

No Light at End of Trans-Himalayan Train Tunnel

Engineering, financial and geopolitical challenges remain for Kerung-Kathmandu railway line

By [Nepali Times](#)

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The prospect of a trans-Himalayan connectivity has historically been a sensitive geopolitical issue since it concerns the region’s main rivals: China and India.

Even back in 1961, when Nepal and China signed an agreement to build a highway linking Kathmandu to Lhasa there were misgivings about Beijing’s strategic motive. India and China were about to go to war along the Himalaya, and the Cold War was at its height. King Mahendra allayed those fears by famously saying: “Communism does not travel by taxi.”

Sixty years later, similar suspicions have surfaced as China moves full steam ahead to connect its Tibetan Autonomous Region with new bullet train links that could ultimately be extended to the Nepal border, and even Kathmandu as a part of its [Belt Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#).



On 25 June, China made a high-profile inauguration of a 435km section of the Lhasa-Nyingchi Electrified High-speed Rail (HSR). The ‘bullet train’ will have a top speed of 160 km/h and pass through 47 tunnels and 121 bridges along the Tsang Po (Brahmaputra) River.

A feat of modern engineering, 90% of the HSR lies above 3,000 meters above sea level and will be a part of the new Sichuan-Tibet Railway. When connected to [Kerung via Lhasa and Xigatse](#), the train could put Lhasa within six hours distance and Chengdu within 19 hours from the Nepal border.



The Lhasa-Nyingchi Electrified High-speed Rail passes through 47 tunnels and 121 bridges along the Tsang Po (Brahmaputra) River.

While China makes rapid progress on rail connectivity, on the Nepal side of the border talk

of a trans-Himalayan railway is only [political tokenism](#). Successive governments in Kathmandu have not even been able to maintain existing highways to Kodari and Rasuwagadi to international standards.

But even the Chinese side seems to be daunted by the cost and sheer magnitude of a trans-Himalayan railway, especially its engineering challenge. [Nepali Times had revealed in 2019](#) the content of a Chinese pre-feasibility study that proposed an alignment from Kerung to Kathmandu through a series of tunnels below Langtang National Park.

Chinese engineers found the gradient from the Tibetan Plateau to the low valleys in Nepal to be too great, and there was also the need to avoid building a railway inside Nepal's protected areas in Langtang, Rolwaling and Mt Everest regions.

"Technically this will be one of the world's toughest railways to construct," said train engineer Paribesh Parajuli of Nepal's Department of Railways who was educated in China, and a consultant for the study.



The Kerung-Kathmandu rail track will be 170km long, and a third of its length could tunnel below the Himalaya to reach the outskirts of Kathmandu. The study estimated the project to cost 38 billion yuan (\$5.5 billion).

A report in *Railway Standard Design* last week and quoted in the Hong Kong-based [South China Morning Post](#) confirmed that the proposed alignment would include 30km of tunnels beneath Langtang National Park.

Liang Dong, a lead engineer with the China Railway First Survey and Design Institute Group will be presenting his report to the Chinese and Nepal governments.

He said the Himalayan Tunnel route from Kerung (Gyirong) to Kathmandu would be more challenging and costly, but other routes were rejected either because the gradients were too steep, they went through protected areas, or were geologically unstable and exposed to glacial lake outburst floods due to climate change.

The possibility of trans-Himalayan connectivity was first mooted as far back as 1973 by Mao Zedong in a meeting with King Birendra in Beijing. Since then, China built the Qinghai-Tibet Railway connecting Lhasa to Xining, and is now working on the Sichuan-Tibet Railway to Chengdu and Kunming.

The Qinghai-Tibet Railway was extended from Lhasa to Xigatse in 2014, and in three years those tracks will reach Kerung on the Nepal border, only 70km in a straight line north of Kathmandu.

Even though it is just a secondary route in China's ambitious BRI, Nepal could gain valuable access to Chinese seaports and trade centres, especially as relations with long-time trade partner India blow hot and cold. Construction on the HSR in Tibet has gone ahead despite the pandemic.

The possibility of extending this train track across the Himalaya to Kathmandu had captured the Nepali public's imagination ever since Prime Minister [K P Oli and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang](#) committed to exploring the project five years ago.

The arrival of the railway line in Kerung possibly in three-year's time will bring that dream closer to reality, but for that the Nepali side has [to show more commitment](#) to the project.

So far, Nepal's action has been limited to participating in discussions and signing MoUs. Framework agreements were signed in 2017 for the Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network, and President Bidya Devi Bhandari even attended a summit in 2019 of the BRI Forum.

China had committed to financing Detailed Project Reports (DPR) for a 72-km rail line between Kathmandu and Rasuwagadi during [President Xi Jinping's visit in October 2019](#), but since then, government planners have blamed the pandemic for delays in taking plans forward.



Rasuwigadi on Nepal's border with China. Photo: Nabin Baral

In fact, no funding was sourced for DPRs, says Suresh Paudel, Deputy Secretary of Development Assistance Coordination and Quality Branch of the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transportation.

"China showed readiness in supporting detailed survey designs, but a budget has not been set so far," Paudel says.

Nepal has already lost time twiddling thumbs and waiting for China's support, even while China aims to finish its Sichuan-Lhasa rail line by 2030.

Even without the delays on the Nepal side, a Kathmandu-China connection will prove to be costly and difficult. Nepal has no railway infrastructure to speak of, and in any case would be unable to bear the financial cost of building a difficult and expensive tunnel across the Himalaya.

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