

## **Diplomacy of Jung Bahadur Rana: A Strategic Adaptation in 19th Century Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

*Jung Bahadur Rana, a key figure in Nepalese history, is known for establishing the Rana autocracy following the Kot Massacre of 1846. However, his significant role in shaping Nepal's diplomatic orientation during a period of colonial expansion in South Asia remains insufficiently explored. This paper critically examines the diplomacy of Jung Bahadur Rana with a focus on the 19th-century geopolitical landscape dominated by British India and Qing China. Through a deep analysis, this study evaluates how Jung Bahadur navigated foreign threats while consolidating Nepalese sovereignty. Applying historical-interpretive methodology, this research draws from published memoirs and secondary literature. This study shows that Jung Bahadur grounded his foreign policy in pragmatism, allying with the British militarily while keeping limited but careful ties with China. The study concludes that his approach laid a durable foundation for Nepal's modern foreign policy, emphasizing neutrality, survival diplomacy, and pragmatism. By reassessing Jung Bahadur's diplomacy, this paper contributes to the historiography of Nepal and sheds light on the long-term consequences in Nepal's international relations.*

**Keywords:** *British India, diplomacy, foreign policy, Jung Bahadur Rana, Nepal, Qing China*

### **Introduction**

The evolution of Nepalese foreign policy dates to ancient Asian civilisation. However, its concept in modern Nepal began with the unification. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines foreign policy as being influenced by domestic considerations, the policies or behaviour of other states, or plans to advance specific geopolitical designs (Britannica, 2019). In the 19th century, Nepal was situated between British India to the south and Qing China to the north. Realizing the country's geographical location and size, King Prithvi Narayan Shah articulated his views on his teaching, describing Nepal as a yam between two boulders. He suggested that Nepal should keep a strong friendship with the emperor of China and maintain a friendship with the emperor of the sea (English emperor) in the south (Joshi, 2023). His advice was clear that Nepal should not take

military initiatives against either of them. But the succeeding rulers could not maintain an independent and non-aligned foreign policy and instead pursued subregional expansion, which led to wars with Tibet and British India in 1792 and 1814, respectively (Khanal, 2009). This shifted Nepal's focus from conquest to preserving independence through adaptable diplomacy.

Nepal ceded significant territories and accepted a British resident in Kathmandu after the Treaty of Sugauli. This turned Nepal into a buffer state under British influence while maintaining limited autonomy. In such situations, there was a rise of the shrewdest politician, like Jung Bahadur, in power after the Kot Massacre in Nepalese politics. In a period dominated by aggressive colonial expansion and regional volatility, Jung pursued an unconventional diplomatic strategy that preserved Nepal's autonomy. Tarrosy argues that whenever direct communication breaks down or conventional diplomacy cannot produce the required result, unconventional methods should be used to have a breakthrough or the enforcement of the common will (Tarrosy, 2014). Jung Bahadur used multiple approaches to diplomacy.

Jung's visit to Britain marked the first time a South Asian ruler interacted with European heads of state on their own soil. His calculated military support to the British during the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny improved the Nepal-Britain relationship, and Nepal regained some of the parts of Terai previously lost under the Sugauli treaty (Kumar, 1967). He was aware of the declining Chinese power and identified that China was neither willing nor able to challenge the British in the Himalayan area (Rose, 1971). Though Nepal was under the nominal suzerainty of the Chinese emperor, Chinese involvement in Nepal was minimal. It offered Jung Bahadur a choice to adopt a British-centric foreign policy and balance ties with China carefully to avoid its interference. His diplomacy and prudent treaty-making skills all combined to secure Nepal's semi-independent status in South Asia.

The principal objective of this study is to analyse how Jung Bahadur Rana's diplomatic initiatives contributed to shaping Nepal's diplomatic identity and its adoption of neutrality and non-alignment. Besides this, the specific objectives are to examine the strategic objectives that guided Jung Bahadur's foreign policy decisions and long-term consequences, especially in terms of Nepal's sovereignty, regional position, and international relations.

## **Review of Literature**

The paper is based on various books, theses, and scholarly journals. Many scholars have discussed the life of Jung Bahadur Rana, his rise to power, and his foreign relations. Scholars like Leo E. Rose (1971) and Ludwig Stiller (1973) have offered comprehensive accounts of Nepal's political developments, focusing primarily on institutional dynamics and modernization under the Ranas. John Whelpton's biography of Jung Bahadur (2016) explores his political life and offers insights into his foreign policy outlook. Divya Upadesh (2023) endorses the diplomatic measures Nepal should adopt to balance its two neighbors. Triratna Manandhar's (2023) scholarly treatment describes Jung Bahadur's foreign policy as effective for its time. Rana (1998) focuses on Jung Bahadur's character, ambition, and internal power consolidation. Rana (1909) and Rana (1978) offer a valuable first-hand familial perspective on Jung Bahadur's key foreign policy actions, such as the Europe tour and support to the British in 1857. Stiller (2019) presented letters written by British residents that can be interpreted to understand the British perspectives of Jung Bahadur's policy, while Stiller (2022) examined the intricate balance between Nepal's internal governance and its external relations. Triratna Manandhar (2080) provided a detail study of the Nepal-Tibet conflict and an essential work for understanding one major dimension of Jung Bahadur's foreign policy. Adhikari (1984) provided a detailed narrative of the political and early diplomatic history of the 19th century. Most analyses focus on his internal policies neglecting his nuanced diplomatic engagements that preserved Nepal's sovereignty during imperial competition. This study seeks to fill that historiographical gap by placing Jung Bahadur's diplomacy at the centre of analysis.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilising a historical-interpretive framework to examine the diplomatic practices of Jung Bahadur Rana during the 19th century. The study primarily relies on secondary materials, including scholarly books, memoirs, archival records, academic journals, and dissertations, concerning Nepal's political and diplomatic past. These materials are carefully reviewed and interpreted to understand the geopolitical setting and Jung Bahadur's foreign policy choices. Both descriptive and analytical methods are employed in the study. The descriptive aspect helps in outlining historical events and diplomatic activities, while the analytical aspect evaluates their broader implications for Nepal's foreign policy identity and

long-term orientation. Priority is given to credible and authoritative works, such as contemporary writings, personal accounts, and foundational studies, to maintain reliability and depth. Through an interpretive lens, the research identifies themes of pragmatism, neutrality, and strategic adjustment in Jung Bahadur's diplomacy, connecting historical evidence with wider theoretical perspectives on state survival in the colonial context.

## **Finding and Discussion**

### **Characteristics of Nepalese politics in the 19th century**

Before the rise of Jung Bahadur to power, Nepalese politics were evident by intense factionalism, palace intrigues, unstable leadership, and weak central authority. From the late 18th to the mid-19th century, Nepal saw her transition from Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification campaign to deep internal instability. According to Rose, the years from 1816 to 1846 for Nepal were a period of complete frustration in the sphere of foreign policy. (Rose, 1971). There was diplomatic confusion in the Nepalese court about whether to align with the British or seek China's favor. Relations with British India, especially after the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816), were marked by mistrust.

The Nepalese Palace remained in a very feeble form. Almost all the kings who succeeded in the throne after Rana Bahadur Shah were minors. This led to further weakening of centralized authority and exercise of power by other dominant players, either regents or Mukhtiyars. The queens played pivotal roles in determining political appointments, and their influence on factional battles resulted in further instability. The royal court was heavily dominated by rival factions of Thapas, Pandes, and Basnets. Consequently, the rise of one group meant the total annihilation of the other (Adhikari, 1984). This created a leadership vacuum and led to further instability until Jung Bahadur Rana seized power in the deadliest military coup on September 14, 1846.

### **Internal Power Consolidation**

Jung Bahadur consolidated his power through a strategic and calculated process involving a series of violent and political events such as the Kote Kot Massacre, Bhandarkhal Parva, and Alau Parva. All these events marked the systematic elimination of his rivals and the centralization of authority in his hands. Shortly after the Kot Massacre, King Rajendra Bikram Shah appointed him as Minister and Commander-in Chief, under the queen's influence. He was the only remaining

member of the late ministry left alive. As Tri Ratna Manandhar says, Jung received all authority immediately after the Kot Massacre except for the position of prime minister (Manandhar, 2023). Following the Kot Massacre, he had full control and command of the army, but political power was yet to be achieved. So, he replaced old officials with his brothers and cousins to consolidate his authority.

Queen Lakshmi Devi, who had received all sovereign powers from King Rajendra on January 5, 1843, fully supported all Jung's activities in the belief that he would fulfill her ambitions to ascend her son Rajendra to the throne. When Jung Bahadur refused to commit as per her plan and threatened her with imprisonment for such an illegal act, she became furious and planned to kill Jung Bahadur at Bhandarkhal. This conspiracy was revealed, which led to the elimination of the Basnet family, including Birdhoj Basnet on October 31, 1846. From this event, Jung Bahadur became the Prime Minister of Nepal and eventually succeeded in neutralizing the queen, a major source of political intrigue and by then his strong opposition. By eliminating the queen's influence, he secured undisputed control over the court and state machinery (Rose, 1971). The queen was exiled to Banaras under the pretense of pilgrimage for her part in this affair. King Rajendra decided to join her. Thus, Jung Bahadur positioned himself as the guardian of Crown Prince Surendra, who received authority as heir apparent from King Rajendra before leaving for Banaras.

King Rajendra, shortly after his arrival in Banaras, joined some of the nobles who were either expelled or escaped in a conspiracy against Jung Bahadur. The court of Nepal was aware of this conspiracy through secret intelligence. This resulted in the enthronement of Heir Apparent, Prince Surendra Bikram Shah, in May 1847. This decision was publicly announced by calling the nobles at Tundikhel. After the coronation King Surendra granted Jung Bahadur several significant powers by bestowing him with a Lalmohar, which further cemented Jung's authority. The deposed King Rajendra attempted to regain power and sought assistance from the East India Company. However, the East India Company refused to help and warned him against engaging in anti-Jung Bahadur activities on Indian soil. Rajendra, along with his approximately 4000 volunteer forces, arrived at a place called Alau in Nepal, close to the border. The rebels were badly defeated in the battle and Rajendra was captured and forced to abdicate in favor of his son Surendra. This made Surendra a puppet king, with Jung Bahadur as the de facto ruler of Nepal. This event paved the way for his position as both military and civil head of the state.

### **The strategic objectives of foreign policy decisions**

The strategic objectives behind Jung Bahadur Rana's foreign policy decisions in the mid-19th century were deeply shaped by Nepal's geopolitical position. To the south, the British East India Company was consolidating its hold over large parts of the Indian subcontinent as a dominant regional actor. Though it respected Nepal's formal independence, the British were increasingly concerned about regional stability, especially on their northern frontier. Jung recognized this strategic concern and turned it into a diplomatic opportunity.

When war was declared between the Sikh state and the British East India Company in December 1845, the Punjab government asked Nepal for help. A grand council had been called to discuss the matter. Most of the generals and sardars, including Prime Minister Fattu Jung Shah himself, took the Sikh's side and asked the council to help them wage war against the British. But Jung Bahadur opposed this idea and urged the council to take a neutral policy, preserving friendly relations with the British government (Rana, 1998). Finally, the idea of supporting the Punjab government was dropped. Jung Bahadur had already recognized British power as a dominant force in South Asia. So, he was very confident that sooner or later the British would be the masters of India. His key objective was to prevent British interference by aligning diplomatically with them.

His visit to Britain was designed at asserting Nepal's identity as a sovereign state capable of diplomatic engagement. The officially stated aim of the visit was to see and bring back intelligence respecting the greatness and prosperity of Britain and its capital (Whelpton, 2016). Purna Jung Rana, son of Jung Bahadur, derived from Jung's own diary that the aim of the visit was to study various social and political aspects of Britain, such as the secret of military organization, principles of domestic and foreign policy, and legislative measures (Rana, 1974). But the main reason for the visit was to try to maintain direct political contact and not through their agency (Rana, 1978). Furthermore, the purpose was to visit Britain in the official capacity of the ambassador of Nepal and establish Nepal's identity as an independent and sovereign state in South Asia. This visit gave a clear message to the British that Nepal was not a passive frontier state but a capable of engaging in international diplomacy despite of its small size. Had Jung avoided such direct engagement, Nepal could have been perceived as an isolated dependency.

Nepal offered military support to the British under the same policy during the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. When the news of mutiny reached Kathmandu Durbar, Jang Bahadur argued that Nepal's interest lies in the restoration and preservation of British rule in India. Since Jung had observed the British military, naval power, and soldiers' discipline during his visit to Britain, he saw fewer chances of success for the rebels. He, cautious and farsighted, sensibly expressed the opinion that Nepal should take the side of the British. As Jung Bahadur was given the absolute powers, his opinion prevailed, and all the courtiers unanimously agreed to help the British.

To support the British, The Nepalese government dispatched 3000 forces to India after negotiations with resident Ramsay. Realizing the number of troops was not sufficient to fight with rebels, Jung Bahadur offered to personally lead 8000 men. It was well accepted by Lord Canning, expressing entire confidence in Jung (Rose, 1971). Nepalese forces fought with distinction and victory at Lucknow and confirmed British rule in the entire Avadh. Every principal British official who encountered Jung Bahadur praised him for his personal conduct and behaviour (Whelpton, 1991). Nepal got a reward for its services and received the parts of the lost lands during the Anglo-Nepal War in the form of Naya Muluk. This support not only won British favour but also ensured Nepal's territorial integrity (Rana, 1998). Had Nepal helped the rebels, no one could say its fate.

As far as Chinese relations are concerned, Jung Bahadur desired to maintain tributary relations and ensured that Nepal did not directly challenge Qing authority in the region. He realised that Nepal's relationship with China had served as an effective deterrent to the British in the past and could still be exploited tactfully. His objective was to keep China at bay diplomatically while not antagonizing a weakening empire that still symbolized legitimacy in the Himalayan frontiers. The mission to China had economic and political benefits since its members were allowed to carry commodities for trading purposes free of any duties or other restrictions (Rose, 1971). The Nepalese mission, which was sent to China in August 1852, returned after 21 months. The lone survivor, Lieutenant Bhimsen Kunwar, reported that the Chinese government disgraced the Nepalese mission and humiliated the delegation team. While on their way to Kathmandu, they were harassed and looted by Tibetans. The Nepalese Wakil reported this matter to Chinese Amban, but it was not addressed. This incident further prompted Nepal to assume China's traditional role as the protector of Tibet.

Nepal had followed a non-interventionist policy on Tibet after the treaty of Betrawati in 1792. However, with the rise of Jung Bahadur, Nepal began to assume an independent posture in South Asian politics. Nepal not only decided to settle its economic grievances with Lhasa but also reaffirmed her political dominance across the Himalayas up to the watershed (Uprety, 1980). The border disputes near the village of Khasa, the ill treatment of the Nepalese mission, and the maltreatment of the Nepalese traders in Tibet were the main reasons for the Third Nepal-Tibet War. The war ended with the Thapathali treaty, which was more advantageous to Nepal than the 1792 treaty in two aspects. Firstly, Tibet was reduced to a semi-satellite status, and secondly, Nepal assumed the traditional Chinese role of the protector of Tibet. This war revealed Jung's dual policy of military assertion against a weaker Tibet and diplomatic accommodation with the dominant British. This balance reinforced Nepal's autonomy by proving that Nepal could act aggressively in its own sphere while carefully avoiding confrontation.

### **Long-term consequences of Jung Bahadur Rana's foreign policy for Nepal's sovereignty and foreign relations**

Jung Bahadur Rana's foreign policy played a pivotal role in shaping Nepal's international identity and safeguarding its sovereignty during an age of imperial expansion. He skillfully positioned Nepal as a buffer state between British India and Qing China. The outcome was that Nepal never entered an open alignment with one side over the other. This diplomacy of equidistance and neutrality was adopted during the entire Rana regime and by successive governments in Nepal.

Another significant achievement of Jung Bahadur's foreign policy was the preservation of Nepal's territorial and political independence through military diplomacy. Shafikul Alam defines military diplomacy as the peaceful use of the military in the realm of diplomacy to achieve the goals of national foreign policy (Alam, 2013). During a time when much of South Asia was falling under direct British colonial rule, Nepal supported British forces as an independent state.

Many historians doubted that Jung was subservient to the British, but it is not true. He never liked the threat and undue political pressure of the British in Nepal (Rana, 1978). According to Stiller, Jung Bahadur was delighted to share his attitude with the residents as follows:

“You say we are independent. The British Government tells us that it has no desire to interfere with our internal affairs and not even to advise us respecting them. We desire to preserve our independence. We attribute that independence solely to our own peculiar policy. You may call it selfish if you like, but we cannot alter it to please you. We know you are the stronger power. You are like a lion. We are like cats. The cat will scratch if it is driven into a corner....” (2022 : 155-156).

The above expression of Jung was evidence of his firmness and commitment to implement his decision. After the successful operation in the Sepoy mutiny, Jung Bahadur paid a courtesy visit to Lord Canning. During his meeting, he asked for the replacement of British resident Ramsey, with whom he did not have a very good relationship. But it did not materialize, and Jung felt very humiliated. On top of this, he was not satisfied with the British reward. So, he intended to express his dissatisfaction in various forms and decided to deal with the British in his own way.

In 1859, a guerrilla band of rebels infiltrated the western part of Nepal. Jung adopted a dual policy of diplomacy by supporting the rebels as needed to affirm and protect Nepal’s independence and sovereignty with careful diplomatic manoeuvring (Kafle et al., 2024). He treated Begam Hazrat Mahal and her son with the honour they deserved and assured them of every care and protection (Rana, 1974). He protected the women of Nana Saheb’s party and further promised not to hand them over to the British, as this was contrary to the laws of Hindu hospitality of “respect of refugees”. This policy has prevailed in Nepalese society until now. The current foreign policy of Nepal towards refugees is also based on neutrality and non-alignment diplomacy, which is deeply rooted in 19th-century diplomacy.

Jung restricted the activities of British subjects engaged in commerce in Nepal. He additionally imposed stricter regulations regarding the recruitment of Nepalese people into the British Indian Army (Rose, 1971). He reminded British residents that British subjects had disturbed the peaceful relations between Nepal and British India (Stiller, 2022). Thus, he limited the movement of residency staff and effectively controlled the British residents, too. In response, the resident advised the British government to put strong political pressure on Nepal, but the British authorities did not like his advice. His success in maintaining independence through strategic cooperation without submission, which inspired Nepal to participate in the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1960s, reflects his enduring foreign policy.

In 1876, Jung Bahadur invited Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales, to the western Terai for hunting purposes. A durbar was held on the British side of the Sarda on 19th February, where Jung presented a letter from the Maharaja, welcoming His Royal Highness, and assuring him of his friendship (Wheeler, 1876). The outcome of this hunting diplomacy strengthened Nepal-Britain relations at the royal level. Later, this hunting diplomacy was used by Chandra Shumsher as an effective tool to conclude the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1923. This treaty formally recognized Nepal as an independent sovereign country (Pradhan, 1996). Hunting diplomacy proved to be a useful tool to convince the British to sign a new treaty.

### **Conclusion**

Jung Bahadur Rana's diplomacy primarily shaped Nepal's sovereignty, regional positioning, and diplomatic course. He balanced relations with both neighbors tactfully and ensured an independent buffer state, Nepal, during imperial expansion. His internal power consolidation, military cooperation with the British, and careful engagement with China demonstrate a pragmatic and farsighted diplomacy. His policy of supporting the British in the Sepoy Mutiny, managing Tibetan relations, and checking foreign influence in Nepal reflected his ability to combine military, political and diplomatic tools effectively. The long-term impact of his diplomacy is evident in Nepal's continued emphasis on neutrality, pragmatism, and non-alignment. His dual-policy approach, commitment to safeguarding territorial integrity, and careful handling of international relations provided a durable framework that has highly influenced subsequent governments. Fundamentally, Jung Bahadur's strategies demonstrated how foresight, adaptability, and tactical engagement could preserve a small state's sovereignty, guide its foreign relations, and leave a lasting imprint on national identity and diplomatic practice.

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