



The Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities and Challenges for Nepal's Development

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stands as a transformative global infrastructure project, reshaping international cooperation and connectivity. This study critically examines the opportunities and challenges BRI presents for Nepal's development, emphasizing its potential impact and prospects for regional integration. Employing a descriptive research design, the study draws insights from qualitative data sourced from reputable secondary materials, including journal articles, government documents, and online resources. The strategic location of Nepal, sharing a 1,414 km Himalayan border with China, positions it as a vital link in regional trade and economic exchange. The BRI offers Nepal unprecedented opportunities to enhance connectivity, paving the way for its transformation into a transit hub between China and India. Key sectors such as trade, tourism, investment, and cultural exchange are self-assured to benefit, with railway connectivity emerging as a game-changer. Despite its immense potential, the BRI also brings significant challenges, including uncertainties around project feasibility, investment allocation, and security concerns. To fully leverage the initiative, Nepal must adopt a strategic approach to navigate these complexities, ensuring maximum developmental gains while fostering sustainable growth and regional collaboration. This study underscores the critical need for Nepal to seize the BRI's opportunities while addressing its challenges to secure long-term economic transformation and global relevance.

Keywords: BRI, challenges, connectivity and trade, development, implications and opportunities.

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a significant attempt with historical implications for China's expanded global engagement in the new era, is being implemented worldwide. It is most extensive infrastructure project globally viewed through interconnection and cooperation (Prasain, 2024). BRI is a global infrastructure and connectivity project aimed at enhancing investment, and cooperation across Asia, Africa, and Europe. (Pandit, 2024) .

Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 has launched BRI that is a landmark foreign policy project aimed at enhancing global connectivity. It comprises two key components: the overland "Belt" connecting China to Central Asia, Russia, South Asia, and Europe, and the "Maritime Silk Road," linking Chinese ports to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe (Bista, 2019). Nepal joined the BRI by signing a Memorandum of Understanding on a Framework Agreement in May 2017, aiming to improve connectivity and integration (Aminjonov et al., 2019). The BRI provides Nepal with opportunities to build transport networks like trans-Himalayan railways and highways, promote trade and tourism, and overcome the challenges of being a landlocked country. Key projects, like the Kathmandu-Kerung railway, are envisioned to connect Nepal to global markets via China (Prasain, 2024).

China and Nepal have enjoyed a long-standing and friendly relationship. When China adopts BRI—a historic endeavor aimed at connecting people across the globe and fostering opportunities for global peace—Nepal cannot remain indifferent (Duwadi, 2020). This study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges that Nepal faces within the framework of the BRI. This initiative offers both economic and political benefits for Nepal and China. It facilitates connectivity between the two nations through roadways and airways while aligning the policies of their respective governments. Achieving the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative requires strong coordination between Nepal and China, supported by effective laws, policies, regulations, strategic implementation, and consideration of social factors.

Overall, the BRI is expected to enhance connectivity between China and Nepal, thereby promoting socio-economic development and fostering tourism. It is further anticipated to create unprecedented opportunities for bilateral trade and commerce along north-south economic corridors and in special economic zones (Murton & Plachta, 2021). Central to Nepal-China development alliances are bilateral commitments to constructing highways, hydropower projects, transmission lines, and border facilities, alongside ongoing discussions about extending the Tibetan railway into Nepal (Bhattarai, 2019). The intensification of Chinese aid to Nepal for well-planned infrastructure projects has been described as a "handshake" across the Himalayas (Singh, 2022).

Despite its potential, the implementation of the BRI in Nepal faces several challenges. Geopolitical tensions between China and India complicate Nepal's ability to navigate its foreign relations. As Nepal attempts to balance its engagement with China under the BRI while maintaining traditional ties with India, concerns have been raised about the potential for diplomatic friction (Sansar News, 2021). Resource constraints and limited institutional capacity also hinder Nepal's ability to effectively plan, implement, and manage BRI projects. The initial proposal of 35 projects under the BRI framework was later scaled down to nine due to concerns over prioritization and feasibility (The Kathmandu Post, 2019). Furthermore, debt

sustainability has emerged as a critical issue, with analysts warning that large-scale infrastructure investments under the BRI could strain Nepal's fiscal capacity (Duwadi, 2020). Social and environmental implications also warrant careful consideration. Infrastructure development under the BRI may displace local communities, disrupt ecosystems, and exacerbate socio-political inequalities if not executed responsibly (Aminjonov et al., 2019). These challenges necessitate strategic planning, effective governance, and transparent decision-making to ensure that the benefits of the BRI are equitably distributed.

Nepal has shown significant interest in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As early as 2014, the Sushil Koirala government welcomed China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative (MoFA, 2015). Nepal expressed its willingness to work closely with China to enhance connectivity, infrastructure, trade, the energy sector, and tourism, aiming to contribute to regional harmony, peace, and development (MoFA, 2015).

Given urgent need of Nepal for infrastructure expansion, the country sees the BRI as an opportunity to tap into its vast hydropower potential for export. In May 2017, Nepal's Foreign Secretary and the Chinese Ambassador signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the OBOR framework agreement, officially marking Nepal's participation in China's ambitious initiative to revive the ancient Silk Road trade routes. The signing took place in Kathmandu just before the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing. The MoU emphasized the establishment and expansion of border economic zones and the redevelopment of transit road networks of Nepal (Sansar News, 2021).

The BRI is anticipated to bring extensive investments to Nepal, transforming its economic landscape by fostering local industries and improving the living standards of low-income communities. One significant achievement is the cross-border optical fiber network connecting Nepal and China via the Geelong-Rasuwegadhi border point, reducing dependence of Nepal on India for global telecom and internet services. The MoU aims to enhance connectivity through improved transit transport, logistics, railway and road networks, civil aviation, power grids, and information and communication technology (Prasain, 2024).

The MoU also promotes Chinese investment in the infrastructure of Nepal, boosting regional stability and economic growth. It is expected to strengthen Nepal-China ties, with projects like the Kathmandu-Lhasa railway connecting Nepal to the broader BRI network extending into Europe and Africa (*Text Signed in Beijing on 4 December 2024*). This initiative has been hailed as a significant milestone in development efforts of Nepal, opening avenues for infrastructure expansion, economic growth, and global integration.

During Prime Minister K.P. Oli's visit to China in 2018, the two governments agreed to intensify the implementation of the BRI, focusing on vital components such as ports, roads, railways, aviation, and communication under the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network. They also resolved to reopen the Zhangmu Khasa port, improve the Jilong Keyrung port, and enhance the Araniko Highway. Similarly, they committed to repairing and upgrading the Syaphrubesi-Rasuwegadhi Highway and constructing a bridge over the Karnali River at the Hilsa Yari port (MoFA, 2018).

Despite initial enthusiasm, leadership of Nepal has struggled to clarify and finalize the projects under the BRI framework. For instance, while Prime Minister Oli initially proposed

35 projects, China later requested a more focused list, leading Nepal to narrow its proposal to nine priority projects. These include the Rasuwagadhi-Kathmandu road upgrade, Kimathanka-Hile road construction, and several hydropower and railway projects (The Kathmandu Post, 2019).

Participation of Nepal in the BRI has also sparked concerns about its relations with India. However, Nepal has reassured both China and India that its involvement in the BRI does not undermine its longstanding ties with India or its commitment to addressing India's security concerns. As ambassador of Nepal to India Deep Kumar Upadhyay stated, "We joined OBOR, but we have made it clear to China that this does not come at the cost of our relationship with India" (Sansar News, 2021).

The initiative highlights China's ambition to establish itself as a central player in a Sino-centric regional order, emphasizing global connectivity without requiring recipient countries to alter their sociopolitical systems. For Nepal, this partnership offers tremendous potential for developing underfunded sectors like hydropower, tourism, and connectivity, further integrating the country into the global value chain (Aminjonov et al., 2019). Analysts argue that the BRI will improve physical connectivity and deepen economic integration across Asia, unleashing the region's full potential. For Nepal, this initiative represents a win-win opportunity to boost its economy while fostering stronger ties with China and other regional partners.

Objectives

The general objective of the study is to assess the opportunities and challenges of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for Nepal's development. The specific objectives are as follows:

- a. To evaluate the implications of the BRI for Nepal's development
- b. To analyze the opportunities and challenges of the BRI from Nepal's perspective.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design and utilized a qualitative research approach, focusing on interpreting and understanding existing information rather than generating numerical data. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to analyze concepts, trends, and perspectives related to the topic by examining previously published materials. It relied on secondary sources, including journal articles, conference proceedings, government documents, books, newspaper and magazine articles, and credible websites. Both hardcopy and electronic resources were used to gather relevant information. Through qualitative content analysis, the study interpreted the ideas, arguments, and findings presented in these sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

However, the limitation of this study lies in its exclusive reliance on secondary data. Since it does not incorporate primary facts or field-based evidence, the findings are dependent on the availability, quality, and accuracy of existing literature.

Results and Discussion

Nepal and China are two neighboring nations of different sizes and stages of development, and their connections are significant and crucial for Nepal's fight to survive as an independent nation has always rested on solid ties with its northern neighbor. Apart from

India, Nepal has been impacted by Chinese and Tibetan cultures. Nepal and China share a 1,414 km boundary in the heart of the Himalayas.

Implications and Opportunities

Nepal and China are close neighbors since the ancient period, and they have a long history of cultural, economic, and trade exchange (Prasain, 2024). China has been emerging as an economic power. BRI economies account for one-third of global GDP and trade, and close to two-thirds of world population. If BRI projects are successful, they stand to benefit a large number of poor people and huge bands of the world's economies. Nepal is obviously going to benefit from BRI in the long run (World Bank, 2018).

Nepal anticipates that initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will enhance infrastructure development, improve cross-border connectivity through railways and roads, and promote trade, tourism, investment, and people-to-people contacts. As a landlocked country, Nepal faces significant challenges in achieving sustainable development without railway connections. Among various initiatives, enhancing railway connectivity is particularly pertinent (MoFA, 2017).

E-initiative is the need of the hour resulting in many initiatives, which has transformed all sectors and higher education is no exception to this due its advantage (Mahalik, 2020). Because of lock down, all schools and colleges have been shut down for months. Few institutions have started online education mainly in urban areas. However, lack of proper infrastructure and training linger around. Therefore, if BRI funds education institutes, it would be better to cope with the challenges emerging (Prasain, 2024). Nepal can be a potential destination for such investment once necessary infrastructures are developed here. Tourism is the key sector that Nepal can take the most benefit from once the infrastructure is developed in line with BRI vision. It will also facilitate trade and investments here. The Key opportunities have been highlighted as below:

The BRI is a massive international infrastructure initiative that aims to link nations through a network of ports, highways, trains and other crucial infrastructure. It aspires to improve connectivity, trade and investment between participating countries.

The BRI aims to close the infrastructure gap in many developing countries. For Nepal, this includes improving transportation networks like railways and highways, which are crucial for enhancing connectivity within the country and with neighboring regions. It Improves cross-border connectivity that can facilitate trade and integration into regional and global markets. For Nepal, this means better access to ports and markets in China and South Asia, potentially reducing trade costs. According to Raghu Bir Bista (2019), the road connectivity between China and Nepal presents significant opportunities for development. He outlines the following aspects of connectivity:

Road Connectivity (China and Nepal) (620 billion)

- Koshi Corridor (Rani-Biratnagar-Itahari-Dhankuta-Leguwashat-Khadbari-Kimathanka) (310 km)
- Belhiya-Bhairawa-Palpa-Ramdi-Kaligandaki-Rudrabeni-Maldhunga-Beni-Jomsom-Beni-Korala (202 km)

- Thori-Bhandara-Malekhu-Galchi-Trishuli-Betrawati-Safrubeshi-Rasuwegadhi (188km)
- Bhattamod-Dhalkebar-Sindhuli-Manthali-Dolkha-Singati-Lamabgar-Lapcha (310 km)
- Birganj-Hetuda-Narayanghat-Mugling-Kathmandu-Dhulikhel-Dolalghat-Baharbise-Kodari (390 km)
- Jamunaha-Nepalgunj-Bangesimal-Khulul-Lamphu-Simikot-Hilsa (521km)
- Kechana-Charali-Ilam-Fihidim-Taplejung-Olangchudola-Dharila (359km)
- Others: Saljhani-Sandhikharka-Dhorpatan-Badehar (195km)
- Lumbini-Bhairwa-Tribeni-Dumkibas-Gadaket-Ramdi-Ridi-Tamghas-Sandhikharka-Gorusinghe-Toliawa-Lumbini (500 km)

Railway (180 billion)

- Mechi Mahakali Electrical Railway (945km)
- Rasuwa-Kathmandu-Pokhara-Lumbini Electric Railway (519km)
- Jayanagar-Janakpur-Bardibas (69km)
- Katahari-Biratnagar-Bathanha (13km)
- Pharping-Budhanilkantha-Thankot-Dhulikhel-Chakrapath

Above BRI initiatives construction and development will give better connectivity, better infrastructure alternatives and better trade, investment and tourism, if Nepal can complete above BRI initiatives on time. When we see its proposed budget, its estimate is approximately 7 trillion budgets on road and railway connectivity to three transit points in northern border with China (Bista, 2019).

The BRI can be a development in Nepal, increasing the country's financial condition. Furthermore, as Nepal seeks to graduate from being a least developed country and become a middle income country prior to 2030, economic collaboration under the BRI would minimize Nepal's singular dependence on India, which is forged not only by economic interests but by geography as well (Duwadi, 2020). By participating in the BRI, Nepal could benefit from increased foreign direct investment, enhanced trade volumes, and diversified economic activities. The initiative provides opportunities for Nepal to boost exports and attract tourists.

In tourism, improved road and rail links can boost the inflow of tourists from China and beyond, promoting Nepal's cultural and natural attractions. BRI projects also offer opportunities for local employment and regional development, further strengthening Nepal's economy and global trade presence.

The BRI focuses on energy cooperation, which could help Nepal in harnessing its hydropower potential and addressing energy shortages. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers transformative opportunities for energy and power development in Nepal, a country abundant in hydropower potential. By leveraging the BRI, Nepal can address its energy deficits and emerge as a regional energy exporter. BRI investments focus on building hydropower plants, upgrading transmission lines, and facilitating cross-border energy trade, exemplified by projects like the China-funded Budhigandaki Hydropower Project, which aids in harnessing Nepal's estimated 83,000 MW of hydropower capacity (World Bank, 2018).

The initiative supports the modernization of Nepal's energy infrastructure, reducing energy losses and ensuring reliable electricity distribution to both urban and rural areas. Through enhanced connectivity, the BRI enables integration of Nepal into regional energy markets, allowing for electricity export to neighboring countries such as China and India, which can significantly boost national revenue (Ruta, 2018). Beyond hydropower, the BRI promotes renewable energy development, including solar, wind, and geothermal projects, aligning with Nepal's sustainable energy goals. Moreover, by fostering energy independence, these initiatives help Nepal reduce its reliance on imported fossil fuels, ensuring long-term energy security and economic resilience. Overall, the BRI's energy and power projects provide Nepal with a platform to strengthen its energy infrastructure, meet domestic needs, and establish itself as a key player in the regional energy market (Dixit, 2019)

Infrastructure projects and investments under the BRI are expected to create jobs and contribute to poverty alleviation in Nepal. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers significant potential to create jobs and reduce poverty in Nepal by driving economic growth and infrastructure development. Large-scale projects such as roads, railways, and hydropower plants generate direct and indirect employment opportunities across various sectors, including engineering, construction, transportation, and hospitality (Dixit, 2019). Similarly, the BRI supports skill development through training programs, enhancing the long-term employability of the local workforce. Improved infrastructure also facilitates market access and economic activities in rural areas, boosting small businesses, agriculture, and tourism (Sovachana, 2020). By attracting foreign investment and supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the BRI raises household incomes, reduces regional disparities, and improves living standards. These initiatives have the potential to transform Nepal's socio-economic landscape, provided they are implemented inclusively and sustainably (Duwadi, 2020).

Challenges

The action plan of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains unclear. Although the agreements between Nepal and China have emphasized the economic aspects of regional cooperation, uncertainty persists regarding the feasibility and potential benefits of some proposed projects. Among the various challenges, the security aspect stands out as the most significant. Similarly, questions about investment allocation remain unresolved, as earlier plans focusing on rail, road, and water transportation have now expanded to include several other dimensions (Duwadi, 2020).

Participation in the BRI often requires large-scale infrastructure development funded through Chinese loans, raising significant concerns about debt sustainability. With limited revenue generation capacity and a heavy reliance on foreign aid, Nepal faces challenges in repaying these loans, which could exacerbate its fiscal vulnerabilities (Murton & Plachta, 2021).

Many BRI projects have long gestation periods and may not yield immediate economic returns, potentially straining the country's financial resources further. The lack of financial transparency in the terms of agreements and loan conditions has made it difficult to assess the long-term fiscal implications of such projects (Duwadi, 2020). As a smaller economy, Nepal's limited negotiation power may also lead to unfavorable financial arrangements, placing the

country at a disadvantage in its dealings with China (Prasain, 2024). These challenges highlight the importance of careful financial planning and prudent negotiations to ensure that Nepal benefits from the BRI without falling into a debt trap.

The social and environmental consequences of BRI projects in Nepal are significant and multifaceted. Large-scale infrastructure development can displace local communities, disrupt livelihoods, and often fails to provide adequate resettlement or compensation measures. Environmental degradation is another pressing issue, as the construction of roads, railways, and hydropower projects can lead to deforestation, soil erosion, and the loss of biodiversity in ecologically sensitive areas (Bista, 2019).

The engagement of Nepal with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has introduced new complexities to its relationship with India. India, long accustomed to seeing Nepal within its sphere of influence, views the increasing Chinese presence through the BRI as a direct challenge to its strategic position. Infrastructure projects under the BRI, focused on enhancing connectivity, appear to rival role of India as a dominant provider of transit and trade routes in the region. This growing competition has fueled concerns in India about a shift in alliances of Nepal.

Moreover, India sees expanded of China footprint in Nepal as part of a larger strategy to encircle it, further straining diplomatic relations. Nepal's growing economic ties with China through BRI projects could also reduce its dependence on India, affecting trade and cooperation. The security concerns over Chinese activities near the India-Nepal border and difficulties in harmonizing policies of Nepal with both BRI and Indian frameworks pose further challenges (Blanchard, 2021). Nepal must tread carefully, using diplomacy to pursue its development goals while maintaining stable and cooperative ties with India.

Findings

The relationship between China and Nepal is rooted in a long history of mutual exchanges and cooperation, with historical evidence showing instances of Nepal offering tributes to China and engaging in reciprocal interactions. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presents Nepal with significant opportunities, particularly in its potential to serve as a transit hub connecting China and India. As a landlocked country, prospects of Nepal for sustainable development pivot on improved connectivity, especially through railways. Among various initiatives under the BRI, such as trade, tourism, investment, and people-to-people exchanges, enhanced connectivity emerges as a priority.

Recent agreements between Nepal and China have emphasized the economic dimensions of regional cooperation, but uncertainty persists regarding the feasibility and tangible benefits of some proposed projects. For Nepal to fully leverage the BRI, it must focus on strategies that maximize economic and developmental gains while addressing underlying concerns.

Conclusion

China has signaled its intention to initiate large-scale projects in Nepal that are crucial for the country's economic transformation, marking a significant opportunity for Nepal, which has historically maintained unilateral rather than bilateral relations. The Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI) presents an opportunity for Nepal to shift from being a landlocked nation to one that is land-linked, improving connectivity between countries. Despite geopolitical challenges, the growing focus on connectivity in Nepal-China relations suggests that geoeconomics could gradually outweigh traditional geopolitical considerations.

While neighboring countries like India and Bhutan may be reluctant to engage with the BRI, Nepal has the potential to serve as a bridge between these two global powers, facilitating broader international connections. However, this opportunity also comes with substantial risks in terms of successful implementation. Given China's strong partnership with Nepal, it is crucial for Nepal to develop practical and sustainable policies to fully leverage the benefits of BRI projects.

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