



## Navigating Geopolitical Tensions: Nepal's Role as a Buffer State Between India and China

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the role of Nepal as a buffer state between India and China. It emphasizes on the unique geographic and strategic position of Nepal which makes it important in changing political environment of South Asia. The research examines foreign relations of Nepal with India and China have developed over time and how it now manages its ties with both the countries. By using a qualitative method and relying heavily on secondary sources, the article explores the key events and policy choices that have shaped the position of Nepal. It also explores how Nepal must try to maintain a balance between the two powers without harming its sovereignty. The article emphasizes the growing competition between India and China that has given both chances and difficulties. Despite of the challenges in diplomatic ties it preserves the policy of non-alignment to protect its national interest. This balance remains of utmost importance for its future.

**KEYWORDS:** *Geo-political, buffer state, foreign policy, international relations, sovereignty*

### 1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Positioned between two emerging global giants, Nepal occupies a critical spot in South Asia's geopolitical landscape (Vyas, and Sangroula, 2014). With its deep-rooted history, the country must carefully balance the strategic ambitions of both India and China, all while protecting its independence and internal stability. Centuries of obscure existence and political mysticism of this high Himalayan Kingdom were, to a great extent, the result of its being an almost impenetrable land mass with a difficult local terrain (Rose, and Dial, 1969). The physical features of Nepal make it convenient to distinguish the three divisions of the country, each of which has its own geographical and historical characteristics: the lower region (Terai), the central region (Kathmandu Valley) and the northern or Himalayan region (Karki et al., 2015).

Nepal, also known as the "roof of the world," is a country distinguished by its breathtaking scenery, vibrant culture, and, above all, its strategic location. Nepal's location, surrounded by China and India, the world's two most populous countries, makes it an important player in regional and global politics (Khadka, 1992). Nepal is a tiny nation that sits between China and India, two of the most potent developing economies in the world. Because of its location, Nepal serves as a crucial buffer state, giving China and India equal influence over the area (Bhusal, and Singh, 2011).

Historically, Nepal maintained a delicate balance, fostering relationships with both neighbors to preserve its sovereignty and stability. It holds an important place in the region not only on account of its size and population but more so for its strategic location as a buffer state between the two countries. Nepal borders with India to the east, south and west; whereas it borders with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the north (Johny, 2024).

Nepal and India have been living as close neighbors of South Asia since the existence of the two countries. The relationship between the two countries is bound by history, geography, economic co-operation, socio-cultural ties and people-to-people relations (Tripathi, 2019). As close neighbors, Nepal and India share a unique relationship of friendship and cooperation characterized by open borders and deep-rooted people-to-people contacts of kinship and culture. There has been a long tradition of free movement of people across the borders (Taneja, Chowdhury, and Prakash, 2011).

Similarly, Nepal and China have a long history of relationship together based in history, geography, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges. Nepal and China are linked together by their shared border along the Himalayas. Despite the natural barrier posed by these mountains, both nations have taken highly significant efforts to enhance connectivity and facilitate trade between them (Chand, and Danner, 2015). IRoads and bridges are examples of infrastructure projects that have been properly started in order to increase transportation connections and, consequently, foster economic cooperation. China has grown to be a major economic partner of Nepal as a result of the two nations' participation in numerous trade agreements and projects meant to enhance bilateral investment and trade. Notably, in an attempt to attract funding for infrastructure and economic projects, Nepal joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017 (Sharma, 2018). China and Nepal have long-standing cultural relations that have been fostered over many generations. The development of cultural and religious exchanges between China and Nepal was greatly aided by historical characters including the Nepali monk Buddhahadra in the early fifth century, Princess Bhrikuti in the seventh century, and the artist Araniko in the thirteenth century (Tuladhar-Douglas, 2005).

Neighbours and major powers have expressed a strong desire to expand their influence in Nepal. Geography has always played an important role in determining a foreign policy-based survival strategy. Geography reveals vulnerability by igniting reality, and it can provide both opportunities and challenges (Khadka, 1992). Nepal is located at the intersection of two sizable neighbors with opposing but complementary interests. Additionally, the relevance of geopolitical struggle among the main powers in Nepal has surely increased since the United States shifted its geopolitical radar to South Asia (Karki, 2013). Nepal has traditionally been a buffer state between India and China, but in light of recent trends in regional and international politics, Nepal's role has become more complex. Nepal's geopolitical significance has been heightened due to the escalating strategic rivalry between its two giant neighbors as well as increased involvement of superpowers like the United States (Johnny, 2024). There are, however, new risks to which this new salience carries inherent risks, such as intricate diplomatic complexities, increased dependence, and increased foreign influence.

Although academics have often debated the bilateral relations and involvement in projects of Nepal like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or SAARC, there is still a clear discrepancy when it comes to analysing how Nepal deliberately compromises and negotiates its buffer posture in the fast changing geopolitical scenario (Adhikari, and Zhi-guo, 2022). In particular, little attention has been given to how its geography at once an asset and a vulnerability shapes its foreign policy approach and internal resilience. This study, therefore, aims to analyze Nepal's evolving role between India and China by looking at both historical trends and current strategies. It will also explore how rising global competition affects Nepal's sovereignty and broader national interests. Understanding Nepal's balancing act is not only relevant but essential to grasping the future security dynamics of South Asia.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Nepal's strategic location between India and China places Nepal in a very challenging situation. While Nepal has opted the principle of neutrality and carefully acted as a buffer state between its very powerful neighbors, there is very limited research on how it currently manages the shift and influence from both the giant nations. Most existing researches focuses on its relations and foreign policy with India and China but tend to lack how it balances both the relationships and competing interests simultaneously. The rising involvement of other global powers, especially the United States, adds a new layer of complexity to Nepal's foreign policy decisions, and the effects of this growing competition remain understudied. Less attention has also been paid to how Nepal is adapting its long-standing neutral position to contemporary geopolitical and economic challenges. The domestic issues that Nepalese policymakers need to address to protect the nation's interests and sovereignty in the face of shifting regional dynamics are also not well understood.

### **Objectives of the study**

The key objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To examine the geographical and strategical significance of Nepal between India and China.
2. To explore the historical development of foreign relations of Nepal with both the neighbors.

3. To analyze the impact of rising geopolitical competition on the sovereignty of Nepal and identify how Nepal balances its diplomatic ties amid regional and global power shifts.

### Research Questions

Based on the objectives of this study, the following research questions have been developed to better understand Nepal's role in the changing geopolitical environment:

1. What makes Nepal geographically and strategically important between India and China?
2. How have the foreign relations of Nepal with India and China developed over time?
3. Is there any impact of rising geopolitical competition on the sovereignty of Nepal and how does Nepal balance its diplomatic ties among regional and global power shifts?

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

A well-organized literature review is conducted to understand Nepal's geopolitical position as a buffer state. Following relevant books, articles, and reports are reviewed to support the study's analysis:

1. Baral, B. N. (2019). Nepal-China-India: Prospects and Challenges of Trilateralism. *Journal of Political Science*, 19, 1-20.

The author in this paper, examines the possibility of trilateral cooperation between China, India, and Nepal particularly highlighting the advantageous location of Nepal between the two strong neighbours, India and China. To showcase the complexity of trilateral connections, the research highlights on both current border disputes and historical confrontations such as the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The author also claims that despite these obstacles, there still are chances for collaboration because of common interests in trade, infrastructure development, and inter-cultural interactions. The author finally comes to the conclusion that Nepal may become a bridge state rather than a buffer state in order to promote stability and regional amalgamation.

2. Upadhyaya, S. (2012). *Nepal and the Geo-Strategic Rivalry between China and India*. Routledge.

In this book, the author explores the strategic position of Nepal between China and India, exactly evaluating how historical and contemporary geopolitical tensions influence and hold impact on its foreign policy. Drawing on declassified documents, memoirs, and interviews, Upadhyaya discusses the domestic politics of Nepal along with its role in the Sino-Indian rivalry, particularly involving Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora. The book highlights the challenges of Nepal in maintaining sovereignty amid external pressures and offers ideas into its potential to act as a stabilizing force in South Asia.

3. Dahal, G. (2018). Foreign Relation of Nepal with China and India. *Journal of Political Science*, 18, 46-61.

The author of this paper has thoroughly explored the international relations of Nepal with its neighbors China and India, highlighting the attempts of Nepal to keep amicable and balanced relations with both neighbours. The research focuses on the cooperation of Nepal with China by specially highlighting on its engagement in China's Belt and Road Initiative and its due dedication and devotion to the "One China Policy." The article comes to the conclusion by pointing out that although Nepal and India had a long history and shared many cultural traits, their relationship has had both fruitful and fruitless times marking both success and failure. By promoting a trilateral agreement between China, India, and Nepal to enhance and uplift mutual growth and stability, the study concludes that Nepal's foreign policy should place a higher priority on regional cooperation and economic success for the betterment.

4. Kumar Sahu, A. (2015). Future of India-Nepal Relations: Is China a Factor? *Strategic Analysis*, 39(2), 197-204.

Arun Kumar Sahu examines the changing nature of India-Nepal relations in the present article, carefully stressing on the rapid expanding regional importance of china. He highlights how the military investments, expenditures and infrastructure projects of China are attempting in changing the foreign policy priorities of Nepal while also discussing the historical and cultural linkages between India and Nepal, such as open borders and shared religious sites. the author further claims that India has both opportunities and difficulties as a result of the growing involvement of Nepal with China, highlighting the necessity for India to re-evaluate its strategy in order to preserve solid bilateral relationships with Nepal, as it holds strong rivalry with China.

5. Khobragade, V. (2016). India-Nepal Relations. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 20(3), 146-163.

In this article, the author discusses the relationship between India and Nepal, focusing on their historical and cultural ties as it indicated a lot of similarities. The study explores the recent challenges including border disputes and trade issues along with the blockades, and how these have impacted and influenced diplomatic relations. The author emphasizes the importance of mutual respect and co-operation to strengthen the bond between India and China for increasing regional co-operation. The article also suggests that addressing misunderstandings and enhancing dialogue are key to maintaining a stable and friendly relationship.

6. K.C., K. (2024). Global Power Shift and Nepal's Geopolitical Complexity. *Journal of Political Science*, 24(1), 202-208.

In this article, the author explores how the global power shifts impact and influence the geopolitical situation of Nepal while specially focusing on the open border between Nepal and India as the core issue. The study also highlights the challenges laid down by globalization which have given rise to various security concerns. K.C. likewise emphasizes the need for effective border governance and co-operation between neighboring countries to address these issues. The article also provides insights into the strategic position of Nepal and the importance of collaborative approaches to manage border-related challenges for improved diplomatic ties.

7. Baral, B. N. (2022). Foreign Policy Behaviour of Small Power: A Study of Nepal. *Journal of Political Science*, 22(1), 51-63.

This paper's author evaluates and analyzes Nepal's foreign policy from the perspective of a small state. While examining how Nepal handles its advantageous situation between China and India, the paper focuses on its efforts to maintain its political independence and sovereignty. The study also makes the identification of key foreign policy practices of Nepal, including non-alignment, neutrality, and balanced relations with neighbors specifically. The paper further highlights the challenges faced by small states in a system dominated by larger nations and also discusses the strategies preserved by Nepal to protect its national interests.

8. Bastola, S. (2025). Foreign Policy of Nepal: Strategic Approach to Sovereignty. *Unity Journal*, 6(1), 235-247.

The author of this article examines the manner in which the small state of Nepal, plans and formulates its foreign policy so as to maintain sovereignty during global transitions of power. The author also touches on Nepal's past commitment towards non-alignment and the evolving need for strategic means such as the tentative to maintain independence concomitantly with the maintenance of sovereignty and independence. The speech also addresses Nepal's attempts to balance its relations with neighboring powers, placing emphasis on the importance of an adaptive foreign policy to contain complex geopolitical currents.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study has adopted a qualitative research methodology relying primarily on secondary sources. The secondary source is used so to explore the geopolitical positioning between India and China. The research also employs an integration of all descriptive, analytical, historical, and doctrinal approach with the aim to provide a complete understanding of the subject matter. Here the descriptive approach is duly applied to explain and describe the geographical and strategic significance of Nepal. It is of utmost importance in explaining the current situation of geographical landscape of the position of Nepal along with its strategic significance as a small buffer state. Following descriptive approach, secondly, analytical approach is applied to interpret and analyze the factors influencing the foreign policy decisions of Nepal by also addressing the underlying reasons and mechanisms behind its strategies in diplomacy. A historical perspective is also somewhat used to trace the evolution and progression of foreign relations of Nepal with both India and China which also includes exploring deep into the key events of the past that have shaped its role as a buffer state.

The doctrinal method is used to analyze the legal documents, treaties, reports, policy papers and so on that are concerned with governing international relations hence lacks the primary source of data. Data for this research is collected from a variety of secondary sources, including academic journals, periodicals, books, government publications, and reputable news portals. By applying these methodologies, the study aims to present a broad understanding of how Nepal has been navigating its geopolitical scenario balancing relationships with neighboring powers while striving to maintain its sovereignty and national interests.

#### 5. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

##### **Historical development of the Foreign Relations of Nepal**

The historical relationship between Nepal and India has been deeply rooted in shared borders, cultures, traditions and political developments over centuries. These subjects of one country has influenced in similar subjects of another nation rapidly in no time (Verma, 2020). Over centuries, this relationship has been evolved through the periods of both co-operation and tension, influenced by both regional and global dynamics.

In 18th century, Nepal was unified under the initiative of brave and ambitious king Prithivi Narayan Shah, who emphasized the strategic importance of the position of Nepal between India and China. In Dilyopadesh, he has advocated for cautious diplomacy, recognizing Nepal as a 'yam between two boulders' (Schwerin, 1993).

The early 19th century in Nepal marks the expansionist ambitions clashing with British colonial interests, which are inscribed by a number of literatures from the past. It then led to Anglo- Nepal war (1814-1816) (Michaels et al., 2016). The subsequent Sugauli Treaty between both the countries resulted in Nepal losing a significant proportion of territory to the British East India Company which so marked a shift towards a more constrained foreign policy. During the Rana Regime, Nepal maintained isolation and Ranas were closely aligned and inclined towards the British India with the strategy to protect and flourish their autocratic rule (Kumar, 2021). This period limited Nepal's international engagement but however ensured internal stability.



The Mid-20th century came along with significant changes. The independence of India and subsequent democratic movements in Nepal led to the consequence of abolition of Rana rule in Nepal. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Nepal and India established formal diplomatic relations, which allowed free movement of people and goods thus strengthening the economic and military co-operation (Nayak, 2010). However, this treaty is not free from criticism. Critics argue that this treaty favours India and undermines the sovereignty of Nepal. The efforts to revise the treaty has been ongoing reflecting the desire of Nepal for a more balanced relationship. Nepal and China also share a long history rooted in borders, cultural, religious and historical ties. As stated in literatures, Bodhisattva Manjushree traveled all the way from China to Kathmandu Valley, carving the Chovar George to drain a lake there, thus making the human settlement possible (Zhang, and Ren, 2022). This event is thought to have been the very firsts in establishing cultural connections. Historical literatures also highlight the marriage of princess Bhrikuti Devi of Nepal to Tibetan emperor Songtsan Gampo in the 7th century, thus symbolizing the political and cultural alliances as marriages were seen as a way to establish political ally back then. In the 13th century, the renowned Nepalese architect Araniko was invited to China where he contributed to Chinese architecture further deepening diplomatic ties between Nepal and China (Pang, Wei, and Wang, 2022).

In contemporary times, Nepal and China have strengthen their bilateral relations through various co-operations. China has been instrumental in the development of the infrastructure of Nepal by assisting in the construction of major highways including Araniko highway which connects Kathmandu to the Chinese border, Prithivi Highway linking Kathmandu to Pokhara. Further, China has also supported the development of industrial projects including the Bansbari Leather and Shoes Factory and the Hetauda Cotton Textile Mills (Murton, 2020). These co-operation and collaboration has significantly contributed to the economic goals and growth.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China has opened new opportunities for the co-operation between both the countries. Nepal joined BRI in 2017 aiming to advance connectivity and economic integration in Nepal through China (Chan, and Bhatta, 2021). Under BRI, projects including the Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network have been proposed which include plans for cross-border railways and improved road networks. The development of Pokhara International Airport in Nepal was made possible due to the strong support of China (Pyakurel, 2019). This sets a strong example in solid outcomes of this partnership proving the connectivity of both the nations and their strong diplomatic ties.

Nepal needs a balanced diplomatic ties and foreign policy as it sits between two powerful nations. While maintaining the traditional ties with India, Nepal has attempted to diversify its economic and diplomatic relations by engaging in its deeper connection with China. This also includes signing transit agreements and seeking the investment of china in various Nepalese sectors (Johny, 2024). However, Nepal remains committed to its policy of forbidding its territory to be used by any of its neighbor, striving a cordial relation with both China and India.

### **Geo-strategic significance of Nepal**

Nepal has a great geopolitical importance due to its placement between two global powers, India and China. Nepal is seen as a gateway to larger regional interest by both the nations rather than just a neighbour. China's attempts are seen in supporting the ambitions of Nepal to become a 'land linked' nation and hence views Nepal as a close ally (Adhikari, and Zhi-guo, 2022). However, the strategy of India shows that it views Nepal as something to be under its control because of probably previous unfair treaties and the disputed border issues. These tensions have allowed China to increase its presence in Nepal through various investments and infrastructure projects (Chand, and Danner, 2015). Meanwhile, The United States and its allies have equally shown interest in Nepal to balance the influence of China through initiatives like Indo-Pacific Strategy. As a result, Nepal finds itself in the middle of rising geopolitical competition among global and regional powers (Adhikari, 2022).

For both China and India, security is still a major priority. China is concerned that unrest in Nepal may incite anti-Chinese sentiment, particularly among Tibetan exiles. In a similar vein, India is concerned that growing Chinese influence in Nepal may have an effect on its national security, especially along the uncontrolled and open Indo-Nepal border (Karki, 2013). India is particularly worried about the growing relations between China and Pakistan and how they can affect India through Nepal. Nepal nonetheless serves as both a buffer zone and a trustworthy neighbour in spite of these difficulties (Chaturvedi, 1992). China's main goal is to stop any outside influence particularly from the United States that may jeopardise its regional interests. However, India views the alliance of Nepal with China as a strategic concern and is anxious to stay out of the spotlight (Bhusal, and Singh, 2011).

Nepal has enormous economic potential which increases its significance even more. Its hydroelectric potential might support not just its own growth but also China's, Bangladesh's, and India's expanding energy demands which could create a sense of competition between these countries (Fukuyo, and Hirohata, 2019). With its stunning nature and rich cultural legacy, Nepal is a popular travel destination. In terms of connectivity, Nepal can serve as

a trade corridor linking China's western regions and Central Asia to South Asia which might help to overcome existing transport limitations. Projects like the extension of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway and Belt and Road Initiative of China clearly shows the centrality of Nepal in regional trade plans (Sharma, 2020). To benefit from this unique and significant position, it is necessary for Nepal to emphasize a really balanced foreign policy and strong domestic stability. Instead of picking sides in power struggles between the giant nations it should remain neutral and independent while interacting with all of the major nations for their mutual advantage (Rose, and Dial, 1969).

### **Nepal's Act of Balancing Diplomatic Ties**

Nepal's foreign policy, for the longest time has been shaped by its position between India and China. In the recent times, Nepal has tried its best balancing its relation with both the countries with prioritizing sovereignty as well as seeking economic and infrastructural support.

After the engagement of Nepal with BRI, the relationship with China has risen to peak, which truly aims to maintain connectivity and improve the infrastructures. Initiatives to improve trade channels and lessen reliance on India for transit are exemplified by projects such as the proposed China-Nepal railway from Kathmandu to Shigatse (Chan, and Bhatta, 2021). Drawing comparisons to the history of other nations, worries have been expressed over the possible debt consequences of such initiatives.

Since ancient times, Nepal and India have had a strong relationship, particularly in the area of commerce and trade. They have collaborated on various initiatives like the India-Nepal Railway, which facilitates the movement of people and products over the border between the countries which shows an effort to increased trade between the countries (Taneja, Chowdhury, and Prakash, 2011). Even when there are conflicts, such as those involving border areas disputes, both nations still manage to work together and co-operate among the disagreements. In an effort to strengthen its infrastructure and stimulate its economy, Nepal has recently been highly active in signing agreements and initiating projects with China and India. Nepal and India have partnered on the Railway project in order to promote trade and facilitate greater regional connectivity (Adhikari, and Zhi-guo, 2022). However, Nepal is careful to plan for viable financial solutions since they are cautious of taking on too much debt from Chinese loans.

In order to shape its own future, Nepal would need to strike a strategic balance between India and China. Nepal must diversify its foreign policy so that it doesn't have to rely on a single country, becoming economically stable and diplomatically strong (Johny, 2024). By adopting a "multi-aligned" diplomatic policy, Nepal is able to involve both neighbors without showing partiality and establishing a concordant relationship whose interests are Nepal's. Nepal's negotiating ability in the global community can also be improved by reaffirming its relationship with multilateral organizations and being a member of regional cooperation associations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (Adhikari, 2022). Further, constraining the effects of natural calamities and, therefore, foreign aid needed depends on economic resilience obtained through diversification and infrastructure development.

Figuring out relationships with both neighbours requires careful diplomacy. While both neighbors offer opportunities for development, Nepal must carefully manage its relationships to avoid over-reliance on either side (Bhusal, and Singh, 2011). This balancing act is further complicated by the involvement of other global powers, such as the United States, which have shown interest in Nepal's strategic position in South Asia (Chaturvedi, 1992). To safeguard its national interests, Nepal continues to prioritize a foreign policy centered on non-alignment, sovereignty, and neutrality, while engaging constructively with all partners.

### **Impact of regional and global power shifts on Nepal**

The geography of Nepal of being sandwiched between the two great powers, India and China, has made it a source of geopolitical interest for centuries. India, with its proximity to Nepal in terms of culture and economics, has long viewed Nepal as within its sphere of influence (Verma, 2020). Experiences of incidents such as the 2015 economic blockade have soured relations, making Nepal seek new alliances, particularly with China. China's increasing investments and infrastructural development in Nepal, under BRI, have been viewed as efforts at counterbalancing India's predominance (Pyakurel, 2019). The triangular dynamics among Nepal, India, and China render Nepal's foreign policy intricate, and it has implications for Nepal to maneuver cautiously without becoming excessively reliant on any single neighbor.

The arrival of the United States adds another layer to Nepal's geopolitics. The MCC compact, while offering much-needed financial aid, has been viewed by some as a geopolitical step by the U.S. to offset China's influence in the area (Adhikari, and Zhi-guo, 2022). This has spurred concerns about Nepal being drawn into a larger power rivalry among global powers. Being impartial and keeping national interests above everything is the key for Nepal to navigate through such complicated dynamics without sacrificing its sovereignty.

The increasingly competitive relationship between the U.S. and China in South Asia has placed Nepal in a vulnerable position. The BRI of China is aimed at strengthening the regional connectivity however, the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific Strategy is aimed at solidifying its presence in the region (Johnny, 2024). Nepal's participation in both strategies is a bid to balance relations with both powers. However, this dual participation requires adroit diplomacy to ensure that Nepal's sovereignty and national interests are not compromised which is quite a complex task.

Internally, Nepal has problems compounding its vulnerability to external forces. Political instability and frequent changes in government hinder the nation from formulating and implementing consistent foreign policies. This instability could be exploited by external powers keen to advance their interests in the region (Khadka, 1992). To guard its sovereignty, Nepal must strive for political stability and a collective foreign policy that prioritizes national interests over external pressure.

In short, Nepal's geopolitical location between India and China, along with the increasingly prominent role of the United States, places it at the center of regional and global power shifts. To navigate this treacherous geopolitical landscape, Nepal needs to adopt a policy of neutrality, diversify both diplomatic and economic relations, and boost domestic political stability. By doing so, Nepal will be in a position to safeguard its sovereignty and national interests amidst the shifting trends of regional and global power competition.

#### **Impact of rising geopolitical competition to the Sovereignty of Nepal**

Nepal's geographical location between India and China has positioned it at the heart of increasing geopolitical rivalry. The rivalry has also been complicated by the entry of the Americans, in this case, through programs like the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) (Machain, 2020). While the MCC is claimed to be geared towards assisting in building infrastructure, its introduction into Nepal has been contentious. Others are concerned that the grip Nepal has on its own matters could be loosened if it takes foreign aid bound up in strategic interests. Most believe that this type of assistance is required for development (Glatzer, Neumann, and Müller, 2023). This is the delicate balancing act Nepal is engaged in defending its sovereignty while at the same time attempting to develop. China and India have natural strategic interests in Nepal, which they have sought through active engagement in infrastructure, trade, and diplomacy. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims at closer economic and transport links, and for this aim Nepal would serve as a gateway to South Asia (Behera, and Mayilvaganan, 2021). India, on the other hand, has cultural, religious, and traditional political links with Nepal. But the trust was undermined after the 2015 blockade, which made a deep dent in Nepal's economy and health sector (Taneja et al., 2020). What this episode did was lay bare how susceptible Nepal is to its neighbors and illustrate why it must seek wider international partnerships to hedge against risks and protect national interests.

Nepal's geopolitics are slowly deteriorating with China perceiving increased U.S. presence in South Asia as denting its own regional interests. China has been cautious of such American encroachment like the MCC, but perceived them as part of a larger Indo-Pacific approach designed to hem it in (Chaturvedi, 1992). China itself has, in turn, bolstered its own diplomatic efforts and investments in Nepal, especially under the BRI. This tug-of-war puts Nepal in a quandary, where tilting too heavily one way could jeopardize its relation with the other (Chand, and Danner, 2015). Nepal must exercise wisdom of mutual respect and symmetrical diplomacy so that it may retain its sovereignty and avoid entanglement in strategic competition.

The geopolitical location of Nepal that is wedged between two superpowers, India and China, has always kept Nepal in the geopolitical limelight. India, prompted by its historical economic and cultural interest in Nepal, had long viewed Nepal as being in its sphere of influence (Khadka, 1992). Instances like the 2015 economic blockade have subjected relations to strain, leading Nepal to seek alternative realignments, especially towards China. China's increasing investments and infrastructure projects in Nepal under the BRI have been interpreted as efforts to counterbalance India's hegemony (Pyakurel, 2019). This three-way dynamic between Nepal, India, and China complicates Nepal's foreign policy, requiring prudent maneuvering to avoid excessive reliance on one neighbor.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Overall, Nepal's location between India and China has always placed the country at the central position in South Asia. From the research conducted, it is clear that Nepal is much sought after both geographically and strategically by both neighbors. Nepal's foreign relations with India and China have fluctuated with changing political, economic, and social situations. Nepal has tried to keep an equilibrium relationship with both powers, especially

when the political scenario at the global and regional levels keeps evolving. It has tried to remain impartial and protect its own interests by engaging with both neighbors and other global powers like the United States. However, the growing competition among powerful nations has also been creating issues for the sovereignty and independence of Nepal. Pressure to choose sides may undermine Nepal's independence in taking its own decisions. However, through the commitment to peaceful diplomacy, national unity and equi-distance foreign policy, Nepal can continue to play the role of a wise and prudent buffer state. Nepal's future depends on how well it is able to ride these outside pressures by focusing on its own advancement and political stability. This research helps us understand that this tiny country named Nepal plays a key role in the game of global politics.

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