Existential Threats to Nepal's National Security: A Strategic and Multidimensional Analysis

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Abstract

The paper examines the characteristics of existential threat on national security in Nepal as dynamic and multi-dimensional and not confined to conventional military paradigm. The conceptualization of existential risk adopted in the study is based on the modern security literature, which regards those sluggish but accretive forces as the erosion of governance, economic dependency, fragmentation, environmental stress, and the geopolitical constraint. Nepal as a state whose historical interpretation has been positioned between India and China makes it especially valuable in understanding how the interaction of these overlapping vulnerabilities acquires new security calculus to small, landlocked states in the twenty-first century. The study design applied in the study involves qualitative and multi-source study design through the use of semi-structured interviews with the elites, national policies reports, protest reports around the 2025 youth mobilizations, and secondary governance and strategic information. Thematic repetition was used to code these materials, and text-mining tools, e.g., frequency and cluster analysis, were used to supplement the interpretive results in order to triangulate interpretive results. This interconnectedness resulted in six theatres which encompass transformation of security paradigm in Nepal, political oligarchy, governance and youth mobilization deficits, economic instability, anthropogenic and systemic risks and geopolitical vulnerability. The combination of these pressures develops what the study calls layered fragility a scenario in which institutional weakness, social disgruntlement, climate pressure and reliance on foreign aid mutually intensify each other as time goes by, gradually restricting state capacity and strategic freedom. It suggests that the processes of compounds and endogenous are more likely to trigger the existential risks to Nepal than the imminent interstate conflict. By assuming it is the interplay of internal vulnerability and external forces that contribute to the anthropogenic threat, and the vulnerability of small states, the article contributes to the security-studies discourse of the need to reform governance, to diversify economies, to adapt to climate change, and to get more people into politics as the foundations of long-term state resilience.

Keywords: Climate risk, Existential security, Fragility of governance, Geopolitical balancing, National resilience

Introduction

What is an existential threat to new security studies? The simplest definition of the term is taken to mean the threat to the existence of people, communities, or even states, or in other words, threats of an event caused either by a sudden catastrophe or by gradual structural corrosion. The new study has expanded this idea to include climate change, pandemics, cyber disruption, institutional collapse, and technological threats capable of annihilating even civilization (IPCC, 2022). The further expansion of the concept is the radicalization of international politics: security is becoming not only the balance of military forces but also an ever-growing concern of political order, economic system, social contract, and ecologies (Buzan, & de Weld, 1998; Paris, 2001).

Threats that are anthropogenic or those that are created or enhanced by human action have assumed the center stage when it comes to debating on global survival in the twenty-first century. Nuclear proliferation, climate-related disasters, biological disasters, and systemic vulnerabilities to digital threats have equally exerted an influence on strategic calculations in comparison to the historical interstate rivalry (UNDP, 2022). Such developments discredit the realist presuppositions according to which security is primarily identical with the defense of territory and military deterrence and propose that the existence of a state would not be determined by the capacity to control, social cohesion, and the adjustment of institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). As the small and vulnerable states are grappling with these pressures, the distinction between the external and internal security has increasingly been ambiguous.

Nepal provides an empirical environment which can be studied to observe this transformation. Nepal is now confronted by a combination of both internally generated and externally invested threats that are threatening its long-term stability and traditionally viewed through the perspective of the buffer-state geopolitics between India and China. The absence of political stability, poor governance, economic dependency, juvenile disillusionment, climatic stress, and involvement in big powers has also added to the absence of institutional credibility and trust by the people. The fact that Nepal is not about to be militarily ruined yet, the totality of all these pressures is a query on the sustainability of Nepal in its democratic regime, its territorial integrity and the social-political unity.

The literature addressing security in Nepal has greatly addressed the topic of post-conflict reconstruction or balancing foreign policies without much regard to the hazard that might be on the rise. The article also adds to the literature by integrating these spheres into an existential-security framework that anticipates gradually moving structural vulnerabilities unlike the crises, which are infrequent. The chosen study design (qualitative and multi-source) is the combination of conducting interviews with political elites, analyzing policies, governance metrics, and narrating the stories of protest participants to understand how the political elites, security actors, and civil-society participants see contemporary threats to Nepal as a viable nation-state.

Its main thesis is that the security concerns of Nepal cannot be perceived as discrete dangers to the country as well as that it is the push of forces of interaction that causes what we can refer to as layered fragility: the erosion of the governance, economical fragility, social fragmentation, environmental destabilization, and the geopolitical constraint are mutually amplifying over time. It is also important to mention that, in order to guarantee that Nepal safeguards its territorial integrity and the institutional and social foundations upon which democratic resilience and strategic autonomy would find ultimate basis, Nepal must address and respond to these interconnections.

Methods and Materials

The study design assigned to this case was a qualitative and multi-source that entailed analysis of how key actors and institutions in Nepal perceive and construct existential threats to the national security of the country. The data consisted of semi-formatted elite interviews with policymakers, security authorities, diplomats, economists, journalists, and leaders of civil societies; official policy documents and legislation; the accounts of protests and discourse of the 2025 youth movements; and secondary governance and strategy information developed by global bodies and regulators.

The sampling of the interviewees was done in a manner that institutional diversity and anonymity could be maintained to ensure that the interviewees were open with the interviewer. All the sources have been uploaded into qualitative study software and coded with the assistance of an iterative inductive-deductive thematic approach, which began with the open coding of the material in the field of governance, geopolitics, economy, climate risk, youth politics, and institutional capacity and proceeded with the later synthesis of the findings into six analytical themes, namely security-paradigm transformation, political oligarchy, governance deficits and youth mobilization, economic fragility, anthropogenic threats, and geopolitical vulnerability. To better support the degree of analytical rigor, the thematic interpretation was complemented with text-mining tools, including word-frequency analysis and similarity-based clustering, that produced the word-cloud and cluster visualizations (Figures 1 and 2) and made it possible to triangulate the assertions about narrative patterns and lexical distributions in the corpus that raised internal validity with cross-verifying claims.

Results and Findings

The qualitative study, which involves elite interviews, policy documents, discourse of protest, governmental data on the governance, and strategic reports, it is clear that the Nepalese national security environment is increasingly informed by the structural, as well as accumulative vulnerabilities, which may not be confined to the traditional military threats alone. The respondents had always understood security in a multidimensional state of political legitimacy, economic stability, social stability, environmental stability and geopolitical independence. These realms

were not perceived as individual, yet these spheres were brought in the limelight as connected and today Nepal is in a security dilemma and this has been expressed as a layered fragility wherein slow-moving stressors are gradually compromising the ability of states and citizen trust. The associations have mention as six themes.

Theme 1: Nepal's Security Paradigm Change: Respondents of diverse institutional backgrounds referred to radical transformation in the monarchy-based, territory-based, conception of security to a human-security and governance-based concept with the Maoist insurgency and the establishment of federalism. The previous military leaders termed the 1996-2006 crisis as a systemic shock that necessitated the restructuring of civil-military relations and strategic planning, which were based on the available assessment of post war restructuring of security in Nepal (Jha, 2014; Upreti, 2009).

The National Security Policy (Government of Nepal, 2016) officially takes an integrated approach, i.e. incorporates economic, environmental, and societal risks, yet, in the opinion of the policy analysts, the implementation appeared to be one-sided, as it was viewed by the informants. Several of the respondents also stressed the fact that there is no native culture of strategic management of the priorities of threats, which is in favor of the thesis that threat management in Nepal is yet to be proactive rather than proactive (Adhikari, 2021). Any changes in the federal government were commonly referred to as a decentralization of power at provincial and local levels that would complicate the process of intelligence gathering and disaster management.

Theme 2: institutional Oligarchy and Erosion: The monopoly of political power by business-political coalition and elite party systems was one of the existing discourses. The Nepal system was seen by civil-society actors as an oligarchic democracy, and both formal pluralism and deep-rooted patronage are also applicable to general elite capture in South Asian democracies (Heller, 2012).

Bureaucratic respondents related the politicization of the civil service to laxity in enforcing regulations and short term policymaking. Transparency international (2024) and the world bank support these perceptions as they in their Worldwide Governance Indicators (2025) document endemic absence of accountability, rule of law, and quality of regulations. The overall idea of such institutional decay was a strategic vulnerability because the state could no longer effortlessly use collective action during the crisis and the people were no longer as willing to be in compliance with security actions.

Theme 3: Governance Weaknesses, Social Confidence and Youth Engagement: Reduced confidence in the national institutions was emphasized a number of times by the participants. Youth activists characterized corruption scandals and extended political stalemate as structural failures and security officials considered the September 2025 protests as signs of structural failures and not individual ones. These findings can be explained by the fact that Transparency International (2024) documents the decline in trust among the population and frequent cases of impunity by senior authorities.

Generational conflicts were particularly sharp. The respondents had argued that digitally networked youths weaken the civilizational thesis shown by Huntington (1996) in that the principal fault line in Nepal appears to be a generation and institutional divide between blocks, rather than a cultural one. In terms of its overall normative transformative activism, even though some observers have viewed Generation Z activism as a paradigm shift in its entirety, a number of observers have also questioned the sustainability of the movement by noting the absence of an organizational conveyor that could funnel protest energy into institutional change, a trend that is indicative of the literature on digitally mediated mobilization overall (Tufekci, 2017).

Theme 4: Economic Weakness and Strategic Dependence: It was transformed into one of the key security pressures: economic vulnerability. Analysts pointed out dependence on remittances, small sets of exports, history of trade deficit, and lack of diversification of foreign direct investment in Nepal (Nepal Rastra Bank, 2025). These institutional properties were observed to restrain sovereign policy actions and make them more susceptible to external shocks.

The fact that it relied on transit routes, the importation of petroleum, and beefing up relations with India was usually cited in order to introduce the geopolitical leverage and a developing infrastructure presence in China was named to diversify the partners, but new asymmetries. India hydropower exports are perceived as minor steps toward resilience but the respondents pointed out that unless there is institutional change and diversification of export, the Nepal economy remains highly vulnerable to climate shocks, political turmoil, and global demand variability (Timilsina, 2025).

Theme 5: Anthropogenic and Systemic Threats: All of them accepted climate change as a multiplier of threats in the long term and not a humanitarian crisis in the short-term. The respondents linked floods, landslides, and glacial-lake outburst floods to infrastructure destruction and displacement and fiscal stress patterns, which have been widely discussed in the Himalayan climate-security literature (ICIMOD, 2023). These said environmental shocks were said to reduce the existence of the states in the peripheral regions and augment competition in land and water resources.

The bio and technological dangers were also on the centre stage. The occurrence of cyber vulnerabilities, regulatory gaps, and pandemic exposure that the COVID-19 highlighted were deemed as a pointer that the socio-technical systems within Nepal are not redundant and resilient (WHO, 2022). The impact of the disasters on power grids has been pointed out by the interviewees: the climate disasters cause effects on power grids and thus on health services and digital communications. The repetitive element that was discovered to contribute to such anthropogenic peril was the political stagnation which restricted the adaptive governance and long term planning.

Theme 6: Weaknesses in Geopolitics and Compensation Strategy: The fact that Nepal lies between India and China turned out to be a structural consistent constraint, which has affected the economic policy, infrastructural decision-making, and signalling of diplomacy. An intermittently hedging attitude of achievement of autonomy minus overtures of coercion was referred to as foreign policy by diplomats and which also aligned with the tendencies of analysis of the Nepal buffer-state quandary (Garver, 2011).

Border issues with India especially in Kalapani–Limpiyadhura–Lipulekh and Susta were also mentioned as hotbed of politics whereas the lack of surveillance capacity along the North frontier was a source of concern with regard to sovereignty in the remoteness of the Himalayan areas. The involvement to the United States was largely viewed as providing strategic diversification and complexing the Nepal external balancing too. Altogether, the respondents described geopolitics not as a looming military danger but as a chronic situation that combines with domestic frailty to increase existential risk.

Frequency Analysis

The word cloud is a powerfully synthesizing reflection of the qualitative results in that the most salient terms, according to them, are national security conceptualized through the perspectives of state capacity, institutional performance, and socio-economic resilience and not through the focus of narrow military preparedness.
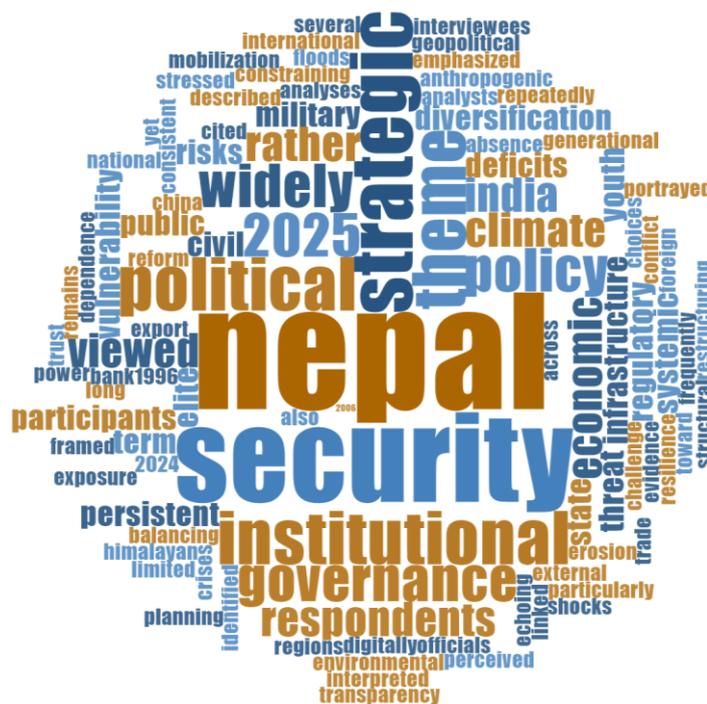

Figure 1: Distribution of Frequency Analysis

The recurrence of terms like institutional erosion, corruption, deficits, instability, balancing, India, China, and policy shows that interviewees and documentary sources alike tended to associate the external geopolitical pressures with internal frailty in governance, and this argument on how sub-national vulnerability has been exacerbated by strategic weakness is one of the main aspects of the study that deserves discussion. At the same time, the focus on climate, infrastructure, risks, and shocks highlight how the perception of the environmental stress as the multiplier of long-term threats is incorporated into the frameworks of financial constraints and administrative limitations. Citations of young generation, 2025, protests, mobilization, and public trust further indicate the factors of generational contestation and legitimacy crisis as the primary aspects of the modern security discourse in Nepal, whereas economic indicators of diversification, exports, remittance and reserves represent chronic dependency as one of the common strategic concerns. Collectively, the visualization summarizes the main analytical argument of the paper it is perceived that the Nepal security environment has been multidimensional and cumulative as a result of the interplay

of political oligarchy, governance deficits, climate pressures, economic fragility, and geopolitical balancing in a manner that produces a state of latent, layered instability and not blatant confrontation.

Cluster Analysis

The cluster diagram displays that the narratives of the respondents were concentrated around six closely related thematic areas, which include: security transformation, political oligarchy, the deficits of the Nepal governance, youth mobilization, the economic vulnerability, anthropogenic threats and geopolitical vulnerability, suggesting a very well-structured and internally consistent perception of the Nepal risk environment. The orientation of the majority of clusters in the negative and moderately negative areas indicates that the subjects rated the existing paths negatively, especially in the context of the governmental performance, institutional decline, and reliance on the outside. The adjacency of the economic frailty and the geopolitical balancing also reveals how the material vulnerability, and the constraints of foreign policy are cognitively connected to each other, and the adjacency between the deficiency of governance and the mobilization of the youth also shows the perceived causality between the falling institutional trust and the generation turmoil. Anthropogenic threats seem to be directly related to the systemic risk narratives and support the view that climate change and technological exposure is not an isolated threat but instead threat multiplier. On the whole, the visualization helps to support the main argument of the study that the security issues in Nepal are perceived as interrelated and cumulative to create a consistent pattern of the instability in layers, instead of a singular or short-term crisis.

Items clustered by word similarity
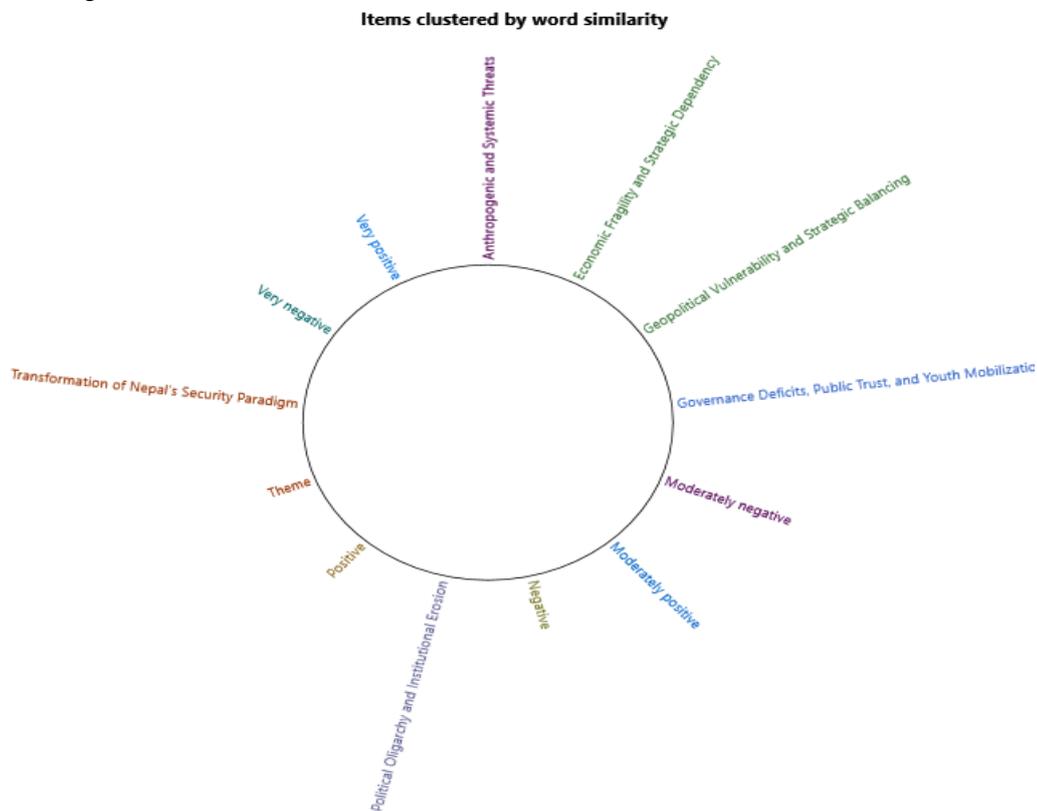
Figure 2: Distribution of Cluster Analysis

The existential security threats in Nepal were not ascribed to one actor, hazard but the combination of political oligarchy, governance erosion, economic dependency, generation fracture, anthropogenic disruption and geopolitical constraint. These processes were always characterized as gradual, but accretive, able to drain institutional power, civic trust, and political independence over time. The findings thus present the current Nepalese security situation as the latent stability and surface stability wherein underlying susceptibilities interacting with each other may gradually erode the long-term sustainability of the nation-state.

Discussion

The results of the given study contribute to the further development of modern discussion about the security of small states proving that the main weaknesses of Nepal become more structural, cumulative, and endogenous instead of being strictly military. The fact that respondents define security as a process between a political legitimacy, economic stability, social cohesion, environmental stability, and geopolitical autonomy is close to the multidimensional security perspectives which focus on the societal and institutional underpinnings of state survival (Buzan, B., Wæver, O., &

de Wilde, J., 1998; Paris, 2001). These aspects seem to be mutually supporting in the case of Nepal: the fragility in the sphere of governance increases the level of economic dependency which further raises the geopolitical vulnerability and the social dissatisfaction and creates the chain of instability that gradually reduces the autonomy of strategies.

Redefining the Nepal Security Transformation: The move of monarchy-focused defence towards a governance-oriented concept of security is related to greater post-conflict changes in fragile states, in which internal legitimacy and institutional coherence are now determinants of long-term stability (Call & Wyeth, 2008). The federal restructuring of Nepal can therefore be viewed not as constitutional engineering only but a security reordering and its success hinges on the level of coordination across the levels of government. The fears expressed by the respondents on the disjointed power reflect comparative studies of decentralization that caution of the transitional failure of coordination when intergovernmental systems are not strongly institutionalized (Rodden, 2004). Theoretically, this adds weight to the discussion that security institutions cannot be separated by political design: the constitution creates a scope of capacities toward threat management.

Elite Capture and Institutional Weakness: Political oligarchy is in line with the political-economy notes that explain the relationship between power concentration and low level of performance in the delivery of public goods and poor state capacity (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Fukuyama, 2014). According to the descriptions of the patronage networks and politicized bureaucracies by the participants, it is possible that Nepal remains in the low-capacity trap where the absence of accountability will not allow institutional stagnation, and institutional strategic investment will not occur. These findings substantiate the view that corruption and elite domination are not only the problems of governance but security burden as it reduces the willingness of people to accept the crisis response and the plausibility of the state in the negotiation process with other states.

Belief, Children and Social Cohesion: The issue of generational mobilization puts the importance of social capital and civic trust under strain in keeping political order. Putnam (2000) and Norris (2011) of the absence of democracy give a precious insight of appreciating how youth scepticism towards formal institutions works and how marginalization of the political process can enhance the series of protests even in the electoral democracy. The Nepal case suggests that digitally mediated activism can accelerate the process of political contestation without the need to improve the optimal capacity, and that it exposes the system to the frequent legitimacy shocks. Under the human-development prism, limited capability growth, limited prospects in the labour sector, diminished institutional voice and unsatisfying prospects that accompany the essence of social stability are also the facts in the frustrations of the younger respondents that are the main features of the social stability described by Sen (1999) and Alkire and Foster (2011).

Economic Fragility of Strategic Constraints: The geopolitical enhancer of the results is the factor of economic vulnerability. Even structural dependence on remittances, imports, and intensive foreign investment harms policy autonomy and repeats the dependency studies of development economics (UNDP, 2022). The IMF (2024) analysis of small open economies also warns that small bases and reliance on external financing expose the small economy to both political and climatic catastrophes. The Nepal location comes with it a larger structural dilemma of landlocked developing nations in which infrastructure dependence on neighbours turns economic crisis into strategic power (Arvis, Raballand, & Marteau, 2010). The scepticism of the respondents about the diversification efforts is an indication allowing one to infer that it is institutional reform and not growth itself that is vital in changing the fortunes of new exports into a sustainable source of resilience.

Anthropogenic Compound Crises and Risks: The presented concepts of climate change as a threat multiplier as provided by the participants are consistent with the new literature on climate-security, which correlates environmental shock with fiscal pressure, displacement, and governance overload (IPCC, 2022; UN Security Council, 2021). The Himalayan context is especially applicable as the degradation of the infrastructures and rural permeability are becoming more and more severe due to the disappearance of the cryosphere and the excessive rainfall (Shrestha et al., 2019). Systems-oriented security models fundamentally rely on the presence of environmental risk coupled with cyber vulnerability and insecurity on infrastructures that are interdependent and where cascading failures occur (Goldin and Mariathasan, 2014). These findings have the implications that the threat of occurrence of existential risks in Nepal is less than the chances of occurrence of compound shocks overwhelming institutional buffers limited in size.

Hedging Policies and Geopolitics: The equilibrium between the big powers in Nepal is a classic example of how small states hedge foreign policies, that is, through economic diplomacy, the infrastructure selection and miniaturization, they may avoid excessive dependence on their partners (Kuik, 2016). The study findings show that geopolitical exposure is magnified by the domestic weakness: the lack of bargaining capability does not allow Kathmandu to get favourable terms by the external partners. This reinforces realist-institutionalist syntheses that consider internal capability as the defining factor of external autonomy (Walt, 1987). Unlike the threat of a military

clash, the respondents saw geopolitics as a context of structuring mundane policy-making, like energy flows or cyber-policing.

Integrated Implications: Together, the discussion restores the security environment in Nepal as a structure of interacting slow-moving pressures, rather than the one-off threats. Political oligarchy restricts the reform, economic dependence restricts strategic choices and makes generational alienation, climate pressure puts a strain on weak infrastructures, and raw materials empower each other. This tendency is consistent with the complexity-related theories of state fragility which emphasize on the feedback-loop of legitimacy, capacity, and foreign vulnerability (OECD, 2020). Layered fragility is the concept implied here so it contributes to a body of knowledge since it summarizes erosive processes which appear to be going on under a perceived political knowledge, but these present themselves in a crisis.

The policy implications of the findings are that improving national security of Nepal will involve less focus on the development of its traditional defence potential, but rather radical reformation of the governance system, integration of young people in politics, adaptation to climate, and economy diversification. In contrast to lack of developments in these regions, the weaknesses that overlap as presented in this paper are likely to persist as Nepal is subjected to persistent legitimacy crisis, and lack of autonomy in a regional order, which is progressively becoming competitive.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the contemporary security predicament in Nepal can not be reduced to merely the individualistic military threats but rather perceived as the cumulative outcome of interaction of political, economic, social, environmental, and geopolitical strains. The multi-source, qualitative integrated analysis that includes elite interviews, policy texts, protest narratives, governance indicators, and computational text analysis suggests that the study discovered that a sense of layered fragility which is the relationship where governance erosion, political oligarchy, youth disaffection and economic dependency, climate stress and strategic balancing are mutually reinforcing with each other. The evolving security outlook in Nepal reflects an official change in paradigm to multidimensional identification of threat, yet recurrently respondents cited loopholes in practice, deficiency of cultural sophistication in strategic culture, and fragmented coordination of different elements of the federal operations as a core reversal to resiliency.

The findings suggest that there is a higher likelihood of an existential risk happening in Nepal owing to the erosion of institutions through time and compound shocks than the risk of an impending interstate conflict. In a bid to address these weak points, it is therefore significant to re-construct national security as a whole-of-state and whole-of-society initiative, not merely on defence modernization but equally on governance reform, economic diversification, climate change preparedness, cyber preparedness, and inclusive political participation- particularly among the younger generations. The article has the potential to contribute to the scholarship of security-studies since it puts Nepal within the framework of bigger debates about the anthropogenic vulnerability of small states and how internal vulnerability can be magnified by external vulnerability. Such analysis would have to be further extended in future study to longitudinal analysis and regional dissimilar perceptions to be aware of whether such trends of disordered instability are being replicated in other Himalayan and South Asian states that have to confront convergent pressures in a more unpredictable world order.

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