

The Balen Shah Generation: Youth Politics and the Quiet Realignment of Nepal's India–China Balance

Dr Kanaklata Yadav

Posr Doctoral Fellow

ICSSR

Abstract

In May 2022, a structural engineer and former rapper secured the mayoralty of Kathmandu by prioritizing issues such as pothole repair, transparency, and municipal competence, rather than foreign policy. However, the civic movement he came to represent—characterized by youth, urbanity, digital fluency, and impatience with both New Delhi's paternalism and Beijing's project-driven approach—is subtly transforming perceptions and legitimization of Nepal's external relationships. By examining the evolving political dynamics in Kathmandu and Pokhara, this article contends that the India–Nepal–China triangle can no longer be sufficiently understood through treaties, boundary commissions, or investment figures alone. Increasingly, these relationships are negotiated in municipal wards, through social media campaigns, and in local markets, where tangible governance outcomes compete with historical ties for political legitimacy. Both New Delhi and Beijing, in distinct ways, continue to address a rapidly changing version of Nepal.

1. A Mayor, Not a Diplomat

Balen Shah's election as Mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City in May 2022 initially appeared to be a local event: an independent candidate, more widely recognized for his hip-hop career than for political manifestos, defeated established nominees from Nepal's leading political families on a platform focused on road repair, waste management, and administrative transparency. While it may seem peripheral to the analysis of Nepal's foreign policy—which has traditionally been managed by the Prime Minister's office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a select group of party elites overseeing relations with New Delhi and Beijing—such a view would be misguided.

Shah's rise is better read as a leading indicator of a broader shift in how legitimacy is built and tested in urban Nepal — a shift with direct, if indirect, consequences for how Indian and Chinese engagement is perceived by the constituencies that will define Nepali politics for the next generation. The events of 2025, when Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli resigned amid youth-led protests that began over social media restrictions and escalated into a broader anti-corruption and governance movement, confirmed that this was not an isolated municipal phenomenon but a generational one (Financial Times, 2025).

2. From Elite Bargaining to Urban Accountability

Throughout much of the post-1990 era, Nepal's relationships with India and China were primarily negotiated by a limited elite, including royal or party leaders, senior bureaucrats, and a small group of scholars and retired diplomats whose perspectives influenced both domestic debates and external perceptions of Nepali opinion. Hachhethu (2023) identifies the emergence, especially after 2015, of a more fragmented and pluralistic political environment, where municipal activism, digital political discourse, and youth-led civic engagement increasingly compete with traditional channels for influence over the framing of foreign policy issues.

This transformation is driven by generational factors. Individuals who reached political maturity after the 2006 peace process and the 2015 constitution lack direct experience of the monarchy, possess weaker affiliations with the parties that led the democratic transition, and have significantly greater exposure—through migration, international education, and social media—to comparative governance standards. As observed by Thapa (2019) and Hachhethu (2023), their political discourse increasingly emphasizes administrative efficiency, tangible infrastructure outcomes, and institutional accountability, rather than inherited ideological or civilizational loyalties. In this context, foreign actors are assessed less by historical narratives and more by their demonstrable contributions.

3. Two Registers of External Presence

This generational transformation highlights a distinction between two distinct forms of Indian and Chinese presence in urban Nepal. In areas such as Kathmandu's Thamel district and similar commercial zones in Pokhara, Chinese commercial and infrastructural influence is highly visible: consumer electronics, construction materials, signage, retail branding, and

standardized market aesthetics linked to Chinese supply chains are prominent (Hutt, 2020). In contrast, Indian influence is more socially embedded than commercially conspicuous, manifested through shared language, cross-border kinship, pilgrimage routes, labor migration, and educational exchanges that shape daily life without overt branding or construction. This distinction is significant because each form of presence is interpreted differently by various audiences. Deep social interdependence is continuously experienced by individuals who cross the border for employment, religious activities, marriage, or education, yet it lacks the visual impact necessary for attribution in a public sphere increasingly shaped by images and youth engagement. Infrastructure projects, regardless of their scale compared to India's broader economic role, are more readily transformed into visible political symbols. For example, a newly constructed road or a Chinese-financed transmission tower can be easily photographed, shared, and credited, whereas decades of labor migration and consumer supply chains linked to Indian markets remain largely invisible in this context.

This asymmetry in visibility, rather than any fundamental change in the structural balance of dependence—India continues to be Nepal's largest trading partner, primary transit route, and main source of labor markets (World Bank, 2022)—is what a generation accustomed to social media is most likely to perceive as 'influence.'

4. Sovereignty as Performance

Nowhere is this generational shift more visible than in the politics of the Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute. Nepal's 2020 constitutional map, incorporating the disputed territory, produced a rare cross-party consensus that has persisted through subsequent flashpoints, including the 2025–26 controversy over the resumption of India–China trade and Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage traffic through Lipulekh Pass. What is notable is less the persistence of the underlying territorial claim, which long predates this generation of Nepali politics, than the register in which it is now expressed: hashtag campaigns such as #BackOffIndia and #SaveHumla, viral classroom map displays, and youth-organised protest mobilisation have become as central to how the dispute is enacted domestically as parliamentary censure motions or formal diplomatic notes.

Media coverage further amplifies this asymmetry. Nepali media outlets provide sustained and detailed reporting on territorial disputes involving India, framing them as matters of national dignity. In contrast, allegations of Chinese infrastructural encroachment in regions such as Humla, Gorkha, and Dolakha receive more sporadic and cautious coverage, often filtered through official denials. Consequently, the public sphere witnesses sovereignty being asserted vocally against India and managed more discreetly with China. This dynamic does not necessarily reflect a perception among Nepali elites that China is less significant, but rather acknowledges that confronting Beijing entails greater economic and diplomatic risks, while the domestic political benefits of asserting national dignity against India remain historically higher.

5. What This Means for Beijing and for New Delhi

For China, the current reliance on infrastructural visibility as a soft-power asset presents inherent risks. A public that evaluates external actors based on visible achievements will also respond visibly to failures, such as controversies over debt—exemplified by the loan-financed Pokhara International Airport, whose operational viability has been challenged by India's refusal to approve specific overflight requests (Reuters, 2024a)—or the repeated destruction of Chinese-financed infrastructure along the Trishuli–Gyirong corridor. Political capital built on visible construction is therefore susceptible to equally visible setbacks, a vulnerability less pronounced in India's more diffuse and socially embedded approach.

For India, the principal risk is of a different nature. While historical intimacy and structural interdependence remain significant, they are, as Hutt (2020) notes, becoming less discernible to a generation that increasingly assesses legitimacy based on visible governance outcomes rather than inherited civilizational narratives. Assuming that deep social connections will automatically generate political goodwill risks a gradual decline in relevance among urban, youth-driven constituencies poised to influence Nepali politics in the coming decade, even as these groups remain substantively engaged with Indian labor markets, educational institutions, and family networks.

Balen Shah's own politics illustrate the opportunity this creates for reframing, rather than abandoning, India's traditional advantages. His appeal rests not on hostility to any external power but on a demand that governance — domestic and, by extension, the partnerships that shape it — be judged by outcomes rather than rhetoric. A relationship such as India's, built on genuine depth, has more raw material to work with in meeting that demand than a relationship built primarily on discrete, photographable projects; the challenge is one of translation, not of substance.

6. Policy Implications

Three strategic adjustments are recommended for India's engagement with this emerging political generation. First, diplomatic messaging should prioritize demonstrable and measurable outcomes over historical or civilizational narratives.

Infrastructure projects such as the Jaynagar–Kurtha railway and the Motihari–Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline are likely to resonate more with this audience than reiterations of the 1950 Treaty (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

Second, India's engagement should intentionally broaden its engagement beyond traditional central government channels to include municipal and provincial actors, such as those represented by Balen Shah, where governance-oriented political capital is increasingly concentrated. Diplomacy should adopt the same digital and visual register in which sovereignty and governance are now debated in urban Nepal, rather than ceding that register by default to whichever actor — domestic political rival or external power — is more comfortable operating within it.

7. Conclusion

Traditionally, the India–Nepal–China triangle has been analyzed as a competition conducted through treaties, boundary commissions, and infrastructure financing. The emergence of a generation for whom Balen Shah, rather than foreign ministries, represents the most credible model of accountable governance indicates that a new arena is now equally significant: the urban, digitally mediated public sphere, where foreign relationships are evaluated based on visible outcomes. Neither India's structural depth nor China's infrastructural visibility alone constitutes a sufficient strategy for securing legitimacy in this context. The actor that adapts its approach to resonate with this new generation—while retaining its authentic comparative strengths—is likely to exert greater influence over Nepal's foreign policy in the coming decade than one that merely increases its material presence or relies on historical ties.

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