



COMMENTARY

THE NEPAL-INDIA OPEN BORDER: CENTERING CLIMATE SECURITY IN THE POLITICAL SPACE

SHWETA KARKI



SOUTH ASIAN FUTURES FELLOWSHIP

THE SOUTH ASIAN FUTURES FELLOWSHIP ANNUALLY SUPPORTS EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS BASED IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION, INTERESTED IN EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF GEOPOLITICS ON REGIONAL COOPERATION. FELLOWS ARE AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS WITH EXPERTISE ON NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY ISSUES; THEY PARTICIPATE IN WORKSHOPS, PRODUCE POLICY PIECES, AND ARE PROVIDED THE OPPORTUNITY OF A 1-MONTH RESEARCH RESIDENCY IN A SOUTH ASIAN CITY. DURING THIS RESIDENCY THEY WORK AT A PARTNER THINK TANK, ENGAGE WITH EXPERTS, AND CONDUCT FIELD STUDY ON A TOPIC OF THEIR INTEREST. THE FELLOWSHIP PRODUCES, AND ENGAGES WITH, REGIONAL NARRATIVES AND FACILITATES KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE ON SHARED CHALLENGES IN AN EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHWETA KARKI IS AN ACADEMIC WITH AN INTEREST IN GAINING A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF CLIMATE CHANGE, REGIONALISM, AND HUMAN SECURITY. SHE GRADUATED WITH AN M.A. IN 2018 FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY (DIRD), TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY WITH THE GOLD MEDAL. SHE BEGAN AS A TEACHING ASSISTANT AND RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AT PRESIDENTIAL BUSINESS SCHOOL, AND HAS BEEN A REGULAR TEACHING FACULTY AT DIRD SINCE FEBRUARY 2019. HAVING BEEN APPOINTED AS A SUBJECT COMMITTEE MEMBER BY THE DEPARTMENT SINCE DECEMBER 2022, SHWETA TEACHES SELECT COURSES UNDER POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND SECURITY, INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS, SMALL STATES AND THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS. SHE IS ALSO CURRENTLY WORKING WITH THE ASIAN INSTITUTE OF DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AS A RESEARCH AND IS AN INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT FOR A JOINT PROJECT WITH THE NEPAL-INDIA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY.

IN THE PAST, SHWETA HAS WORKED WITH DCNEPAL, ENGLISH EDITION AS A SENIOR CORRESPONDENT AND WAS A MEMBER OF THE EDITORIAL BOARD AT THE CENTRE FOR NEPAL AND ASIAN STUDIES (CNAS), FOR THE STRATEGIC STUDIES SERIES. SHE HAS PUBLICATIONS ON VARIOUS ONLINE PLATFORMS AND HAS CONTRIBUTED TO ACADEMIC JOURNALS, AS WELL. SHE EXPLORES A WIDE RANGE OF SUBJECTS INCLUDING THE INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY, SOUTH ASIAN GEOPOLITICS AND HUMAN SECURITY.

The Nepal-India Open Border: Centering Climate Security in the Political Space

Evolving Idea of Security:

According to a 2023 ICIMOD report, countries that rely on the water towers of Asia, also known as the Hindu Kush Region, will likely experience increased water availability until the mid-century due to accelerated glacial melt; however, this trend is expected to reverse after that period.¹ This has raised concerns about disaster risk management, as well as food and water insecurity in South Asia.² In spite of this, while ambitious national commitments have been presented, climate risks have not been a focal point of discussions in regional and bilateral channels when discussing shared resources and determining development aspirations.

Climate security has been emphasized in several evolving discourses, linking climate-induced impacts to threat perceptions that vary depending on the nature of the securitizing actor, the definition of what constitutes as threats, and what or who requires fortification.³ The 2015 Pentagon report is often cited when ascertaining the national security inferences of climate change,⁴ whereas the human and ecological dimensions have further been assessed in studies that both look at situations and probabilities of conflict⁵, as well as instances of development and movement.⁶ There has also been a shift in the security discourse where resilience, in conjunction with development, has been tied together with issues of disaster risk reduction and adaptation.⁷

The Nepal-India open border offers a unique case: while it appears structured on paper, its implementation is affected by various complexities. The treaty-based structure allows for the free movement of goods and people, but this does not necessarily align with common perceptions of resource insecurity and climate-related risks. Over the years, reconsideration of border governance has been a recurring issue on various platforms. Tensions over disputed territories persist, driven by both geopolitical factors and internal political discontent. Despite growing bilateral interests in the energy sector, climate issues rarely take center stage in high-level negotiations. There is a lack of a constructive discourse on an integrated understanding of climate-related risks, transboundary governance, and security. Community

cooperation across borders and involvement of non-state actors are examples of resilience, but as studies point out, much still needs to be done. This paper—while acknowledging the economic and socio-cultural significance of the open border—argues that both the arrangement and the existing mechanisms of governance do not address persistent insecurities related to disaster risk management and resource scarcity on both sides of the border.

Changing Dynamics of Openness: Contours of Climate Security

There has been extensive global debate on the implications of open borders in a world where climate change-induced events are linked to disasters and displacement, while new avenues for cooperation continue to be explored. The Nepal-India border exemplifies shared risks, highlighting the vulnerabilities present in the region. However, the longstanding challenges of such openness also show that the perception of these threats does not necessarily align with priorities in identifying, defining, and addressing them.

Broadly, an open border between Nepal and India, was ideated as a symbol of mutual trust and neighborly relations, a concept cemented later with the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty. Since then, relations between the countries have been affected by regime changes and a plethora of security concerns arising from conflicting interests. Advancing on certain fronts of connectivity and energy, anxieties have developed regarding territorial considerations, ideological differences, treaties on trade and water, as well as issues of governance.⁸ Much has also consequently been spoken and written about the actual significance of such a porous border, especially since the COVID-19 lockdown and the dissatisfaction with the issue of embargo and blockades; and most recently, the border disputes concerning Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and Lipulekh.

Amidst these developments, resource sharing has been a prominent issue⁹ (Chauhan) and so has the evident necessity of cross-border disaster management for which blame has often been shifted to either side.¹⁰ Moreover, unplanned development on both sides of the border—without fully considering environmental concerns and climate-induced risks in high-level state dialogues—has heightened vulnerabilities.¹¹ This discussion has largely been focused on two major interconnected fronts: with one being focused on water treaties and

resource management, and the other establishing the causality of mobility and displacement due to climate-induced events. The only difference is that along the open border where both issues may be securitized, shared waters have decidedly and constantly been a source of tension amongst various actors involved in or observing its management.

Centering Security: Perceptions of Disasters, Instability and Scarcity

Communities along the India-Nepal border that share rivers also share—sometimes disproportionately—the costs of climate change. Studies highlight changes in seasonal migratory patterns due to climate stressors affecting agricultural income,¹² and projections indicate the probability of mass displacement from disasters and shifts in livelihoods.¹³ As a result, the issue of climate migrants and climate refugees has gained increased attention. It remains to be seen how countries now facing water insecurities¹⁴ deal with increased movement, where migration has long been an adaptation technique. There have been instances where communities have crossed onto the other side due to water shortages.¹⁵

Moreover, if water and food insecurity were prioritized, extreme weather conditions would reveal that the most vulnerable have been hit hardest. This is due to a combination of erratic monsoons, limited water access, over-extraction of groundwater, haphazard infrastructural development, and the lack of attention from the central government to those on the margins. These issues are exacerbated by the failure to link the climate crisis with the water crisis in bilateral negotiations.¹⁶ Multiple rivers flow down from the Himalayas cutting across Nepal into India and the tributaries supply freshwater for irrigation and household needs. Amidst the lingering mistrust lining certain agreements, water availability being impacted by climate change and weather variability in the region has been an enduring concern.¹⁷

A study on the Koshi and Gandak rivers, for example, highlighted transboundary issues in flood risk management. It outlined the effects of climate variability on changing precipitation patterns that influence flooding, the role of embankments, and other factors, detailing their impact on agriculture and sanitation. The study also emphasized the costs of neglecting traditional adaptation practices.¹⁸ It also summarized how certain narratives have circulated myths about the causes of floods being driven by vested interests. This coincides with the cooperation seen through the Nepal–India Joint Committee on Inundation and Flood

Management.¹⁹ Even so, while progress has been recorded on paper, it is hindered by the fact that these meetings rarely result in concrete action plans and solutions. Both governments have reportedly been less committed to addressing the issues in the border villages.²⁰

Moreover, these “myths” are part of “socio-political constructions,”²¹ either conveying that Nepal, as an upper riparian state, releases floodwater into Bihar, or reinforcing the understanding that embankments can provide lasting protection from disasters. These studies also point towards how climate-induced events, coupled with poor infrastructure and environmental degradation, can increase the frequency and magnitude of such disasters in the future. This is a cause for concern because as a study in the Narayani and Mahakali basins pointed out, the riparian regions and community structures are not resilient to the potential impacts of climate-induced disasters.²²

Exacerbating Existing Apprehensions? Governance, Community Resilience, and Insecurities

Despite the strong historical, economic, cultural, and religious ties between the two countries, there have been strains in Nepal-India relations due to various factors, including those mentioned earlier. Water-related concerns regarding transboundary rivers, treaty arrangements, and sharing mechanisms have been a source of recurring discontent on political platforms. This is evident in the discourse surrounding treaties, including those related to the Mahakali, Koshi, and Gandak rivers.²³

The agreements are viewed as unequal in Nepal, with most of the benefits seen as favoring India.²⁴ Water agreements have also come under the nationalist gaze for reasons pertaining to the “hydro-hegemon” status linked with India’s agreements with not just Nepal, but also Bhutan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.²⁵ The success of implementing the projects outlined in the documents has often been subject to diverging political and security interests, particularly concerning, but not limited to, land ownership, navigation, compensation measures, territorial integrity, water sharing, and energy trade.²⁶ These concerns are not limited to major rivers; they have come to the forefront of the climate vulnerability discourse as communities increasingly face water-related insecurities, which in the past have led to disagreements and conflict.

The Koshi floods serve as a prominent example where local officials have their own grievances regarding inclusion in decision-making processes. Communities have attempted to propose solutions, but these have not received active support from the relevant authorities, who often overlook civil society initiatives. Meanwhile, dissatisfaction with the Koshi agreement continues to overshadow development efforts.²⁷ Even though governments play a central role in the debate over treaties, the lack of proper governance at the borders has heightened vulnerabilities, leaving communities without protective measures against recurring disasters.²⁸ There is still a need for real-time information and knowledge-sharing across borders, with coordinated state responses, along with revision and implementation of treaties.

The dispute surrounding the Pandai River offers another example. Stretching from Nepal to the West Champaran district in Bihar, it highlights the importance of smaller transboundary rivers that remain vital to households in the riparian region. A 2017 report noted that the impacts of climate change were becoming more apparent in many shared rivers. Smaller rivers, like the Pandai, were not receiving due consideration, and the importance of traditional institutions was diminishing. Conflicts arose due to water insecurity, with villages in Nepal asserting sovereign rights over resources, while downstream villages claimed their “natural right to water.”²⁹

Resilience and Negotiations

When considering climate change as a security issue in this context, it is important to also understand community-level dynamics. For example, cooperation through community-led early warning systems for flood management has been observed at certain points along the Ratu River.³⁰ However, despite some success stories,³⁰ studies have found that both state-to-state and community cooperation, and cross-border communication, have generally lagged on many fronts.³¹ This is because resilience incorporates not only coping mechanisms but also adaptation and transformation capacities.³² In this regard, a common critique is that state-led initiatives have been centralized, with local perspectives across the border often sidelined. This is particularly evident as investments in hydropower infrastructure increase, an area where both India and China are allegedly competing. India’s interests are said to focus more on water than

on hydropower, while actors in Nepal have been primarily concerned with preserving their political power.³³

The Upper Karnali Hydropower Project and the Saptakoshi High Dam Multipurpose Project are initiatives in Nepal that were linked to Indian interests in securing its water needs, where cooperation masked underlying asymmetries.³⁴ Further, studies that have also highlighted the securitization of transboundary rivers. Indian hydrocrats sometimes wield their influence in Nepal's hydropower development when they perceive risks to their own state's water security. They capitalize on their knowledge to structurally and statutorily offset perceived threats of scarcity and availability.³⁵ Another example is the questions raised about India's interest in Chinese investment in Nepal's hydropower sector, where narratives emerged suggesting that India was more focused on safeguarding its future water supply than on hydroelectricity.³⁶

An open border does not, therefore, signify mutuality or absolute trust; however, it does add a dimension of interdependence in relations. In terms of regional tensions that have plagued cooperation agendas, India-Nepal relations is still fairly on stable ground owing to the diverse intersections of people-to-people relations and diplomatic channels, though there has been a noticeable dip in trust within state-level associations since the 2015 unofficial blockade and the Kalapani dispute. Amidst considerations of sovereignty and rights along the border, the projected risks of water and food insecurity, heightened by climate stressors, call for climate change to be central to negotiations, especially when dealing with shared resources.

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21, BLOCK C, QUTAB INSTITUTIONAL
AREA, NEW DELHI, DELHI 110016

PHONE: 011-43104566
EMAIL: OFFICE@CSDRONLINE.ORG
WEB: WWW.CSDRONLINE.ORG TWITTER:
[@CSDR_INDIA](https://twitter.com/CSDR_INDIA)