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From Yam to Pivot: Theoretical Insights on Nepal's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Geography has remained an instrumental factor in shaping Nepal's foreign policy for a considerable time. The presence of dominant powers in the neighborhood and beyond has made Nepal concerned about safeguarding its vital interests. For this reason, its strategic position is referred to as the 'yam between three boulders'. Hence, this article aims to apply the leading theories of international relations, namely Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, in analysing the shifting trends in Nepal's foreign policy behavior. There has been a gradual shift in traditional balance policy towards a hedging policy. This strategy provides a realistic viewpoint that explains the unfolding, complex relations in contemporary foreign policy. Liberalism fosters Nepal's engagement in multilateral treaties, active participation in various regional and global forums, and adherence to international law. Foreign policy adopts a constructivist insight in its enduring commitment to non-alignment, neutrality, and the value of world peace. Nepal, as a small power, behaved realistically during the escalating mode of external threat. It followed a constructivist approach to resist pressure from powerful neighbors, whereas the liberal viewpoint prevailed during periods of regional and global relaxation. The study concludes that a sensitive geostrategic position, shifting global power, the emergence of new actors, and changes in the domestic power sequence have led to a shift in foreign policy behaviour. This article assumes a qualitative approach and uses secondary sources to gather the required data.

Keywords: Constructivism, hedging strategy, liberalism, realism, three boulders

Introduction

States, as major actors in international relations, conduct their activities beyond national boundaries. Such activities align with the guiding policies and principles, which are continuously influenced by the core value of 'national interests'. Together, these policies constitute foreign policy. Nepal, a small power at the center of South Asia, is situated between two Asian giants- India and China. Its foreign policy has long been shaped and often constrained by its unique geographical positioning between two Asian powers. This influences its strategic vulnerabilities as well as diplomatic avenues (Dahal, 2011). Despite its landlocked position, Nepal remained prominent in its dealings with its immediate neighbors and donors. It has been serving as a vibrant bridge between the Tibetan Plateau and the Indian Subcontinent. This position has been a double-edged sword in its foreign policy dealings with immediate neighbours and beyond. This position has been substituted in trade and diplomacy, whereas Nepal could never remain free from geopolitical pressure. Thus, Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of modern Nepal, has aptly used the metaphor 'yam between two boulders' (Stiller, 1968) to describe Nepal's delicate position. Symbolically, 'boulders' represent China and India, and 'yam' symbolises Nepal's resilience despite its small size. This 'yam' concept has guided Nepal's foreign policy approach, centred on non-alignment, neutrality and balanced relations.

So far, the contemporary era has observed a gradual shift in the country's foreign policy outlook. Jesse and Dreyer (2016) argue that actors and established institutions shape foreign policy change. Leadership positions in government and non-governmental entities, their impact on policy determination and alteration in domestic institutions, are more responsible for the transformation of foreign policy (Jesse & Dreyer, 2016, p. 49). With shifts in global power dynamics, Nepal has also experienced shifts in its foreign policy. Accordingly, the neighbourhood-centric foreign policy has transformed towards broader regional and international issues.

The 1950s proved to be a milestone for Nepal with its entry into the United Nations. Foreign policy proved more diversified with the decision to establish diplomatic ties with China, Japan, and many other countries beyond the neighbourhood. Nepal's engagement in NAM, SAARC, various UN-supported programs and BIMESTEC paved the way towards multilateralism (Acharya, 2019). Non-alignment, neutrality, and a balance strategy have appeared in the new strategy, i.e., balancing, hedging, and strategic ambiguity. This policy shift, to some extent, tends to maximise economic activity, minimise risk and enhance diplomatic business. Amid a global power shift, growing geopolitical rivalry, and conflicting interests among immediate neighbours and donors, the article explores how theories of international relations provide insights into Nepal's foreign policy behaviour as a small power. For this purpose, the article is framed to examine Nepal's traditional foreign policy framework, shifting strategies, and the impact of existing international relations theories in the changing scenario of Nepal's foreign policy.

Literature Review

Foreign policy, as a broader academic discourse, is shaped by various theories. According to Jackson and Sorensen (2013), "the choice of theory how policymakers view the world is likely to affect the choice of policy" (p.252). However, many theories have contributed to the analysis of Nepal's foreign policy transformation across various time periods. Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism, the leading theories of international relations, have their significance in Nepal's foreign policy shift.

Political Realism

Political realism, traditionally known as classical realism, is a post-Second World War innovation. However, its roots trace back to the idea of Thucydides, an ancient Greek Philosopher. Similarly, the ideas of Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes in the 15th and 17th centuries, respectively, contributed to the development of this theory. The credit for developing this theory in the twentieth century goes to Morgenthau (1997) and his famous book "Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace". Realists make certain assumptions about the state as the major actor in international relations. The global system is anarchic, where actors are always worried about their survival. All actors are guided by their interests, and the balance of power preserves the state's inner motive of survival (Fearon, 1998). The theory is rooted in a pessimistic view of human nature characterised by groupism, anarchism, egoism, and power politics.

But the world politics changed into new dynamics during the 1980s. Substantial changes occurred in the realist outlook, focusing on the international system rather than state-centric approaches, as explained by classical realists. Consequently, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed neo-realism concentrate on the structure of the global system rather than domestic factors (Sørensen et al., 2022). This theory is supposed to behave from two different approaches- defensive and offensive realisms. The former seeks to preserve status by maintaining a balance of power, and the latter seeks to assert control in the chaotic international system to maintain one's security. Basically, the small states have their own reality. Drawing attention to the fact, Jesse and Dryer (2016) state that "foreign policy choice is constrained for the small states as the smaller they are, the greater the constraint. The more constrained the choice, the more the state should follow the lines of bandwagoning or balancing" (p. 176). Mostly, small states adopt bandwagoning or balancing policies in response to structural constraints.

The early 1990s witnessed that both classical and neo-realism could not address contemporary changes. The dissolution of the Soviet Union demanded the study of the impacts of internal and external determinants on a state's foreign policy behaviour. It gave birth to the new theory called neo-classical realism. Theory holds that material capabilities determine a state's status in the international system. However, it is stated that "the pressure of the international system affects the state's foreign policy through a complex process where such pressures are to be rendered and addressed through intermediate variables linked to internal factors" (Rose, 1998, p.148). In this context, the theory argues that internal

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determinants have a significant influence on understanding foreign policy, even in the face of external determinants.

Liberalism

Liberalism, the foundational theory of international relations, was systematically studied through Emeric Crosbac's work, 'The Speech of the state- 1623'. Reflecting the social changes occurring in contemporary Europe, the theory strongly advocated equality, freedom, and the rational distribution of wealth (Galal, 2020, p. 45). The theory postulates that peace and cooperation are the foundations of international relations. Adherence to international law, organisational strengthening, and the promotion of democratic values are essential to ensuring lasting peace worldwide. It emphasises the potential for human progress and is more optimistic about peace and stability. Hence, international cooperation is possible even in the presence of an anarchical international system. So, the theory gives top priority to harmony and cooperation through international institutions (Stein, 2008). It shows greater respect for international law by enforcing international institutions. Keohane and Martin (1995) further state that "institutions can offer information, reduce transaction costs, make commitment more credible, establish focal points for coordination, and in general, facilitate the operation of reciprocity (p.42). Beyond the traditional nation-state system, individuals, social organisations, civil society, and multinational companies work as new actors in international relations.

Constructivism

The end of the Cold War and the development of regional integration in Europe led to the emergence of an identity element. This element ultimately gave birth to 'constructivism' as a new theory in international relations. Nicholas Onuf, in his book 'The World of our Making', introduced it as a social theory. Alexander Wendt further developed this theory, depicting the impact of ideas, values, beliefs, identity, and perception in the process of foreign policymaking (Galal, 2020, p. 49). The theory emerged against the background of the ideas of Kant, Hegel, and Grotius. It argues that national identity, moral values, and historical narratives have a significant impact on foreign policy. "Moral norms – thus ethics matter in world politics" (Price, 2008, p. 317). Highlighting the characteristics of this theory, Hurd (2008) concludes that it focuses on spiritual aspects of international relations and serves as an alternative to materialism. Hude further notes that "several social elements, including state interaction, contribute to the production of international relations. The degree of similarities and differences in identity and interest determines the level of relations (Hurd, 2008, p. 300). The theory posits that rivalry is a universal spiritual phenomenon that is shaped by the quality of society. All these elements guide actors and shape motivational behaviour in foreign policy.

Methodology

Nepal has its own experience of policy change in foreign policy matters. It was primarily due to the unification of modern Nepal in 1869. Amid Nepal's geostrategic position under the expansionist policies of immediate neighbours and the challenging incidents at home,

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Nepal's foreign policy continued to shift in the succeeding years (Dahal, 2024). Hence, the article aims to apply international relations theories to understand Nepal's foreign policy shift. Attempts have thus been made to analyse the contemporary foreign policy shift through the lens of relevant international relations theories.

The article is rooted in the theoretical philosophy of ontology, epistemology and axiology. Ontologically, multiple theories have contributed due to their contextual, ever-changing, and relative nature (Zukauskas et al., 2018, p. 122). Nepal's unique geographical position, social structure, ideology, global power shift, several internal factors and its engagement in various regional and global forums are the factors studied from epistemological insights. Further, neutrality, non-alignment, Panchasheel, world peace, and international law provide axiological insights into Nepal's foreign policy shift. The article is prepared in a descriptive-analytical design and employs secondary data gathered from various journals, books, official documents, and published and unpublished literature.

Data Presentation

Geographical Location and History

Nepal, with a total area of 1,47,516 sq km, is a medium-sized state. It is often called a small power, mainly because of its strategic location in the centre of South Asia, its active engagement in various regional and global institutions, and its capacity to preserve sovereignty and independent identity in the challenging days of nation-building (Baral, 2018). The value and knowledge of sages and scholars best preserved Nepal's identity during the early days of nation-building. However, the foundation of Nepal's foreign policy lies in the vision of brave King Prithvi Narayan Shah, who served the nation as a classical realist. It was possible to form a unified nation mainly because of the successful operation of war diplomacy. National security has remained the primary concern, and the succeeding rulers dragged the country into war with powerful neighbours, popularly known as the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816). Even after the war, Nepal experienced several shifts in foreign policy, responding to changes in regime and the shifting global order. Hence, Nepal's foreign policy has evolved from the traditional metaphor of a yam between two boulders. This has now transformed into 'a yam between three boulders' (Baral, 2025), including the influence of donors and Western powers beyond immediate neighbours. Hence, Nepal's foreign policy has witnessed several trends that emerged over the last two and a half centuries. The following sub-topics shed light on the relationships between all those trends and the leading theories of international relations

Why Foreign Policy Changes?

Foreign policy is itself a dynamic concept. For the vitality of the international system, changes and reforms over time are necessary. According to realists, power structures are not always uniform. Several internal and external factors influence foreign policy decision-making. Jesse and Dreyer (2016) argue that the rise and decline of power capability of a state, possible threats and power position of neighboring states, changing global order and

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its impact on international and regional hegemony and rim and buffer position of small states (p.175) are the principal conditions in the foreign policy choice of a country.

Unlike realists, liberals consider domestic factors and international cooperation to be significant influences on foreign policy decision-making. Possible domestic actors, including societal, organisational, institutional, economic, and individual factors, are said to influence foreign policy choices. Mass movements, ethnic groups, interest groups, political parties, formal governmental institutions, economic corporations, and individual actors have significant influence on policy decisions (Acharya, 2023). Hence, changes in the actors controlling government, domestic institutions, and non-governmental actors lead to changes in foreign policy. The ruling elite, political party, bureaucracy, military, public opinion, and the judicial institutions have been seen as the driving forces behind a change in foreign policy reflecting the coalition among domestic elements. Further, constructivists have their own view of the factors that instigate changes in the foreign policy agenda. Whatever the theoretical implications, Nepal's unique position in the theory focuses on the capacity of actors within the institutional structure to achieve the targeted goal through the development and practice of norms. Established norms and identity are always the primary factors in foreign policy change.

Foreign policy seems to be taking a new shape, along with the rise and fall of norms and values as symbols of identity. Hence, the small powers adjust their foreign policy slowly and steadily rather than make automatic changes in line with structural change in the international system (Jesse & Dreyer 2016, p. 47). Nepal's non-alignment policy, neutral position in neighbourhood conflicts, and advocacy of the peace zone proposal have served as constructivist attributes in its foreign policy behaviour.

Realist Theory and The Foreign Policy of Nepal

Nepal is one of the countries with the world's oldest civilisations. However, it has always remained cautious about its security and survival, mainly because of powerful neighbours. It is primarily because of the sensitive geostrategic position that survival has remained pivotal amid power asymmetry with immediate neighbours and global powers (K.C., 2024). Hence, from a realistic perspective, Nepal's foreign policy reflects its continuous effort to protect its vital interests, namely sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence. Nepal's political history shows that dynasties like Kirat, Lichhavi, Malla, and Shah, and their respective regimes, had backgrounds of war and struggle. "Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of Modern Nepal, himself was a man of decision and realist enough to recognise the complexity of the task he was undertaking" (Stiller, 2017, p. 99). His unification campaign was based on hard-power diplomacy, combining the army and the people. Nepal's policy remained offensive during the unification but later became defensive. Following the unification, Nepal was involved in a war with powerful neighbours, i.e. Tibet and British India.

Nepal was engaged in war twice: with Tibet (1788 and 1792), and with British India, commonly known as the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816). Nepal, as a small power, adopted the 'policy of isolation' during the Rana regime by maintaining intimate relations with

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British India. The post-Rana regime witnessed a different strategy. Nepal's 'peace zone proposal' and its equi-proximity policy in dealing with immediate neighbours are rooted in political realism. Realistic orientation in Nepal's signing of BRI and Nepal's engagement in the Belt and Road Initiative (2017), and the US-supported project- Millennium Challenge Corporation in 2022 (Mulmi et al., 2023). Protection of vital interests amid a global power shift under a stronger neighbour's domination is crucial to Nepal's foreign policy from a realistic perspective. The domestic environment has an equal impact on foreign policymaking. Unstable politics, fragmented party policy, institutional inefficiency, foreign policy changes driven by regime change, polarised society, haphazard policymaking, and donor-based economy are internal factors affecting foreign policymaking. Hence, neoclassical realism has a significant impact, as both internal and external factors influence the foreign policy decision-making process.

Liberalism and Foreign Policy Outlook

Foreign policy is extracted from both internal and external factors. The Liberal theory holds that domestic factors have a wide-ranging influence on foreign policymaking. Divergent societal groups, internal institutions, and even the individual play a greater role in foreign policy decision-making. It is stated that "state policy of any type and perhaps most importantly foreign policy is the product of the interplay between powerful societal groups" (Moravcsik, 2008). The theory also promotes institutional arrangements, which are often called institutional liberalism. According to liberal thinkers, the theory postulates that "peace and security are possible through the establishment of an international institution with democratic values" (Galal, 2020, p. 47). Hence, the scholars are more optimistic about the possibility of establishing a better world order through international cooperation and the appeal to international law (Stein, 2008). The institutional liberalism states that "institutions can reduce transaction cost, offer information, establish focal points for coordination, make commitment more credible, and in general facilitate the operation of reciprocity (Keohane & Martin, 1995, p.42).

From a Nepali perspective, Nepal's foreign policy reflects an effort to promote a diplomatic role in economic well-being by engaging in multilateral forums. Growing engagement in multi-factorial forums is guided by liberal philosophy and Nepal's appeal to international laws and organisations. In the 1950s, Nepal's foreign policy took a significant turn through its engagement in the Afro-Asian Conference (1955), its entry into the United Nations Organisation, and its establishment of diplomatic relations with countries around the world. Nepal's joining of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), its crucial role in the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), active engagement in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMESTEC), and its growing involvement in various multilateral forums explicitly highlight the impact of liberalism. Reestablishment of a multiparty democratic system in Nepal during the 1990s uprising established certain conventions in foreign policy. Democracy, human rights, rule of law and independence remained the groundwork of the country's foreign policy. This discussion draws to a close that collaborative mechanism has

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enhanced national security and development through international cooperation, trade diversification and foreign aid.

Constructivist Lens on Nepal's Foreign Policy

As a prominent theory of international relations, social constructivism provides an alternative framework for shaping foreign policy. The foundational 'yam' theory provided the ground for adopting a non-aligned foreign policy. Over time, this policy has been shifting towards hedging and strategic balance. Social factors such as norms, values, identity and perceptions are more responsible for such shifts. A few established norms and values still illuminate this policy. The fundamental bases of Nepal's foreign policy, such as non-alignment, the principles of panchsheel, international law, and the value of world peace (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, Article 51), are all influenced by this theory. The theory is equally applicable to the social aspects of interstate relations, where Nepal's foreign policy has been dramatically influenced by a host of historical, cultural, social, and religious factors while maintaining ties with immediate neighbours.

In contrast to the assumption of political realism, social constructivism emphasises the primacy of identity and interest over tangible material factors. Hence, perceptions and ideas of political leadership work as principal internal elements in foreign policy decision-making. These internal elements facilitate the ruling elite in formulating the attitude. The attitude is eventually determined by a state's interests, and foreign policy is formulated accordingly. Small powers have a modest role in consolidating global norms and values. However, to preserve their identity, states are eager to create and promote certain norms. Foreign policy, to a considerable extent, is guided by these norms. Interestingly, adherence to these norms and values imposes greater constraints on foreign policy decision-making. According to constructivist theory, Nepal's tradition of non-alignment, its neutral stance on the China-India conflict (Nayak, 2021), and its contributions to world peace shape its foreign policy.

Discussion

Nepal's legacy as an independent and sovereign state for nearly five millennia has a profound impact on its foreign policy. The foundation of foreign policy began with the unification of modern Nepal by Prithvi Narayan Shah, who metaphorically described Nepal's position as 'a yam between two boulders' (Acharya, 2023). This observation remains pertinent to the foreign policy analysis of contemporary Nepal. However, significant shifts have occurred since the 18th century to the quarter of the 21st century. Regime shifts, changes in domestic milieus, and global power shifts have led to a non-alignment policy. Despite being a small power, Nepal was involved in wars with powerful neighbours during the nation-building process. Considering the power position, the Rana rulers (1846-1950) remained isolated from the outside world, maintaining intimate relations with the British. The demise of the Rana rule and the advent of the democratic system brought 'special relations' with the Southern neighbour. At the same time, Nepal's entry into the UNO, its participation in the Afro-Asian Conference of 1955, and other multilateral forums promoted its engagement with the global community.

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Nepal's policy of upholding balanced relations with immediate neighbours and its efforts to declare Nepal a 'zone of peace' were the major policy shifts during the Panchayat era (1960-1990). Further, the multiparty democratic era brought new changes in foreign policy. Democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the value of world peace became the driving ideals of foreign policy. With the shifting of global power amid geopolitical rivalry, Nepal's joining with China's BRI in 2017 and its involvement in MCC in 2022, the US's launch program serves as a hedging policy. Nepal's continuous support for peacekeeping operations, its neutral stance on the UN and neighbourhood conflicts, and its contributions to UN peacekeeping are evidence of constructivist idealism. However, it seems that small powers find themselves peripheralized due to the influence of dominant powers within the institutional mechanisms through which the liberal aims to promote democracy, peace, cooperation and development (Thorhallsson, 2018). Further, the reality persists in Nepal's landlocked position, where the small power can exist only between three rival hegemonies (two immediate neighbours and overseas donors, especially the West) through balancing, hedging, and pivoting.

Hence, considering the survival factor, a realistic perspective contributes to the analysis of Nepal's hedging policy and the strategic balance between rival powers (Johnny, 2024). New classical realism guides foreign policy operations by bridging external and internal dimensions. The theory focuses on internal disturbances caused by a fragmented elite and external pressure from global power rivalry.

The liberal philosophy enlightens Nepal's engagement with multilateral organisations and the promotion of economic interdependence in the changing global order. Nepal's commitment to a rule-based international order has become an integral part of its foreign policy. Besides, the ideas of national identity, historical legacy, non-alignment, the value of world peace, and neutrality explain Nepal's foreign policy from a constructivist perspective. However, Cerioli (2025) argues that it is strenuous for peripheral countries to apply all international relations theories in their original form. Nepal, a country in the global south, requires an interdisciplinary perspective due to socioeconomic asymmetries, its geography, historical legacy, and the presence of emerging powers in its immediate neighborhood. Against the backdrop of geopolitical constraints and the conflicting interests of immediate neighbours and donors, Nepal's foreign policy has remained paradoxical. Yet, a diverse set of relational forms encompassing partnership, cooperation, rivalry, animosity, and friendship exist with neighboring states. These policies integrate mainstream theories of foreign policy such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism.

Conclusion

As a small power, positioned between two rival giants, Nepal has several geopolitical constraints in its foreign policy. Over the years, foreign policy behaviour has shifted due to numerous internal and external factors. The traditional balancing strategy, inspired by 'yam theory', has now evolved into a hedging or pivotal strategy in dealing with immediate neighbours and powers beyond the neighbourhood. These strategies exhibit a pragmatic blend of realism, liberalism and constructivism. This study shows how a small state like Nepal takes a realistic stance in the face of threats. Foreign policy decisions follow a

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constructivist approach when the threat comes from a greater power, whereas peaceful situations favour a liberal perspective. Hence, realism supports Nepal's continued focus on a survival strategy. The presence of rival powers in the neighbourhood has always made Nepal cautious in protecting its vital interests. At the same time, liberalism emphasizes its advocacy of peace, sovereign equality and adherence to international law in various regional and global forums. The theory further emphasises economic cooperation through institutional engagement. In addition, the constructivist perspective underscores Nepal's foreign policy behaviour through its enduring influence on Panchsheel, non-alignment, and commitment to world peace. Thus, Nepal's foreign policy shift employs multi-theoretical strategies to preserve its sovereignty, maximise economic benefits and enhance its international identity.

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