

India-Nepal Relations (2010–2015): Between Tradition, Transformation, and Tensions

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Abstract

The period between 2010 and 2015 was a dynamic phase in India-Nepal relations, marked by both significant cooperation and deep-rooted tensions. This paper explores the diplomatic, economic, cultural, and strategic aspects of the bilateral relationship during this period. The influence of political changes in Nepal, the evolving strategic environment in South Asia, India's foreign policy initiatives, and regional economic interdependencies are closely analysed. It further discusses key events such as the 2015 Constitution of Nepal and the resulting blockade, natural disasters like the 2015 earthquake, and changes in government in both nations.

I. Introduction

India and Nepal share a deep-rooted historical, cultural, geographical, and economic relationship, nurtured over centuries through open borders, people-to-people linkages, and shared heritage. However, from 2010 to 2015, this relationship went through a series of shifts due to evolving domestic and regional factors. While both countries maintained a rhetoric of friendship and cooperation, internal political transformations in Nepal and India's regional strategic concerns led to several points of friction. This paper aims to dissect these complexities and provide a nuanced understanding of the developments in India-Nepal relations during this period.

II. Historical Background

Before delving into the 2010–2015 timeframe, it is essential to understand the broader historical context:

1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship: This foundational treaty shaped bilateral relations, allowing free movement of people and goods and providing for close strategic cooperation.

Cultural and Religious Ties: Shared Hindu and Buddhist traditions underpin socio-cultural bonds.

Geopolitical Dynamics: India's traditional influence in Nepal was challenged by increasing Chinese presence, affecting Kathmandu's foreign policy.

III. Political Developments in Nepal (2010–2015)

3.1. Constitutional Transition and Political Volatility

After the abolition of the monarchy in 2008, Nepal entered a prolonged phase of political instability. Between 2010 and 2015:

Multiple governments were formed and dissolved, including those led by Madhav Kumar Nepal, JhalaNathKhanal, BaburamBhattarai, and SushilKoirala.

The first Constituent Assembly (CA) was dissolved in 2012 without promulgating a constitution.

The second CA, elected in 2013, finally delivered a constitution in September 2015.

This political flux affected bilateral cooperation, as India often preferred stable governments that supported its regional agenda.

3.2. Maoist Politics and Indian Concerns

India had complex relations with the Maoists, who were formerly insurgents and became mainstream politicians post-2006. Leaders like Prachanda and Bhattarai, though keen to maintain ties with India, also promoted nationalistic agendas and balanced relations with China.

IV. India's Foreign Policy Toward Nepal (2010–2015)

4.1. Continuity Under Manmohan Singh

Under UPA II (2010–2014), India maintained a cautious engagement with Nepal:
Supported the peace and constitution-drafting processes.
Invested in infrastructure and hydropower.
Quietly monitored China's growing presence.

4.2. Modi's Neighbourhood First Policy

The change of government in India in 2014 brought a more assertive tone:
Narendra Modi's visit to Nepal in August 2014 was historic, being the first bilateral visit by an Indian PM in 17 years.
Modi's outreach emphasized cultural unity, economic partnership, and political support for inclusive democracy.
Several MOUs were signed in areas of trade, hydropower, and connectivity.

V. Economic and Strategic Dimensions

5.1. Trade and Transit

India remained Nepal's largest trading partner:
Over 60% of Nepal's trade was with India.
Key imports included petroleum products, machinery, and food grains.
The 1996 Trade and Transit Treaty remained operational, and India provided multiple transit points.

5.2. Hydropower Cooperation

India was keen to tap Nepal's hydropower potential:
The 2014 Power Trade Agreement allowed Indian firms to develop and import electricity.
The Arun III and Upper Karnali hydropower projects saw progress, though delays persisted due to local opposition.

5.3. Security and Strategic Engagement

India remained concerned about:
Cross-border terrorism and smuggling.
Activities of Pakistani ISI through Nepal.
China's growing investments and strategic linkages.
India increased training and aid to Nepal's security forces and provided support to border infrastructure.

VI. Cultural and People-to-People Ties

Despite political ups and downs, social and cultural relations remained strong:
Millions of Nepalis work in India and vice versa.
The open border facilitates daily exchanges.
Educational and religious tourism flourished.
Modi's emphasis on the Ramayana circuit and visits to Pashupatinath highlighted this civilizational connection.

VII. The 2015 Constitution and India's Response

7.1. Nepal's New Constitution

On September 20, 2015, Nepal promulgated a new constitution. While a historic achievement, it faced criticism from:
Madhesi and Tharu communities in the Terai region who felt excluded.
India, which urged for a more inclusive and consultative approach.

7.2. The Blockade Controversy

Soon after, a blockade occurred at the Indo-Nepal border:
Nepal accused India of imposing an "undeclared blockade."
India denied official involvement, blaming internal protests by Madhesi groups.
The humanitarian impact was severe:
Fuel, medicine, and essential supplies were blocked.
Anti-India sentiment surged in Nepal.
This event marked a nadir in India-Nepal relations during the period and left a long-lasting imprint.

VIII. The 2015 Earthquake and Indian Assistance

On April 25, 2015, a devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal:
India was the first responder with "Operation Maitri."
Thousands of Indian military and NDRF personnel helped in rescue and relief.
Despite initial gratitude, later criticisms emerged about India's "overexposure" in media and slow aid disbursement.
Nonetheless, the earthquake provided a moment of solidarity.

IX. China's Rising Influence (2010–2015)

As India-Nepal ties strained, China enhanced its profile:
Increased FDI and aid in infrastructure.
Cultural diplomacy through Confucius Institutes and language programs.
Diplomatic visits and treaties emphasizing connectivity and trade.
Nepal's balancing act between India and China became more evident.

X. Public Perception and Media Narratives

The Indian media was criticized in Nepal for being intrusive and patronizing during the earthquake and blockade:
"Go back India" protests surfaced.
A new wave of Nepali nationalism emerged, particularly among youth.
Indian diplomacy was seen as heavy-handed by some sectors.
This shaped long-term perceptions and fueled calls for a more equal partnership.

XI. Major Agreements and Initiatives (2010–2015)

Power Trade Agreement (2014)
India-Nepal Bus Services Initiated (2014)
Janakpur-Ayodhya Bus Service Launched (2014)
India pledged \$1 billion at the 2015 Donors' Conference
Petroleum pipeline MoU (Amlekhgunj-Raxaul, 2015)
These initiatives showed India's interest in expanding soft and hard connectivity.

XII. Challenges in the Bilateral Relationship

Trust deficit, especially post-2015 Constitution and blockade.
Perception of Indian interference in domestic politics.
Unequal economic interdependence.
Nepal's political instability.
Ethnic tensions within Nepal spilling into foreign relations.

XIII. Opportunities and the Way Forward

Despite challenges, the period laid a foundation for future cooperation:
Increased infrastructure investment and energy cooperation.
Emphasis on people-centric diplomacy.
Scope for trilateral cooperation with China.

Revisiting and modernizing the 1950 Treaty.

XIV. Conclusion

India-Nepal relations between 2010 and 2015 were marked by both promise and pitfalls. While the Modi government initially rejuvenated ties, the latter part of this period saw significant deterioration due to the constitutional crisis and the blockade controversy. Political instability in Nepal and India's strategic assertiveness created friction, but the underlying cultural, economic, and social bonds remained resilient. For the bilateral relationship to prosper, mutual respect, non-interference, and equitable cooperation must guide future engagements.