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## Nepal-Uzbekistan Relations: The Future Ahead

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**A**bstract As landlocked nations, Nepal and Uzbekistan share common challenges and obstacles in trade, connectivity and economic development. However, the shifting connectivity landscape in Central and South Asia presents new opportunities for enhanced cooperation. This policy brief examines the strategic potential for strengthening ties between the two countries by addressing key developmental constraints to overcome limited engagement. Additionally, it emphasises leveraging the comparative advantages of their respective economies to create mutual benefits. The brief concludes by offering important recommendations to enhance bilateral and multilateral cooperation, fostering growth and development for both countries.

## Introduction

The geopolitical and geo-economics significance of South Asia and Central Asia has increasingly garnered global attention, driven by their strategic locations, abundant natural resources, rapid economic progress and expanding connectivity initiatives. This growing importance is reflected in large-scale projects designed to enhance trade and energy cooperation, positioning these regions as key actors in shaping regional and global connectivity. The development of major transit corridors, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), Asian Highways, and the Trans-Afghan Corridor, underscores their critical role in facilitating trade between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, further solidifying their status as critical hubs in the evolving global economic landscape.<sup>1</sup> Nepal and Uzbekistan stand at this pivotal juncture and must seize the opportunity to drive their development.

Nepal and Uzbekistan share a rich cultural history, along with several similarities and common challenges. Historical and cultural connections can be traced back to the era of the ancient Silk Road, which existed sometime between the first and second centuries BC. Uzbekistan, with its cities like Samarkand, Tashkent, and Bukhara, played a pivotal role in the Silk Road trade that connected Central Asia to South Asia, including regions that now constitute modern-day Nepal. These cities were hubs of commerce, culture, and education, and they facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and traditions between distant lands. The Buddhist heritage shared by both nations also hints at historical linkages. Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha in Nepal, and the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Road into Central Asia, including regions of Uzbekistan, underscore their ancient ties. This shared heritage forms a cultural bridge that can be further explored and celebrated through tourism and cultural exchanges.

Moreover, as members of the Group of Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), both face common economic and logistical constraints. Both nations are heavily reliant on neighbouring countries for transit and trade, which in turn leads to high transportation costs, while also needing to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes to ensure stable access to global markets.

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<sup>1</sup> [“Strengthening connectivity of countries in South and Central Asia”](#), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

Therefore, their geographical positions make diplomatic relations crucial, not only to tackle these challenges but also to capitalise on their strategic locations for economic and political gains. Hence, a focused partnership between Nepal and Uzbekistan holds immense potential, as they can learn from each other's approaches and collaborate on shared priorities.

Realising this potential, Nepal and Uzbekistan established formal diplomatic ties on 27 January 2018.<sup>2</sup> The bilateral relationship holds strategic importance in shifting regional geopolitics and global trends. Uzbekistan is located at the heart of Central Asia, which makes it a critical hub for regional trade, energy, and connectivity initiatives. As a key partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Uzbekistan has actively developed infrastructure projects such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway to strengthen its role as a transit corridor between Europe, China, and South Asia.<sup>3</sup> It also plays a major role in regional energy cooperation, exporting natural gas and participating in cross-border electricity projects like the Central Asia–South Asia power project (CASA 1000), which transmits surplus hydropower from Central to South Asia.

Nepal, seeking to expand its trade beyond its immediate neighbours, can benefit from Uzbekistan's proactive engagement in regional initiatives by exploring transit routes and trade corridors to diversify its economic partnerships. On the other hand, Nepal's geography also presents opportunities as it is a bridge between two major Asian economies, India and China. Harnessing this potential, however, requires significant diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation from both ends.

Bilaterally, Uzbekistan can utilise Nepal's expertise in hydropower development, which could serve as a model for optimising water resources and enhancing renewable energy capacity. Additionally, Nepal's well-established tourism industry, particularly in trekking and eco-tourism, could provide insights for Uzbekistan as it seeks to develop its Silk Road heritage and tourism sector. Joint initiatives in adventure tourism, cultural exchanges, and sustainable tourism development could help Uzbekistan attract more international visitors. Nepal, on the other hand, can benefit from Uzbekistan's industrial development by leveraging its expertise in manufacturing, textile production, and agricultural processing. Uzbekistan has a well-established textile industry, ranking among the world's top cotton producers, and its advancements in fabric production and export could support Nepal's growing textile sector through knowledge exchange, joint ventures, and investment opportunities. Between January and July 2024, Uzbekistan exported textile products worth over \$1.7 billion to 85 countries worldwide.<sup>4</sup> By collaborating on technology transfer and industrial policy frameworks, Nepal can enhance its production capabilities, create jobs, and attract foreign investment. Additionally, collaboration in agricultural research, irrigation techniques, and food processing

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<sup>2</sup> [Nepal and Uzbekistan ties](#), *The Himalayan Times*, Kathmandu, 28 January 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Azimzhan Khitakhunov, "[The New Era of Central Asia-China Cooperation: The Case of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway](#)", *Eurasian Research Institute*, 06 June 2024.

<sup>4</sup> "[Uzbekistan's textile exports exceed \\$1.7bn in 2024](#)," *Daryo*, 11 September 2024.



could boost Nepal's productivity and exports. Within the framework of multilateral cooperation, the two countries collaborate actively on international platforms.<sup>5</sup> Nepal and Uzbekistan engage in multilateral cooperation through various international platforms, focusing on trade, development, and regional connectivity. Both nations actively participate in the UN, advocating for better transit rights and financial support for LLDCs. Their shared membership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) reinforces common positions on global governance and economic cooperation. As part of China's BRI, they seek to enhance infrastructure and trade links between South and Central Asia. Uzbekistan's full membership in the SCO and Nepal's status as a dialogue partner provide avenues for economic and security collaboration. Additionally, both countries engage in the WTO to improve trade facilitation and market access. These multilateral efforts contribute to stronger economic and political ties while addressing common challenges. These forums provide a space for both nations to advocate for their shared interests, including economic development, sustainable growth, and better connectivity for landlocked countries.

Therefore, establishing a long-term partnership between Nepal and Uzbekistan presents significant prospects for economic advancement while strengthening regional stability and connectivity. However, despite these possibilities, their bilateral engagement remains an under-researched area. This study examines the current state of their relations, shared challenges, key opportunities for deeper collaboration, and the obstacles that must be addressed. It also provides strategic recommendations to enhance cooperation and maximise the potential benefits for both nations.

## Historical Context of the Relationship

The political, cultural, and commercial interactions between Central Asia and the South Asian subcontinent can be traced back to the first and second centuries BC, particularly during the expansion of the Kushan Empire into southern central India, encompassing the Himalayan region. The Kushans governed significant overland routes (the so-called Silk Route) connecting China and Rome, which were essential for facilitating trade and economic exchanges between these distinct regions. Culturally, Buddhism proliferated from India into Central Asia and subsequently to China during the era of the Kushan Empire. Since then, Nepal has held significant importance for Uzbekistan, as it is the birthplace of Lord Buddha.<sup>6</sup>

## Current State of Nepal-Uzbekistan Relations

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and Nepal signifies a strategically significant yet largely underutilised opportunity for the enhancement of cooperation between Central and South Asia. This diplomatic initiative has successfully culminated in the formalisation of relations between Nepal and all Central Asian republics.

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<sup>5</sup> [“Nepal establishes diplomatic ties with Uzbekistan,”](#) *Lokantar*, 28 January 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Bobojan Gafurov, [“The Great Civilization of the Kushans”](#), *Courier*, published by UNESCO, February 1969, pp.04-06.

However, the development of bilateral relations has been constrained by structural limitations and competing regional priorities, rather than by intentional political decisions.

The institutional framework of bilateral relations is still in its nascent stage and is marked by the absence of permanent diplomatic missions, as well as limited formal mechanisms for regular consultations. This institutional void significantly hinders the potential for sustainable diplomatic engagement and effective policy coordination. Presently, interactions are facilitated through permanent missions to the United Nations—a structure that, while operational, inherently restricts the scope and depth of relations.

The meeting in July 2021 between Abdulaziz Kamilov, then Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, and Bharat Raj Poudyal, the then foreign secretary of Nepal in Tashkent, represented a significant high-level bilateral engagement. However, it primarily exemplifies the situational nature of contemporary diplomatic interactions.<sup>7</sup> Convened within the framework of the “Central and South Asia: Regional Interconnectedness” conference, the meeting culminated in a series of declarations of intent yet failed to yield specific political initiatives. This outcome highlights a disparity between diplomatic rhetoric and the current state of cooperation.

The economic relations between the two countries exhibit a concerning trend, characterised by a significant decline in trade volume, which suggests underlying structural issues rather than mere cyclical fluctuations. Uzbekistan’s exports to Nepal decreased from \$514,000 in 2016 to \$25,400 in 2022, while Nepal’s exports to Uzbekistan also diminished during the same period. These trends highlight fundamental barriers to economic cooperation.<sup>8</sup> This trading model, characterised by low-cost goods and a lack of diversification, underscores the absence of strategic economic complementarities within their bilateral relations.

Despite the more advanced dimensions of multilateral relations, they predominantly manifest common stances on international issues rather than fostering active bilateral cooperation. The involvement of both countries in the United Nations system, particularly within the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and forums addressing the concerns of developing and landlocked nations, has not culminated in coordinated political initiatives or collaborative development programs. While the shared membership of the two nations in the NAM holds symbolic significance, it has not produced substantive benefits.

The regional context significantly influences the evolution of bilateral relations. The strategic positioning of Uzbekistan within Central Asia, coupled with its interactions with major powers such as Russia and China, presents both opportunities and constraints for bolstering cooperation with South Asian nations. Likewise, the geographic situation of Nepal, positioned between China and India, requires meticulous calibration of its foreign affairs, which directly impacts its autonomous bilateral initiatives with Central Asian states.

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<sup>7</sup> [“FM Abdulaziz Kamilov receives First Deputy Minister of Nepal”](#), *Kun.uz*, 12 July 2021

<sup>8</sup> [Uzbekistan \(UZB\) and Nepal \(NPL\) Bilateral Trade](#), Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)

## Common Concerns

Uzbekistan and Nepal's bilateral relations can be characterised by their shared status as landlocked nations, which presents both strategic challenges and opportunities for political collaboration. Among the 44 landlocked countries globally, the two nations encounter various but interconnected issues in accessing international markets; their approaches to reaching maritime trade routes exemplify distinct regional realities. Uzbekistan is implementing a multifaceted strategy through several transport corridors, including the Trans-Afghan Corridor, the Trans-Caspian Corridor, and the INSTC, thereby securing access to the ports of Iran, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan. Conversely, Nepal has historically prioritised its transit corridors through Indian territory, particularly via the port of Kolkata and Vishakhapatnam, which mirrors its profound economic integration with the Indian subcontinent. Nepal has been discussing with India using the Kandla seaport in Gujarat to gain access to European, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian markets.

It is perceived that China's BRI could, to some extent, mitigate their landlocked status. Nepal's participation in the BRI since 2017, in conjunction with Uzbekistan's pre-existing membership, presents opportunities for enhancing regional connectivity. However, this theoretical consensus has yet to materialise into tangible bilateral transit corridor initiatives, highlighting the geographical constraints and complex regional dynamics that hinder the development of infrastructure.

Climate change presents a critical challenge that both countries must address with practical solutions. Nepal is encountering pressing threats such as glacial melting, frequent flooding, and escalating deforestation. The Community Forestry Initiative, established in 1993,<sup>9</sup> represents a significant political endeavour that has yielded tangible results, increasing forest coverage from 26 percent in 1992 to 45 percent in 2016.<sup>10</sup> The program's impact on approximately three million households, roughly 30 percent of Nepal's population, underscores the potential of effective ecological management.

The framework for climate change adaptation in Nepal, particularly through the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA)<sup>11</sup> and the Local Adaptation Plan of Action (LAPA),<sup>12</sup> provides significant insights. These initiatives have facilitated the implementation of numerous projects in the domains of agriculture, water resource management, and disaster risk reduction, thereby effectively embedding climate change adaptation within both national and local development agendas. This multifaceted approach to infrastructure development—encompassing irrigation systems, drinking water supply facilities, and micro-hydro power

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<sup>9</sup> "[Community Conservation Resilience Initiative in Nepal](#)", Global Forest Coalition, 05 June 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Cassidy, E. "[How Nepal regenerated its forests](#)", *NASA Earth Observatory*.

<sup>11</sup> "[Nepal National Adaptation Programme of Action \(NAPA\)](#)", United Nations Development Programme, September 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Penniston, B, "[A review of Nepal's Local Adaptation Plans of Action \(LAPA\)](#)," *USAID Climate Links*, 01 January 2013.

plants—serves as a potential model for addressing analogous challenges in Uzbekistan, where issues of water scarcity and desertification increasingly threaten sustainable development.

Labour migration dynamics represent a significant political challenge, though they manifest differently across various perspectives. Nepal’s experience with international migration is notable; as of 2021, approximately 3.5 million of its citizens resided abroad. The economic implications of this phenomenon are evident in remittances, which constituted over 23 percent of the country’s GDP in 2020, positioning Nepal as the seventh highest globally in terms of the impact of remittances on GDP.<sup>13</sup> This migration model has substantially contributed to a decline in poverty rates, which fell by nearly 20 percent between 1995 and 2004.<sup>14</sup>

Uzbekistan confronts similar issues in managing labour migration, with estimates ranging from 2 to 3 million nationals working abroad. The economic effect is comparable, with remittances accounting for 17 percent of GDP in 2022, though this ratio has recently declined.<sup>15</sup> Growing policy attention to migration management is seen in the government’s institutional response, especially through the diplomatic representation and enlarged mission of the Foreign Labour Migration Agency.

The appeal of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) constitutes an additional challenge, further exacerbated by analogous structural constraints, including limited regional economic integration, inadequate transportation infrastructure, and challenges in cultivating attractive investment climates. These pervasive obstacles underscore the potential for enhanced policy coordination and knowledge exchange in formulating more effective investment promotion strategies.

Both countries must also carefully manage the impact of regional powers, which necessitates complex diplomatic manoeuvring. In Central Asia, Uzbekistan manages partnerships with Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union, while Nepal strikes a balance between India and China. This simultaneous requirement for balanced foreign policy approaches presents opportunities for exchanging diplomatic strategies and experiences in maintaining independent policy space while engaging with powerful neighbours.

### Key Opportunities for Enhanced Cooperation

The potential for enhanced collaboration between Uzbekistan and Nepal should be examined within the broader framework of evolving connectivity dynamics in Central and South Asia. While current bilateral interactions remain relatively modest, there is significant strategic potential to transform this relationship into a more robust partnership, particularly in light of the complementary economic attributes of both nations and their shared developmental challenges.

<sup>13</sup> Rijal, A, “[Opportunities and challenges of migration for Nepal](#)”, Nepal Economic Forum, 10 August 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Lokshin, M., Bontch-Osmolovski, M., & Glinskaya, E, “[Work-related migration and poverty reduction in Nepal](#)” (Policy Research Working Paper No. 4231), *The World Bank*, 01 May 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Saida, N, “[How are patterns of labour migration from Uzbekistan changing?](#)” *The Diplomat*, 19 April 2024.

The economic domain presents a highly pragmatic opportunity for strengthening bilateral relations, although this potential remains largely untapped. Uzbekistan's vast natural resources, particularly its status as the world's sixth-largest<sup>16</sup> holder of gold reserves, along with its capacity for energy production, align well with Nepal's burgeoning industrial development needs. However, actualising this economic potential necessitates addressing substantial infrastructure and institutional challenges. The implementation of targeted trade facilitation mechanisms, coupled with comprehensive market research, would be essential for fostering significant economic engagement.

In the context of bilateral relations, regional interconnectedness offers both a strategic opportunity and a considerable challenge. Historically, trade and interpersonal interactions have been constrained by the absence of direct transit links; however, emerging regional infrastructure projects present new possibilities. The prospective integration of existing transit routes through neighbouring countries may establish viable trade pathways, albeit necessitating intricate international coordination and substantial political commitment. In conjunction with Nepal's transit agreements with China and India, Uzbekistan's experience in establishing the Trans-Afghan Corridor could serve as a foundation for innovative connectivity options.

Within multilateral institutions, the analogous status of both nations as landlocked developing countries facilitates a natural alignment on various international issues. This shared experience could be leveraged more effectively, particularly in advocating for enhanced transit rights and development assistance in international forums. The framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where Uzbekistan holds full membership, and Nepal aspires for increased engagement, provides a legal platform for strengthening bilateral collaboration beyond conventional diplomatic channels.

Development cooperation represents a fundamental avenue for strengthening bilateral relationships, particularly in addressing shared challenges. Climate change adaptation and water resource management emerge as pivotal domains where both nations encounter analogous issues while employing unique strategies for mitigation. Uzbekistan's proficiency in managing water scarcity and implementing large-scale irrigation initiatives could facilitate Nepal's agricultural development. Conversely, Nepal's successful community forest management programs and disaster resilience strategies may offer insightful lessons for Uzbekistan's environmental sustainability initiatives.

Nevertheless, capitalising on these opportunities necessitates a more systematic approach to bilateral cooperation. The current irregularity of diplomatic relations underscores the significance of establishing consistent consultative mechanisms and sector-specific working groups. Such institutional frameworks would be essential for converting broad collaborative potential into concrete projects and enduring partnerships.

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<sup>16</sup> "[Uzbekistan ranks sixth globally in gold reserve growth, expanding holdings by 154 tons from 2013 to 2023](#)", *Daryo*, 08 October 2024.



Furthermore, the geopolitical dynamics in both regions substantially impact the prospects for enhanced bilateral collaboration. It is imperative for both nations to approach their interactions with regional powers with prudence while endeavouring to fortify their bilateral relationship. This necessitates a nuanced diplomatic strategy that acknowledges prevailing regional affiliations while delineating opportunities for bilateral cooperation that do not jeopardise established regional partnerships.

The development of a more robust bilateral relationship should be progressive, building upon existing multilateral frameworks while simultaneously cultivating novel bilateral practices. Emphasis should be placed on areas where substantive advancements are most feasible, such as technical collaboration in agricultural practices and environmental stewardship, while concurrently pursuing long-term objectives like enhanced trade and connectivity.

### **Challenges in Bilateral Relations**

The limited development of bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Nepal can be attributed to several interconnected structural and institutional challenges that warrant thorough examination. The economic dimension is perhaps the most salient manifestation of these constraints, as evidenced by persistently low trade volumes and declining commercial engagement. As previously mentioned, Uzbekistan's exports to Nepal experienced a substantial decline, falling from \$514 thousand in 2016 to \$25.4 thousand in 2022. Similarly, Nepal's exports to Uzbekistan also underwent a marked reduction, decreasing from \$79.7 thousand to \$7.95 thousand during the same timeframe.

Geographic restrictions present substantial obstacles to bilateral collaboration, particularly in Nepal. The nation's Himalayan topography gives rise to considerable infrastructural challenges, characterised by unpaved roads and vulnerability to natural disasters and seasonal disruptions. The absence of direct air and rail connectivity between Uzbekistan and Nepal exacerbates these issues, resulting in significant economic barriers to trade and interpersonal interactions. Although theoretical transit routes through China or India are posited, their practical implementation encounters considerable political and logistical complexities.

The institutional framework for bilateral cooperation is inadequately developed, lacking mechanisms for regular consultation and collaboration. This absence of formal channels for ongoing dialogue and cooperation hinders the capacity to effectively address emerging opportunities and challenges within the partnership. Although both countries engage in various global forums, the deficiency of established institutional pathways has impeded the translation of shared objectives into tangible bilateral initiatives.

These challenges are further exacerbated by restricted connectivity between individuals and cultural exchanges. The current visa arrangement between both countries is very difficult for robust bilateral engagements. The lack of direct transportation links, in conjunction with limited academic and cultural exchange programs, has resulted in minimal mutual

understanding and awareness between the two communities. This psychological divide intensifies the difficulty of cultivating closer economic and political relations.

The cumulative impact of these issues accentuates the imperative for a comprehensive policy framework addressing bilateral relations, one that encompasses both structural constraints and institutional limitations. This framework must take into account not only the immediate barriers to collaboration but also the broader regional context within which bilateral partnerships must be fortified.

### **Recommendations**

1. There is stagnation in the bilateral relations despite the establishment of formal diplomatic ties between both countries since 2018. In order to enhance these bilateral relations, it is essential for both countries to establish direct diplomatic missions in each other's territories. This initiative would facilitate trade, economic cooperation, tourism, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people interactions.
2. A mutually beneficial scenario exists in the context of foreign investments and technology transfer between the two nations, as Uzbekistan possesses a more substantial economy characterised by robust manufacturing sectors, while Nepal seeks foreign investments and technological advancements to facilitate rapid economic growth. The insights and experiences of Uzbekistan could prove advantageous for Nepal. In this context, Nepal could extend specialised incentives to attract Uzbek investors to participate in its economic development.
3. Frequent meetings and interactions should be facilitated at the Track II and Track 1.5 levels, particularly between business associations and think tanks, to explore innovative solutions and identify remedies for the current challenges in bilateral relations.
4. Both countries should establish bilateral Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) to facilitate the exchange of faculty at the institutional level and provide scholarships for students. This initiative aims to foster a more profound understanding of each other's societies and approaches to global issues.
5. Despite possessing significant tourism potential (including mountain, heritage, religious, and health tourism) and promising business opportunities, the current visa arrangements between Uzbekistan and Nepal pose a substantial barrier to the enhancement of bilateral relations. While Uzbekistan provides an online visa option for Nepalese citizens, it is noteworthy that Uzbekistan is not included in the list of countries eligible for visa on arrival in Nepal. Therefore, it is imperative to establish reciprocal visa provisions to facilitate the movement of citizens between both nations.

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that, despite the existence of formal diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and Nepal for over seven years, the bilateral relationship has not demonstrated significant improvement. This is particularly notable given their strategic geographic locations, abundant natural resources, and shared challenges related to transit trade issues, the impacts of climate change, and the quest to institutionalise democratic governance. Moreover, the absence of high-level political visits in recent years and the absence of permanent missions in each other's territory has further hindered the potential for strengthening bilateral ties. At the multilateral level, there has been limited coordination and collaboration between the two countries. In an era characterised by globalisation, where nations are profoundly interconnected and interdependent, both Uzbekistan and Nepal should leverage the connectivity opportunities available in Central and South Asia to enhance trade and investment. For example, the Chabahar Port presents an opportunity for a transit port for both countries. Overall, there exists substantial strategic potential to transform this relationship into a more robust partnership, particularly in light of the complementary economic attributes of both nations and their shared developmental challenges.

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