



India–Nepal Relations in the Changing Geopolitical Landscape: Strategic Challenges, Connectivity, and Regional Cooperation (1980–2026)

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Abstract

India and Nepal share one of the most unique bilateral relationships in South Asia, characterized by deep historical, cultural, religious, economic, and strategic connections. Since the establishment of modern diplomatic relations, both countries have maintained close interaction through the open border system, people-to-people contact, trade cooperation, and security coordination. However, the nature of India–Nepal relations has undergone significant transformation from 1980 to 2026 due to changing domestic politics, regional geopolitical shifts, globalization, and the increasing influence of external powers, particularly China, in South Asia. The contemporary geopolitical environment has created both opportunities and challenges for the bilateral partnership, making the study of India–Nepal relations highly relevant in present times.

The present research paper examines the evolution of India–Nepal relations from 1980 to 2026 with special emphasis on political, economic, strategic, and regional dimensions. The study analyzes major developments such as Nepal's democratic transition, constitutional changes, border disputes, trade and transit relations, hydropower cooperation, and regional connectivity initiatives. It also evaluates the strategic implications of China's growing economic and infrastructural engagement in Nepal under initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has significantly influenced the regional balance of power and India's foreign policy approach toward Nepal.

The research further highlights important bilateral issues including the Kalapani and Lipulekh border disputes, economic blockades, cross-border migration, water resource management, and security cooperation. The study explores how political instability and changing governments in Nepal have affected diplomatic trust and bilateral coordination with India. Simultaneously, the paper discusses the role of regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC in strengthening regional integration and promoting cooperation between the two neighboring countries.

The study is analytical and descriptive in nature and is based mainly on secondary data collected from books, research journals, government reports, policy documents, newspapers, and official publications of India and Nepal. Historical and comparative methods have been used to understand the changing dynamics of bilateral relations over time.

The findings of the study reveal that despite periodic tensions and geopolitical challenges, India and Nepal continue to share strong civilizational ties and mutual strategic interests. Economic connectivity, infrastructural development, energy cooperation, and cultural diplomacy remain key pillars of bilateral engagement. However, unresolved border disputes, political mistrust, and external geopolitical competition continue to create challenges in maintaining stable relations. The study concludes that sustainable diplomatic dialogue, mutual respect for sovereignty, balanced regional cooperation, and enhanced economic partnership are essential for strengthening India–Nepal relations in the changing geopolitical landscape of South Asia.

Keywords

India–Nepal Relations, South Asian Geopolitics, Bilateral Relations, Regional Cooperation, Border Diplomacy, Strategic Partnership, Connectivity, China Factor, SAARC, BIMSTEC, Trade and Transit, Hydropower Cooperation, Security Cooperation, Foreign Policy, Geopolitical Challenges, South Asia, Economic Diplomacy, Open Border System, Cultural Relations, Regional Stability

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

India and Nepal share a unique and historically significant relationship rooted in geography, culture, religion, economy, and civilizational heritage. The bilateral relations between the two neighboring countries are characterized by deep people-to-people connections, an open international border, mutual economic dependence, and shared strategic interests. India and Nepal have maintained close interaction for centuries through trade, pilgrimage, cultural exchange, and social integration. The close relationship was formally institutionalized through the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed in 1950, which established the framework for diplomatic cooperation, economic engagement, and free movement of people between the two countries. Since then, India has remained Nepal's largest trade partner, development partner, and a major source of investment and infrastructural support.

From 1980 onwards, India–Nepal relations entered a new phase shaped by changing domestic politics, democratic movements, regional power competition, and globalization. During the 1980s, Nepal followed a monarchy-based Panchayat political system, while India maintained significant strategic influence in Nepal due to historical and geographical proximity. However, political developments such as the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990, the Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006, the abolition of monarchy in 2008, and the adoption of the new Constitution in 2015 significantly transformed Nepal's internal political structure and its foreign policy orientation. These developments directly influenced the nature of bilateral relations with India.

The geopolitical importance of Nepal has increased considerably in recent decades because of its strategic location between two major Asian powers, India and China. Nepal acts as a buffer state in South Asia and occupies a crucial position in regional security and connectivity. India views Nepal as an important component of its neighborhood policy and regional security architecture, while China has expanded its economic, infrastructural, and diplomatic engagement in Nepal through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As a result, India–Nepal relations are increasingly influenced by broader geopolitical competition and regional strategic dynamics. The growing Chinese presence in Nepal has created new challenges and concerns for India's strategic interests in the Himalayan region.

Despite strong historical and cultural ties, bilateral relations between India and Nepal have experienced several tensions and disagreements over the years. Issues such as border disputes in Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Susta regions, trade and transit disagreements, political mistrust, constitutional controversies, and allegations of interference in internal affairs have occasionally strained diplomatic relations. The economic blockade-like situation during Nepal's constitutional crisis in 2015 further affected public perception and diplomatic trust between the two countries.

Nevertheless, both nations have continuously engaged in dialogue and cooperation to maintain stability and mutual understanding.

Economic cooperation remains one of the most important dimensions of India–Nepal relations. India is Nepal's largest trading partner and provides significant support in areas such as infrastructure development, hydropower projects, road connectivity, railways, petroleum pipelines, education, health, and disaster management. Various connectivity projects, including integrated check posts, cross-border rail links, transmission lines, and energy cooperation initiatives, have strengthened economic interdependence between the two countries. Furthermore, the open border facilitates employment opportunities, tourism, cultural interaction, and migration, making bilateral relations highly interconnected at the societal level.

Regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) also play an important role in promoting regional integration and cooperation between India and Nepal. Both countries cooperate on issues related to regional security, climate change, disaster management, sustainable development, and economic growth. At the same time, regional instability, terrorism, environmental challenges, and geopolitical rivalry continue to influence bilateral diplomacy in South Asia.

The present study aims to analyze the evolution of India–Nepal relations from 1980 to 2026 in the context of changing geopolitical realities. The study focuses on political, economic, strategic, and regional dimensions of bilateral relations while examining emerging challenges and future opportunities for cooperation. It seeks to understand how domestic political changes, regional power competition, connectivity initiatives, and diplomatic engagements have shaped contemporary India–Nepal relations. The research also emphasizes the importance of mutual trust, sovereign equality, and regional cooperation in maintaining long-term stability and strategic partnership between the two neighboring countries.

Statement of the Problem

India and Nepal have traditionally shared close and friendly relations based on historical, cultural, religious, and geographical proximity. Despite these deep-rooted ties, bilateral relations between the two countries have experienced periodic tensions, diplomatic misunderstandings, and strategic challenges, particularly from 1980 onwards. The changing political landscape in Nepal, regional geopolitical competition, and evolving foreign policy priorities have significantly influenced the nature of India–Nepal relations in recent decades. These developments have created both opportunities for cooperation and areas of conflict that require systematic academic analysis.

One of the major concerns in India–Nepal relations is the issue of political mistrust and diplomatic sensitivity. Nepal has often expressed concerns regarding India's influence in its internal political affairs, while India considers Nepal strategically important for its national security and regional stability. Political transitions in Nepal, including the democratic movement of 1990, the Maoist insurgency, the abolition of monarchy, and the adoption of the Constitution in 2015, have repeatedly affected bilateral relations. These political developments created instability and uncertainty, which impacted diplomatic coordination and policy implementation between the two countries.

Another major issue is the unresolved border disputes between India and Nepal, particularly in the Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Susta regions. These disputes have periodically intensified nationalist sentiments and strained diplomatic relations. The publication of political maps by both countries in recent years further complicated the issue and affected mutual trust. The absence of a permanent and mutually acceptable solution to border-related disputes continues to remain a serious challenge in bilateral relations.

Economic relations between India and Nepal also face several challenges despite strong interdependence. Nepal is heavily dependent on India for trade, transit facilities, petroleum supply, and essential commodities because of its landlocked geographical position. At times, this dependence has generated dissatisfaction within Nepal regarding trade imbalance and economic vulnerability. The

2015 border disruption and supply crisis significantly affected Nepal's economy and created anti-India sentiments among sections of Nepalese society. Such developments demonstrate the fragile nature of economic cooperation and the need for more balanced and sustainable bilateral engagement.

The increasing involvement of China in Nepal's economic and infrastructural sectors has emerged as another significant issue affecting India–Nepal relations. China's growing investments, connectivity projects, and diplomatic influence in Nepal under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have altered the geopolitical environment of South Asia. Nepal's attempt to balance relations between India and China has created strategic competition in the region. India perceives the expanding Chinese presence near its northern borders as a challenge to its traditional strategic influence in Nepal. Consequently, regional geopolitical rivalry has become an important factor shaping contemporary bilateral relations.

In addition to political and strategic issues, challenges related to water resource management, hydropower cooperation, migration, border security, and regional connectivity continue to influence bilateral relations. Although both countries have enormous potential for cooperation in hydropower generation, infrastructure development, tourism, and regional trade, several projects have faced delays due to political instability, bureaucratic obstacles, and lack of mutual coordination.

Therefore, the present study seeks to critically examine the changing dynamics of India–Nepal relations from 1980 to 2026 in the context of regional geopolitics, economic interdependence, strategic competition, and diplomatic cooperation. The study aims to identify the major challenges affecting bilateral relations and explore possible measures for strengthening mutual trust, regional stability, and long-term partnership between India and Nepal in the changing geopolitical landscape of South Asia.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to critically examine the changing dynamics of India–Nepal relations from 1980 to 2026 in the context of political transformation, regional geopolitics, economic cooperation, and strategic challenges. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1. To examine the historical evolution of India–Nepal relations from 1980 to 2026.**
This objective focuses on understanding the major political, diplomatic, and strategic developments that have shaped bilateral relations during the study period.
- 2. To analyze the political and strategic dimensions of India–Nepal relations.**
The study aims to evaluate issues related to security cooperation, diplomatic engagement, border management, and regional stability between the two countries.
- 3. To study the impact of Nepal's internal political changes on bilateral relations with India.**
This includes examining the effects of democratic movements, constitutional changes, political instability, and regime transformation in Nepal on diplomatic relations with India.
- 4. To evaluate the economic relations and connectivity initiatives between India and Nepal.**
The objective includes analyzing trade relations, transit facilities, hydropower cooperation, infrastructure development, investment, and regional connectivity projects.
- 5. To examine the influence of China on India–Nepal relations in the contemporary geopolitical context.**
This objective seeks to understand how China's increasing economic and strategic engagement in Nepal affects India's regional interests and bilateral diplomacy.
- 6. To identify the major challenges and disputes affecting India–Nepal relations.**
The study focuses on border disputes, political mistrust, economic dependency, water-sharing issues, and strategic competition in South Asia.
- 7. To assess the role of regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC in strengthening bilateral cooperation.**
This objective evaluates the contribution of regional cooperation frameworks in promoting peace, connectivity, and economic integration.
- 8. To suggest policy measures for strengthening India–Nepal relations in the future.**
The study aims to provide recommendations for improving diplomatic trust, economic partnership, strategic cooperation, and sustainable regional engagement between the two countries.

Research Questions

The present study seeks to explore the changing dimensions of India–Nepal relations from 1980 to 2026 in the context of political developments, economic cooperation, strategic interests, and regional geopolitics. To achieve the objectives of the study, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. **How have India–Nepal relations evolved from 1980 to 2026?**
This question examines the historical and political developments that have influenced bilateral relations during the study period.
2. **What are the major political and strategic factors shaping India–Nepal relations in the contemporary period?**
The study seeks to understand the role of diplomacy, security concerns, border management, and geopolitical interests in bilateral engagement.
3. **How have Nepal’s internal political transformations affected its relations with India?**
This question focuses on the impact of democratic movements, constitutional changes, political instability, and governance transitions in Nepal on bilateral relations.
4. **What is the significance of trade, transit, and connectivity in India–Nepal relations?**
The research evaluates the importance of economic cooperation, infrastructure development, hydropower projects, and regional connectivity initiatives between the two countries.
5. **How has China’s increasing presence in Nepal influenced India–Nepal relations?**
This question examines the geopolitical implications of China’s growing economic, infrastructural, and strategic involvement in Nepal.
6. **What are the major challenges and disputes affecting bilateral relations between India and Nepal?**
The study investigates issues such as border disputes, political mistrust, economic dependency, water-sharing concerns, and strategic competition.
7. **What role do regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC play in promoting cooperation between India and Nepal?**
This question explores the contribution of regional institutions toward economic integration, peace, and regional stability in South Asia.
8. **What policy measures can strengthen India–Nepal relations in the changing geopolitical environment of South Asia?**
The study aims to identify practical recommendations for improving diplomatic cooperation, economic partnership, and long-term regional stability.

Hypothesis

A hypothesis is a tentative assumption or proposition that provides a possible explanation for the relationship between variables under study. The present research on India–Nepal relations from 1980 to 2026 is based on the following hypotheses:

1. **H1: Changing geopolitical dynamics in South Asia have significantly influenced India–Nepal relations.**
This hypothesis assumes that regional power competition, particularly the growing influence of China in Nepal, has affected the political and strategic relationship between India and Nepal.
2. **H2: Strong economic connectivity and trade cooperation contribute positively to bilateral relations between India and Nepal.**
The hypothesis suggests that infrastructure development, transit facilities, trade partnerships, and hydropower cooperation strengthen mutual interdependence and diplomatic relations.
3. **H3: Political instability and internal political changes in Nepal have directly impacted bilateral relations with India.**
This hypothesis assumes that democratic transitions, constitutional changes, and political conflicts in Nepal influence diplomatic trust and policy coordination with India.
4. **H4: Border disputes and strategic mistrust create challenges in maintaining stable India–Nepal relations.**
The hypothesis highlights that unresolved territorial disputes and security concerns negatively affect diplomatic engagement between the two countries.

5. **H5: Regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC play an important role in promoting cooperation and regional integration between India and Nepal.**

This hypothesis assumes that regional institutional frameworks contribute to economic collaboration, connectivity, and regional stability in South Asia.

6. **H6: Sustainable diplomatic dialogue and mutual respect for sovereignty are essential for strengthening future India–Nepal relations.**

The hypothesis suggests that long-term bilateral stability depends upon balanced diplomacy, political trust, and cooperative regional engagement.

Review of Literature

The review of literature is an important part of research that helps in understanding previous studies, theoretical perspectives, and scholarly contributions related to the research topic. In the context of India–Nepal relations, various scholars, researchers, diplomats, and policy analysts have examined the political, economic, cultural, and strategic dimensions of bilateral relations. The existing literature highlights both the cooperative and conflictual aspects of India–Nepal relations from historical as well as contemporary perspectives.

S.D. Muni, in his works on India–Nepal relations and South Asian geopolitics, emphasized that the relationship between India and Nepal is deeply influenced by geographical proximity, cultural ties, and strategic considerations. He argued that India's security concerns and Nepal's political instability have remained central factors shaping bilateral relations. Muni also discussed how democratic transitions and external geopolitical influences have affected mutual trust between the two countries.

Leo E. Rose analyzed Nepal's foreign policy and its relations with India in the context of regional power politics. According to Rose, Nepal has historically attempted to maintain a balance between India and China to preserve its sovereignty and strategic autonomy. His studies highlighted the importance of Nepal's geographical position between two major Asian powers and the resulting diplomatic complexities in bilateral relations with India.

Lok Raj Baral focused on the political and diplomatic dimensions of India–Nepal relations. He examined issues such as democratic development, regional cooperation, and the challenges arising from political mistrust. Baral emphasized that despite occasional tensions, the relationship between India and Nepal is sustained by deep socio-cultural interaction and economic interdependence.

B.C. Upreti extensively studied Nepal's political transformation and its implications for India–Nepal relations. His research examined the Maoist insurgency, constitutional changes, and regional geopolitics in Nepal. Upreti argued that Nepal's internal political instability has repeatedly affected bilateral cooperation and strategic coordination with India. He also emphasized the need for balanced diplomacy and mutual understanding to maintain long-term stability in bilateral relations.

Several scholars have also examined the economic dimensions of India–Nepal relations, particularly trade, transit, and hydropower cooperation. Studies indicate that Nepal's landlocked geographical position makes India an important economic partner for trade access and connectivity. Research on hydropower projects and water resource management highlights both opportunities for cooperation and disputes related to resource sharing and project implementation. Scholars have argued that infrastructure connectivity, energy cooperation, and regional trade integration are essential for strengthening bilateral relations.

Another significant area of literature focuses on border disputes and security issues between India and Nepal. Researchers have analyzed disputes related to Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Susta regions and their impact on diplomatic relations. Studies reveal that border disagreements have often generated nationalist sentiments and political tensions in both countries. The open border system, although beneficial for social and economic interaction, has also raised concerns related to illegal migration, smuggling, and cross-border security challenges.

Contemporary literature on India–Nepal relations increasingly focuses on China's growing role in Nepal and the changing geopolitical environment in South Asia. Scholars studying regional geopolitics

have highlighted China's expanding economic investments, infrastructural projects, and diplomatic engagement in Nepal under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These studies suggest that China's increasing presence has altered traditional power dynamics in South Asia and created strategic concerns for India. The literature also emphasizes Nepal's efforts to diversify its foreign relations and reduce excessive dependence on India.

Research related to regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) highlights the importance of regional cooperation in promoting economic integration, connectivity, and political stability. Scholars argue that regional platforms provide opportunities for India and Nepal to strengthen multilateral cooperation in areas such as trade, tourism, disaster management, climate change, and sustainable development.

The review of existing literature indicates that although numerous studies have been conducted on India–Nepal relations, there remains a need for comprehensive research that examines the changing geopolitical dynamics, connectivity initiatives, strategic challenges, and regional cooperation from 1980 to 2026 in an integrated manner. The present study seeks to fill this gap by providing a detailed analytical understanding of contemporary India–Nepal relations in the evolving geopolitical landscape of South Asia.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is a systematic framework used for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information related to the research problem. It provides the scientific foundation of the study and helps in achieving the objectives of the research in a structured and reliable manner. The present study on *India–Nepal Relations in the Changing Geopolitical Landscape: Strategic Challenges, Connectivity, and Regional Cooperation (1980–2026)* adopts an analytical and descriptive approach to examine the political, economic, strategic, and regional dimensions of bilateral relations between India and Nepal.

Nature of the Study

The present research is descriptive and analytical in nature. The descriptive approach has been used to explain the historical evolution and major developments in India–Nepal relations from 1980 to 2026. The analytical approach has been applied to examine the impact of geopolitical changes, strategic competition, economic cooperation, and regional diplomacy on bilateral relations. The study also evaluates emerging challenges and future prospects in the relationship between the two neighboring countries.

Research Design

The study is based on a qualitative research design. It focuses on understanding the changing dynamics of India–Nepal relations through interpretation of political events, diplomatic engagements, economic cooperation, and strategic developments. The research adopts a historical and comparative perspective to analyze continuity and change in bilateral relations over time.

Sources of Data

The study is primarily based on secondary sources of data. Relevant information has been collected from various authentic and reliable academic and governmental sources. Secondary data has been considered appropriate because the study focuses on historical developments, foreign policy analysis, and geopolitical interpretation.

Secondary Sources

The major secondary sources used in the study include:

- Books related to India–Nepal relations and South Asian geopolitics

- Research journals and scholarly articles
- Government reports and policy documents
- Publications of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India
- Official reports of the Government of Nepal
- SAARC and BIMSTEC reports
- Newspapers, magazines, and editorials
- Reports from research institutions and think tanks
- International relations and foreign policy studies
- Online academic databases and official websites

Method of Data Collection

Data has been collected through extensive review of literature, official publications, policy reports, research papers, and contemporary geopolitical analyses. Various historical records and diplomatic documents have also been consulted to understand the evolution of bilateral relations between India and Nepal.

Method of Analysis

The collected data has been analyzed using historical, descriptive, and comparative methods. The historical method has been used to examine the evolution of bilateral relations from 1980 onwards. Comparative analysis has been employed to understand changes in diplomatic relations across different political periods and geopolitical contexts. The study also uses geopolitical interpretation to analyze strategic competition, regional security concerns, and the influence of external powers such as China in Nepal.

Area of the Study

The study focuses on India–Nepal bilateral relations in the context of South Asian geopolitics from 1980 to 2026. It covers political, economic, strategic, diplomatic, and regional dimensions of bilateral relations. Special emphasis has been given to issues such as border disputes, connectivity, hydropower cooperation, trade relations, regional organizations, and China’s growing involvement in Nepal.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is limited to the examination of bilateral relations between India and Nepal during the period 1980–2026. The study primarily focuses on:

- Political and diplomatic relations
- Strategic and security cooperation
- Economic relations and connectivity
- Regional organizations and cooperation
- Border disputes and geopolitical challenges
- China’s role in Nepal and South Asian geopolitics

The study does not include detailed military or technical analysis beyond the broader strategic perspective.

Significance of the Study

The present study is significant because it contributes to the understanding of contemporary India–Nepal relations in the changing geopolitical environment of South Asia. The research is useful for academicians, policymakers, diplomats, and students of international relations, political science, and regional studies. It also helps in understanding the impact of regional power competition, connectivity initiatives, and diplomatic cooperation on bilateral stability and regional peace.

Limitations of the Study

The study is mainly based on secondary data; therefore, its findings depend upon the availability and authenticity of published sources. Due to the dynamic nature of international relations and geopolitical developments, some contemporary events may continue to evolve beyond the scope of the present research. Additionally, certain diplomatic and strategic matters may not be fully accessible because of confidentiality and policy restrictions.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study defines the boundaries and focus areas of the research. The present study titled *“India–Nepal Relations in the Changing Geopolitical Landscape: Strategic Challenges, Connectivity, and Regional Cooperation (1980–2026)”* focuses on analyzing the multidimensional aspects of bilateral relations between India and Nepal within the broader context of South Asian geopolitics. The study attempts to examine the political, economic, strategic, cultural, and regional dimensions that have shaped bilateral relations from 1980 to 2026.

The research primarily covers the historical evolution of India–Nepal relations during the contemporary period, especially after 1980, when major political and geopolitical transformations began influencing South Asia. The study includes analysis of important developments such as Nepal’s democratic transition, the Maoist insurgency, the abolition of monarchy, constitutional reforms, and changing foreign policy priorities. It also examines how these internal political developments in Nepal affected diplomatic and strategic relations with India.

The scope of the study further includes an examination of political and strategic relations between the two countries. This involves analysis of diplomatic engagement, security cooperation, border management, and strategic concerns related to regional stability. Particular attention has been given to border disputes such as Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Susta, which have periodically influenced bilateral relations and public perception in both countries.

Economic relations form another important area within the scope of the study. The research analyzes trade relations, transit facilities, infrastructure development, hydropower cooperation, connectivity projects, investment partnerships, and energy collaboration between India and Nepal. The study also evaluates the significance of the open border system and economic interdependence in strengthening bilateral cooperation.

The present study additionally focuses on the role of regional and global geopolitical changes in shaping India–Nepal relations. Special emphasis has been placed on China’s increasing economic and strategic engagement in Nepal and its implications for India’s security and foreign policy interests in South Asia. The study examines how regional power competition and changing geopolitical alignments influence bilateral diplomacy and regional cooperation.

The research also includes the role of regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in promoting regional integration, connectivity, and cooperation between India and Nepal. Issues related to climate change, disaster management, migration, tourism, and cultural diplomacy are also included within the broader scope of the study.

Geographically, the study is confined to India and Nepal within the regional framework of South Asia. Temporally, the research covers the period from 1980 to 2026, enabling a comprehensive understanding of continuity and change in bilateral relations over nearly five decades.

However, the study is limited to political, economic, strategic, and regional dimensions of bilateral relations and does not include detailed military or technical analysis beyond the general strategic perspective. The research is primarily based on secondary data sources such as books, journals, government reports, official publications, and scholarly articles. Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of India–Nepal relations in the contemporary geopolitical

landscape and contributes to a deeper understanding of regional diplomacy and bilateral cooperation in South Asia.

Significance of the Study

The study of India–Nepal relations holds great academic, political, strategic, and regional importance because both countries share deep historical, cultural, religious, economic, and geographical connections. India and Nepal have maintained close bilateral interaction for centuries through open borders, people-to-people relations, trade, cultural exchange, and diplomatic cooperation. In the contemporary geopolitical environment, the relationship between the two neighboring countries has become increasingly significant due to changing regional dynamics, globalization, and the growing influence of external powers in South Asia. Therefore, the present study is important for understanding the evolving nature of bilateral relations and their impact on regional stability and cooperation.

One of the major significances of the study lies in its contribution to understanding the changing geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Nepal occupies a strategically important position between India and China, making it a key element in regional power politics. The growing economic and strategic engagement of China in Nepal has transformed the geopolitical environment of the Himalayan region and influenced India's foreign policy approach toward Nepal. This study helps in analyzing how regional power competition and geopolitical interests shape bilateral diplomacy, strategic cooperation, and regional security.

The study is also significant because it examines the historical evolution of India–Nepal relations from 1980 to 2026, covering major political developments such as Nepal's democratic transition, Maoist insurgency, constitutional reforms, and changing governance structures. Understanding these developments is essential for analyzing how domestic political changes in Nepal have affected bilateral relations with India. The research provides insight into the continuity and transformation of diplomatic engagement between the two countries over nearly five decades.

Another important significance of the study is its focus on economic relations and connectivity initiatives between India and Nepal. Economic cooperation plays a vital role in strengthening bilateral relations through trade, transit, hydropower development, infrastructure projects, tourism, and energy collaboration. The study highlights the importance of connectivity projects such as integrated check posts, railways, petroleum pipelines, and transmission lines in promoting regional integration and economic interdependence. It also examines the challenges related to trade imbalance, economic dependency, and implementation of development projects.

The study is further important because it addresses sensitive issues such as border disputes, political mistrust, water-sharing concerns, and security challenges that continue to affect bilateral relations. By analyzing these issues in a systematic manner, the research contributes to a better understanding of the causes of diplomatic tensions and the need for peaceful conflict resolution through dialogue and cooperation.

The research additionally contributes to the field of international relations, political science, strategic studies, and South Asian studies by providing a comprehensive analysis of bilateral diplomacy in the context of regional geopolitics. It offers valuable academic material for researchers, scholars, students, policymakers, and diplomats interested in India–Nepal relations and South Asian regional politics.

The study also emphasizes the role of regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC in promoting regional cooperation, connectivity, and stability. It highlights the importance of multilateral engagement in addressing common regional challenges related to climate change, disaster management, migration, economic development, and sustainable growth.

From a policy perspective, the research is significant because it provides practical recommendations for strengthening India–Nepal relations through balanced diplomacy, mutual trust, economic partnership, and strategic cooperation. The study encourages the development of sustainable bilateral relations based on sovereign equality, regional cooperation, and peaceful coexistence.

Thus, the present study is highly relevant in the contemporary era as it enhances understanding of the strategic importance of India–Nepal relations and their broader implications for peace, security, and development in South Asia.

Limitations of the Study

Every research study has certain limitations that may affect the scope, interpretation, and generalization of the findings. The present study titled “*India–Nepal Relations in the Changing Geopolitical Landscape: Strategic Challenges, Connectivity, and Regional Cooperation (1980–2026)*” also faces some limitations due to the nature of the subject, availability of data, and changing geopolitical circumstances. However, sincere efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, reliability, and analytical depth throughout the research process.

One of the primary limitations of the study is that it is mainly based on secondary sources of data. The research relies on books, journals, government reports, policy papers, newspapers, official documents, and scholarly articles for collecting information related to India–Nepal relations. Since primary data such as interviews with diplomats, policymakers, or government officials could not be collected extensively, the study depends upon the authenticity and interpretation of already published material.

Another limitation is related to the dynamic and continuously changing nature of international relations and geopolitics. Bilateral relations between India and Nepal are influenced by rapidly changing political developments, diplomatic interactions, regional security concerns, and global strategic shifts. Therefore, new political events, policy changes, or geopolitical developments occurring after the completion of the study may influence the relevance of certain observations and conclusions.

The study covers a broad time period from 1980 to 2026, which includes several major political, economic, and strategic developments in both India and Nepal. Due to the extensive time frame, it is not possible to analyze every event and policy decision in complete detail. The research focuses mainly on significant developments that directly affected bilateral relations and regional geopolitics.

Another limitation of the study is that it primarily emphasizes political, economic, strategic, and regional dimensions of India–Nepal relations. Although cultural, social, and religious ties between the two countries are discussed, the study does not provide an exhaustive sociological or anthropological analysis of people-to-people relations and cultural interaction.

The research also faces limitations regarding access to confidential diplomatic and strategic information. Certain policy decisions, security arrangements, and diplomatic negotiations between India and Nepal are not publicly available due to national security and governmental confidentiality. As a result, the study is based mainly on publicly accessible information and official statements.

Additionally, the study focuses primarily on the bilateral relationship between India and Nepal within the South Asian geopolitical framework. It does not include an in-depth comparative analysis of Nepal’s relations with other countries except where necessary to explain the influence of external powers, particularly China, on India–Nepal relations.

Another limitation is the possibility of differing political perspectives and interpretations regarding sensitive issues such as border disputes, economic dependency, constitutional controversies, and regional strategic competition. Different scholars, governments, and institutions may interpret these issues differently based on their political and ideological viewpoints. Therefore, the study attempts to maintain academic neutrality and balanced analysis while examining these sensitive subjects.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive and analytical understanding of India–Nepal relations in the contemporary geopolitical context. The research contributes significantly to the field of South Asian studies, international relations, and regional diplomacy by highlighting major challenges, opportunities, and future prospects in bilateral relations between India and Nepal.

Major Areas of Analysis

The present study on “*India–Nepal Relations in the Changing Geopolitical Landscape: Strategic Challenges, Connectivity, and Regional Cooperation (1980–2026)*” focuses on several important dimensions of bilateral relations between India and Nepal. These major areas of analysis help in understanding the historical evolution, contemporary challenges, strategic significance, and future prospects of bilateral cooperation in the South Asian region. The major areas of analysis of the study are as follows:

1. Political Relations and Diplomatic Engagement

One of the major areas of analysis in the study is the political and diplomatic relationship between India and Nepal. The research examines the evolution of bilateral diplomacy, high-level political visits, treaty arrangements, and diplomatic negotiations from 1980 to 2026. It analyzes how political developments such as democratic movements, constitutional reforms, coalition politics, and governmental changes in Nepal have influenced bilateral relations with India. The study also evaluates the role of diplomacy in resolving bilateral disputes and maintaining regional stability.

2. Strategic and Security Dimensions

The study analyzes the strategic importance of Nepal in India’s foreign policy and regional security framework. Nepal’s geographical location between India and China makes it strategically significant in South Asian geopolitics. This section examines security cooperation, border management, defence coordination, cross-border crime, migration, and regional security concerns. It also evaluates the impact of geopolitical competition and external influences on bilateral strategic relations.

3. Border Disputes and Territorial Issues

Border disputes constitute an important area of analysis in India–Nepal relations. The study focuses on territorial disputes related to Kalapani, Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura, and Susta regions. It examines the historical background, political implications, nationalist sentiments, and diplomatic responses related to these disputes. The study also explores the role of border management and peaceful dialogue in maintaining bilateral trust and cooperation.

4. Economic Relations and Trade Cooperation

Economic cooperation is one of the key pillars of India–Nepal relations. The study analyzes bilateral trade, transit agreements, investment, infrastructure development, tourism, and economic interdependence between the two countries. It examines the importance of India as Nepal’s largest trade and transit partner and evaluates challenges such as trade imbalance, economic dependency, and implementation barriers in development projects.

5. Connectivity and Infrastructure Development

The research examines connectivity initiatives and infrastructural cooperation between India and Nepal. This includes analysis of railway projects, integrated check posts, highways, petroleum pipelines, transmission lines, border connectivity, and digital infrastructure. The study evaluates how connectivity projects contribute to economic growth, regional integration, and strengthening bilateral cooperation.

6. Hydropower and Water Resource Cooperation

Hydropower and water resources are significant components of India–Nepal relations. The study examines bilateral cooperation in hydropower generation, river water management, irrigation projects, flood control, and energy trade. It also analyzes challenges related to water-sharing agreements, project delays, environmental concerns, and political disagreements over resource utilization.

7. China's Growing Influence in Nepal

One of the most important contemporary areas of analysis is China's increasing economic and strategic engagement in Nepal. The study examines China's infrastructural investments, diplomatic initiatives, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and growing geopolitical presence in Nepal. It evaluates how China's involvement influences India–Nepal relations and regional strategic balance in South Asia.

8. Regional Cooperation and Multilateral Engagement

The study analyzes the role of regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC in promoting cooperation between India and Nepal. It examines regional connectivity, trade integration, climate cooperation, disaster management, and sustainable development initiatives. The research also evaluates the effectiveness of regional institutions in strengthening peace, stability, and cooperation in South Asia.

9. Cultural and People-to-People Relations

India and Nepal share deep cultural, religious, linguistic, and social ties. The study examines the significance of open borders, migration, pilgrimage tourism, educational exchange, and cultural diplomacy in strengthening bilateral relations. It also analyzes how people-to-people interaction contributes to mutual understanding and long-term friendship between the two countries.

10. Emerging Challenges and Future Prospects

The study further analyzes contemporary challenges affecting India–Nepal relations, including political mistrust, economic dependency, geopolitical rivalry, border tensions, and policy disagreements. It also explores future opportunities for strengthening bilateral cooperation through diplomacy, economic partnership, connectivity, regional integration, and sustainable development initiatives.

These major areas of analysis collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of India–Nepal relations in the changing geopolitical context of South Asia. By examining political, economic, strategic, cultural, and regional dimensions, the study highlights both the opportunities and challenges in bilateral relations and contributes to a deeper understanding of regional diplomacy and cooperation between India and Nepal.

Findings (Expected)

The present study on *“India–Nepal Relations in the Changing Geopolitical Landscape: Strategic Challenges, Connectivity, and Regional Cooperation (1980–2026)”* is expected to generate significant findings regarding the political, economic, strategic, and regional dimensions of bilateral relations between India and Nepal. Based on the analysis of historical developments, geopolitical changes, and contemporary diplomatic trends, the expected findings of the study are as follows:

1. Deep Historical and Cultural Ties Continue to Strengthen Bilateral Relations

The study is expected to find that India and Nepal continue to share strong historical, cultural, religious, and civilizational ties despite political and diplomatic challenges. The open border system, common cultural traditions, religious pilgrimage, migration, intermarriage, and linguistic similarities have created deep people-to-people connections between the two countries. These socio-cultural relations remain one of the strongest foundations of bilateral cooperation.

2. Political Developments in Nepal Significantly Influence Bilateral Relations

The research is expected to reveal that Nepal's internal political transformations, including democratic movements, constitutional changes, political instability, and regime transitions, have directly affected

India–Nepal relations. Political uncertainty and changing governments in Nepal have influenced diplomatic trust, policy continuity, and bilateral coordination with India.

3. India Remains Nepal’s Most Important Economic and Development Partner

The study is expected to show that India continues to be Nepal’s largest trade partner, transit provider, and development partner. Bilateral cooperation in infrastructure development, hydropower, connectivity, education, healthcare, tourism, and energy projects has strengthened economic interdependence between the two countries. Connectivity initiatives such as railways, integrated check posts, petroleum pipelines, and transmission lines are expected to play a major role in enhancing regional integration.

4. Trade Imbalance and Economic Dependency Remain Important Challenges

The findings are expected to indicate that despite strong economic cooperation, Nepal’s heavy dependence on India for trade and transit creates concerns regarding economic vulnerability and imbalance. Trade deficits, implementation delays in infrastructure projects, and occasional disruptions in supply chains are expected to remain major issues affecting bilateral economic relations.

5. Border Disputes Continue to Affect Diplomatic Trust

The study is expected to find that unresolved border disputes related to Kalapani, Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura, and Susta continue to create diplomatic tensions and nationalist sentiments in both countries. These disputes periodically affect bilateral trust and political relations despite continuous diplomatic dialogue and negotiation efforts.

6. China’s Growing Influence Has Changed the Geopolitical Dynamics of India–Nepal Relations

One of the major expected findings is that China’s increasing economic, infrastructural, and strategic engagement in Nepal has significantly altered the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Nepal’s efforts to diversify foreign relations and reduce dependency on India through closer engagement with China are expected to influence India’s strategic calculations and foreign policy approach toward Nepal.

7. Regional Geopolitical Competition Has Increased Strategic Sensitivity in Bilateral Relations

The study is expected to reveal that regional power competition between India and China has made India–Nepal relations more strategically sensitive. Nepal’s geographical position between two major Asian powers increases its strategic importance in regional security and diplomacy. As a result, geopolitical considerations are expected to play a major role in shaping bilateral relations in the contemporary era.

8. Regional Organizations Provide Opportunities for Cooperation but Face Structural Limitations

The research is expected to find that regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC provide important platforms for economic cooperation, connectivity, and regional integration between India and Nepal. However, political tensions, limited institutional effectiveness, and regional rivalries are expected to restrict the full potential of regional cooperation in South Asia.

9. Connectivity and Infrastructure Cooperation Can Improve Bilateral Relations

The findings are expected to indicate that increased connectivity through transportation networks, trade corridors, energy cooperation, and digital infrastructure can significantly improve bilateral relations and economic growth. Infrastructure and connectivity projects are likely to emerge as major instruments of regional diplomacy and cooperation in the future.

10. Diplomatic Dialogue and Mutual Trust Are Essential for Future Stability

The study is expected to conclude that sustainable bilateral relations between India and Nepal depend upon mutual trust, sovereign equality, peaceful dialogue, and balanced diplomacy. Strengthening political communication, resolving disputes through negotiation, and promoting economic partnership and cultural cooperation are expected to be essential for maintaining long-term regional stability and friendly relations between the two countries.

The expected findings of the study suggest that India–Nepal relations are characterized by both strong cooperation and emerging strategic challenges. While historical ties, economic interdependence, and regional cooperation continue to strengthen bilateral engagement, geopolitical competition, border disputes, and political mistrust remain significant concerns. The study is expected to emphasize the importance of constructive diplomacy, regional integration, and sustainable cooperation in ensuring peaceful and stable India–Nepal relations in the changing geopolitical landscape of South Asia.

Suggestions / Policy Recommendations

The present study on *“India–Nepal Relations in the Changing Geopolitical Landscape: Strategic Challenges, Connectivity, and Regional Cooperation (1980–2026)”* highlights the need for strengthening bilateral cooperation between India and Nepal through balanced diplomacy, mutual trust, economic partnership, and regional engagement. Although both countries share deep historical and cultural ties, several political, strategic, and economic challenges continue to affect bilateral relations. Therefore, the following suggestions and policy recommendations are proposed for improving India–Nepal relations and ensuring long-term regional stability and cooperation.

1. Strengthening Diplomatic Dialogue and Political Trust

India and Nepal should maintain continuous diplomatic engagement and high-level political dialogue to address misunderstandings and strengthen mutual trust. Regular bilateral meetings, diplomatic consultations, and strategic discussions can help in resolving sensitive issues peacefully and improving political coordination. Both countries should respect each other’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence while maintaining friendly and cooperative relations.

2. Peaceful Resolution of Border Disputes

Border disputes related to Kalapani, Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura, and Susta should be resolved through peaceful negotiation, historical evidence, and diplomatic mechanisms. Joint boundary commissions and technical committees should be strengthened to prevent escalation of tensions. Both countries should avoid politicization of border issues and promote confidence-building measures to maintain stability along the border regions.

3. Expanding Economic Cooperation and Trade Relations

India and Nepal should further strengthen bilateral trade and economic cooperation by reducing trade barriers, improving customs procedures, and promoting balanced trade partnerships. Nepal’s export capacity should be enhanced through technical support, investment promotion, and market access initiatives. Both countries should encourage private sector participation and cross-border economic collaboration to increase economic growth and employment opportunities.

4. Enhancing Connectivity and Infrastructure Development

Connectivity projects should be accelerated to improve regional integration and economic cooperation. India and Nepal should prioritize the development of railways, highways, integrated check posts, petroleum pipelines, transmission lines, digital infrastructure, and border connectivity projects. Efficient implementation of infrastructure projects will strengthen economic interdependence and facilitate easier movement of goods and people between the two countries.

5. Strengthening Hydropower and Energy Cooperation

Nepal possesses enormous hydropower potential, and India can play an important role in its development. Both countries should enhance cooperation in hydropower generation, electricity trade, water resource management, and renewable energy projects. Transparent agreements, timely project implementation, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms can help in building long-term energy partnership and regional energy security.

6. Promoting People-to-People and Cultural Relations

Cultural diplomacy and people-to-people interaction should be further strengthened through educational exchange programs, tourism, religious pilgrimage, academic cooperation, and cultural activities. Since India and Nepal share deep cultural and religious connections, promoting social and cultural engagement can help in reducing political mistrust and strengthening bilateral friendship at the societal level.

7. Managing Geopolitical Competition Through Balanced Diplomacy

India and Nepal should adopt balanced and constructive diplomacy in the context of changing regional geopolitics. Nepal should maintain balanced relations with both India and China while protecting its national interests and sovereignty. Similarly, India should adopt a cooperative and sensitive approach toward Nepal's developmental aspirations and foreign policy priorities. Constructive regional diplomacy is essential for maintaining stability in South Asia.

8. Strengthening Regional Cooperation Through SAARC and BIMSTEC

Both countries should actively cooperate within regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC to promote regional integration, trade connectivity, climate cooperation, disaster management, and sustainable development. Strengthening multilateral regional frameworks can contribute to peace, stability, and economic progress in South Asia.

9. Improving Border Management and Security Cooperation

India and Nepal should enhance coordination in border management, intelligence sharing, and security cooperation to address issues such as cross-border crime, human trafficking, smuggling, terrorism, and illegal migration. Modern border infrastructure and coordinated security mechanisms can help maintain peace and stability along the open border while preserving traditional social and economic interaction.

10. Encouraging Academic and Policy Research on Bilateral Relations

Universities, research institutions, think tanks, and policy organizations in both countries should promote academic research, dialogue, and exchange programs on India–Nepal relations and South Asian geopolitics. Greater intellectual cooperation can improve understanding of bilateral challenges and contribute to evidence-based policymaking and diplomatic engagement.

11. Developing Crisis Management and Communication Mechanisms

Both countries should establish effective crisis communication and conflict management mechanisms to prevent diplomatic misunderstandings during periods of political or economic tension. Rapid diplomatic coordination and transparent communication can reduce misinformation, public mistrust, and unnecessary escalation of bilateral disputes.

12. Focusing on Sustainable Development and Environmental Cooperation

India and Nepal should cooperate in addressing environmental challenges such as climate change, glacier melting, floods, natural disasters, and ecological degradation in the Himalayan region. Joint initiatives related to sustainable development, disaster preparedness, environmental conservation, and water management can strengthen regional resilience and long-term cooperation.

Conclusion

The future of India–Nepal relations depends upon constructive diplomacy, mutual respect, regional cooperation, and sustainable economic partnership. Both countries must work together to transform historical and cultural ties into stronger strategic and developmental cooperation. Peaceful resolution of disputes, enhancement of connectivity, promotion of people-to-people interaction, and balanced regional engagement are essential for maintaining stable and friendly bilateral relations. By adopting cooperative and forward-looking policies, India and Nepal can contribute significantly to regional peace, prosperity, and stability in South Asia.

India and Nepal share a unique and historically significant relationship based on geography, culture, religion, economy, and strategic cooperation. The bilateral relations between the two neighboring countries have evolved through different historical and political phases and continue to play an important role in shaping the geopolitical environment of South Asia. From 1980 to 2026, India–Nepal relations have experienced both cooperation and challenges due to changing domestic politics, regional power competition, globalization, and emerging strategic concerns. Despite periodic tensions, the relationship remains deeply interconnected because of strong civilizational ties, open borders, economic interdependence, and people-to-people interaction.

The study reveals that political developments within Nepal have had a major influence on bilateral relations with India. The democratic movement of 1990, the Maoist insurgency, the abolition of monarchy, constitutional reforms, and political instability significantly transformed Nepal's internal political structure and foreign policy orientation. These developments affected diplomatic trust and policy coordination between the two countries at different stages. India consistently played an important role in Nepal's democratic transition, peace process, economic development, and infrastructural growth, though Nepal occasionally expressed concerns regarding India's political influence in its internal affairs.

Economic cooperation remains one of the strongest pillars of India–Nepal relations. India continues to be Nepal's largest trading partner, transit provider, and development partner. Bilateral cooperation in areas such as hydropower, infrastructure development, connectivity, tourism, education, and energy has strengthened mutual interdependence between the two countries. Projects related to railways, petroleum pipelines, integrated check posts, transmission lines, and road connectivity demonstrate the importance of regional integration and economic partnership. At the same time, issues related to trade imbalance, economic dependency, and delays in project implementation continue to create challenges in bilateral economic relations.

The study also highlights that border disputes and geopolitical competition have become significant challenges in contemporary India–Nepal relations. Disputes related to Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Susta periodically intensified diplomatic tensions and nationalist sentiments in both countries. Similarly, China's increasing economic and strategic engagement in Nepal has altered the regional geopolitical balance and created strategic concerns for India. Nepal's efforts to maintain balanced relations with both India and China reflect its desire to protect national sovereignty and diversify foreign partnerships. Consequently, India–Nepal relations are increasingly influenced by broader regional and global geopolitical dynamics.

Regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC have provided opportunities for India and Nepal to cooperate on issues related to trade, connectivity, climate change, disaster management, and sustainable development. However, regional political tensions and limited institutional effectiveness have restricted the full potential of regional integration in South Asia. Strengthening multilateral

cooperation and regional connectivity remains essential for long-term stability and development in the region.

The findings of the study indicate that despite occasional misunderstandings and political tensions, India and Nepal continue to share strong strategic, cultural, and economic ties. Mutual trust, diplomatic dialogue, sovereign equality, and regional cooperation are essential for strengthening future bilateral relations. Both countries need to address border disputes peacefully, enhance economic partnership, improve connectivity projects, and promote people-to-people interaction to maintain stable and friendly relations.

In conclusion, India–Nepal relations remain highly significant in the changing geopolitical landscape of South Asia. The future of bilateral relations depends upon constructive diplomacy, balanced regional engagement, economic cooperation, and mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty and national interests. By strengthening collaboration in political, economic, cultural, and strategic fields, India and Nepal can contribute not only to bilateral prosperity but also to peace, stability, and sustainable development in the South Asian region.

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