

Nepal's Left Parties' Foreign Policy and Its Impact on India–Nepal Relations: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a holistic assessment of how the foreign policies of Nepal's principal left parties—the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist, CPN-UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre)—shape India–Nepal relations. It examines four core dimensions: (1) diplomatic–political, (2) security, (3) economic–energy, and (4) social–cross-border connectivity. The analysis finds that the left parties' preference for “balanced multipolarity” (simultaneous engagement with India and China) has produced periodic friction with India—e.g., during the 2015 supply shock linked to constitutional politics and the 2020 border-map dispute—yet it has also delivered cooperation dividends in power trade, connectivity projects, and people-to-people ties. Notably, since 2024, the long-term India–Nepal power trade understanding (targeting up to 10,000 MW over a decade) and the expansion of cross-border transmission lines have deepened economic interdependence. In security affairs, left governments sometimes tilt toward Beijing, but Nepal's open border, dense social ties, and market access keep India central. Overall, the “balancing” approach poses strategic challenges for New Delhi while simultaneously creating pragmatic opportunities—especially in electricity trade, commerce, and citizen-led connectivity—for a resilient future trajectory.

KEYWORDS: India-Nepal relations, China's influence, political alignment, power trade, cross-border connectivity, left parties

1. INTRODUCTION

Nepal's foreign policy has always been shaped by the realities of geography. Sandwiched between India to the south and China to the north, Nepal faces the constant challenge of balancing its sovereignty with the practical need to engage both of its giant neighbours. Since the democratic transition and the rise of left-oriented forces in the post-monarchy era, the country's political landscape has been dominated by the **Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist–Leninist (CPN-UML)** and the **Communist Party of Nepal–Maoist Centre (CPN-MC)**. These parties have not only influenced domestic politics but have also left a strong imprint on Nepal's foreign relations—particularly with India, the neighbor with which Nepal shares an open border, deep cultural ties, and critical economic interdependence.

The foreign policy orientation of these left parties is often summarized as a strategy of “**balanced multipolarity**”—a deliberate attempt to diversify partnerships by engaging both India and China.

While the intention is to safeguard Nepal's independence and bargaining power, in practice this has produced moments of tension as well as cooperation. For instance, relations soured during the **2015 supply crisis**, widely seen in Nepal as an "unofficial blockade" linked to the new constitution, and again during the **2020 boundary-map dispute**. Yet, these same governments also negotiated landmark agreements such as the **long-term power trade deal with India in 2024**, paving the way for Nepal to export up to 10,000 MW of hydropower in the coming decade.

India–Nepal relations cannot be reduced to politics alone. They are multidimensional, touching on **diplomatic–political issues, security concerns, economic and energy linkages, and everyday social–cultural interactions across the open border**. In each of these spheres, the left parties' policies have sought to leverage Nepal's unique geostrategic position while simultaneously reflecting nationalist sentiments at home. For New Delhi, this creates both challenges—managing periods of mistrust when Kathmandu tilts toward Beijing—and opportunities, particularly in the areas of energy trade, infrastructure connectivity, and people-to-people ties that remain the bedrock of bilateral engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have long been interested in Nepal's foreign policy because of its unique position between India and China. Early studies, such as those by Rose (1971) and Baral (1983), described Nepal's dependence on India for trade, transit, and security. These works suggested that no matter who was in power, India always played a central role in shaping Nepal's policies.

Later, when Nepal's communist parties such as the CPN-UML and CPN (Maoist Centre) became more influential, scholars began paying closer attention to their approach toward foreign relations. Jha (2014) and Muni (2016) argue that the left parties often promoted stronger ties with China while trying to reduce Nepal's dependence on India. They also pointed out that anti-India statements were often used to appeal to people's nationalist feelings. However, in practice, Nepal could not completely turn away from India because of its geography and economy.

Some studies, like Bhattarai (2019), note that Nepal's left governments usually start by distancing themselves from India and leaning toward China, but eventually come back to working with India. This shows a cycle where political promises often clash with the realities of governance. Events such as the 2015 Indian blockade had a strong influence on how the left parties positioned themselves. Writers like Adhikari (2016) and Paudel (2017) explain that the blockade increased anti-India feelings and pushed Nepal closer to China. Still, others argue that depending too much on China also carries risks, raising questions about whether this approach can last.

Recent studies, including Thapa (2020), place Nepal's foreign policy within a bigger regional setting. They argue that Nepal is trying to balance its relations with India, China, and even the United States to protect its own independence and gain development benefits.

Overall, the literature shows three main points. First, India remains the most important factor in Nepal's foreign policy. Second, the left parties often use nationalist and anti-India narratives for political purposes. Third, China's growing role gives Nepal new opportunities, but India continues to be a constant presence in its foreign relations.

3. BRIEF POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF LEFT AND FOREIGN POLICY ORIENTATION

The left political space in Nepal is primarily dominated by two major parties: the Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist–Leninist (CPN–UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal–Maoist Centre (CPN–MC). After the 2017 elections, these two parties briefly united to form a single entity called the Nepal Communist Party. However, this merger was later annulled by the court, which forced them to revert to competing in elections either separately or in coalition.

Since 2022, the position of Prime Minister has rotated between key leaders from these parties. Pushpa Kamal Dahal, commonly known as "Prachanda," leads the CPN–MC, while K.P. Sharma Oli heads the CPN–UML. This frequent rotation and shifting coalitions have caused political instability in Nepal. As a result, the country's foreign policy messaging is continually reshaped depending on which coalition is in power, reflecting the changing political dynamics within the left-wing parties. This instability affects how Nepal positions itself regionally, especially in relation to its neighbors India and China.

The left parties' ideological roots in Marxism–Leninism fuse with nationalist imperatives to influence foreign policy centered on sovereignty and non-alignment. They aspire to balance relations between India and China, moving away from historical dependency on India. Their policy emphasizes Panchsheel principles—respect for sovereignty, equality, and peaceful coexistence—which shape Nepal's interactions with regional powers.

The left alliance's coalition governments post-2017 have leaned increasingly towards China, drawn by Beijing's economic and infrastructure promises. This shift introduces complexity, as left parties seek to diversify Nepal's foreign relations while managing domestic nationalism and regional sensitivities. Traditionally close relations with India are undergoing strain due to Nepal's leftist-led tilt toward China. This shift affects economic ties and cooperation, particularly in energy and border management. The left parties' rhetoric and policy changes occasionally cause mistrust, challenging India's historical primacy in Nepal.

4. SINCE 2015, TURNING POINTS AND THEIR INDIA LINKAGES

Since 2015, Nepal's political and economic trajectory has been marked by several crucial turning points that have been deeply intertwined with its relationship with India, a key neighbor and trading partner. These turning points have not only shaped Nepal's internal affairs but also its foreign policy orientation and regional economic framework. Below is a detailed exploration of four major developments in Nepal's recent history and their distinct linkages to India.

4.1 2015–16 Crisis and Its Aftermath

The promulgation of Nepal's new constitution in September 2015 sparked significant unrest in the southern Terai region, home to the Madhesi community. The protests quickly escalated into a crisis marked by months of border disruptions along the southern frontier with India. Many in Kathmandu—including media outlets and political leaders—characterized the situation as an "unofficial blockade" imposed by India aimed at pressuring Nepal on constitutional issues related to Madhesi representation. Indian authorities, however, denied deliberately blocking the border and instead attributed the disruption to the ongoing Madhesi protests.

During this tense period, the CPN-UML leader K.P. Sharma Oli publicly appealed to India to end the blockade, emphasizing the hardship it imposed on Nepal's economy and people. At the same time, Oli's government took a pragmatic hedging step by simultaneously establishing alternative supply arrangements through China, opening petroleum and transit routes that bypassed India. This dual approach reflected Nepal's strategic aim to reduce overdependence on a single neighbor and signal that other options existed—even though India remained the major economic partner. The crisis underscored Nepal's vulnerability due to its landlocked status and heavy reliance on cross-border trade routes, while also exposing the intricate political dynamics influencing regional geopolitics.

4.2 2016 Nepal–China Transit Agreement

In a landmark move following the blockade, Prime Minister Oli's visit to Beijing resulted in the signing of a Transit and Transport Agreement between Nepal and China in 2016. This agreement granted Nepal access to multiple Chinese ports for trade and transit—marking a significant attempt to diversify supply lines and lessen the overwhelming logistical dependence on India.

Although the protocol for this agreement was officially operationalized in 2019, its symbolic importance resonated beyond actual trade volumes. The transit agreement was hailed domestically as a way to reduce Nepal's overreliance on Indian routes, which had been seen as a strategic vulnerability during the blockade. However, operational challenges such as difficult terrain, higher costs, and underdeveloped infrastructure meant that for several years, very few commercial shipments passed through these new Chinese corridors. Despite this, the agreement stands as a critical strategic pivot, signaling Nepal's ambition to balance its neighborhood relations and open new economic gateways for future growth.

4.3 2020 Map Amendment

The political narrative took another assertive turn in 2020 when the Oli government unveiled a new political map of Nepal that incorporated disputed territories—Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura—formally into Nepal through a constitutional amendment passed unanimously by the parliament. This move came amid ongoing insurgent boundary disagreements with India and was widely seen as a nationalist gesture aimed at rallying domestic political support.

India, however, rejected Nepal's claims and reiterated its own position on these contested border areas. The resulting diplomatic friction led to a slowdown in boundary talks and chilled the broader political climate between the two countries. While the amendment galvanized nationalist sentiments within Nepal, it also underscored the delicate nature of Nepal-India relations, where territorial disputes have the potential to disrupt centuries-old ties. The episode highlighted how domestic political imperatives in Nepal sometimes complicate bilateral diplomacy, affecting cooperation beyond border issues.

4.4 2023–24 Energy Breakthrough with India

In stark contrast to previous tensions, the period of 2023 to 2024 saw a marked surge in sectoral cooperation between Nepal and India, particularly in the energy sector—a vital area for Nepal's economic development. During Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's visit to India in 2023, both countries announced a landmark long-term power trade agreement that was finalized in January 2024. The agreement envisages India importing up to 10,000 megawatts (MW) of electricity from

Nepal within the next decade—a transformative deal considered a milestone in Nepal’s hydropower potential development and India’s expanding clean energy needs. This pact not only unlocks financing and development opportunities for major hydropower projects like Arun-III and Upper Tamakoshi but also strategically aligns with India’s green energy transition goals. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly reaffirmed the 10,000-MW target, while Dahal described it as a “major development” emphasizing the significance of energy cooperation as a driver for bilateral ties. This breakthrough reflects a pragmatic dimension of Nepal-India relations where despite political ups and downs, mutually beneficial collaborations continue to deepen, fostering regional integration and economic progress.

Overall, these turning points since 2015 trace a path from political crises and border tensions to strategic diversification and landmark cooperative energy agreements, illustrating the evolving, multilayered relationship between Nepal and India. Each event reflects Nepal’s efforts to navigate its geopolitical challenges and economic priorities while balancing the influence and sensitivities of its powerful neighbours.

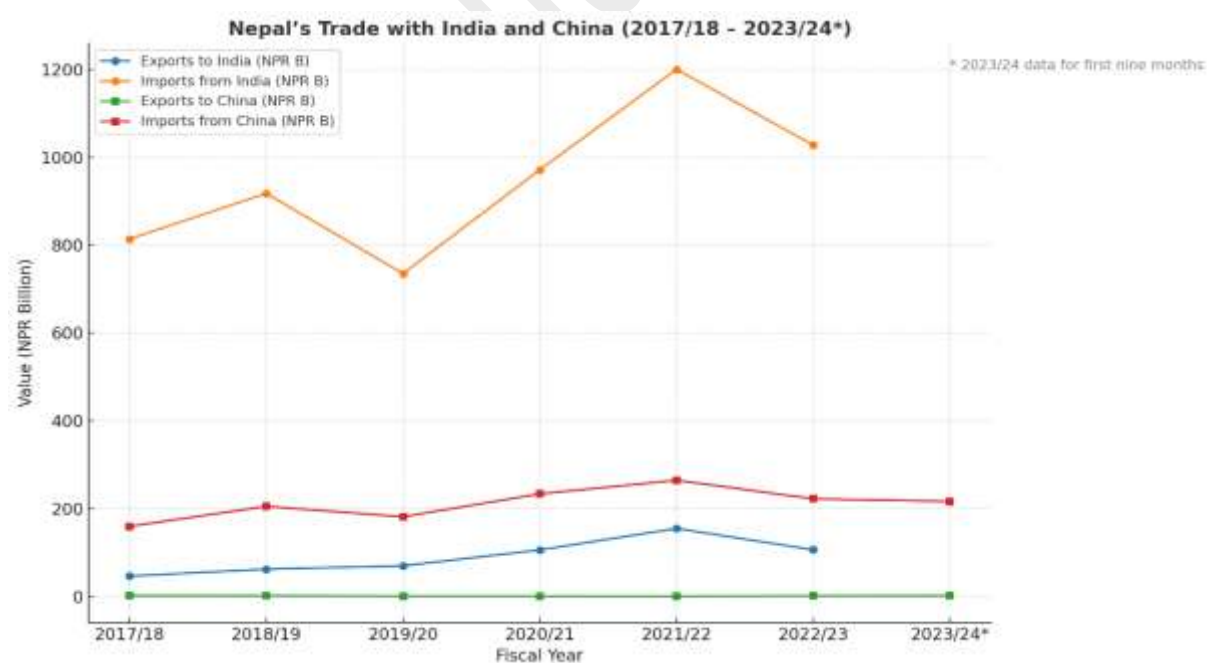
4.5 What Has Actually Changed in the Economic Core?

Trade Structure

India remains Nepal’s anchor market and supply base:

- India’s share in Nepal’s total trade: ~64% (FY 2022–23).
- Nepal’s exports to India: ~68% of total exports (edible oils, tea/coffee, jute, electricity emerging).

Nepal’s imports from India: petroleum products, iron/steel, machinery, essentials that still mostly move via Indian routes. Data and Trends in Nepal’s Trade and Diplomatic Ties



s the chart showing **Nepal’s trade with India and China (2017/18 – 2023/24*)**.

Key Insights from the Data

Key Dimension	Observation
India's Dominance	India is by far Nepal's largest trade partner: exports to India surged from □ 46.7 B in 2017/18 to a peak of □ 155.22 B in 2021/22. Imports from India consistently outpace exports, ranging from □ 735 B to over □ 1 trillion annually.
China's Emerging Role	Nepal's trade with China remains modest. Exports to China peaked at □ 2.44 B in 2017/18 but generally hover around □ 1-2 B. Imports from China are higher—around □ 180-260 B annually—but still far behind those from India.
Trade Imbalance	Nepal faces substantial trade deficits with both neighbors. The gap is especially pronounced with India, where imports exceed exports by a wide margin every year.
Recent Shifts	In FY 2023/24, exports to India rebounded sharply by ~82% in the first eight months compared to the prior year, while exports to China grew as well—though from a low base (275% gain, but still small relative to India) Nepse TradingNepse Trading. Imports from China also rose sharply (up 33–35%) while those from India fell slightly

India remains Nepal's largest trade partner, but China's growing share is notable . Additionally, diplomatic projects like the US-backed Millennium Challenge Corporation have prompted complex triangulations in Nepal's relations with India and China, influenced by left party caution and nationalism.

Views of Political Leaders and Analysts

- Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), leader of the Maoist Centre, stated, "Our foreign policy must reflect Nepal's independent voice and safeguard our sovereignty, balancing relations with neighboring giants without bowing to pressure" (Diplomat, 2024).
- Indian diplomat on Nepal's left parties' rise: "The growing China-Nepal nexus under the left parties challenges traditional South Asian geopolitical dynamics and calls for India to recalibrate its engagement with Nepal carefully."
- **K.P. Sharma Oli (CPN-UML):** "We will be a reliable friend and neighbour of both. Our foreign policy will be based on mutual benefits and mutual respect." (Reuters, 2022)
- **CPN-UML's doctrine:** pursue an "**independent yet balanced foreign policy**... given our geostrategic location... in relation to two proximate neighbors India and China."

4.6How Left-Party Choices Shaped India–Nepal Ties

Left-party choices in Nepal have had a distinctive and complex impact on the trajectory of India-Nepal relations, reflecting a balance between nationalist symbolism and practical interdependence. These choices have shaped how the two neighbors engage with each other, incorporating assertive domestic messaging alongside sustained functional cooperation in critical sectors.

National gesturing and Practical Interdependence

Left-wing governments in Nepal have often deployed assertive and symbolic gestures to strengthen domestic legitimacy. One of the most notable examples was the 2020 constitutional amendment that formally incorporated disputed border territories—Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura—into Nepal’s official political map. This move served as a nationalist expression intended to consolidate internal political support and assert sovereignty. Similarly, sharp border rhetoric has been used periodically to reinforce national pride and political credibility within Nepal.

However, despite these assertive displays, the left parties have been careful never to completely sever functional ties with India, acknowledging the prohibitive economic and logistical costs of doing so. Key sectors such as trade, fuel supply, electricity imports and exports, and labor mobility are deeply intertwined with India. Nepal remains heavily dependent on India’s transit routes and energy infrastructure, and this practical interdependence constrains the extent of political posturing that can translate into real policy shifts. Even after the 2016 China transit deal—which was seen as diversifying Nepal’s supply chain options—India’s geographic and infrastructural advantages continued to dominate logistics, limiting the deal’s practical impact.

Calibrated Use of the China Card

The left’s engagement with China has been marked by cautious diversification rather than wholesale alignment. The signing of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Memorandum of Understanding in 2017 exemplified Nepal’s intention to broaden its economic and strategic horizons beyond India. The BRI framework offered potential avenues for new infrastructure projects and investment, which could dilute Nepal’s overreliance on India.

However, despite this diplomatic overture, no major BRI projects have yet substantially advanced in Nepal. The government and public remain cautious, debating the terms of Chinese loan financing and wary of becoming overly dependent on Beijing. This ambivalence has limited the depth of a China tilt by Nepal’s left-wing governments, implicitly keeping India central to Nepal’s foreign policy and economic framework. The calibrated approach reflects a pragmatic acknowledgment of Nepal’s geopolitical realities and economic dependencies, ensuring China’s role grows gradually without sidelining India.

Energy as a Relationship Stabilizer

Energy cooperation has emerged as a critical stabilizing factor in India-Nepal relations under left party leadership. The reorientation toward pragmatic energy collaboration culminated in the landmark 2024 long-term power trade agreement, under which India will import up to 10,000 MW of hydropower from Nepal by 2034.

This deal represents a strategic shift from political rhetoric to tangible, positive-sum cooperation. It creates recurring, mutually beneficial flows of electricity that provide economic earnings for Nepal and meet India’s increasing green energy demand. Beyond economics, energy cooperation fosters interdependence and trust, cushioning political and diplomatic shocks. This steady, sectoral cooperation continues through bureaucratic channels—power secretaries, joint energy committees—helping institutionalize the relationship and ensuring a functional continuity irrespective of political shifts.

Coalition Volatility and Policy Mood Swings

Nepal's left political landscape is marked by frequent coalition changes and realignments, including significant reshuffles in 2024. Such political volatility injects uncertainty and fluidity into Nepal's foreign policy messaging, appointments, and government posture toward India. Shifts in coalition power often bring changes in tone—from confrontation to conciliation—and can delay the implementation of policies or new initiatives.

However, this volatility in political leadership has been partially offset by stable bureaucratic relations between Nepal and India. The ongoing work of joint secretaries, technical committees, and sector-specific cooperation helps maintain momentum in critical collaborative sectors such as trade, energy, and transit. These institutionalized ties soften the impact of political swings and enable ongoing dialogue and project implementation despite the changing political landscape.

5. CASE STUDIES

A. The 2015–16 Crisis and the “Northern Option”

- Trigger: Constitution promulgation and Madhes protests; severe supply disruptions at the India border.
- Left response: CPN-UML government portrayed the crisis as sovereignty infringement; rapidly inked petroleum and transit understandings with China.
- Effect on India ties: A sharp trust deficit, later softened by dialogue and practical fixes.

B. The 2020 Map Amendment

- Trigger: India's road via Lipulekh; dormant border mechanism.
- Left response: Constitutional amendment inserting the new map—*maximalist* legal position.
- Effect on India ties: Talks slowed; public mood hardened on both sides. Yet trade and energy cooperation later proceeded.

C. The 2023–24 Power Trade Pact

- Trigger: Growing Nepali hydro capacity and India's clean-energy demand.
- Left response: Dahal's government prioritized bankable, long-term access to the Indian market.
- Effect on India ties: A structural positive: investment signal for Nepali hydro; cross-border grid integration; potential trilateral flows (Nepal–India grid to Bangladesh).

Why India Still Matters ?

- **Trade:** India makes up ~64% of Nepal's total trade; takes ~68% of Nepal's exports (FY 2022–23). MEA India
- **Transit:** Protocols exist for China routes, but **operational uptake is minimal** versus Indian corridors. Kathmandu Post
- **Power:** A 25-year long-term framework sets a target for India to **import 10,000 MW** from Nepal over the next decade—de-risking project finance. SASEC

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For Kathmandu, regardless of which party governs:

- Institutionalizing a pragmatic hedging strategy is crucial. This means toning down nationalist rhetoric while empowering sectoral committees and bureaucratic mechanisms to deliver consistent cooperation on the ground.
- Making China transit and economic options operational in a realistic and cautious manner is important. Pilot-scale cargo shipments via northern routes can diversify options without risking debt sustainability from overly ambitious BRI loans.
- Accelerating grid and market reforms at home will help Nepal's hydropower projects qualify faster for India's import lists and secure long-term contracts, improving project viability and economic returns.

For New Delhi:

- India should leverage its core strengths—such as reliable transit networks, a deep market, and integrated grid connectivity—rather than reacting defensively to every political signal from Nepal.
- It is strategically important to decouple boundary disputes and political disagreements from ongoing sectoral cooperation. This separation prevents political tensions in Nepal from negatively affecting vital areas of bilateral collaboration like trade and energy.

In essence, India remains Nepal's most critical partner due to entrenched economic linkages and infrastructural realities. Both sides benefit from fostering stable, institutionalized cooperation that can withstand political fluctuations while cautiously expanding alternative options and reforms.

7. CONCLUSION

Nepal's foreign policy under the leadership of left parties reflects a constant balancing act between asserting independence and dealing with the realities of geography. Their idea of "balanced multipolarity" has aimed to bring China closer into the fold, but the deep economic, social, and cultural links with India continue to make New Delhi Nepal's most important partner.

Since 2015, key events such as the supply crisis, the China transit deal, the 2020 border map amendment, and most recently, the 2023–24 power trade agreement have shown this dual dynamic. While disputes and nationalist signaling created moments of mistrust, practical cooperation in trade, energy, and cross-border mobility kept the relationship moving forward. The landmark 10,000 MW power trade pact especially stands out as a step that ties Nepal's hydropower future with India's green energy transition. Frequent political shifts in Kathmandu often change the tone of relations, but long-standing bureaucratic and institutional cooperation ensures that ties remain steady. At the same time, Nepal's cautious use of the "China card" has expanded its options without replacing India's central role.

For Nepal, the real challenge is to move beyond short-term political gestures and build a stable, development-focused strategy. For India, separating political disagreements from economic and energy cooperation will be vital. As former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli put it, *"We will be a*

reliable friend and neighbour of both... based on mutual benefits and mutual respect." If this vision is followed consistently, India and Nepal can move toward a more resilient and cooperative future despite political ups and downs.

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