M. Dejonghe, "Will Only a Green Power Remain Great Power?" *Egmont Institute*, 2021.

<sup>79</sup> A. Giri, "Kathmandu-Kerung railway chugs ahead as China tables report," *The Kathmandu Post*, April 5, 2022.

<sup>80</sup> H. Yanki, "Press Conference" *Embassy of People's Republic of China*, May 23, 2019.

<sup>81</sup> W. Murray and M. Grimsley, "On Strategy," in *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War*, (eds.) W. Murray, M. Knox and A. Bernstein (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>82</sup> R.D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography* (New York: Freedom House, 2012), 29.

<sup>83</sup> T. Marshall, "Introduction," *Prisoners of Geography* (London: Eliott and Thompson Limited, 2015), X.

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.<sup>84</sup> Nepal has variously strategized its geography in different periods of time. With the unification of Nepal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Nepal's founding father Prithivi Narayan Shah identified Nepal as 'yam' between two boulders.<sup>85</sup> 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. It's the Himalayas that have shaped the policy choices of Indian 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<sup>86</sup> is one of the major sources of its discontentment towards the BRI projects, particularly towards the proposed trans-Himalayan railway.

The origination 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 Sugauli, signed in 1816 after the defeat of Nepal in the Anglo-Nepal war, to prevent Nepal from developing relations with any other

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<sup>84</sup> T. Marshall, "Introduction," *Power of Geography* (London: Eliott and Thompson Limited, 2021), Xiii.

<sup>85</sup> L.F. Stiller, *Prithvinarayan Shah in the light of Ditya Upadesh* (Kathmandu: Himalaya Book Centre, 1968).

<sup>86</sup> V. Kapur, "India's Himalayan Frontier: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities in the Twenty-First Century," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 11, no. 4 (2007): 82–95.

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”.<sup>87</sup>

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.<sup>88</sup> 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

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<sup>87</sup> A.S. Bhasin, “Speech of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in Parliament on International Situation and the Policy of the Government of India in Relation thereto (Excerpts),” *Nepal's Relations with India and China* (1994): 45.

<sup>88</sup> S.R. Schram, *Political Thought of Mao Tsetung* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), 257.



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.<sup>89</sup> Thus, the Sino-Indian contestation in the Himalayas is quite visible. Although Nepal has always favored neutrality and non-alignment to deal with Sino-Indian spats, 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".<sup>90</sup> 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 US-led 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.<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup> Washington even believed that China had a role in Nepal's indecision over the compact.<sup>93</sup> Although the US Ambassador to Nepal Randy Berry Beijing refuted such allegations, Beijing took no less time to accuse the US of using 'coercive diplomacy' against Nepal.<sup>94</sup> 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<sup>95</sup> because the Nepal-India border

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<sup>89</sup> J. Gettleman, H. Kumar and S. Yasir, "Worst Clash in Decades on Disputed India-China Border Kills 20 Indian Troops," *The New York Times*, June 17, 2020.

<sup>90</sup> "Amity with all, enmity with none," *The Kathmandu Post*, July 11, 2018.

<sup>91</sup> "Top 10 facts about the MCC-Nepal Compact," *US Embassy in Nepal*, January 17, 2020.

<sup>92</sup> "US Assistant Secretary Lu warns of reviewing ties with Nepal if MCC is not endorsed," *Annapurna Express*, February 11, 2022.

<sup>93</sup> P. Jha, "US believes China behind delay of \$500m grant project in Nepal," *The Hindustan Times*, February 14, 2022.

<sup>94</sup> "China accuses US of Employing 'Coercive Diplomacy' on MCC Grant Agreement," *Republica*, February 18, 2022.

<sup>95</sup> M. Naravane, *Webinar organized by the Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses* (New Delhi, May 15, 2020).

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,<sup>96</sup> India saw it as an erosion of its mutual security arrangements with Nepal.<sup>97</sup> 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."<sup>98</sup> 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),<sup>99</sup> 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.

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<sup>96</sup> L.E. Rose, *Nepal: Strategy for Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>97</sup> S.D. Muni, "India's Nepal Policy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*. (eds) D.M. Malone, C.R. Mohan and S. Raghavan (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>98</sup> J.W. Garver, *Protracted Contest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 147–48.

<sup>99</sup> "G7 Summit: Spending Plan to rival China adopted," *BBC*, June 12, 2021.

## Bridge or burden

Nepali strategists and foreign policy analysts are often heard touting 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 intrincating 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."<sup>100</sup> 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 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 carts 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

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<sup>100</sup> King B.B.B. Shah, Interview with *Newsweek*, September 10, 1973.

interest to be an economic transit point between India and China.<sup>101</sup> 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 Goa. 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

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<sup>101</sup> P. Shrestha, "Traversing the Middle Kingdom," *Nepali Times*, September 22, 2005.

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."<sup>102</sup> 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 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

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<sup>102</sup> J. Whelpton, "Foreword to Mandala Reprint Edition," *Nepal Strategy for Survival* by L.E. Rose (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 2010), xi.

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 menaces 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 geoenvironmental 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, Nepal's foreign policy of non-alignment may remain limited to papers and as a ritual. Today, Nepal is not 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 conflicts in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As such, 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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.