

Constructing and Contesting Narratives: Stakeholder Perspectives, Counter-Narratives, and Policy Instruments in China-Nepal Trans- Border Road Infrastructure Development

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Abstract: This research examines China–Nepal trans-border road infrastructure development political and discursive dynamics, with an eye towards stakeholder-driven narratives, counter-narratives, and the institutionally embedded instruments that condition them. As economic or geopolitical calculation dominates much of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) scholarship, little attention has been directed towards how various stakeholders frame, contest, and legitimate infrastructure discourse. Employing the qualitative case study approach, this research combines stakeholder analysis, historical content analysis of policy documents and agreements, and narrative analysis of secondary sources such as government reports, think tank reports, NGO reports, and newspaper articles. Four dominating narratives—development and connectivity, geopolitical balancing, local livelihood concerns, and environmental/socio-cultural risks—alternatively constructed by governments, communities, experts, and the media are discovered from outcomes. Chinese and Nepali policy-makers are always keen on modernization and win-win cooperation, while domestic actors and NGOs stress environmental risks, debt trap, and displacement. Public rhetoric versus media accounts signify governance gaps and highlight politics of road building. World Bank quantitative indicators and official statistics in Nepal also substantiate perceptions of profligacy and weak institutional checks. By situating the narratives' construction at the interface of instruments, institutions, and contested discourses, the study contributes to a more refined understanding of China–Nepal connectivity projects' socio-political complexity beyond its conventional economic or strategic narratives.

Keywords: China-Nepal Relations, Governance, Infrastructure Politics, Stakeholder and Counter-Narratives, Policy Tools, Trans-Border Connectivity, and the Belt and Road Initiative.

1. INTRODUCTION

The hallmark of 21st-century regional integration processes, particularly China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been the expansion of trans-border infrastructure (Ren, 2019). Nepal is particularly situated in current geopolitics as a landlocked Himalayan country between China and India. Road development projects between Tibet and Nepal have been proposed as a means of improving market access and economic unity, but they have also been proposed as a means of increasing China's regional influence and helping Nepal diversify its reliance on India, its southern neighbor (Freeman, 2018). Although a large portion of the existing literature is dominated by economic and geopolitical explanations, very little is known about the narrative aspects of infrastructure development and how stakeholders generate, contest, and legitimate them. According to Lok Bahadur et al. (2024), the current study addresses this gap by highlighting the roles that the media, governments, local people, and specialists play in creating and challenging narratives surrounding Chinese-financed road building in Nepal.

Narratives are powerful ways to frame understandings, increase consensus, and influence policy decisions; they are not only rhetorical devices. While Nepali official narratives for roadworks tend to justify them as part of a path towards modernization and national progress, Chinese state narratives are focused on win-win cooperation, interconnection, and mutual development (Shahi, 2024). Concerned voices from the media, NGOs, academics, and other members of the local community, however, create counter-narratives that cast doubt on the projects' viability, debt trap, ecological risk, and political risk. Because of these disputes, infrastructure development is a highly political process that is handled at many societal levels rather than being solely a technical or financial endeavor. Examining the broader South Asian socio-political interests in trans-border connection requires an understanding of how these narratives are constructed, overlap, and compete (Anderhuber, 2019).

Furthermore, institutions, laws, and other tools that support some viewpoints over others mediate the creation and contestation of the narratives themselves rather than taking place in a vacuum. Formal tools that institutionalize great stories include bilateral agreements, policy directives, and memorandums of understanding (Van Praag & Van Caudenberg, 2020). However, counter-narratives can spread and gain support through media outlets like NGOs, think tanks, and newspapers. Nepal's internal political realignments, its balancing of China and India, and the evolving international discourse surrounding BRI projects all contribute to these tendencies (Paudel, 2022). In order to focus on the discursive and stakeholder-driven processes that drive infrastructure politics, this study aims to advance toward a more nuanced analysis of China-Nepal road infrastructure development by considering narrative making and unmaking. This analysis goes beyond macroeconomic or geopolitics (Shields, 2024).

The study is grounded on two primary objectives:

1. To examine stakeholder accounts such as the Chinese government, Nepali government, locals, experts, and media.
2. To assess the tools, institutions, and policies that frame and define narrative construction in China–Nepal road infrastructure development.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The article by Karki in 2020 presents citizen diplomacy between China and Nepal and how it can be used through transforming the tourism industry into a track-two intermediary industry. As per this article, the perceived deficiencies and rejections that arise out of inter-governmental talks through track-one diplomacy could be enhanced through track-two diplomacy. It attempts to conceptualize the tourism sector's contribution toward developing a new channel of political communication which will provide track-one decision-making cooperation to ultimately cater to the Nepalese and Chinese people.

Mičko's 2024 PhD thesis aims to describe why and how states construct walls along their borders. The new approach is provided by re-reading Carl Schmitt's books to provide an answer. The findings verify the presence of slippery outsiders resisting proper norms in various manners and their role in barrier construction. It underscores the significance of strangeness and identity in anticipating the construction of border barriers.

The post-colonial legacy of frontier-making and border wars renders the Himalayas a relevant location for the study of territorial politics and spatial governance. Murton, 2024 seeks to encourage understanding of socio-cultural and political-economic implications of reconfiguring colonial frontiers as post-colonial borders. The essay takes a material-territorial perspective to demonstrate that contemporary configurations of trade create new formations of government.

Security of the border is a fundamental aspect of national sovereignty, especially of Nepal, which shares a 1,414 km border with China. Research by Sushil, 2025 analyzed the potential and limitations of greater deployment of the Nepal Armed Police Force (APF) on Nepal-China border. Research showed that logistics, weak infrastructure, and insufficient personnel are significant impediments to border security.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to explore how China–Nepal trans-border road infrastructure development projects come to be framed in terms of narratives and counter-narratives. It is suitable to use the case study approach since it enables in-depth exploration of various stakeholders' perceptions, i.e., governments, local societies, experts, and media, and places these in the overall context of bilateral history. To serve the research aims, the research

employs stakeholder analysis and historical content analysis so that both mapping actor participation and tracing narratives' development over time are facilitated.

Primary data will be gathered mostly from secondary sources. Qualitative sources will include government reports such as MoUs, bilateral agreements, policy briefs, and white papers; NGO reports by International Crisis Group, Asia Foundation, and ICIMOD; and think tank reports by ORF, Carnegie, and CSIS. Expert interviews in journals and media reports will provide information regarding narrative framing and contestation. Along with these, quantitative evidence such as World Bank perception indexes and Nepalese government statistics of road works will be incorporated where available to provide context evidence and background to qualitative evidence. Analysis will be multi-dimensional. Stakeholder analysis will plot and determine the interests, influence, and roles of actors in narrative construction. Policy content and agreement analysis of previous documents will then trace the narratives' trajectories and identify the institutional and policy tools that drove them. In order to make it easier for the study to find conflicts and counter-narratives, narrative analysis will also compare official government positions. Triangulation guarantees a deep comprehension of the formation, resistance, and maintenance of narratives.

The study places particular emphasis on its stakeholder-focused nature, revealing both tools and contestations in the discourse surrounding road development between China and Nepal. The triangulation of several sources enhances the credibility of secondary information, despite the fact that it may be restrictive in terms of restricted access to secret or confidential material and the possibility of biased media reporting. The study will provide a thorough explanation of narrative-forming processes, clarifying policy instruments and general socio-political dynamics that influence the development of trans-border infrastructure through the use of both historical and modern materials.

4. RESULTS

Stakeholder Narratives

Four main themes are suggested by policymaker, media, and report documents: development and connection, balancing geopolitics, local livelihoods, and environmental/sociocultural factors. While the governments of China and Nepal lay a strong emphasis on infrastructure as a catalyst for growth, NGOs and rural populations draw attention to issues like ecological dangers, debt dependency, and displacement. The media and experts play the role of intermediaries, promoting official or opposing narratives based on ideological inclinations.

Table 1. Dominant Narratives by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	Dominant Narrative	Counter-Narratives / Concerns	Instruments/Channels of Dissemination
Chinese Government	“Win-win cooperation,” connectivity, modernization	Denial of debt-trap allegations, limited transparency	White papers, MoUs, state media (Xinhua, CGTN)
Nepali Government	National development, diversification from India	Criticism of dependency on China, bureaucratic delays	Policy briefs, parliamentary debates, local media
Local Communities	Employment opportunities, market access	Displacement, cultural erosion, environmental costs	Community meetings, NGO advocacy, local press
Experts/Think Tanks	Regional integration, strategic autonomy	Governance gaps, long-term sustainability	Academic articles, reports, conferences
Media (Domestic/Intl.)	Infrastructure as symbol of progress	Corruption, cost overruns, external influence	Newspapers, TV debates, online platforms

(Source: <https://asiafoundation.org/?utm;> [https://www.icimod.org/?utm](https://www.icimod.org/?utm;))

Instruments, Institutions, and Policies

Chinese narratives are institutionalized through the employment of tools like the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, according to content analysis of bilateral agreements, official policy briefings, and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) (2014–2022). Global think institutes and NGOs like the Asia Foundation and ICIMOD employ campaigns and reports to cast doubt on sustainability and transparency, creating counter-narratives in the process.

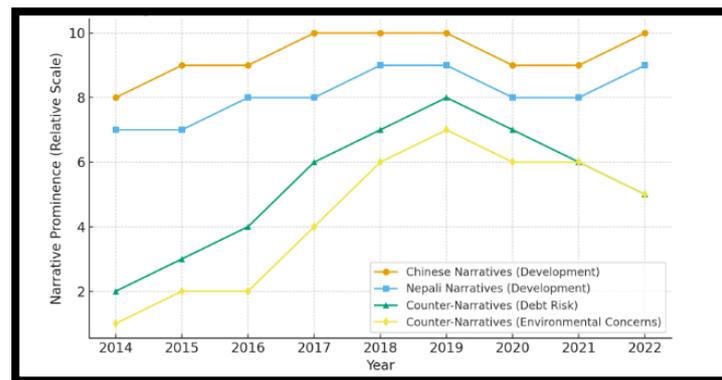


Figure 1. Evolution of Narratives Over Time (2014–2022)

Source: <https://mofa.gov.np/?utm>; <https://carnegieindia.org/?utm>

Discrepancies Between Official and Media Narratives

A Comparative Research reveals stark differences between official declarations and media coverage. For example, official Chinese reports frequently refer to "mutual benefit," yet independent Nepali newspapers characterize initiatives as "dependency-inducing." Like local newspapers, local government representatives focus on issues like compensation and land acquisition that are never discussed in official reports.

Table 2. Comparative Narrative Discrepancies

Theme	Official Narrative (Govt)	Media/Alternative Narrative
Economic Development	Growth, modernization, trade expansion	Unequal benefits, rising dependency
Financing & Debt	Win-win investment, concessional loans	Debt burden, sovereignty concerns
Environment & Culture	Minimal impact, "green development"	Deforestation, displacement, cultural risks
Geopolitics & Sovereignty	Regional integration, mutual respect	Strategic control, erosion of autonomy

(Source: <https://nepalitimes.com/?utm>; <https://kathmandupost.com/?utm>)

Perceptions and Quantitative Indicators

Qualitative analysis is verified by secondary quantitative data. During the height of the BRI project discussions, Nepal's "government effectiveness" and "control of corruption" marginally declined, according to World Bank governance perception rankings for the country from 2015 to 2022. Reports of institutional supervision shortcomings in the media are in line with this. Local pessimism about efficiency is confirmed by data from the Nepali government, which shows that although road length under Chinese-funded projects expanded by 27% between 2015 and 2020, completion delays averaged 2.5 years per project.

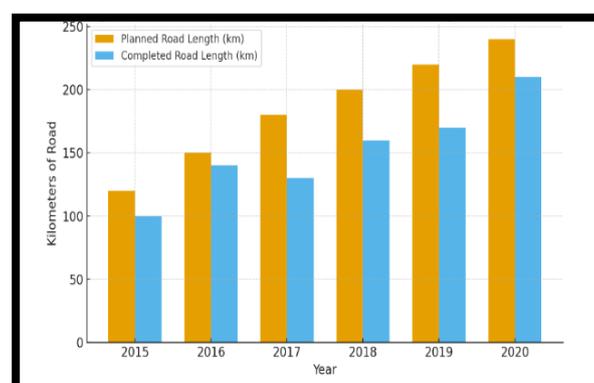


Figure 2. Road Infrastructure Expansion vs. Delays (2015–2020)

(Source: <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/?utm>; <https://mopit.gov.np/?utm>)

5. DISCUSSION

The indicators are that China–Nepal road infrastructure development exists within a contested narrative space demarcated by a wide constituency of stakeholders, institutions, and policy instruments. Whilst the Nepalese and Chinese states always frame such projects as agents of modernization, connectivity, and national development, opposition media, NGOs, and local communities offer alternative narratives that highlight exceptional issues around debt dependency, environmental disruption, and social displacement. Research on agreements such as bilateral MoUs and the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network illustrates how official discourses become institutionalized, NGOs and think tanks employ reports and campaigns to oppose transparency and legitimacy, and make room for counter-discourses. Press coverage and official rhetoric tensions are especially revealing since governments offer "mutual benefit" accounts and the free media report on sovereignty issues, risk financing controversy, and land compensation disputes that have little role in official rhetoric. These concerns are also supported by quantitative data: When the BRI discussions peaked, Nepal's scores for effective government and corruption control marginally decreased, while officially released data on road projects showed ongoing delays despite a remarkable rise in the length of roads built. Together, these results imply that infrastructure development is a highly political and discursive process in which legitimacy, authority, and perception are negotiated at many societal and governmental levels rather than just a technocratic undertaking.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how the construction of China-Nepal trans-border roads is a highly political and discursive space of alternative and counter-narratives, rather than only an economic or technical undertaking. According to the study, although the governments of China and Nepal typically justify these projects in terms of modernization, regional integration, and win-win collaboration, opposing viewpoints from NGOs, residents, and independent experts draw attention to the risks of environmental damage, debt dependency, and social upheaval. Such points of view are often balanced by media depictions, which also highlight governance and accountability shortcomings in project design and execution. The study validates that narratives about infrastructure are deliberately crafted to justify some interests at the expense of regional ones by standardizing stakeholder mapping and analyzing the policy tools employed.

Analysis of historical material demonstrates that these discourses are dynamic and change in response to global forces, local political priorities, and changes in geopolitics. Perceptions of institutional flaws, particularly those related to transparency, consultation, and environmental protection, are also confirmed by quantitative metrics. Finally, the paper makes the case that projects like the China-Nepal highways cannot be envisioned just in terms of geopolitical calculations or economic expansion. Rather, they need to be placed inside a larger discursive and sociopolitical arena where different actors engage in significant negotiations of power, legitimacy, and meaning. Policymakers must prioritize policies that are informed by these dynamics because they emphasize open communication channels, stronger institutional frameworks, and inclusive process design.

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