

# **Nepal-India Relations (2015–2020): A Study of Cooperation, Conflict, and Change**

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## **Abstract**

*Nepal and India share a deep-rooted historical, cultural, economic, and geopolitical relationship. However, between 2015 and 2020, this bilateral relationship experienced a period of both cooperation and tension. The aftermath of Nepal's constitution promulgation in 2015, the unofficial blockade, the 2015 earthquake, and the 2020 border disputes significantly influenced bilateral ties. This paper explores the developments in Nepal-India relations during this period, examining diplomatic interactions, trade relations, political events, and strategic implications, along with an evaluation of how these shaped regional dynamics.*

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## **I. Introduction**

The bilateral relationship between Nepal and India has traditionally been characterized by open borders, people-to-people contact, and strong trade interdependence. However, the period from 2015 to 2020 marked a significant shift, with multiple diplomatic frictions arising over constitutional issues, economic blockades, and territorial disputes. This paper evaluates these aspects in detail to understand the evolving nature of Nepal-India ties during this period.

## **II. The 2015 Constitution and Diplomatic Fallout**

Nepal adopted a new constitution on September 20, 2015, after years of political struggle. However, India expressed reservations, particularly over the treatment of Madhesi and Tharu communities, who share close ethnic ties with the Indian population in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. India urged Nepal to address the concerns of these groups to ensure an inclusive constitution.

This was followed by what Nepal termed an "unofficial blockade" at key border points. The movement of goods and fuel from India was severely restricted, causing acute shortages in Nepal. India denied imposing a blockade and attributed the disruption to protests by Madhesi groups within Nepal. Nevertheless, this strained bilateral relations deeply and intensified nationalist sentiments within Nepal.

## **III. Earthquake Relief and Strategic Competition**

The April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, which killed nearly 9,000 people, became a humanitarian crisis and an opportunity for regional diplomacy. India launched "Operation Maitri," one of its largest disaster relief efforts, sending rescue teams, relief materials, and aid. Initially appreciated, India's media portrayal and approach later drew criticism from sections of the Nepali public who perceived it as overbearing.

China also increased its engagement, offering aid and initiating reconstruction projects. This raised concerns in New Delhi, as it signaled growing Chinese influence in Nepal. The competition for strategic space in Nepal became evident during this time.

## **IV. Trade, Transit, and Connectivity**

Trade relations between India and Nepal continued, but the blockade of 2015–16 pushed Nepal to diversify its economic and transit links. Nepal signed a transit agreement with China in 2016, allowing access to Chinese ports and reducing dependence on India for trade routes.

Despite tensions, India and Nepal signed agreements to enhance cross-border railway links, hydropower development, and digital payment connectivity. For instance, the inauguration of the Motihari-Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline in 2019 marked a milestone in bilateral cooperation.

## **V. The 2020 Border Dispute and Map Controversy**

One of the most serious diplomatic standoffs between Nepal and India occurred in 2020 over the Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh region. The issue flared after India inaugurated a road through Lipulekh Pass to Kailash Mansarovar in May 2020. Nepal protested the move, claiming the territory based on historical treaties and maps.

In response, Nepal's Parliament passed a constitutional amendment to update the country's political map, incorporating the disputed territories. India rejected the move, calling it "unilateral" and "not based on facts." This episode sharply escalated diplomatic tensions and hardened nationalist sentiments on both sides.

## **VI. People-to-People Ties and Cultural Diplomacy**

Despite diplomatic tensions, cultural and religious connections remained robust. The cross-border movement of people, especially for pilgrimage and family ties, continued under regulated conditions. In 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Janakpur and Muktinath in Nepal, emphasizing shared religious heritage and launching the Ramayana Circuit project.

Such efforts demonstrated that despite political frictions, soft power and civilizational linkages offered avenues for restoring goodwill.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Between 2015 and 2020, Nepal-India relations experienced both cooperation and conflict. The aftermath of the 2015 constitution, the unofficial blockade, strategic competition with China, and the 2020 border dispute reshaped the dynamics of bilateral ties. While the political relationship witnessed lows, cultural and economic cooperation continued intermittently. The period underscores the importance of mutual sensitivity, balanced diplomacy, and regional stability for future bilateral engagement.

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