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**Nepal: Between Autonomy and
Alignment**

*Political Renewal, Himalayan Nationalism
and Strategic Choice*

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Nepal: Between Autonomy and Alignment

Political Renewal, Himalayan Nationalism and Strategic Choice

Abstract

Nepal stands at an important political and strategic inflection point. The rise of Balendra Shah and the new political generation has brought to the surface a powerful public demand for cleaner governance, greater accountability, economic opportunity and a stronger sense of national agency. Yet the transformation of domestic politics is unfolding within an older strategic reality: Nepal remains geographically positioned between India and China, economically intertwined with India, but increasingly engaged with China, and dependent on a wider international ecosystem for investment, technology and development.

This article examines whether Nepal's emerging political direction represents a sustainable path towards greater national autonomy or merely another phase of political experimentation. It analyses the principal challenges confronting the new government, including economic vulnerability, employment, institutional capacity, infrastructure, border management and the expectations of a young and increasingly globally connected population. It then examines the principal sources of friction in India–Nepal relations, including the Agnipath scheme and Gorkha recruitment question, cartographic disputes, border sensitivities and diplomatic protocol.

The article argues that Nepal's engagement with China should not automatically be interpreted as a strategic departure from India. Kathmandu's emerging approach appears centred on diversification, sovereign choice and economic diplomacy, while seeking productive relationships with both its major neighbours. For India, this requires a recalibration from influence centred on familiarity to partnership grounded in trust, delivery, respect and mutual economic opportunity. India's enduring advantages—geographical proximity, economic interdependence, social connectivity, energy cooperation and historical ties—remains substantial, but they cannot be taken for granted.

The article concludes that Nepal does not need to choose between India and China; it is seeking greater freedom to choose its own future. India's strategic challenge is therefore

not to demand alignment, but to remain so relevant, reliable and trusted that partnership emerges naturally from Nepal's own national choices.

Keywords: Nepal, India–Nepal Relations, Strategic Autonomy, Himalayan Geopolitics

Nepal's Moment of Reckoning

Nepal has never been an ordinary neighbour for India. The Himalayas separate the two countries, yet the people on either side have crossed that barrier for centuries with an ease that diplomats sometimes find difficult to understand. Families, faiths, trade, soldiers, students, workers and pilgrims have created a relationship deeper than any treaty. At the same time, Nepal has always guarded its sovereignty with unusual emotional intensity, because a small state living beside two civilisational giants (India and China) cannot afford to forget the value of political space. That tension has entered a new phase after the dramatic political upheaval of 2025 and the electoral rise of Balendra Shah in 2026. Nepal now has a government born from a generational revolt against the old political order, a powerful parliamentary mandate, and a public impatient for visible change. The question, therefore, is not whether Nepal has changed. It plainly has. The deeper question is whether the country has changed its direction, and whether India understands what this new direction means.

The election of 05 March 2026 gave Shah's Rastriya Swatantra Party 182 of the 275 seats in the House of Representatives—an extraordinary result in a political system accustomed to coalitions and frequent changes of government. The outcome followed the youth-led unrest of September 2025, after which Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli resigned, the House was dissolved and an interim government, under former Chief Justice Sushila Karki, prepared the country for a fresh election. The scale of the RSP victory did more than replace one set of politicians with another. It expressed a public demand for competence, accountability, speed and distance from the habits of the old establishment (House of Commons Library, 2026). The mandate is therefore both an opportunity and a burden. A government elected as the instrument of change cannot easily explain away slow delivery, administrative resistance or political infighting as the unavoidable imperfections of governing (Walker, N. 2026).

Balendra Shah and the Politics of a New Nepal

Nepal's new experiment also carries a paradox. The electorate has chosen an outsider, but the machinery of the state remains old. Shah may speak the language of digital governance, efficiency and generational renewal, yet ministries, procedures, procurement rules, local interests and institutional memories do not change because a new face enters Singha Durbar. During the government's first hundred days, it did show some capacity for speed, especially in areas of service delivery, and The Kathmandu Post reporting noted improvements in the clearing of a huge driving-licence backlog. But the same period exposed the gap between promises and execution: a government review found that only 38 of 100 initial commitments had been implemented, while the Supreme Court checked or suspended several executive initiatives (Kantipur Bureau, 2026; The Kathmandu Post, 2026a). This is the first test of the Shah era. Political novelty creates attention; only institutional performance creates legitimacy (The Kathmandu Post, 2026).

The new leadership also has to govern a society whose expectations have been inflated by the very movement that brought it to power. Young Nepalis did not protest merely to change the names on office doors—they were reacting to corruption, economic frustration, limited opportunities and a sense that political leaders had learned to survive without solving the problems of ordinary citizens. The central domestic challenge is consequently much larger than a cabinet reshuffle. Nepal must create jobs at home, improve public services, strengthen institutions, make investment less cumbersome and build confidence that merits can matter more than connections. The World Bank notes that Nepal's long-term record contains substantial social progress, including dramatic poverty reduction, but also persistent structural constraints: weak private-sector development, low productivity, inadequate job creation and continuing migration as a livelihood strategy. The new government has inherited precisely the problem that brought it to office (World Bank Group, 2025).

This is why the first question about whether Nepal is on the right path should be asked at home, rather than at the border. A country's strategic weight begins with the confidence of its citizens. If the new political order can convert anger into better institutions, employment, infrastructure and opportunity, Nepal will enter its next decade with greater room for independent choices. If it cannot, politics may again become a cycle of disappointment

followed by another search for a saviour. Shah's historic mandate gives Nepal a rare opening, but a mandate is not a substitute for state capacity. The republic has changed governments before. What it needs now is to change the quality of governance.

The Himalayan Test: What the New Government Has Inherited

The economic test will be particularly unforgiving. Nepal has built resilience through remittances, tourism and a steadily expanding services economy, yet the structure remains fragile. The IMF's 2026 assessment shows workers' remittances at around one-third of GDP in recent years, while the World Bank has highlighted how migration has reduced poverty without generating enough productive employment at home. Nepal's foreign-exchange buffers are substantial, but reserves and remittances cannot by themselves produce a transformative domestic economy. The country needs investment, exports, manufacturing niches, digital services, tourism infrastructure and, above all, an environment in which domestic entrepreneurs believe that success is possible without first securing political patronage. The strategic significance of these economic reforms is easily missed. A prosperous Nepal will be less vulnerable to external pressure—a frustrated Nepal will naturally become more receptive to competing outside narratives (IMF, 2026) (World Bank, 2025).

Hydropower could become the great bridge between Nepal's domestic transformation and its external strategy. The country possesses extraordinary energy potential, and India has already become an important destination for Nepali electricity. Bilateral arrangements envisage large-scale expansion of cross-border power trade, and India records that Nepal had exported roughly 1,150 megawatts by the 2025 wet season, with the longer-term framework envisaging up to 10,000 megawatts of exports over a decade (Embassy of India in Nepal, 2026a, 2026b). This is more than a commercial statistic. Every transmission line connecting Nepal to the Indian grid creates a corridor of interdependence. Every hydropower project that generates predictable revenue gives Kathmandu a wider economic base. Every successful energy partnership demonstrates that geography need not trap Nepal between two giants—it can allow Nepal to sell what its mountains produce to the markets that need it.

Yet Nepal cannot live on potential alone. The World Bank estimates that the economy grew at an average real rate of only 4.2 percent between 1996 and 2023, behind several regional peers, while manufacturing has weakened, logistics remain costly and infrastructure

constraints continue to suppress competitiveness. The institution argues that Nepal needs a decisive shift towards private-sector-led growth, stronger skills, better institutions and focused development of hydropower, tourism, agribusiness and digital services (World Bank, 2025). That is the real challenge before Shah. Political slogans can mobilise a generation, but roads, power, ports, custom systems, schools, hospitals and enterprises are what converts hope into national capability.

When Geography Becomes Geopolitics

The strategic environment makes the challenge more complicated. Nepal is a landlocked country, but that description is increasingly inadequate. Its future depends on whether it can become land-linked— connected Southward to India's ports and markets, Northward to China's transport networks, and outward to digital and financial systems. Nepal's Constitution itself frames foreign policy around sovereignty, territorial integrity, sovereign equality, non-interference, non-alignment and mutual benefit (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, n.d.-a). This is not merely diplomatic language. It is the instinctive strategy of a small state located between two larger powers. Kathmandu is unlikely to accept a binary choice between India and China, and India would be unwise to demand one (MoFA).

China offers Nepal an alternative Northern horizon. The 2024 Nepal-China Cooperation Framework under the Belt and Road Initiative identifies ports, roads, tunnels, railways, aviation infrastructure, telecommunications and power transmission among areas for cooperation, while stressing project feasibility, national laws and value for money. The framework also explicitly says that Chinese cooperation with Nepal does not preclude cooperation with other countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2024). That last point matters. Nepal sees China not simply as an ideological partner but as an additional economic and strategic option. The Chinese relationship also carries a security dimension because Tibet sits immediately beyond Nepal's Northern frontier and Beijing attaches importance to stability there.

India therefore faces a problem that is subtler than Chinese influence. It is tempting in New Delhi to look at a Chinese-funded road or a BRI document and calculate geopolitical gains or loss. Kathmandu often looks at something else: who treats Nepal with respect, who

delivers quickly, who listens, who creates jobs, who opens markets, and who appears to understand Nepali nationalism without trying to manage it. That is the psychological terrain on which strategic relationships are built. Nepal's foreign policy continuity since 2026 suggests that the Shah government is seeking a balanced and independent posture rather than formally tilting towards one side. The new government's diplomatic reset, including its efforts to bring foreign engagements under stronger state control, is better read as an assertion of sovereign equality than as a declaration of hostility towards India (Giri, A. 2026) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2024) (The Kathmandu Post, 2026b).

Figure 1: Strategic Geography of Nepal



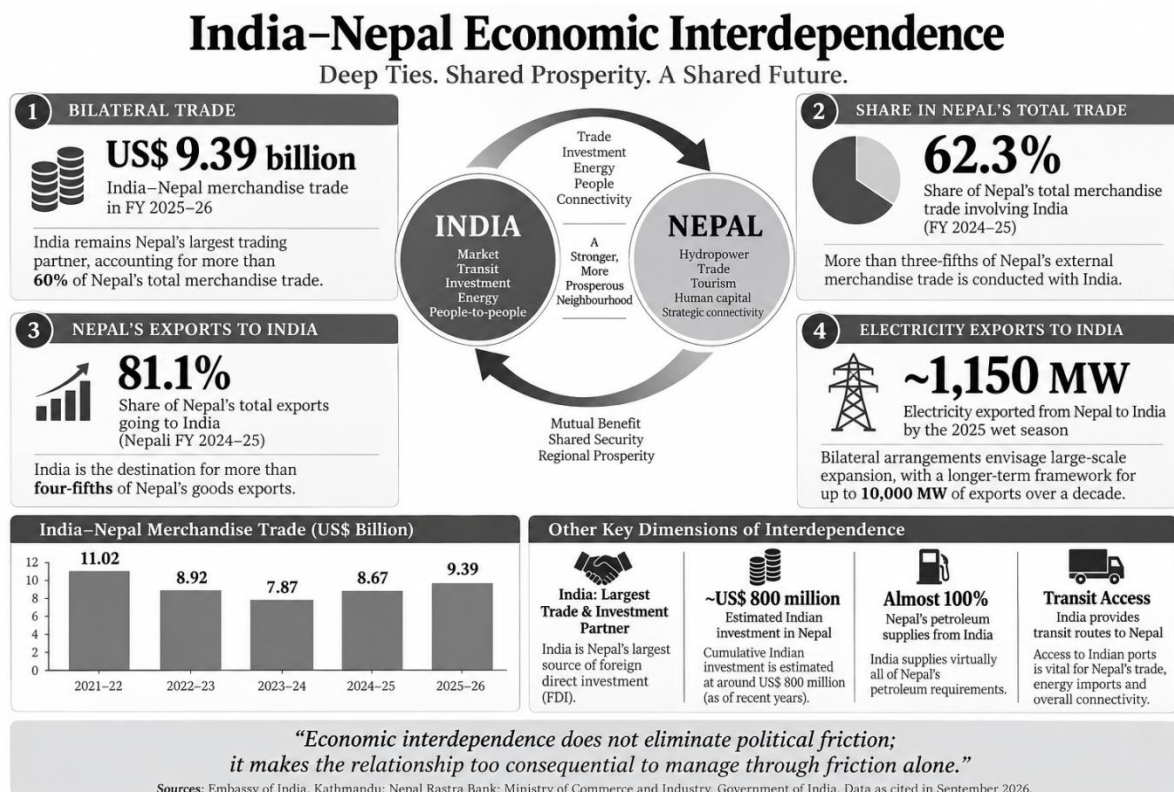
Source: Collated by Author

The India–Nepal Friction: When Familiarity Breeds Irritation

This is where the India-Nepal relationship becomes especially interesting. The relationship is too deep to be described as broken and too sensitive to be described as frictionless. Trade, investment, power, transit, education, health, tourism, defence links and family connections bind the two societies together. India remains Nepal's largest trading

partner and largest source of foreign investment, and bilateral merchandise trade reached about US\$9.39 billion in financial year 2025-26. More than 60 percent of Nepal's external merchandise trade is conducted with India, and India is the destination for more than 80 percent of Nepal's goods export. India also supplies virtually all of Nepal's petroleum requirements (Embassy of India in Nepal, 2026a, 2026b).. These are structural facts. But structural interdependence does not automatically produce political warmth. Sometimes the opposite happens—the closer two neighbours are, the more strongly each reacts when the other disappoints it.

Figure 2: India-Nepal Economic Interdependence



Source: Collated by Author

The recent frictions illustrate this uncomfortable truth. The Agnipath issue is not merely about one recruitment scheme. For generations, service in the Indian Army has been a part of the social and historical fabric of Nepal, especially for communities whose sons and families have lived with the identity of the Gorkha soldier. Recruitment of Nepali youths into

the Indian Army has remained suspended since 2020, and the later introduction of Agnipath added a new complication because the model changed the assumptions around tenure, recruitment and post-service benefits. In August 2026, former Gorkha soldiers and prospective recruits publicly pressed the visiting Indian Army Chief to revive recruitment, even though Agnipath itself was not part of the formal agenda of his official meetings (Pariyar, D. 2026). The emotional significance of the issue is greater than its numerical scale. A relationship maintained through generations can be weakened by silence as much as by disagreement.

India should therefore treat the Gorkha question as a strategic confidence issue, not as an administrative file. The solution may not be a simple return to the past, because India's military manpower system has changed, and Nepal's own concerns have evolved. But leaving the matter suspended indefinitely allows uncertainty to become resentment. A dedicated bilateral mechanism involving the two governments, military representatives, veterans and affected families could examine recruitment, welfare, pensions and the future shape of service. Even where agreement takes time, consultation itself would signal respect. In neighbourhood diplomacy, the manner of handling an issue can become as important as the issue itself.

Then there is the cartographic dispute, especially over Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura. Nepal released its map in 2020 depicting the disputed territories within Nepal. Nepal's Foreign Ministry continues to maintain that the territories East of the Mahakali River belongs to Nepal under the 1816 Sugauli Treaty, while India rejects Nepal's claim and says the claims are not justified by historical facts and evidence. In May 2026, Nepal again protested plans for the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage through Lipulekh, while India said it remained open to constructive engagement (MoFA, Nepal, 2026a) (Roy, S. and Ghimire, Y. 2026). Neither side benefits when maps become substitutes for negotiation.

Maps matter because borders are more than lines. In Kathmandu, a larger national map carries the emotional charge of sovereignty, memory and dignity. In New Delhi, the same image may be perceived as an assertion against India's territorial position. The result is a classic security dilemma in miniature: an action intended primarily for domestic political legitimacy is interpreted by the other side as strategic signalling. The wise response is not to pretend that the map does not matter, nor to exaggerate it into a *casus belli*. It is to separate symbolism from settlement. Nepal's Foreign Minister Shisir Khanal said in September 2026

that the map remains a shared national commitment and cannot simply be treated as “old baggage” (The Kathmandu Post, 2026c). That position deserves to be understood even when India disagrees with its substance.

There are quieter irritants too. Border management remains complicated because an open frontier is both a civilisational bridge and a security challenge. Smuggling, trafficking, informal commerce, local encroachment and disputes over border pillars create friction for officials and communities. India and Nepal have therefore built a network of bilateral mechanisms covering border management, security, trade, energy, water resources and transport. The Embassy of India records more than forty such institutional mechanisms, while recent survey officials agreed to use unmanned aerial vehicles and other technology to map cross-border occupation over a three-year period (Embassy of India in Kathmandu, 2026a) (The Kathmandu Post, 2026d). This is precisely the right direction. A politically difficult border should be measured, mapped and managed with more technology and less rhetoric.

Protocol, too, has acquired strategic meaning in the Shah era. When he came to office, the Prime Minister initially chose to meet resident foreign ambassadors collectively rather than individually. The stated rationale was greater transparency and sovereign equality, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was brought more explicitly into the process. After roughly one hundred days, Shah changed course and began individual meetings, including with India's ambassador, Naveen Srivastava, in August (Giri, A. 2026). On the surface, this may look trivial. It is not. Diplomatic protocol is a language through which states communicate hierarchy, equality, access and respect. Nepal's new leadership was telling the world that it did not wish to reproduce the informal habits of personalised diplomacy. India should read that not as an insult, but as a statement about how the next generation in Kathmandu wants sovereign relationships to be conducted.

China and Pakistan: Other Side of Nepal's Strategic Equation

The question of China must also be kept in proportion. Nepal's cooperation with Beijing is real, expanding and strategically consequential, but it does not mean that Kathmandu has become a Chinese camp. Nepal's official foreign policy still rests on non-alignment, sovereign equality and national interest. The 2024 China-Nepal framework itself

leaves space for cooperation with other countries, while the two sides continue to work on roads, ports, railways, power and other connectivity projects (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2024). Chinese influence therefore deserves careful scrutiny, especially where infrastructure, financing and strategic geography intersect, but an India policy built entirely around countering China would misunderstand Nepal. Kathmandu will resist any formula that asks it to prove friendship by limiting its options (MoFA, Nepal).

Pakistan presents an even more important lesson in proportion. Its economic weight in Nepal is far smaller than India's or China's, but its diplomatic relevance can grow when bilateral politics acquire a geopolitical edge. Pakistan has maintained ties with Nepal through multilateral and South Asian channels, and the two countries continued diplomatic contact during the devastating August 2026 floods, when Shah spoke by telephone with his Pakistan counterpart. That interaction by itself does not establish a strategic alignment (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2026b). The more important point is psychological: when a neighbour feels under pressure from one major power, it naturally explores wider diplomatic space. India should therefore distinguish between Nepal's legitimate diversification and any attempt by another state to exploit India-Nepal friction.

The strongest evidence that the relationship is not drifting beyond repair is the recent effort on both sides to rebuild practical cooperation. Nepal's Foreign Minister visited India in June 2026. The discussions covered development cooperation, connectivity, trade and transit, energy and people-to-people relations, alongside newer areas such as startups, digital technology and capacity building (Embassy of India in Kathmandu, 2026c). In September, Finance Minister of Nepal, Swarnim Wagle, called for a reset focused on trade, connectivity, energy and reconstruction, while saying that difficult issues such as the boundary dispute should be addressed constructively (The Kathmandu Post, 2026f). India and Nepal have also been working on a possible visit by Prime Minister Shah to India later in 2026 (Roy, S. 2026). The direction is therefore not one of rupture but recalibration.

What India Must Do: From Influence to Trust

That recalibration should shape India's strategy. The first principle must be simple—India cannot keep Nepal “on its side” in the old sense of the phrase. Nepal is a sovereign country, and its strategic autonomy is central to its political identity. Any Indian strategy that attempts to manage Kathmandu through pressure, patronage or assumptions of automatic

loyalty will eventually produce the opposite result. The more effective objective is to make partnership with India so useful, respectful and tangible that close relations become the natural consequence of Nepal's own interests.

- **Listen Differently.** India's enormous size gives it a structural advantage, but size can also create deafness. Kathmandu's complaints about dignity, protocol, border issues or political treatment should not automatically be dismissed as anti-India manoeuvring. Some may be amplified for domestic reasons; some may contain genuine grievances; others may simply be misunderstood. The answer is disciplined diagnosis. India should invest in sustained political dialogue at multiple levels, and not wait for crisis to trigger high-level contact. A relationship between neighbours cannot be managed only through prime ministers and foreign secretaries. Provincial governments, border districts, business communities, universities, religious institutions and veterans also need institutional channels.
- **Create Opportunity.** India should turn economic interdependence into visible opportunity. The current trade relationship is enormous, but trade statistics are not felt uniformly by citizens. Indian projects should increasingly be judged not only by whether they are completed, but by whether ordinary Nepalis can see what they gain from them. The bilateral relationship should move from a 'donor-recipient psychology' towards co-creation. Cross-border transmission lines, rail links, integrated check posts, digital payments, tourism circuits, logistics parks, agricultural value chains and technology partnerships can become the everyday architecture of trust. The best infrastructure diplomacy is infrastructure that works before either government holds a press conference to announce it.
- **Power Partnership.** Power should become the flagship of the new relationship. Nepal can produce more electricity than its domestic market can immediately absorb; India possesses a vast and growing power market. The two countries already have an institutional framework for power trade, and Nepal has begun exporting significant volumes to India. The strategic opportunity is to build a genuine Himalayan energy economy: long-term purchase agreements, transmission investments, storage, grid synchronisation, industrial off-take and regional trade. Nepal should be able to see India not merely as its nearest market but as the platform through which Himalayan electricity

reaches a larger South Asian market. Bangladesh's participation through the Indian grid is an early sign of how such a model could expand.

- Resolve Irritants.** India should resolve irritants before they become symbols. The border dispute will not disappear through public statements, and neither side should expect a breakthrough settlement overnight. But the mechanism can be made more productive. Technical committees should receive political backing; survey and satellite data should be shared where possible; disputed areas should be insulated from unnecessary public provocation; and progress on less controversial stretches of the boundary should continue. The August 2026 agreement to map cross-border occupation within three years is precisely the sort of practical process that can reduce ambiguity (Giri, Anil, 2026). A difficult border becomes more manageable when it is treated as a technical problem alongside its political dimension.
- Revisit Agnipath.** India should find a credible way through the Gorkha recruitment issue. The Indian Army's relationship with Nepali soldiers is unique, but uniqueness creates an obligation to manage change sensitively. Agnipath may be appropriate to India's manpower requirements, yet the concerns raised in Nepal about tenure and welfare cannot simply be treated as someone else's problem. A negotiated framework that explains the new system, protects legitimate interests and gives Nepal a voice in the future of recruitment, would remove a persistent source of misunderstanding. India has invested decades of military trust in the Gorkha connection—a bureaucratic pause should not be allowed to become a strategic fracture.
- Respect Nationalism.** India needs to take Nepali nationalism seriously without fearing it. Nepal's national identity is not a temporary political mood. It is part of the country's experience as a sovereign Himalayan state. India should be able to disagree firmly over territory without responding emotionally to every nationalist expression. In fact, a confident major power can afford such composure. The key distinction is between legitimate assertion of sovereignty and deliberate mobilisation against another country. Treating the two as identical only strengthens the incentives for political entrepreneurs to frame bilateral relations as a zero-sum contest.
- Deliver Reliably.** India should compete through delivery, and not through rhetoric about competition. If China builds something useful, Nepal will notice. If India builds something useful, Nepal will notice that too. Kathmandu is increasingly sophisticated about external partnerships. It can compare timelines, financing conditions, visibility,

technology transfer and local employment. India's strategic advantage will come from reliability. A road finished on time, an electricity purchase that pays predictably, a railway that moves people, a digital payment system that saves time and a hospital that functions every day are stronger instruments of statecraft than a dozen declarations about special relations.

- **Expand Engagement.** India should expand the relationship beyond the traditional vocabulary of security and development assistance. Nepal's young population is looking towards artificial intelligence, startups, higher education, tourism technology, climate resilience and entrepreneurship. India has an extraordinary ecosystem in each of these areas. Scholarships, university partnerships, incubator networks, skilling programmes, joint research and digital public infrastructure can connect the two countries at precisely the level at which the new Nepali generation forms its perceptions. A young Nepali who experiences India as a source of opportunity will think differently about the relationship from one who encounters India only through political headlines.
- **Modernise Borders.** The open border needs modernisation, not closure. The frontier has enormous human value and should remain a unique bridge between societies. But openness without data, surveillance and coordinated enforcement can become a vulnerability exploited by smugglers, traffickers and criminal networks. India and Nepal can introduce more biometric and digital systems where appropriate, strengthen intelligence sharing, improve border infrastructure and cooperate against organised crime while preserving legitimate movement. Security and openness are not necessarily opposites. With institutional confidence, they can reinforce each other.
- **Avoid Exclusivity.** India should resist the temptation to measure every Nepali action through the lens of China. That would be strategically lazy. Nepal will cooperate with China because China is powerful and because Nepal has legitimate development needs. Nepal will cooperate with India because India is geographically, economically and culturally indispensable. Nepal will also seek relationships with the United States, Japan, Europe and others. The correct Indian response is not to demand exclusivity but to deepen indispensability. A country does not have to be prevented from having alternatives when one partnership is so useful that alternatives do not threaten it.

The Opportunity Hidden Inside the Friction

The recent Bhote Koshi disaster provides a striking metaphor for the region's future. In August 2026, a devastating Himalayan flood and landslide destroyed infrastructure in Nepal and along the Nepal-China frontier. Nepal sought support from its neighbours and international partners, while Indian and Chinese personnel were involved in different aspects of relief and rescue. The disaster underlined a reality that strategic planners sometimes forget: rivers, glaciers, roads, power lines, air routes and communities do not recognise the political language with which states describe one another. Climate stress is turning the Himalayan geography into a common security problem (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2026b) (Sharma, G., Sharma, S. and Wang, E.2026). India and Nepal will have to cooperate because nature itself is becoming a strategic actor.

So, is Nepal on the right path? The honest answer is that Nepal is at an important path, but not yet at a destination. The political transformation is real. The public demand for cleaner, faster and more accountable government is unmistakable. The new leadership has a stronger mandate than most recent Nepali governments, yet it still faces the old problems of bureaucracy, economic weakness, migration, institutional capacity and disaster vulnerability. The early record is therefore mixed, with genuine signs of administrative energy alongside implementation gaps and institutional friction (IMF, 2026) (World Bank, 2026). It is too early to declare success, just as it would be premature to write off the experiment.

Is Nepal on the Right Path?

The same measured assessment applies to Nepal's foreign policy. There is little evidence that Kathmandu has formally chosen China over India. There is stronger evidence that it wants greater room to manoeuvre, more equal treatment and a relationship with each major neighbour that serves Nepali national interests. That is not an unreasonable objective for a sovereign state. Nor is it inherently hostile to India. Indeed, the scale of current economic, energy and institutional cooperation shows that the relationship possesses deep ballast. The challenge is to convert that ballast into renewed confidence.

India, for its part, should recognise that the Nepal of 2026 is not the Nepal of a generation ago. The Gen Z population is better connected to the world, more demanding of political dignity and less willing to accept inherited assumptions about relationships. That

does not make it anti-Indian. It makes it more conscious of agency. New Delhi's strategic response should therefore be equally modern: less paternalism, more partnership; less symbolism, more delivery; less suspicion, more institutional engagement.

The most important strategic lesson is perhaps this: Nepal is not trying to become somebody else's Nepal—it is trying to become more fully itself. Its politics, nationalism and foreign policy will increasingly be shaped by that search for self-definition. China will test the northern door. The global powers will offer alternatives. Pakistan may occasionally find diplomatic space. India, however, possesses something no external competitor can manufacture—geography, history, social interconnection and an enormous economic ecosystem next door. Those advantages are real, but they are not self-executing. They have to be translated into trust.

Conclusion: The Future Nepal Wants

A mature Indian policy should therefore stop asking how to keep Nepal aligned and start asking how to make alignment unnecessary. When a Nepali government can say that its strategic autonomy is strengthened by its relationship with India, both countries gain. When a Nepali entrepreneur can access Indian markets, when Nepali hydropower earns long-term revenue, when a student sees India as a centre of opportunity, when a Gorkha family feels heard, and when a border village benefits from orderly connectivity, the relationship becomes resilient because it is lived rather than proclaimed.

Nepal does not have to choose between India and China. It will choose Nepal. India's strategic challenge is to ensure that, when Nepal chooses its own future, India is naturally—and confidently—part of it. That is not influence through pressure. It is influence through relevance; and in the Himalayas, relevance that is trusted can be more enduring than power that is merely feared.

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