

## Nepal's Geostrategic Location: Realist Imperatives on Foreign Policy

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#### ABSTRACT

Realist imperatives in foreign policy emphasize the pursuit of national interests, power balance, and pragmatic decision-making in an anarchic international system. This study aims to analyze Nepal's foreign policy through a realist perspective, focusing on its historical evolution, challenges, and opportunities. An exploratory research design is employed, using secondary data from peer-reviewed journals, historical records, academic books, policy reports, and governmental publications. The publication period of the sources ranges between 1963 and 2023. The study finds that Nepal's foreign policy decisions are significantly influenced by its geopolitical position and the need to balance relationships with neighboring powers India and China. The implication of this study is that realist theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how small states like Nepal navigate complex international dynamics to safeguard their national interests.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nestled between two global powerhouses, India and China, lies the captivating land of Nepal. This small Himalayan nation, often overlooked on the world stage, holds a geostrategic location of immense significance. Nepal's current position presents a critical point that demands cautious navigation, underscored by the term "tarul" used to connote its geopolitical vulnerability. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, understanding the realist imperatives that shape Nepal's foreign policy becomes paramount. This article explores the intricate interplay between geography, power dynamics, and national interests, unraveling the complexities that influence Nepal's approach to international relations.

Through an analysis of historical context, geopolitical considerations, and diplomatic maneuvering, we delve into the compelling reasons behind Nepal's strategic decisions and shed light on the vital role it plays in the evolving global landscape.

#### 1.1 CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

Geopolitics encompasses the exploration of the intricate interplay between geography and politics, with a specific focus on how geographical factors exert influence over political power dynamics, international relations, and decision-making processes – that goes beyond a map, says Granieri (2015). It involves analyses of the tangible attributes of a given region, including spatial

positioning, available resources, topography, and climatic conditions, that mold the interactions of nation-states and various actors within the global arena. Similarly, geostrategic encompasses how states and other actors develop and execute strategic policy frameworks over the long term to optimize their geopolitical interests, considering the geographical factors. Instances of leveraging the understanding of geopolitical dynamics and political maneuvering can be seen from the times, and the likes of Napoleon Bonaparte – who utilized it to reshape the European political landscape – which is why, overtime, geopolitics has garnered more and more attention in International Relations, where today, it stands as a focal point of study.

Realism, a prominent theoretical perspective in international relations, emphasizes a pragmatic approach to political analysis. This conceptual framework has been shaped by influential thinkers such as Waltz, Morgenthau, Machiavelli, and Thucydides who have contributed to realist thought mainly through neorealism, classical realism, pragmatism, and account of power respectively. By examining these principles of realism, we can better grasp the choices made by states, considering the state-centric focus, the role of rationality, the limits of ethics, the pursuit of national interest, and the dynamics of power politics in an anarchical world. Realism acknowledges that states consider factors such as geography, natural resources, and strategic positioning when formulating their policies, aligning with the central tenets of geopolitics which emphasize the influence of geographic circumstances and resources on state behavior. Besides, geopolitics is considered an “integral branch” of realism anyway (Wu, 2018).

Similarly, realist imperatives in foreign policy prioritize a state's national interests, including security, territorial integrity, economic prosperity, and sovereignty. They emphasize maintaining a balance of power among states to prevent the rise of a hegemonic power. Realists view states as rational actors driven by self-

interest, seeking relative gains and pragmatic decision-making based on power dynamics and interests. They follow a realpolitik approach that achieves tangible outcomes aligned with national interests, prioritizing practical considerations over idealistic or moral concerns.

In the context of Nepal, establishing equilibrium in the region, particularly with its neighboring countries India and China is a strategic imperative that is essential to prevent the emergence of any dominant power, whether regional or global in nature that could pose a threat to Nepal's sovereignty and national interests. Therefore, rational decision-making based on a pragmatic assessment, and realpolitik considerations that prioritize practical outcomes over idealistic or moral considerations, would strongly guide Nepal's foreign policy.

## **1.2 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

- To analyze Nepal's foreign policy from a realist perspective, focusing on its historical evolution, challenges, opportunities, and the realist imperatives that shape its strategic decision-making.

## **1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

### **1.3.1 THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE:**

- A deeper understanding of Nepal's foreign policy has been provided through the application of realist theory, highlighting how power dynamics and national interests shape decision-making.
- The study's analysis of Nepal's geopolitical position contributes to the broader discourse on small states within international relations, particularly in terms of realist imperatives.
- Insights into realist theory can be applied to understand foreign policy in the context of developing and landlocked nations.

### 1.3.2 EMPIRICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

- Nepal's strategic decisions and foreign policy evolution have been examined in light of historical events and geopolitical realities, offering valuable empirical insights.
- Provision of practical implications for policymakers to the challenges and opportunities faced by Nepal in navigating regional power dynamics, especially between China and India.
- A clearer understanding of how Nepal's strategic location can be leveraged for national interests and regional engagement.

### 1.4 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The study is limited to Nepal and its foreign policy, specifically focusing on its interactions with major regional powers, China and India.
- The analysis is confined to a realist perspective, excluding alternative theories like liberalism or constructivism in examining foreign policy.
- The study emphasizes Nepal's foreign policy developments from the early 19th century to the present, with minimal focus on pre-modern history.
- The research is restricted to analyzing Nepal's foreign policy strategies and decisions, without delving into domestic political or economic issues.
- The study primarily relies on secondary data sources, such as academic literature, historical accounts, and previously published analyses, limiting the scope for primary data collection or new empirical findings.

### 1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW

Nepal, being a landlocked nation, finds itself in a disadvantaged position, as a "hostage" – according to Poudyal (2022)–

and "yam" being its "true self" – according to Pulami (2023) – hindering its economic, political, and diplomatic prospects on the international stage. He adds that the geographical constraints imposed by its topography not only restrict its connections with countries beyond its neighbors but also create a complex web of dependency where Kathmandu relies on external actors as a "client state".

Nepal holds significant geopolitical importance for both India and China, researchers highlight. China seeks to influence Nepal in order to deter any anti-Chinese movements on Nepali soil (Acharya, 2019), as Tibetan exiles who support the Dalai Lama have sought refuge in India since 1959 (Poudyal, 2022). Additionally, China's high-profile political, military, economic, and cultural delegations frequently visiting Kathmandu, indicates Nepal's importance in China's South Asia policy (Upadhyay, 2012). From a political and cultural perspective, the relationship between India and Nepal has been influenced by historical factors and geostrategic calculations, say Bhatnagar & Ahmed (2021). Furthermore, Nepal's significance has been heightened by the "repeated skirmishes" between regional and global powers (Aryal, 2022).

Realism, a school of thought deeply intertwined with geopolitics, as observed by (Wu, 2018) embodies a distinctly materialistic inclination characterized by power politics. In regards to geopolitics, realism, and foreign policy, Thucydides' (1963) quote from "History of the Peloponnesian War" sums it up well – "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must". This quote emphasizes the significance of relative material power, of which, also are, military capabilities, resources, etc. Nepal's approach is influenced by the understanding that it must balance its relationships with India and China while safeguarding its own interests and security. Realism provides a lens through which we can analyze Nepal's foreign policy behavior within the context of power dynamics and the constraints it faces as a smaller state –

Nepal, being identified as a “small state” due to its relative size to its neighbors. (Adhikari, 2018). By the same token, he observes that realist doctrine emphasizes that small states' behavior in the international arena is primarily determined by the constraints and opportunities present in the global system, rather than their domestic political dynamics.

However, things aren't as easy as they seem when it comes to implementing realist imperatives for a small state like Nepal. Realist imperatives often pose significant challenges for small states in maintaining their sovereignty and security. In the case of Nepal, being sandwiched between two regional powers creates a complex geopolitical environment. Therefore, Nepal's pursuit of “neutrality” becomes imperative as a small state – even though it seems to have become “unfashionable” since the end of the cold war – and also holds relevance in the 21st century according to Simpson (2018), as it allows the country to navigate this delicate balancing act and safeguard its interests amidst the influence and interests of larger powers. Neutrality is seen as a means for small states to opt-out of power politics and avoid becoming embroiled in violent conflicts. Simpson (2018) also goes through exploring the realist perspective on neutrality including its practice in ancient times, with a specific focus on the “Melian Dialogue” (negotiations between Athenians and the Melians) from Thucydides' book (1963) “The History of the Peloponnesian War” showcasing the strategic considerations and power dynamics involved in the decision-making process of a small state like Melos to remain neutral during a conflict.

Pham (2008) observes that Morgenthau acknowledged that interest and power were inherent in human nature but understood their meanings to be subject to constant change. Building upon that understanding, realists generally pay less attention to small states, as they are more interested in studying Great Powers, and prioritize state sovereignty, the importance of power, national interests,

and state survival epitomized by Machiavelli (1981), stance of power being the “pivot” and the strong and weak being put into binary oppositions of “right” and “wrong”. They argue that states should balance or bandwagon in times of conflict, but neutrality presents a third option that falls outside the mainstream realist thought.

Nepal, as a sovereign nation, has historically maintained a policy of non-alignment and neutrality making it the “most important and original” strategic policy viewed by Baral (2018). So, even though neutrality and “non-alignment” is not prescribed in realism, it is acknowledged which makes realist imperatives, which emphasize the pursuit of national interests and the preservation of sovereignty, relevant to Nepal's policy.

Similarly, the research gap in this context lies in exploring the intersection between Nepal's foreign policy, including, but not limited to: its policy of neutrality and non-alignment, and the realist imperatives that guide the actions of small states. While it is evident that Nepal has historically pursued a policy of non-alignment and neutrality, the specific dynamics and implications of this policy in relation to realist imperatives remain underexplored, as well as other approaches of realism such as power projection, economic realism, etc., which will be delved into in this term paper.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHOD**

### **2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design, utilizing a descriptive and analytical approach to examine Nepal's foreign policy through the lens of realist theory. The research is conducted through a systematic review of secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and policy papers. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns, trends, and shifts in Nepal's foreign policy over time, particularly in relation to its geopolitical context.



## 2.2 SOURCES OF SECONDARY DATA

The sources of secondary data for this study include peer-reviewed journals, historical records, academic books, policy reports, and governmental publications. Data are gathered from credible platforms such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, SSRN, and institutional repositories, with a publication period ranging between 1963 and 2023. This timeframe ensures that both historical and contemporary perspectives on Nepal's foreign policy are captured.

## 3. ANALYSIS

### 3.1 IMPRINTS OF REALISM: RELEVANCE AND INFLUENCE ON NEPAL

The research studies carried out by Lalrinawma (2023), Rashid and Farooq (2019) and Machiavelli (1981) share similarities in their views on power and politics, though from different times and places. Both prioritize the state's goal of maintaining power and security. Kautilya emphasizes ethical behavior and justice, while Machiavelli prioritizes self-interest and the ends justifying the means. Their ideas have implications for understanding realism in political philosophy, highlighting the importance of power, self-interest, and the role of ethics in politics, which also demonstrates the influence of culture on realism, suggesting Nepal's opportunity to shape the application of such ideas. Additionally, the study shows the impression these personalities have today, for instance Chanakya on the current Indian Foreign Policy – delved into applying to Nepal. (Rashid & Farooq, 2019)

### 3.2 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: FOREIGN POLICY AND IMPRINT OF REALISM IN NEPAL

Taking a realistic perspective, Nepal has faced arduous challenges in its pursuit of survival right from the inception of nation-building. According to Baral (2018), Nepal's foreign policy has undergone transformations throughout its history. Initially, Nepal pursued an independent foreign policy, recognizing the importance of its strategic location. However, it later adopted a policy of isolation under the Rana rule, aligning closely with British India.

Following political changes in 1950, Nepal shifted towards a policy of special relations with India, driven by fears of a Chinese threat. Subsequently, Nepal pursued a non-aligned stance, seeking to navigate the Cold War politics and establish diplomatic relations with China. The declaration of Nepal as a Zone of Peace and the emphasis on equidistance and equi-proximity with India and China reflect Nepal's realist imperative to maintain a balanced relationship with its powerful neighbors while safeguarding its own national interests in the complex geopolitics of the region. The concept of trilateral cooperation has emerged as a strategic necessity, considering the dynamics between India and China and their impact on Nepal's security and development.

Throughout the annals of history, the profound words imparted by Prithvi Narayan Shah in his Divya Upadesh has remained ever relevant, alongside the 'yam' "theory", says Pulami (2022). Implicit in the Divya Upadesh remains: the placement exposing Nepal to security threats due to proximity, as well as realist perspectives through "balancing acts" and "accommodating" for protecting national interest (Bhattarai, 2022).

Although, as mentioned, Ranas' policy fell into the category of isolation, according to Saphalya Amartya, a highly regarded historian in Nepal, Juddha Shumsher, the Prime Minister of the Rana regime, is recognized as a realist leader who possessed a keen sense of timing and knew when to proceed and when to halt (Amartya, 2004). Instances of pragmatic decisions driven by a realist perspective of prioritizing national interests and aligning with a more powerful state for security and advantage can also be seen from the "bandwagoning" with the British – like in 1904 and 1914 in Tibet attacks and World War-I respectively, as well as the 1923 peace and friendship treaty with Britain by Chandra Sumsher.

Even during King Mahendra's reign in Nepal, the country experienced significant shifts in its foreign policy, marked by an emphasis on national interest and the

pursuit of strategic relationships. First, there was a clear focus on national interest, as demonstrated by Nepal's establishment of diplomatic ties with China and participation in the Afro-Asian Conference. Second, the balance of power played a significant role, with India cautiously maintaining its influence in Nepal while China's proximity raised concerns. Third, security concerns, including border disputes and the Sino-Indian conflict, highlighted the region's security dynamics. Lastly, Nepal consistently sought to assert its sovereignty and autonomy through independent foreign policy decisions and demands for international trade and transit facilities.

Moreover, the rise of Maoists in Nepal, who embraced a radical ideology and aimed to overthrow the existing power structures sought to establish their authority and advance their ideological agenda, demonstrating the realist notion that actors use force and coercion to achieve their objectives. On the other hand, the involvement of external actors, like Uncle Sam, in Nepal's political dynamics highlights the realist concept of power politics and the pursuit of national interests.

### **3.3 STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES FOR NEPAL**

Nepal, as a nation engaging with the international community, faces a range of challenges and opportunities in shaping its foreign policy, which is why it is crucial for Nepal to consider theoretical frameworks such as realism to provide insight into navigating through them.

Beginning with neutrality, as mentioned, is like an expression of realism for small states through non-alignment and other ideas. Nepal isn't unfamiliar with non-alignment. However, Nepal pursuing neutrality and non-alignment while balancing is sharply criticized Bhattarai (2022). On top of that, Jesse (2006) advances clarifying Machiavelli's warning to "never trust a neutral state". Drawing inspiration from the Hobbesian perspective, which views the international scene as akin to the state of nature, Nepal finds itself navigating an anarchic global amphitheater where each state exists as an individual

entity. In this context, the imperative of neutrality becomes relevant, aligning with the realist framework in the pursuit of national interests and the paramount objective of national security – as gone through by Dahal (2012). However, this balancing act has been quite precarious for Nepal. Dahal (2012) agrees for it to have been a viable idea, had Nepal achieved self-sufficiency on essentials.

Neutrality and national interest are closely tied although they almost look mutually exclusive because of its connection with realism that is mainstream. The permanence of self-interest and struggle for power, however, still are very important, and stand as columns of Morgenthau's political realism. Nepal's emphasis on an independent identity and the protection of national interests is evident in its strategic actions, international engagements, and policy initiatives. Through a combination of diplomatic efforts, regional alliances, and strategic positioning, Nepal aims to maintain its sovereignty, pursue its unique path, and ensure its policies are guided by its own national interests, rather than brute force, which isn't an option for Nepal.

Therefore, both aspects need to be considered. This event can be instantiated through events in 2006 and 2009 where Nepal engaged with international players such as the UK, the US, and China, while also considering China's proposal of a Comprehensive Peace and Friendship Treaty, reflecting its commitment to non-alignment and the protection of national interests. By engaging with multiple actors, Nepal can demonstrate its adherence to a non-aligned approach, maintaining independence and avoiding formal alliances with major powers. This approach allows Nepal to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape and avoid excessive dependence on any single country or alliance.

Moreover, Realism actively encourages pragmatic approaches. Coming back to Prithvi Narayan Shah's approach to diplomacy, particularly his defensive policy can be seen as a manifestation of pragmatic diplomacy. Recognizing the

presence of powerful neighboring rulers, Shah understood the need to adopt a cautious and strategic approach to safeguard Nepal's sovereignty and territorial integrity. His emphasis on defensive wars and preparedness rather than initiating military initiatives against external powers demonstrated a pragmatic understanding of the geopolitical realities. By advocating for a strong national economy, balancing offensive and defensive approaches, and maintaining cautious friendships with neighboring powers like British-India and China, Shah's diplomatic principles aligned with a pragmatic approach that prioritized practical considerations and the long-term interests of Nepal, which still stands relevant today. Pragmatic diplomacy is imperative for Nepal to effectively navigate its geopolitical challenges, protect its sovereignty, boost the economy, and pursue its national interests (Baral, 2021).

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

##### **4.1 IMPLICATIONS OF REALIST IMPERATIVES FOR NEPAL**

With the integration of realist imperatives, come certain implications for Nepal starting with security. When applied to Nepal, a realist perspective highlights the imperatives of ensuring security and protecting national interests in the face of potential threats. Nepal, being located between powerful neighbors like India and China, must carefully balance its relationships to avoid dominance or marginalization. Acting in self-help, Nepal would prioritize its own interests and actively engage in diplomacy, seek economic opportunities, and safeguard its territorial integrity and resources. Additionally, Nepal would navigate the security dilemma, aiming to enhance security without provoking tensions or conflicts. With this stance, for Nepal to prioritize long-term sustainable measures is necessary. A realist approach, coupled with a policy of non-alignment, may result in Nepal's isolation and limited diplomatic leverage on the international stage and lead to missing opportunities while avoiding

entanglements. Understanding and managing the interests of neighboring powers, such as India and China, while upholding its own sovereignty and national interests, is essential because the influence of these powers "cannot be wiped-out" Baral (2021).

Additionally, Nepal, situated between two major economies, has numerous opportunities to reap the benefits of their advancements, especially with the idea of being a "golden-bridge" (Baral, 2019) rather than a "buffer". Economic power is acknowledged by realism, as expressed by Guzzini (1998), who views International Politics Economy (IPE) as a reaction in response and against realism influenced by Kenneth Waltz. Trilateralism, involving Nepal, India, and China, can be a useful approach for Nepal to advance its economic interests. This can foster economic cooperation, trade facilitation, and investment promotion, creating mutually beneficial outcomes for all participating countries. Furthermore, Nepal can actively attract foreign direct investment (FDI) by offering favorable investment policies, creating an investor-friendly environment, and showcasing its economic potential. By engaging in initiatives such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Nepal can tap into regional economic opportunities and enhance its economic connectivity with neighboring countries. However, again, there is also a negative implication of dependence and reliance stemming from the fact which needs to be taken heed of.

In recent years, there has been a notable growth in the number of scholars in Nepal promoting realism as a viable approach to foreign policy. Previously, the dominance of other theoretical frameworks overshadowed the realist perspective. Their advocacy for realism reflects a shift in the intellectual discourse within Nepal, as they seek to provide a more nuanced and pragmatic understanding of international relations. This growing presence of realist scholars in Nepal adds diversity to the academic landscape and fosters critical

debates on the country's foreign policy options.

However, it is important to consider the potential drawbacks and limitations of embracing realist imperatives. While realism emphasizes power politics and the pursuit of national interests, it may overlook the importance of collaboration, cooperation, and shared values in addressing global challenges. Nepal, being a smaller nation in terms of power and influence, might face difficulties in navigating a purely realist approach, as it may struggle to assert its interests in a world dominated by larger and more powerful states.

Moreover, realism's emphasis on self-interest and competition may hinder opportunities for multilateral cooperation and hinder Nepal's ability to address common regional issues such as migration and economic development. In this context, liberalism presents an alternative perspective that emphasizes collective security, interdependence, and the promotion of shared values. One notable example is Nepal's aspiration to establish itself as a peace zone in the region. Realism, with its focus on power dynamics and self-interest, might not fully align with this vision. A liberal approach, on the other hand, could offer a framework that encourages regional cooperation, conflict resolution, and the promotion of peace.

#### **4.2 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES**

In addition to the growing prominence of realist scholars in Nepal, it is equally important to consider alternative approaches in understanding and shaping foreign policy. While realism offers valuable insights into power dynamics and national interests, other theoretical frameworks like liberalism provide alternative perspectives that prioritize cooperation, multilateralism, and the promotion of shared values, which is why it is apt to pick the best from both (and other) worlds. As Nepal continues to experience the forces of globalization and increased interactions with the international community, there is a growing trend of adopting aspects of neoliberalism

alongside westernization. By embracing liberal principles, Nepal could actively engage in regional and global efforts to address conflicts, enhance diplomatic relationships, and foster partnerships based on shared values and interests. This could not only contribute to Nepal's own security and stability but also strengthen its position as a promoter of peace and regional cooperation. By considering a range of theoretical perspectives, Nepal can develop a more comprehensive and adaptable foreign policy approach that takes into account both realist imperatives and the potential benefits of liberal internationalism. This inclusive approach to foreign policy discourse will facilitate a well-rounded understanding of Nepal's position in the global community and ensure the pursuit of national interests in a dynamic and interconnected world.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

The incorporation of realist imperatives into Nepal's foreign policy carries substantial implications for the nation. Given Nepal's geographical position between influential neighbors such as India and China, it becomes crucial to tactfully manage relationships to prevent subjugation or marginalization. Nepal must actively pursue diplomacy, explore economic prospects, and ensure the preservation of its territorial integrity and resources while effectively addressing the security challenges it faces.

However, while security and protecting national interests are crucial, it is also essential to consider alternative theoretical frameworks when shaping foreign policy. Approaches such as liberalism and other theoretical perspectives can offer valuable insights and considerations for Nepal's engagement with the international community and develop a more comprehensive and adaptable foreign policy approach. Further research can be done regarding other theoretical frameworks' imperatives being applied and integrated to Nepal's foreign policy.



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