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Krishna P. Pandey

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# The proposed Nepal-China trans-border railway in Nepal's collective imagination

KRISHNA P. PANDEY  
*Purbanchal University*

Nepal-China relations have been amicable since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1955. Consequently, the image of China in Nepal's collective imagination has remained positive. This imagination reached new heights when China welcomed the promulgation of Nepal's new constitution in September 2015, while India, opposed to the promulgation, imposed an embargo. The Indian embargo not only undermined Nepali sovereignty by disapproving of the contents of the new constitution, but also compelled Nepal to think about lessening its dependency on India. The most obvious route was to expand trans-border connectivity with China. In March 2016, Nepal and China inked a 'historic' trade deal aiming to expand trans-border connectivity including a much-hyped trans-border railway link. Drawing broad public support, the deal had the effect of revitalising Nepali aspirations of coming out of an 'India-locked' trade and transit. This article examines opposing voices regarding the significance of this shift. On the one hand, there are those that embrace expansion of Nepal-China cross-border railway connectivity. Here, hopes are that railway connectivity will shift Nepal's destiny away from dependence on India. On the other hand, many are wary that such a project is unaffordable, technically difficult, and most importantly, it plays into China's interests in South Asian sub-regional geopolitics.

## Introduction

In March 2016, many people in Nepal cheered the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between China and Nepal with the goal of expanding trans-border connectivity including a trans-border railway following the five-months-long Indian embargo on Nepal imposed in 2015. The de facto Indian embargo had not only undermined Nepali sovereignty but also compelled the landlocked country to think about lessening its dependency on its southern neighbour. Again in June 2018, during

Prime Minister of Nepal K. P. Sharma Oli's visit to China, both countries signed an additional MoU on cooperation on railway connectivity giving the 2016 trade deal concrete shape. This was followed yet again by celebrations back in Nepal. The agreement for building a trans-border railway under China's BRI project, which, in Nepal's collective imagination has been ingrained as a 'Chinese Rail' was not the result of Nepali folk reverie. It rather reflects the abiding aspiration among a

majority of Nepali citizens of being 'true sovereign', bearing far-reaching geopolitical importance for both countries. The agreement of building the trans-border railway was signed in the aftermath of Indian embargo as it was more needed for Nepal than for China. The likelihood of Chinese trains passing across the Himalayas is the 'most spectacular and most discussed' project in Nepal (Murton & Lord 2020: 7). Nepal's premier visited China first in March 2016 following the embargo, which prompted Nepal to sign the MoU on trade and transit with China for the first time, and the second MoU in June 2018 to push the 2016 MoU a step forward. Again in October 2019, during the visit of the Chinese president to Nepal, both countries reiterated to bring the dream of the trans-border railway into reality and China agreed to begin a feasibility study of the project. During the last four years, the progress on building the trans-border railway has been realised to the extent that it moved from Nepal's request to China in 2016 to signing of the MoU in 2018 and China being ready for the feasibility study in 2019.

Nepal's indifference to orient its people on the potential consequences of India-lockedness in the past led to the people's apathy to think of seeking alternate access and pressurise the government for connectivity with China. For instance, Nepal government did nothing to expand or improve the standard of Araniko highway which was an only route to China since its construction in the 1960s, let alone expanding other road networks and railways. India benefitted from this apathy as its monopoly over Nepal's trade and transit access became more secured whereas Nepal's transport connectivity with China remained a daydream for long. Nepal realised the constraints of being 'India-locked' only after the embargo strangled public life in 2015 by halting the transportation of goods. The government was left either submit to Indian

embargo or expand road and railroad connectivity with China for future.

Since the ascendancy of Xi Jinping in the power in China in 2013 and launching of much-hyped Belt and Road Initiative, many South Asian countries including Nepal experienced new form of regional power balance and aspired for expanding their connectivity with China. This change in the South Asian sub-regional geopolitics has been prompting a turn on India-centric collective imagination because, for Nepal, the hope of trans-border railway seemed legitimate as soon as China extended its railway network to Tibetan city Xigatse and also planned to extend further south towards Nepal-China border. China's technological advancement in the railway made it possible to dream of its trains passing through high altitude Tibetan plateau and rough Himalayan ranges leaving Indian railway technology far behind.

The idea of 'imagined power corridors' has also been taking shape under the project of trans-Himalayan transmission connectivity (Murton & Lord 2020) along with the idea of, let me call it, 'imagined Chinese rail' across the Himalayas. However, the transmission project has been left unattended with regard to the formation of Nepali collective imagination on Nepal-China connectivity. One of the reasons of this could be the fact that people could not establish direct link between the Indian embargo and the need of trans-Himalayan transmission line. In this backdrop, I leave the idea of 'imagined power corridors' aside and inquire only how Nepali collective imagination has taken the agreement of trans-border railway as a panacea for India-lockedness.

This research is based on the analysis of the opinions expressed through news, interviews, op-eds and letter to the editor from the four largest national dailies (two English and two Nepali language dailies published from Nepal) having contents of Nepal-China trade

and transit agreement particularly trans-border railway connectivity. The contents chosen for coding have been drawn from print versions of these papers so the opinions expressed beyond the space of these papers mark the limitation of this research. I have included the contents for coding only from the four papers preceding and following one week from the two visits (first in March 2016 and second in June 2018) of Nepal's prime minister to China because, during this period, the public opinion on the imagined railway project was at the peak with wide media coverage. The coding helped me conceptualise two categories of collective imagination: enthusiastic collective imagination and pessimistic collective imagination.

#### *Earlier efforts in trans-Himalayan connectivity*

There are quite a few historical references to trans-border trade, and interaction occurred between Nepal and Tibet even in the ancient times. Tibet was the trade hub for Nepal for long but here I concentrate on the efforts made only after Nepal opened its door for the outside world in the 1950s and the annexation of Tibet to China in 1951. Nepal had provided a gateway between South Asia, and China and even to Central Asia through Lhasa for free and unrestricted trade before East India Company opened the direct routes from Sikkim (Adhikari 2015; Thapaliyal 2017). The trans-Himalayan trade routes passed through Nepal were vibrant due to Nepal's strong trade relation with Tibet until the 1950s. Particularly, salt trade routes along the trans-Himalayan passes, such as Kora-La between Mustang (Nepal) and Tibet, were of special significance in terms of Nepal-Tibet trade turning themselves into famous conduits between the two countries (Acharya 2015; Murton, Lord & Beazley 2016; Murton 2017). However, the lack of concerted efforts of modernising these passes for more efficient trade and transportation put China in a sort of

geographical isolation keeping Nepal far away from enjoying the benefits of the Chinese economy until now.

Nepal realised the consequences of geographical isolation with China only after the collapse of Rana oligarchy in Nepal in the 1950s. The fact is that Nepal's isolation from China was apparent in a speech of the Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru in 1950. He stated in the lower house of Indian Parliament, 'any child knows that you cannot go to Nepal without passing through India...' (quoted in Sigdel 2016: 1). His statement displays the highhandedness entrenched in the mind of the Indian leaders about their one of the neighbours' geopolitical constraints. With the regime change from a family plutocracy to democracy, Nepal prioritised establishing diplomatic relations with its neighbouring and third countries as an effort to expose itself to the international forum. Meanwhile, Nepal signed the Peace and Friendship Treaty with China on 21 March 1960 after a decade of having signed a similar Treaty with India in 1950 that brought the two countries closer than before. Several Indian scholars assert that China's request of signing Peace and Friendship Treaty had been turned down by Nepal (see Ghoble 1992; Ramakant 1994) however the joint communiqué issued at the end of premier B. P. Koirala's visit to China in 1960 states that he had appreciated the Chinese proposal for a Treaty of Peace and Friendship. They also claim that Nepal had declined the Chinese proposal for building a road link between the two countries (Ghoble 1992; Ramakant 1994). Their claims were not justified as both countries signed the treaty under the premiership of B. P. Koirala in April 1962 and the construction of Kathmandu-Kodari highway proceeded. Literally, Nepal partly broke its dependence on India only after the construction of Araniko highway in the 1960s amid Indian disapproval (Ramakant

1994) however the limited access to China through this highway could not practically bring Nepal out from India-lockedness.

Nepal's decision to construct the Kathmandu-Kodari highway with supports from China in 1961 was celebrated by the Nepalis, and the campaigns for raising symbolic funds also were launched in Kathmandu in June 1962 (Ray 1963: 416). This public celebration in Kathmandu and campaigns to collect funds conspicuously unveiled the suppressed collective imagination of that time, which displayed the discontent of Nepali people with Nepal's dependence on India. Another side of the coin is that, according to Ghoble (1992), Nepali leaders living in India after the king's 1961 takeover condemned the agreement of constructing a Kathmandu-Kodari highway as it would help communist subversion of Nepal. Their condemnation was the result of the fear that the highway would herald the way for Chinese communism to Nepal, which King Mahendra sarcastically challenged with his famous quote, 'communism would not enter in Nepal in a taxi-cab' (Ghoble 1992: 602). Even the wariness of India was not less than that of the Nepali leaders living in India. The following excerpt evidently brings out the Indian wariness embedded in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru:

In 1961, China and Nepal agreed to construct a 104-kilometre road from Kathmandu to Kodari on the China- Nepal border. Against this, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru expressed strong reservations stating that 'India's security interests would be adversely affected by the road'. He asserted that Nepal's failure to consult with India on the matter was a flagrant violation of the treaty of 1950, both in letter and spirit. (Quoted from Adhikari 2012: 85)

India's disfavour with regards to Nepal-China road connectivity rests outwardly on 'security concerns' but in reality the Kathmandu-Kodari highway threatened India's hegemony over Nepal and strengthened Nepal-China attachment eventually lessening Nepal's dependency on India. The construction of the highway was started in 1963 and opened in 1967. This proved successful in breaching the trans-Himalayan barrier instilling the belief that connectivity with China, despite geographical constraints, is practically possible by which dependence on India can be reduced. From Chinese point of view, Mao Zedong's comment epitomises Nepal's need for the trans-border highway. He told to his Nepali guests in August 1964, 'once these roads are opened, India may be a bit more respectful towards you' (quoted in Garver 1991: 957). Mao's remark is an excellent example of China's awareness of Indian overbearing treatment to Nepal produced by the lack of Nepal-China trans-border connectivity.

Unlike Nepal-China trans-border connectivity, Nepal-India trans-border connectivity, which numbers more than twenty road networks (and few planned railway tracks), did not receive public celebration when they were opened or announced. Rather, expansion of trans-border connectivity with India usually does not invite hue and cry whether it be roadway or railway. While the discussion of the trans-border railway with China was at its height, India also announced a trans-border railway to Kathmandu from Raxaul (India), though the public paid no heed. This duality implies crucial meaning in how differently Nepali collective imagination understands trans-border connectivity with China and India and how Nepali nationalistic sentiments are built in line with China and India's approach to Nepal.

There was an effort to renovate the Kodari highway in May 1989 (Garver 1991) but the

highway has remained in a miserable condition due to the indifference of the post-Panchayat governments formed after the 1990s political change. Several other efforts also were initiated to expand road networks through other trans-Himalayan passes but the indifference on the side of Nepali leadership left those efforts incomplete. For instance, Garver (1991) claims that China had expressed commitment to build Nepal-Tibet highway across Korala pass Mustang in the 1980s and a study to build similar highway via Tinkar pass in Darchula had been conducted in 1989 but the proposal unattended due to Nepal government's apathy. Kyirong-Rasuwadhi, the second trans-Himalayan road was brought into operation following the the 2015 earthquake whereas few other routes including Simikot-Hilsa and Korala pass that connect Tibet to Nepal's national road network are in pipeline now.

There is a belief that India has been creating hurdles in Nepal's efforts of expanding connectivity with China because the Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950 gave India great involvement in Nepal's internal affairs (Wagner 2016). In the words of Sharma (2018: 7), 'India raises its ears while Nepal tries to extend its relation with China'. The Birgunj-Kathmandu highway, which was completed with supports from India in 1956, linked Kathmandu with India but there was no reporting of Chinese protest to that. Contrastingly, the construction of Kathmandu-Kodari highway brought hue and cry among many Indian leaders and scholars. For some, Nepal's dissatisfaction with India's overbearing attitude led the country to approach China (Ghoble 1992) but for others, King Mahendra's difficulties with India opened the door for China in Nepal (Ramakant 1994). Nepal's approach to China for trans-Himalayan connectivity always remained as a scruple on Indian imagination. These arguments do not utterly overrule the claim that China does not

have any interest of strategic involvement in Nepal.

The Indian establishment was cautious that Mahendra and Birendra tried hard to bring out Nepal from India-lockedness by improving bilateral relations with China (Garver 1991). King Mahendra and his supporters were convinced that the 'Chinese threat' (as claimed by the Indians) was unreal and that China was basically good for the monarchy (Ray 1963). Not only the King and his supporters but also people felt the same, which was evident in the aforementioned celebration. An Indian scholar, Malik (2001: 86) writes that 'China has had limited success in keeping Nepal out of India's orbit.' Among the scholars who are of critical towards Nepal-China intimacy, there is a minimum common level of anxiety that Nepal has used China to pressurise India since the 1960s (Ramakant 1994), which has been frequently euphemised as Nepal playing 'China card'. But, a Chinese scholar calls this sort of euphemism 'over-simplified' and 'even superficial' (Hong-Wei 1985). By the same token, Nepali scholars also categorically decline the Indian assessment. Pitamber Sharma (2016), a renowned Nepali intellectual, overrides Indian claim with the assertion that Nepal can play only 'Nepal card'.

An attempt to link Kathmandu and Lhasa through trans-border bus service in 2005 via Kodari route was initiated for the first time in 2005 since the first opening of this route in 1967. As a result, Sajha Yatayat of Nepal used to operate twice-weekly between Kathmandu and Lhasa but the bus service was discontinued soon after (KC & Bhattarai 2018). Still, there are twenty-eight trans-Himalayan passes between Nepal and Tibet having commercial and strategic interest to Nepal (Thapaliyal 2017) though only two of them have been linked through the rough road network (Kodari and Rasuwadhi). If these passes are effectively utilised, for instance, the cargo

transportation from Lanzhou to Kathmandu through Xigatse, and Kyirong takes ten days, dramatically reducing the traditional thirty-five day maritime route through Indian ports (Sigdel 2016). The proposed railway will reduce time and the cost of cargo transport to Nepal, and simultaneously can connect the Chinese and Indian railway networks if, according to Acharya (2015), Qinghai-Tibet Railway is expanded to Patna in India through Nepal under BRI connectivity (see also Garver 1991: 975). The railway link will not only bridge two geographically distant territories but also reconnect two distant communities socially and culturally; communities once linked by the marital ties of Bhrikuti and Songtsen Gampo.

### *Locating the railway in the Nepali collective Imagination*

The extant literature on the sociological interpretation of imagination deals with two key aspects: Individual vis-à-vis collective imagination. My concern in this paper is with the imagination of Chinese trains framed by the recent geo-political trajectory between Nepal, India and China in the backdrop of the 2015 blockade and shared by the larger Nepali mass; a collective form of imagination. The term 'imagination' – be it individual or collective – is used to refer 'all the arbitrary evocation of things which are absent but which exist elsewhere' (Ricoeur 1978: 4). There are debates on what evokes the mental image of something that is absent or far away. However, Adams (2004: 278) is of the view that social forces shape imagination and imagination, in turn, helps produce a sense of reality. This is evident in Nepal's case that the nationalistic sentiment engendered from the consequences of being landlocked and sub-regional power imbalance have paved the way for the emergence of a new form of collective imagination which views the imagined trans-border railway as a 'national liberation' project.

For sociologists, collective imagination has become a useful concept to study the link between imaginary representations of social events with their existence since it represents the 'fantasies shared by a group of people' (Adams 2004: 278). A seminal work on collective imagination is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) derived from the individuals' shared imagination of belonging to a nation. Imagined communities delineate the strength of shared imaginaries of the individuals in binding them in a utopian idea of a 'nation'. Durkheim (1893) also discussed collective imagination in the form of 'collective consciousness' that helps build a sense of solidarity among unique individuals in industrial societies and subsequently determine their social actions. Powerful imaginaries associated with Chinese railways emanated from the sufferings caused by the 2015 Indian embargo. These provided a rich source of meanings that influenced the way Nepali people came to interpret Nepal's relations with China and India; feeding especially into popular sentiments of Nepali nationalism.

In other parts of the world also, railway imaginations and nationalistic sentiments have been found inextricably linked with the past. For instance, a proposal for linking Europe and India through a railway had been put forward as early as in the year 1873 but could not take shape due to the opposition of British authorities (Baker 1917: 100). Subsequently, another proposed connection of the Russian and Indian railway via Afghanistan during the British Raj in India was also looked at cautiously by the British authorities both from strategic and commercial point of view ((Baker 1917). The construction of railway track from Ulan-Ude (Soviet Union) to Ulan-Bator (Mangolia) and subsequent expansions to Beijing in the 1950s, which replaced the old camel caravan route from Ulan-Bator to Beijing, had endured pressing national interest

for all three countries (Petrov 1956: 471). The government of Mongolia had expressed gratitude to the Soviet government for its assistance in constructing the Ulan-Ude to Ulan-Bator track (Petrov 1956: 472). China and the Soviet Union had strategic collaborations in other trans-boundary railway tracks also keeping in mind their national interests.

The railway imaginaries in everyday life conveyed through Nepali literature, songs and graphic presentations, for long, have been borrowed from British-Indian railways. Particularly, Nepali songs are rich in using various forms of railway imaginaries although Nepal itself does not have its functional railway network so far. These songs in one way or another reveal the deeply embedded but unfulfilled longing for trains running east and west. Thus, the Nepali collective imagination is rich with the images of smoke-emitting Indian trains, a deeply impressed imaginary that has remained since the introduction of the railway in Nepal in the first quarter of the twentieth century. A popular folk song of the 1970s by Lal Bahadur Khati 'aru kalo railko dhuwale' (lit. others turned dark-faced due to smoke-emitting train ...) appears to be a best reference of how the trains used to be understood by the Nepalis at that time. The long-standing discussion of constructing railway east to west in the Southern Nepal but not seriously operationalised yet has already occupied space in Nepalis' imagination such as in another song *purba paschim rail* (from *Chhakka Panja* movie) released in 2016. Such collective imagination of railways, now, is gradually being turned upside down after the 2015 blockade and, simultaneously, the image of Indian trains is being taken over by Chinese ones. Although the days of running China-designed trains on Nepal-China trans-border railway are far away, imaginaries of Chinese trains have begun to appear in everyday life such as in the recently released song *Chinako*

rail (lit. Chinese trains) by Saru Gautam. Now, the imaginaries of trains in the collective mind of the Nepalis have been gradually reconfigured by environment-friendly Chinese electric trains rather than by the noisy and smoke-emitting Indian trains.

As mentioned above, the trajectory of the collective imagination around a railway in Nepal may be traced back to the British Raj in India. Altogether around 140 km railway tracks constructed in Nepal in the 1920s had been linked with Indian railway network. No new tracks were added, and existing ones have never been expanded, despite the fact that a comprehensive railways act was introduced in 1963. The official shutting down of the only functioning Janakpur-Jaynagar track in 2014 marked the short history of railways in Nepal that gave coup de grâce to the Nepalis' attachment to the trains. Now this track is being renovated with support from India which once again will reconnect Nepal with the Indian railway network. After the collapse of colonial rule in India in the 1950s, expansion of the railway network did not remain a priority for Nepal government, however, the imaginaries of railways and trains kept influencing everyday life among Nepalis. One finds folk songs, movies, stories and memoirs aplenty on the subject. The Indian trains running across north Indian cities Gorakhpur, Nautanwa, Raxaul and Jogbani carrying both the hope and despair of the Nepalis remained the major source of their imagination until now in which metaphors and analogies from Chinese trains were absent because these trains were (and still are) far from public access.

My study of the opinions appeared in the major national dailies in Nepal reveal that the emergent enthusiastic collective imagination has a strong sense of apprehension towards Indian presence in Nepal, so expanding trans-Himalayan railway connectivity is not only expected to reduce trade dependence with India

and increase Chinese investment in Nepal but also deflect India's political engagement on Nepal's internal affairs (see also Murton, Lord & Beazley 2016; Murton 2017; Murton & Lord 2020). The central question is what made the emergence of such collective imagination possible? From the vantage point of Nepali population, the 2015 Indian embargo is instrumental for the emergence of pro-Chinese collective imagination. India imposed a de facto embargo against Nepal right after the promulgation of the new constitution in September 2015 expressing its dissatisfaction on the contents of the Constitution of sovereign Nepal. The embargo severely paralysed daily life of the Nepalis for five months but at the same time, it also created a powerful context to look for transit access towards China. It invigorated the prospect of Chinese train, which has been viewed as a panacea for age-old Indian highhandedness and Nepal's dependence on India. Moreover, the prospect of Chinese trains has also featured as a 'nationalist infrastructural imaginaries and speculative geopolitical polemics' in Nepal (Murton & Lord, 2020: 7). It is still uncertain whether the proposed trans-border railway link would be completed and really lessen Nepal's dependence on India but one thing is obvious that the enthusiastic collective imagination has already presumed its success.

A large section of Nepalis took time to come out from India-centric collective imagination—which is pessimistic of trans-Himalayan railway—and realise that Nepal is truly an India-locked country. India's highhandedness expressed through the embargo undermining Nepal's sovereignty, micro-managing internal affairs and consequently halting daily life of the thirty million Nepalis in 2015 inconspicuously prepared the ground for them to come out from the India-centric imagination (see also Chatterji 2019). Contrary to the Indian expectation from

embargo, the Nepali perception of India gradually began to be questioned despite a small section of the Nepalis still remained assured with India's 'proactive' role in Nepal.

This questioning carried far-reaching geopolitical importance on the one hand and gave rise to a new collective conscience on the other that China is a 'friend in need' thereby raising the Nepalis' hope to the peak. The imagined trans-Himalayan railway project necessarily has bilateral security, trade and transit concerns but, for the Nepali mass, it is a coup de grâce to the recurrent Indian highhandedness and a 'panacea' for Nepal's development aspirations paralysed for long.

If there were other factors besides the embargo, why did the popular imagination not emerge to this height before? Nepalis were taught that Nepal is a landlocked country without letting them question on the country's 'India-lockedness'. This form of schooling usually blurred the elementary difference between being 'landlocked' and 'India-locked' since Nepal was viewed as merely a subset of Indian culture, economy and politics. This schooling is, by principle, faulty as it undermines the cultural orientation of northern Nepal towards China's Tibet Autonomous Region, which is 'entangled with the broader political economies of China' (Murton 2017: 254). Nepali school curriculum still traces hundreds of references that place Nepali society under the larger framework of Indian culture, economy and politics but very few with the Chinese ones nonetheless there are ample evidences of cultural exchange between Nepal and China (including Tibet) since medieval period. Hinduism, trade dependence and democratic governance are the major ones that have been set as the conditions responsible for Nepal's destiny to tilt towards India. On the contrary, Nepalis were rarely taught to seek similar links with China.

*The 2015 Indian embargo and yearning for the Chuchche Rail*

There is little doubt that the Nepali collective imagination has remained thankful to China. The 2015 Indian embargo further pushed the imagination to a new height of thankfulness to China by letting to question on Nepal-India relationship, which is usually defined half-heartedly as ‘special’ and ‘friendly’. Although the border embargo had been ostensibly called by the Tarai-based parties agitating against the newly promulgated constitution, the embargo was discreetly an Indian plan. The embargo gave rise to ‘widespread disenchantment in Nepal, forcing its leaders to seek trade alliances’ with China (Chalise 2016) despite the claim of historic and socio-cultural ties between Nepal and India. Even Indian proposal of building Raxaul-Kathmandu railway announced in 2017 could not compensate the trust-loss resulted from the embargo. This proposal was an epiphenomenon of the Nepal-China trans-border railway agreement and guided by counter-effort of averting Nepal’s railway connectivity with China.

The Nepali government ministers, even so-called vocal youth leaders and top-rank political leaders appeared ambivalent to call the embargo an embargo (Thapa 2017). However, the embargo once again denied the transit rights of Nepal and caused to develop new national consensus to seek advanced connectivity with China (Paudel 2018). The opinions held by the Nepali leaders and the bureaucrats on the embargo were far less uncensored than the opinions of the laities despite the activities of Indian government of that time were adequate to call the disruption of supply an embargo. The pre-embedded friendly image of China in the collective psyche of a large section of the population encouraged to possess such uncensored responses and protest against the embargo.

China, in particular, has always captured the Nepali imagination with its size, culture, and development, and in Nepal, there has always been a distant hope that China someday would reach out to its neighbour when Nepal needs it the most. (Sigdel 2016: 1-2)

The reason, perhaps, is that Nepalis have observed China having appeared benevolent whenever Indian overbearing surfaces nevertheless Chinese support alone was not sufficient to counter that. However, the Chinese support imparted the message for the people that Nepal has someone to help it whenever some other behaves high-handedly in spite of China’s underlying strategic interests. For instance, during the 1989 Indian embargo, Chinese tankers and trucks had delivered supplies to Kathmandu under the agreement of fuel and food supply (Garver 1991: 964). Similarly, during the 2015 embargo also, China followed a similar approach. On 11 March 2016, a Chinese train loaded with Nepali freight left from Lanzhou for Xigatse signalling the significant shift in Nepal’s geo-political reality (Sigdel 2016). The trans-Himalayan railway project is a bilateral project and modality of investment on the project has not been decided yet however there is a strong presumption that China would provide every support and the project would come true.

The 2015 border blockade disenchanted Nepalis from India and consequently pressurised the government to think over alternatives. As an epiphenomenon of this, both countries admitted Nepalis’ aspiration of Chinese trains by signing an agreement for trans-border connectivity during the trip of Nepal’s premier to China in March 2016. Again in June 2018 during the second state visit of the premier, both countries further agreed to cooperate each other to expand the Xigatse-Gyirong railway to Kathmandu in future.

Nepal's president's state visit to China in April 2019 that ended with signing the protocol of implementing the Transit and Transport Agreement further raised the hope of Chinese chuchche trains as the project was brought under the BRI. The visit of the Chinese president Xi Jinping to Nepal in October 2019 ensured the Chinese support for the feasibility study of the railway as both parties agreed to conduct feasibility study of Kyirong-Kathmandu railway. The joint press statement issued at the end of the visit states that

[t]he two sides, while recalling the MoU signed between the two countries on 21 June 2018 on Cooperation in Railway Project, agreed to conduct the feasibility study as outlined in the MoU signed on 13 October 2019, which will lay an important foundation to launching the construction of the Cross-Border Railway. Both sides also reiterated their commitment to extend cooperation on Kathmandu-Pokhara-Lumbini Railway Project. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal 2019)

The pros and cons of the trans-border railway can be discussed from various vantage points but a large population in Nepal is not ready to accept that there are 'side-effects' of the railway too. There are others who believe that the 'side effects' cannot be ruled out utterly however these 'side effects' never outweigh the torture inflicted by the 'India-lockedness' and frequent border blockades. This urges us to re-explore relevancy of the age-old saying — Nepal: yam between the two boulders— because employing the same looking glass for both boulders (India and China) cannot capture the present-day ground reality when regional power balance has appeared in favour of China. Those who are enthusiastic towards China 'presence' in Nepal have devised several buzzwords, which admittedly express that trans-Himalayan connectivity (particularly,

trans-Himalayan railway) is the only panacea for not only Nepal's India-lockedness but also for its prospects of infrastructural development and economic growth. In addition, these buzzwords, such as 'beginning of new age', 'conduit for trade', 'tectonic shift', 'golden opportunity' 'a hen lying golden egg', 'magic stick' and 'game-changer', illuminate also the Nepal's upper hand in South Asian power sharing and its vocal presence in outside world. Against the claim that Nepal is using 'China card' against India, the buzzwords used by the sympathisers of the trans-Himalayan railway reveal their deeply entrenched thoughts that the railway project possesses the characteristics of 'national liberation' from Indian domination and symbol of 'national rejuvenation and pride' (Devkota 2016: 6; Paudel 2018: para 2 & 3). In addition, the nationalist thrust embedded in these buzzwords reveal the deep interest of Nepal to contribute in soothing wounded sovereignty of the country by means of trans-Himalayan railway.

The India-lockedness, as an emerging character, is a new buzzword emerged from the narratives of the embargo and gradually substituting landlocked character of Nepal (Sharma 2016 ; Nepal 2016; Koirala 2016). This emerging character is rhetorical to persuade to those who are critical of Nepal's need for trans-border connectivity with China. For those who lobby for Nepal-China railway connectivity, the India-lockedness has far more detrimental consequences than the landlockedness. If the trans-border railway project comes to be true, according to Rana (2013), China and India shall have opportunity to meet in Nepal and Nepal's fortune of India-lockedness will also be changed to true sense of landlockedness. Acharya (2018) gives the credit of the trans-border railway project to the prime minister K.P. Oli although the credit goes to the pressure born from the embargo.

The role of the imagined railway on Nepal's economy needs to be discussed in relation with China's investment in Nepal. There are discussions by several Indian and western scholars on this topic, which unanimously rely on the 'debt trap' theory (Chatterji 2019: 14). Even among Nepali scholars, the debt trap theory seems tried to get space however, so far now, the railway project has been viewed as a 'most important effort' and a 'beginning of new age' in cross-country connectivity (Poudel 2018), which will increase trade and promote tourism (Ojha 2016). The magnification of this sort, for some, is contingent on the possibilities of diversifying trade (Pitamber Sharma 2016), expanding trade and employment (Neupane 2018) and reducing Nepal's 'near-total dependency on Indian for trade and transit' (Chalise 2016: 1). China's headway in strengthening connectivity with Nepal through the Qinghai-Tibet Railway which has already reached Shigatse and is supposed to reach Nepal's border at Zhangmu (Khasa) in near future, and a proposed second track to Gyirong that is expected to connect Kathmandu has energised the magnification (Acharya 2015: 26 in Adhikari 2015; see also Holslag 2010: 646). So, the imagined trans-Himalayan project is believed to be a game-changer for Nepal's multidimensional development, geopolitics and globalisation of Nepali economy (Adhikari 2015; Acharya & Pokharel 2018; Acharya 2018; Wagle 2018). The ultimate reason of all this is that the embargo taught the Nepalis about the extent they are dependent on others and how the powerful and cynic neighbours can strangle them in hard times (Bhattarai 2016).

Since this paper does not intend to deal with Chinese investment and its geo-political implication as such, the idea of 'debt trap' is restricted only with reference to the discussion on the railway project however, the project obviously falls under the larger scheme of

Nepal-China bilateral investment or popularly known as 'Chinese investment'. This imagined railway which is expected to pass through Kyirong-Rasuwagadhi corridor contextualises its strategic importance in Nepal-China relations as this corridor is the shortest route between China and India through Nepal (265 kilometres from Nepal-China border to Nepal-India border) possess historical legacy of linking the populations and economies of Nepal with those of China, Tibet, and India for centuries (Murton & Lord 2020: 6; see also Reeves 2012).

### *Scepticism amid optimism*

Two contrasting sets of collective imagination—enthusiastic and pessimistic—are in limelight with regard to the trans-Himalayan railway connectivity. The first takes the connectivity a must for Nepal's to enjoy its true sense of sovereignty and is optimistic of China's support in translating it into reality. The second is more reluctant or pessimistic to Nepal's increasing connectivity towards the north due to the belief that Nepal's geography, politics and culture naturally put the country closer to India than China (see also Ramakant 1994). Even the Indian scholars seem convinced that it is difficult for the Nepali people to move away from 'democratic ethos' and to stick with a communist regime (Chatterji 2019: 14).

Here, two sets of collective imagination need to be understood parallel with two sets of nationalist stance namely China-centric and India-centric. The enthusiastic collective imagination which corresponds to China-centric nationalist sentiment undermines Nepal's cultural, geographical and economic proximity to India. Contrastingly, the pessimistic collective imagination which parallels with India-centric nationalism is of the view that Nepal's inclination to India is a ground reality so undermining friendly relation

with India can be costly for Nepal. These two opposing nationalistic sentiments have always made hard efforts to negate each other on which the trans-Himalayan railway project has added fuel for the last few years.

In other parts of the world as well, the railways have stood either as nationalist projects or opposed from nationalist point of view. In India also, a railway project was, for some, equated with nationalism and nation-state building in the past (Kerr 2003). Even the Chinese in the early years of the twentieth century were reluctant to see expanding railways with foreign loans as it was linked with their national interest (Wang 1910). Now, the imagined trans-Himalayan railway project in Nepal also is trapped in the controversial trajectory of two conflicting nationalistic sentiments. Thus the debate over the project has fractured Nepali nationalism into India-centric and China-centric. Moreover, the nationalistic sentiments are sharply polarised beyond the ethnic line in terms of the potential consequences of the project despite the claim that the Tarai-origin people are sympathetic to Nepal's close connection with India and the hill-origin population is comforting to Nepal-China connectivity (Graver 1991; Ramakant 1994).

My analysis of the contents illustrates that the political inclination of the individuals, rather than ethnic, makes sense in shaping their stand, for or against, the railway project because their political agents, particularly the political parties, also are not truly unanimous on the need for trans-Himalayan railway connectivity. The position of the three major parties — Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal, and Tarai-based parties— represent two sides of a pole. The Nepali Congress and the Tarai-based parties are more inclined to expand connectivity with India whereas the Communist Party of Nepal is more attached to the north, although this claim is difficult to

substantiate without further data (see also Ramakant 1994). One leading national English daily, *Republica*, asserts in its editorial that in the 'efforts to reach out to China or any other country, Nepal should be mindful that it does not compromise on vital Indian interest in Nepal' (Republica 2016: 6). The implied meaning in this statement tacitly warns that discounting India's interest in an exchange with reaching out to China is not beneficial for Nepal.

Those who are sceptical about the implications of the Nepal-China railway derive their arguments from the 'debt trap' theory. According to Li Tao, executive director of the Institute of South Asian Studies at Sichuan University in China, the notion of 'debt trap' is 'a figment of Western imagination' that has been conspicuously coined to terrorise the developing countries of Asia and Africa where Chinese investment is soaring up under the Belt and Road initiative (quoted in Adhikari 2018: para 35). A reader of *Nagarik Daily* opines that this high-cost railway project is pushing Nepal into a Chinese debt trap like Sri Lanka in its Hambantota port project (Yadav 2018). Even the chief editor of *Kantipur Daily* is wary of the possibility of turning Nepal into an 'economic colony' as the project needs to borrow large external loan (Sharma 2018). Similarly, another reader of *Kantipur Daily* urges Nepal to 'come out from railway dream' since it is not the only option for the country's progress (Pudasaini 2018).

Perhaps there are political reasons for interpreting China's support for Nepal: as an attempt to 'invade South Asia and an endeavour to expand communism in the Himalaya' (Paudel 2016). However, people generally take an optimistic view of the operationalisation of the railway project in the wake of the embargo, and the capitalisation of this optimism has benefited pro-Chinese sentiment in Nepal (Adhikari 2018). There is also, of course, a high

possibility of delaying the implementation of the project due to the geographical and engineering difficulties (Neupane 2018) as it requires high cost and advanced railway technologies. Similarly, propagandizing Chinese commitment to support (Acharya 2016) and the relatively long distance between Gyirong and Chinese seaports may also hamper expeditious implementation of the project. Quite a few people are doubtful of the intentions of Nepali leaders and bureaucrats for implementing the agreement on a war footing (Thapa 2016; Basyal 2016). The recent visit of the Chinese president in October 2019 also did not yield any concrete package for the speedy operationalisation of the project besides mere paper commitment of starting a feasibility study. Despite a much-hyped expectation among a majority of Nepalis, the excitement and fanfare of welcoming Chuchche Rail began to dull as the incumbent Chinese ambassador stated that the trans-Himalayan railway is ‘a complex project which will take time to construct... [it] is very important for both the countries, but owing to the difficult geography, construction is not an easy job. It is not going to be ready overnight’ (Ghimire 2019: para 2). Her statement poured cold water on the enthusiastic imagination of those who are still waiting to see the Chinese chuchche rail in Kathmandu.

#### *Conclusion: the way forward*

I cannot claim that pessimistic or India-centric collective imagination has lost all its ground permanently. Rather, the possibilities of its resurrection are there if Nepal and China both fail to recognise the sentiments of the Nepali people, and fail to act judiciously not to let the enthusiastic collective imagination evaporate. The pessimistic collective imagination, which has seemed relatively weak for a while as the effects of the embargo are still in collective memory, appears comfortable in accepting

Indian ‘hegemony’, thereby interpreting the railway project as a part of China’s ‘debt trap diplomacy’ or as expanding its ‘economic colony’. On the other hand, the enthusiastic collective imagination which is in favour of Nepal-China trade and transit agreement, accords Chinese ‘presence’ in general as ‘natural’, and Chinese rail in particular as a ‘game-changer’, ‘magic stick’, or the ‘the chicken that lays golden eggs’ for Nepal.

It was difficult for both countries to come to an agreement over a trans-border railway project amid the concerns of India. But sincerity, expressed by both governments for Nepal's need for third-country access via trans-Himalayan connectivity, worked out generally well. On the part of China, it is not sure if there was public pressure for the expansion of trans-Himalayan connectivity, but in Nepal pressure born from the public in the wake of the embargo was instrumental for the government in signing the agreement with China. Even the electoral success of K P Oli-led former CPN-UML in the parliamentary election held in November-December 2017 was interpreted in connection with his strategic mobilisation of the collective expectation of Chinese trains to attract the electorates. This implies the gravity of the enthusiastic collective imagination on the trans-Himalayan railway which needs to be taken seriously by both countries.

The enthusiastic collective imagination should be taken as a strength in regards to Nepal-China bilateral relations. It strongly underpins the inter-governmental efforts and helps legitimise bilateral cooperation and investment efforts in everyday life by ensuring public ownership over them. So, the task of defending this is the responsibility of Nepal and China together. Now the emphasis should be laid on promoting people-to-people interaction as it is the only means to reinforce enthusiastic collective imagination so that both countries may realise the urgency of the project. If this

optimism fragments, the friendly relations at the government level, established through documents and signatures, will fail to give a sense of true friendship. Moreover, if the the project fails to materialise, it will create a vacuum for people-level trust-deficit. In this case, it will shatter Nepali dreams of emerging from India-lockedness and enjoying their true sense of sovereignty.

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