

Madhyama Pratipad: Nepal's Middle Path Ambition through Non-alignment

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Abstract

The geopolitical variable alone is not sufficient to understand Nepal's entry into NAM and its relevance. While very little literature has been produced on Nepal's non-alignment, what exists is also limited to either speeches or statements delivered by Nepali leaders at the conferences on Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Still, while scanning the perspective of Non-Nepali Cold War foreign policy analysts in the literature produced on Himalayan geopolitics, it can be clearly observed that Nepal's voyage to non-alignment was driven by the Indian response to the bipolarity in Cold War. Such a perspective, however, dismisses the influence that Madhyama Pratipad (the concept of the middle path) had in the evolution of Nepal's foreign policy priorities as a unified state in 1769. Madhyama Pratipad, here, should be understood as the cultural and civilizational philosophy, which Nepal has accommodated in its world view for centuries. Hence, Nepal's shift to non-alignment was not abrupt and impulsive. Rather it was triggered by the Madhyama Pratipad, which was also realized by the founder of modern Nepal, Prithivi Narayan Shah.

While non-alignment and Madhyama Pratipad differ in their approaches, their objectives remain the same: balancing. While non-alignment demands balancing by not being aligned to any security bloc, Madhyama Pratipad appeals to balancing by treading a middle path. Thus, this qualitative study argues how the historical experience of balancing made it easier for the Himalayan state to adapt to the non-aligned policy and posture. Accordingly, non-alignment to Nepal is not only a survival strategy but also a historical expression of its cultural and civilizational philosophy. Therefore, any attempt to understand Nepal's foreign policy of non-alignment only from the grand narratives of geopolitics and changing dynamics in the regional and international security environment would not be sufficient to weigh the rationale and relevance of non-alignment for Nepal. Today, India's perceptible shift to multi-alignment and China's emphasis on the Xi Jinping Thought have already raised the question of the relevance of non-alignment for Nepal. The answers lie in Nepal's historical experience of balancing.

Keywords: Non-Aligned Movement, Relevancy, Multi-alignment, Panchasheel, Nepal-India- China.

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Introduction

*“Don’t walk in front of me... I may not follow;
Don’t walk behind me... I may not lead;
Walk beside me... just be my friend.”*

These lines by Nobel laureate Albert Camus may be interpreted variously but as reader-response of international relations enthusiasts, we understand it as Camus’s call for collective resistance (be my friend) against the great power ambitions (who always want to lead the global affairs and be at the front with their military might, economic supremacy and hegemonic aspiration). Whilst the autobiographical interpretation of the extracted lines also reveals Camus’s Anti-Soviet stance and a harsh critique of the United States, our inference may not appear haywire. Collective resistance against bloc politics and bipolarity is at the heart of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Nepal’s entry into NAM has generally been analyzed from two perspectives: firstly, against the bipolarity of the global Cold War and secondly, as an attempt to deal with the changing dynamics of Sino-Indian interactions following the integration of Tibet. But such generalization usually pays no heed to Nepal’s historical experience of balancing and the cultural and civilizational philosophy of *Madhyama Pratipad*, which eased Kathmandu’s sojourn into the NAM in the early decades of the Cold War.

Being one of the older countries in the world, Nepal has withstood and endured numerous battles. While it led some, it lost the others. But, in all the unfavorable circumstances, the strategically located country always preferred in maintaining the balance. Thus, when NAM was being devised to resist the cold-war bipolarity, Nepal saw it as a continuity of what the Himalayan country had always practiced: balancing powerful princely states against the Chinese empire in the ancient and medieval period; balancing British East India company against the Chinese empire in the modern period; and balancing India and China after the integration of Tibet. The only difference was of scale and magnitude.

With NAM, Nepal had to balance the two superpowers during the Cold War—the United States and the Soviet Union— without disturbing the traditional balance with India and China (Khanal, 1982; Uprety, 1982). Therefore, while questions are being raised on the relevance of NAM for Nepal as both Nepal’s neighbors, despite being the founding members of NAM have expressed a sharp departure from the core value of NAM, policymakers in Kathmandu need to develop a realization regarding how the balancing act is historically rooted in Nepal’s foreign policy institutions, priorities, and behaviors. In the admiration of Nepal’s act of balancing, Henry Kissinger in his 2014 book *World Order* has stated, “For centuries Nepal skillfully managed its diplomatic posture between the ruling dynasties in China and those in India” (Kissinger, 2014, p.179). Analyzing this diplomacy of balance from the prism of *Madhyama Pratipad* can benefit Nepali policymakers in two ways: Nepal’s adherence to non-alignment could safely avoid the charge of being driven by the Indian definition of non-alignment, and it could take the ownership of the policy citing the historical experience. Secondly, Nepal’s claim could steer a new policy debate on the importance and relevance of *Madhyama Pratipad* whilst a new “cold war” is being brewed.

Madhyama Pratipad has roots in Buddhist philosophy (that has drawn strong attention in the diplomatic relations between India and China) which underlines the middle path as the appropriate means to overcome any kind of anguish and agony. Today, whilst the rise of China has strategized Nepal's geographical location in the context of the emergence of different strategic partnerships and alliances to contain the rise, Kathmandu's power elites have confronted numerous challenges, particularly in accommodating the divergent interests of the major powers. Nepal's uncertainty over U.S.-sponsored Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant manifested a political fiasco tormenting the decision-makers. In such an adverse condition, *Madhyama Pratipad* offers a middle ground to balance the interests of major powers in Nepal with its "soft power attractiveness" (Scott, 2016). While Beijing is globalizing Buddhism with a strategic purpose and New Delhi is using Hinduism to reinterpret Buddhism, Nepal's reclaim of *Madhyama Pratipad* to attest the relevance of non-alignment as its historical experience would yield a positive outcome (Thapa, 1982; Uprety, 1982).

After the establishment of a unified Nepal in the 18th century, Kathmandu has been balancing its Gulliverian neighbors variously. The founder of unified Nepal P.N. Shah demanded a balanced approach from policymakers by unveiling a "yam-between-two-boulders" theory. But rulers after him opted for expansionist policies, because of which Nepal lost its territories to British East Indian company (Baral, 1982). Rana rulers, however, used the policy of appeasing the British government to prolong their oligarchic regime until 1950. In its non-colonial history, Nepal balanced its relations with the Chinese emperor and British East India in such a manner that on the one hand, Kathmandu was sending its quinquennial missions to China, and on the other, it was sending men to fight for the British in the world wars. Thus, even before joining NAM, Nepal was familiar with the art of not going to the extreme or extending support to one side absolutely (Uprety, 1982). Therefore, Nepal's adoption of the non-alignment posture and policy was not influenced by the Indian version (Rose and Scholz, 1980).

Thus, the objective of this study is to reveal how Nepal's entry into the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) was not driven by the Indian worldview of Cold War politics, but rather by its own historical experience and as part of its civilizational and cultural experience with the middle path (Baral, 1982; Uprety, 1982; Khanal, 1982). This understanding can assist Nepal to rediscover the significance and relevance of NAM for the country located between the two nuclear powers, who fought a border war in 1962 while standoffs and skirmishes often characterize their unsettled territorial dispute in the Himalayan region. After all, *Madhyama Pratipad* thrives on the idea of peaceful co-existence which is the upshot of Nepal's religious and spiritual values and entwines "a modus vivendi between material progress and spiritual growth" (Uprety, 1982). The multidimensional facets of Nepal's cultural heritage, which play an important role in its worldview (Rose, 1971) have also reinforced the spirit of *Madhyama Pratipad*.

Method

This qualitative study is driven by the cultural and civilizational philosophy of *Madhyama Pratipad* to manifest the relevance of non-alignment for Nepal. The historical experiences of Nepal's act of balancing have been surveyed by delving into the Yam theory of King P.N. Shah. In the same manner, accounts on Nepal's response to the Anglo-Tibet and Sino-Tibet disputes have been analyzed to show how the relevance of non-alignment for Nepal should be understood in a historical perspective. Speeches delivered by former kings and Nepali prime ministers on the issue of the relevance of non-alignment for Nepal have been studied to validate the major claims. Information collected from secondary sources, including the documents on the foreign policy of Nepal, India, and China, academic journals related to the NAM, 1982 conference proceedings on Nepal and Non-alignment, general articles, and op-ed articles on Nepal's non-alignment policy and posture have also been examined. Reports published by study centers, think tanks and research centers on the neighborhood policy and diplomatic practices of Nepal, India, and China have been reviewed. Media sources were also reviewed for an understanding of the various issues connected with the neighborhood policy of China, India, and Nepal. The themes that emerged from the reviews have been analyzed and interpreted from the perspective of *Madhyama Pratipad*.

Cultural philosophy and historical experience

Madhyama Pratipad negates the Hobbesian or Machiavellian or Kautilayan worldviews. Rather it demands a peaceful, stable, and harmonious neighborhood by not escalating the conflict by band-wagoning or forming alliances. The idea of balancing during the era of conquest and invasion doesn't match with the concept of balancing in today's globalized world, where the risk posed by both markets and nuclear powers cannot be brushed aside. Thus, to avert the situation of backlash triggered by absolute rejection and unconditional acceptance, the middle path is a prerequisite in international relations. That middle path needs to be trodden variously: through appeasement, non-alignment, equidistance, and neutrality, among others. Nepal's foreign policy has embraced them all in different periods of time. The stimulating facet of *Madhyama Pratipad* is its cultural and civilizational affinity with the Chinese and Indian ideals of "Shijie Datong" (the world as a family) and "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the entire world as a family). At present, both the ancient civilizations, Indian and Chinese, seem to have abandoned these ideals and have aspired for great power ambitions. In such a context, Nepal's claim over *Madhyama Pratipad* may not unveil the relevance of non-alignment for Nepal but may also be a wake-up call to both of its neighbors, who have not been able to renegotiate their intricate interface.

The NAM began with the Bandung Conference. In the Nepali context, the concept is a product of cultural traditions and historical experiences, where peaceful co-existence has been the essence. *Madhyama Pratipad* aims to maintain and extend it from the societal level to the national and international levels. Cultural assimilation and accommodation of diversity have advanced the spirit of co-existence in Nepal. Nepal's trans-Himalayan trade and pilgrimage

impelled the emergence of various religious faiths in Nepal, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Lamaism. The religious co-existence even led to mutual faith as indicated by the expressions like *Halahal Lokeshwar* and *Nilkantha Lokeshwar* (both embodying the trait of Sakyamuni and Shiva). Politically, it led to the doctrine of peaceful co-existence (Uprety, 1982), which is one of the sources of *Madhyama Pratipad*.

The influence of *Madhyama Pratipad* in Nepal's approach towards the Anglo-Tibetan conflict in the first decade of the 20th century is the best example to depict Nepal's historical experience of avoiding dispute through the endorsement of peaceful co-existence. While Russia's influence in Tibet had tormented the British, Lord Curzon, India's Viceroy selected Francis Younghusband to conduct a semi-military mission to Tibet. But, according to the Nepal-Tibet Treaty of 1856, Nepal was supposed "to offer assistance to Tibet if the latter is invaded by an outside power". Nepal's de facto prime minister Chandra Shumsher had understood that even the combined strength of Nepal and Tibet would not be able to prevent the British aggression, and even if Nepal dared to, it would only make the Himalayan region more vulnerable to power politics of the great power. Thus, as an attempt to avoid such an adverse situation, Nepal declined to provide military assistance to Tibet but warned Tibetans of the approaching British troops. Nepal wrote to Tibet:

The safety of your capital depends only upon your peacefully and submissively approaching the British with an open heart upon the settlement of the pending dispute. Move at once on the matter otherwise any negligence on your part would cost you your capital (Englishman, 1903).

With the entry of British forces in Lhasa in 1904, Nepal's role as a mediator between the British and Tibetans became crucially important. As such, Nepali *Vakil* in Lhasa Jit Bahadur KC and Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher in Kathmandu played an important role in the Anglo-Tibetan negotiations. Kathmandu was able to conclude the Anglo-Tibetan Convention in 1904 terminating Russian presence from Tibet as the latter pledged not to allow any foreign representatives in Lhasa or give permission to build roads or railways, telegraph, or mining rights to a foreign power (Uprety, 1982). Thus, the presence of *Madhyama Pratipad* in Nepal's approach was quite visible as it not only mediated the Anglo-Tibetan dispute but also represented the Tibetan grievances "before the Fort William in Calcutta and that helped to soften the terms of the Convention" (Uprety 1982).

Nepal's stern belief in *Madhyama Pratipad* was also visible in its response to the Sino-Tibet dispute at the beginning of the 20th century. After 1908 Beijing was beginning to develop a policy of effective control over Tibet, which in a state of fear, sought Nepal's help to reform its civil and military services, which Kathmandu rejected. But China sent 1000 Chinese soldiers to Tibet for shielding its trade markets (Foreign Secret E. Consultations, 1908). Earlier, when the Chinese *Amban* (representative) in Lhasa had asked the Nepal government to allow the recruitment of 300 Nepali *Khacharas* (Nepali half-breeds) in the Chinese troops, Nepal had rejected the proposal saying *Khacharas* were unsuitable for military service. Nepal also rejected China's demand to sell 500 magazines of rifles to arm the new Chinese soldiers prepared to deal with Tibet (Foreign Secret E. Consultations, 1910). By rejecting the

demands of both sides, Nepal sought the middle path. Nepal had also made efforts to deter the 1000 Chinese forces from entering Lhasa as the Nepali *Vakil*, Jit Bahadur organized a conference in Lhasa between Chinese representative and their Tibetan counterparts. But that effort alone was not sufficient as Tibet perceived the arrival of Chinese troops as an absolute infringement upon its authority. China had reckoned the necessity of its troops as a security concern. As soon as Chinese troops entered Lhasa, Dalai Lama fled to India and by 1910, Lhasa was under the full control of the Chinese. However, to prevent the Sino-Tibet dispute from further escalation, the Nepali *Vakil* had played an important role. An agreement was signed by the Tibetan and Chinese sides with the Nepali *Vakil* as the witness. Both the disputing parties had also agreed to supervise the number of arms under Nepali custody (Foreign Ministry Archive).

Thus, while we provide space to Nepal's geographical location in our discussion over the relevance of NAM for Nepal, it is equally important to consider Nepal's historical experiences and cultural philosophy in maintaining the balance between its two neighbors (Baral, 1982). During the Lichhavi period, the balance had tilted towards Tibet-China while in the post-Sugauli period, the tilt was more visible towards British India. But, even during the time of British colonialism in South Asia, Nepal took comfort in *Madhyama Pratipad* as indicated by its role in Anglo-Tibetan and Sino-Tibetan conflict.

Path to globalism

By exercising the philosophy of *Madhyama Pratipad* in its neighborhood, landlocked Nepal sought the path of globalism through NAM, particularly after the political change of 1950. Nepal's desire to go beyond its neighborhood, in the context of the early days of the Cold War, is reflected in King Tribhuvan's 1954 statement:

It is an undeniable fact that no nation can in the context of the modern world have an isolated existence. The age demands that all nations, big and small, must draw close and contribute to the welfare of humanity as a whole. It follows that we must develop good and friendly relations with nations of the world without attaching ourselves to any particular power group (*The Statesman*, 1954)

Exhausted by the isolationist policy that Nepal was obliged to embrace because of British colonialism in South Asia, Kathmandu preferred to tread on a globalist path after the political change of 1950. This the country discovered in the NAM. Today, while Sino-Indian geopolitical rivalry has impacted the entire South Asian region, NAM is a soothing balm to its geopolitical dilemma. Thus, its relevance cannot be denied to the strategically placed small powers, for whom multilateralism is a key to reinforcing the ethos of *Madhyama Pratipad*.

As non-alignment had its origin in the early days of the Cold War when two super powers were busy forming alliances, and new countries were emerging through the process of decolonization. NAM attracted most of the newly independent developing counties in Asia and Africa who were willing to resist the bloc politics in the Cold War. The architects of the

NAM were Jawaharlal Nehru (India's first prime minister), Josip Broz Tito (President of Yugoslavia), Gamal Abdel Nasser (President of Egypt), Sukarno (President of Indonesia), and Kwame Nkrumah (President of Ghana). Later, when its effectiveness and relevance were also emphasized by the communist leaders and freedom fighters including Fidel Castro (Cuba) and Nelson Mandela (South Africa) and by other leaders including Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Hosni Mubarak (Egypt) (Dinkel, 2019). NAM also faced the harsh criticism of becoming a hiding place for dictators. While critiquing the policies and postures of the NAM countries, it is also best to understand how the spirit of *panchasheela* (five principles of peaceful co-existence) ideologically drove the movement after the Bandung Conference in 1955, which was the second international conference that Nepal had attended. The first international conference Nepal attended was the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in 1947 as an attempt to escape its self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world when sea changes were taking place in international relations following the end of World War II and the establishment of the UN.

Although Nepal missed the opportunity to become the founding member of the UN despite being a sovereign and independent country, Nepal obtained the membership of the UN in 1955 to fulfill its policy of diversification by treading on the path to globalism. NAM principles, too, reverberate the fall of the traditional model and the emergence of new international relations (Bandyopadhyaya, 1977). While the Cold War contradictions led to polycentrism, the concept of *détente* on the other hand led to the rapid development of the NAM (Dinkel, 2019), which became a prominent ideology during the Cold War for the states not desiring to align with any power blocs and military alliances and rather advocating for the world peace, solidarity, cooperation, and collaboration (Wajid Ali, 2004). Today, NAM not only incorporates the Third World, but also a list of countries that are diverse in political, economic, and cultural terms; including developed countries like Singapore, war-torn countries like Afghanistan and Somalia, democratic countries like India, and communist states like North Korea and China (Wajid Ali, 2004).

In Nepal, non-alignment is the policy that all political parties and regimes have embraced despite their conflicting ideologies, which is not only because of the geopolitical obligation but also because of historical experiences. Although non-alignment as a global movement that began during the early years of the Cold War offers a platform to go beyond any kind of bipolarity – either at the regional level or international level – non-alignment as a balancing policy has always been at the heart of Nepali statecraft. Such a level of unanimity has further increased the relevance of NAM for Nepal, unlike in India, where scholars and foreign policy analysts, and political parties are divided over its relevance for New Delhi. India, today, remains a multi-aligned state (Korybko, 2021) through its effective participation in the security community led by the US, including the QUAD and the Indo Pacific Strategy (IPS); and, in the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Further, coordinating Nepal's foreign policy with that of India has become a "matter of history" (Baral, 1981) because of the repudiation of the 1950 treaty by the Nepali side and New Delhi's keenness to review it by constituting

Eminent Persons' Group (EPG), whose report, however, has still not received by the Indian government. While India finds refuge in multi-alignment to fulfill its great power ambition, Nepal's aspirations are widely driven by the spirit of South-South cooperation.

India and China, the two immediate neighbors of Nepal, played an important role in formulating the objectives and principles of the NAM. Today, both countries have transformed their bilateral relations into geopolitical rivals, not only because of their territorial disputes in the Himalayan region but because of their conflicting great power ambitions. Although India has been reluctant towards joining China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), more than two-thirds of the budget of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has been invested in projects in India (*The Indian Express*, 2021), China has, however, strategically revived the principles of *Panchasheel* while dealing with its neighbors and has been furthering its interest through BRI with its neighbors (Krishnan, 2014). This means, China has increased its influence in neighboring regions like South Asia and Southeast Asia (Krishnan, 2014). Today, as both the NAM countries have adopted two different paths (India strengthening its strategic partnership with the US and China emphasizing the BRI), the relevance of NAM in Nepal's foreign policy priority is being questioned.

Prior to harboring doubts and suspicions over Nepal's non-alignment, it is very important to understand three factors that have perpetually infused non-alignment in Nepal's foreign policy. First is Nepal's cultural, civilizational, and historical impulsion as triggered by the philosophy of *Madhyama Pratipad* in relation to the pursuance of Nepal's policy and posture of non-alignment. Second is the unanimous ambition of the policymakers and foreign policy formulators of Nepal to pursue globalism through South-South Cooperation and the third is Nepal's location between the two Asian giants, whose relation is driven by cooperation, conflict, and competition. The last factor has received good attention while the two other factors are often brushed aside. The influence of civilizational, cultural, and historical underpinnings of *Madhyama Pratipad* on Nepal's path to globalism is, however, less considered because labeling 1950 as a departure point has become commonplace.

The ideological origin of NAM is often traced to anticolonial movements (Wajid Ali 2004; Strydom, 2007), which is not the case for Nepal, which was never colonized. To Nepal NAM offered two opportunities: a path to globalism through collective resistance and to keep a geopolitical balance in the neighborhood after the 1962 war between India and China, and beyond the neighborhood in the context of global Cold War. With the end of colonial rule and the start of the postcolonial "nation-building", the Bandung Conference aimed at inviting as many African and Asian governments as possible and uniting to make the collective voice heard in the international politics (Bandyopadhyaya, 1977). The Conference homogenized the Third World countries and made them visible internationally. After the Bandung Conference and leading to the next conference in Belgrade (1961), the number of members had countries significantly increased due to decolonization (Dinkel, 2019). The Belgrade Conference shifted the importance of NAM to counter the indirect forms of colonialism and imperialism (Dinkel, 2019) and underlined NAM as a successful attempt in averting the risk to back either USA or USSR.

Consequently, the member countries emerged as the “third force” (Wajid Ali, 2004). However, in the 1970s, the movement developed in a different manner towards institutionalization (Narayanan, 2016). Due to the absence of a charter dictating the aims and objectives of the NAM, it was confined to the speeches and pronouncements of the leaders (Strydom, 2007). As such, the member countries developed the essence of NAM according to their situation and circumstances (Dinkel, 2019) because of the non-binding principle and owing to its confinement to the exchange of ideas among states (Strydom, 2007). The decade of the 1980s was characterized by disagreements and divergences among the member countries because of the desire of the US and USSR to lure more countries towards them (Wajid Ali, 2004). The military conflicts between the non-aligned states Angola and Zaire, Algeria and Morocco, Chad and Libya, Cambodia and Vietnam, Cuba and most Latin American states, Ethiopia and Sudan, Egypt and many of the Arab States, India and Pakistan, Tanzania and Uganda, and Ghana and Togo also led to the policy divergences among the non-aligned states (Tellis, 2021). Consequently, due to its non-institutionalization, policy divergences of the member countries, and increasing geopolitical and territorial conflicts among them, along with a fissure in multilateralism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the relevance and applicability of NAM in the multipolar world is severely questioned (Dinkel, 2019). While Nepal's foreign policymakers encounter such questions and critiques, its best to respond by citing Nepal's historical and civilizational experiences in maintaining *Madhyama Pratipad* and its suitability in pursuing the path of globalism even in the time of global and regional crises. Nepal's effective presence in the non-alignment movement began with the First Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries held in Belgrade in 1961, where the Nepali delegation was led by King Mahendra. At the conference, King Mahendra had stated:

The principle of peaceful co-existence when used negatively in the sense of military non-involvement becomes one of non-alignment. Belief in the policy of non-alignment implies in our opinion rejection of the theory that the challenge of the modern world is a military challenge.

Supporting the principle of peaceful co-existence of states, King Mahendra lauded the rights of the sovereign states to keep themselves detached from any kind of military involvement. When he led the Nepali delegation to the NAM summit in Cairo and in Lusaka, King Mahendra expressed similar views and suggested measures to solve the problems of economic development faced by developing countries (Baral, 1981; Lohani, 1982). Critiquing the lack of willpower and interest on the part of the leadership of developed countries to readjust their tariff and trade policies to meet the just needs of the developing countries, King Mahendra suggested the significance of the collective unity of developing countries under the NAM framework. He had also developed a realization regarding how Nepal should reorient its foreign policy through the principle of non-alignment while dealing with its Gulliverian neighborhood (Baral, 1981). Aligning with either of the neighbors would have been a threat to Nepal's political independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty (Baral, 1981). Today, while both the neighboring countries have expressed significant departure from the NAM, decision-makers in Kathmandu should be meticulous enough to judge the

solemnity of the crisis before Nepal faces a situation where it may have to compromise its political independence and sovereignty. Therefore, referring to the historical experience and civilizational underpinnings endowed by *Madhyama Pratipad* it is more important for the foreign policy formulators and implementors for disseminating the relevance of the NAM for Nepal in the context of changing global and regional power relations.

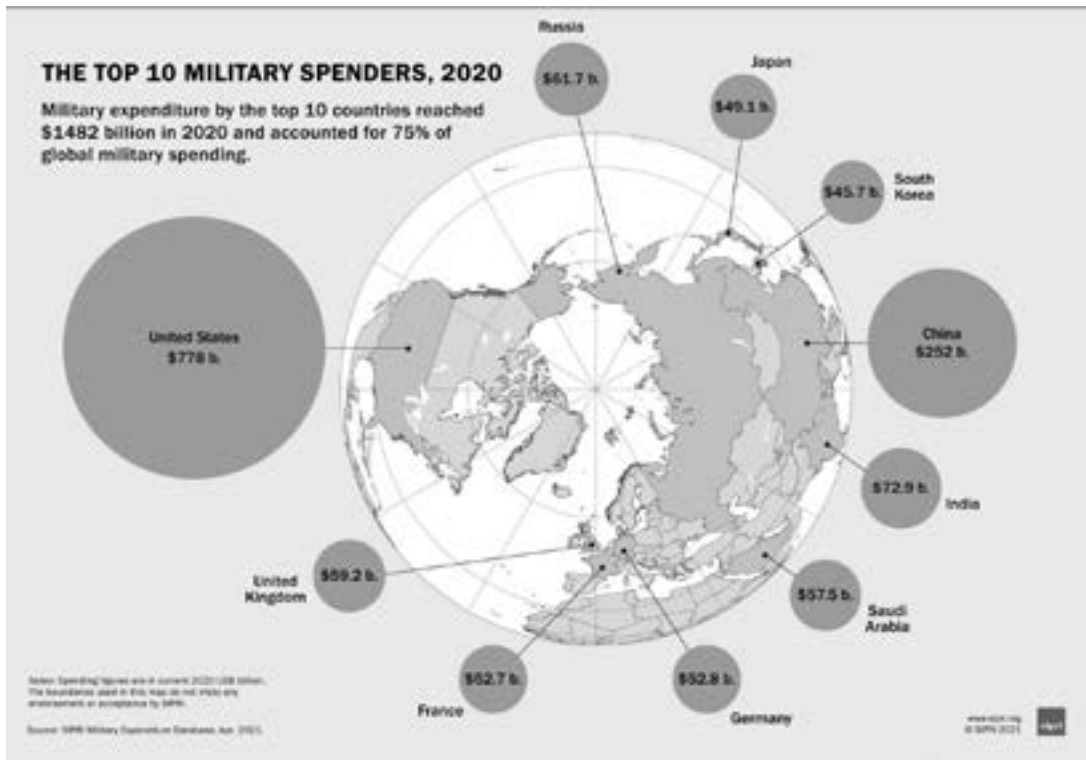
***Madhyama Pratipad* as a strategy for small powers**

Powerful countries have power, influence, and clout to not only fulfill but also impose their interests, while small countries are unable to use their military capabilities to fulfill their interests. The best strategy available to small countries is effective balancing through the middle path or *Madhyama Pratipad*. NAM offers them the same insight. Although NAM has regional powers as members today, they have been lured by their major power ambitions and are aligned in multiple ways. Thus, their fascination with the NAM was limited to the Cold War bipolarity as an attempt to get rid of the great power competition (Keethaponcalan, 2016). Unlike the interests of the regional powers to strategically resist the bipolarity, small countries had both security and economic reasons (Lohani, 1982). Because, unlike the legally and occasionally neutral states, the non-aligned countries were able to exert pressure in international politics on different global issues. In the international arena, the NAM provided all member states a platform to secure, consolidate, and legitimize their voice on issues of international importance. The NAM, as a political posture, was opted by the small states during the Cold War; and after its end, and was very relevant for them.

The NAM principles are also used by the leaders in the small powers not only to promote cohesion among the two or more different ideological camps inside the country. It has also helped the small states to thwart the risk of proxy wars in the international arena (Maniruzzaman, 1982). While during the Cold War period, non-alignment was not only understood as not getting allied with either the United States or the USSR but also as a strategy of the small powers to avoid the consequences of being trapped in the great power rivalry (Rothstein, 1968). As the instigation of internal conflicts in the small states with outside support made them largely vulnerable, NAM emerged as an important small power strategy.

Today the vulnerabilities and uncertainties faced by the small states have multiplied in an unprecedented manner compared to threats confronted during the Cold War (Krause & Singer, 2001). Thus, small powers always look for ways to maximize scarce resources and advance themselves in countering these intricacies (Rothstein, 1968). As a response to the structural shifts in the international environment, the small powers have adopted the policy of non-alignment (Maniruzzaman, 1982) as a survival strategy. Nepal, as a small power, pursued the path of globalism to increase its economic engagement (Lohani, 1982) and minimize the geopolitical implications emanating from its neighborhood, which had benefitted small powers during the period of the Cold War (Vital, 1967). While the power politics in regional and international institutions made it compulsory for the small powers to adhere to the

policy of the non-alignment (Krause & Singer, 2001) *Madhyama Pratipad* appears more relevant and germane for strategically located countries like Nepal. Owing to the structural changes in the international system coupled with the inability of international norms to curb the hard power ambitions of the major powers, small powers feel more comfortable with the policy of non-alignment even today (Maniruzzaman, 1982). In today's world, where countries have been ever-increasing their defense expenditures and nuclear capabilities amidst the growth of strategic partnerships and alliances triggered by a geopolitical rivalry between the countries, *Madhyama Pratipad* through non-alignment appears to be the best policy choice for the small powers.



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database, April 2021

While Nepal's two neighbors, India and China have found a place in the list of top ten military spenders (as shown above), the relevance of the policy of non-alignment has become more pronounced for Nepal. After all, the suitability and applicability of the policy is influenced by Nepal's geostrategic location between the two major powers of Asia (Shah, 1973). But the civilizational and cultural underpinnings attached with it cannot be denied, with the help of which Nepal aims to contribute to the world peace (Shah, 1973). Nepal sees the significance of NAM to boost its political independence and concomitantly heighten the spirit of interdependence with different countries (Baral, 1981). Thus, NAM for Nepal is not only about a path to pursue an independent foreign policy that otherwise is constrained by

its geographical location but to also foster peaceful coexistence with other countries in the world, the impetus for which is rooted in Nepal's cultural and civilizational philosophy of *Madhyama Pratipad*.

Nepal's belief in NAM is triggered by the concept of equality in all international decisions which have global implications even though the social problems faced by the countries differ (Shah, 1973). To Nepal, NAM yields an ideological convergence between the countries and the people by materializing peaceful relations among them. For Nepal, the policy of non-alignment can serve as a platform to exercise sovereign equality, where not only size is equated with success. Therefore, given the geopolitical, regional, and global context, NAM remains relevant, appropriate, and significant for a country like Nepal, whose aspirations are quite different from that of its two big and powerful neighbors. Hence, even if India is multi-aligned and China is offering the narrative of *Panchasheel* to fulfill its BRI objectives, there is no point in critiquing Nepal's relentless adherence to NAM without understanding its historical experiences, cultural and civilizational philosophy of *Madhyama Pratipad*, and more specifically the Yam Theory propounded by King Prithivi Narayan Shah (Baral, 1982).

India has made a perceptible shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment in order to fulfill its great power ambitions, and China has reiterated on *Panchasheel* to materialize its BRI projects in different parts of the world as a response to the "debt trap" allegations. In such a context, Nepal's non-alignment – the cornerstone of Nepal's foreign policy – should not remain confined to discourse. This is because enshrining the principles of NAM in the Constitution and Foreign Policy is not enough for the founder member of NAM. Thus, it's time to go beyond the ritual attendance at NAM summits to steer a pragmatic revitalization of the policy of non-alignment in its foreign policy by referring to the historical, cultural, and civilizational significance of *Madhyama Pratipad*. After all, Nepal adheres to the policy of non-alignment because it believes that it "brightens the prospects of peace, which is prerequisite for its security, independence, and development" (Shah, 1975).

India's Multi-Alignment

Although civilizational India had accommodated the worldview of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the entire world as a family), the post-colonial, independent India couldn't revitalize it as it had to maintain a balance between the United States and the USSR throughout the Cold War. India, initially sought such a balance in non-alignment under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, at least from the time of its independence in 1947 to the 1962 war with China, and realized that it could fulfill its interest by maintaining equidistance with superpowers and avoiding military alliances (Hall, 2016). But leaders and prime ministers after Nehru made a significant departure from the Nehruvian policy by setting up a radical agenda for the developing world, arming India with advanced military weapons in response to the threats from Pakistan and China, pursuing economic self-reliance, and ultimately boosting India's strategic autonomy (Hall, 2016, p. 274).

After initiating the policy of opening-up in 1991, India encouraged foreign trade and investment, introduced the “Look East Policy” in 1994, tested five nuclear devices in 1998, and pursued entente with the USA (Bhardwaj, 2020). The Look East Policy significantly enhanced India’s relation with Southeast Asian states or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other regional multilateral institutions (Tellis, 2021). During the premiership of Manmohan Singh (2004-2014), there were significant changes in India’s foreign policy principles and regarding its greater integration into the global economy (Hilali, 2001). Thus, India’s shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment in this phase was characterized by continued increasing engagement with the US that was initiated by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was Singh’s predecessor. The Look East Policy was initiated by PV Narasimha Rao, and the Neighborhood Policy by I.K. Gujral (Menon, 2021).

India’s multi-alignment policy aims to respond effectively to the new transnational challenges that could not be dealt with autonomy in the 21st century (Sebastian, 2021). In this phase, India became an inaugural member of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and observer state of the SCO in 2005. India joined Brazil, Russia, and China in 2006 to form the BRIC, which was joined by South Africa in 2010 (Sebastian, 2021) and is renamed as ‘BRICS’. India also became a member of the G-20 in 2008 and organized the first meeting of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (Sebastian, 2021). Further, India’s strategic partnership with other countries deepened as an instrument of regional diplomacy. Thus, India’s multi-alignment initiatives are aimed at fulfilling its great power ambition by managing critical security threats from China and Pakistan, accessing regional and global forums, and promoting its values without unswervingly committing to the Western normative agenda (Narayanan, 2016).

Today, while India has skillfully maneuvered its foreign policy behavior in the China-led BRICS and the SCO, New Delhi has also involved itself actively in the US-led QUAD along with Japan and Australia. India’s effective presence in the QUAD Leader’s Summit, Annual BRICS Summit, and meetings of the SCO indicate its multi-aligned foreign policy. Such a shift from India’s conventional stance over non-alignment is the upshot of the influence of pragmatism on the foreign policy behavior of the Modi administration (Sebastian, 2021). Under the Modi administration, even though India has not been a part of a formal military alliance, it has become a part of the diverse network of loose and issue-specific coalitions and regional groupings led by both, India’s adversaries like China, and India’s strategic partners like the United States, attesting India’s shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment (Korybko, 2021). Moreover, India’s change in the policy of non-alignment to multi-alignment was also visible in its balanced response to the recent escalation of the Israel-Hamas conflict, which was distinctive from its previous pro-Palestine stance. As part of its multi-aligned policy, New Delhi couldn’t brush aside Israel’s interest.

India’s multi-alignment in contemporary times is aimed at adapting to the new realities fashioned by the new transformation in the world order. The emergence of a multipolar world coupled with the rise of China and its growing influence in India’s backyard has obliged New Delhi to go beyond the conventional parameters (Menon, 2021). As such, Indian Prime

Minister Narendra Modi steered the Indian foreign policy going beyond the idea of traditional networks and devising new partnerships in the specific areas of agriculture, Information Technology (IT), and cyber security. New Delhi's multi-aligned policy doesn't prevent India to develop cooperation with its geopolitical rival like China (Bhardwaj, 2020). Although India and China have not been able to resolve their territorial disputes which are often aggravated by standoffs and skirmishes, they have been cooperating in both the BRICS and SCO.

On the economic front, bilateral trade has significantly increased. The import of Chinese goods to India has averaged INR. 141.90 billion from 1991 to 2021, which reached INR. 524.33 billion in July 2021 (Reserve Bank of India, 2021). Similarly, Indian exports to China have averaged at INR. 37.28 billion from 1991 to 2021 (Trading Economics, 2021), and the highest record was INR. 192.92 billion in March 2021 (Krishnan, 2021). The increase in bilateral trade was possible even after the violent clash in the Galwan valley and in the context of the boycott of Chinese goods in India. Despite the increasing antagonism between the two countries, the investment flow from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – which is led by China to finance infrastructure projects in Asia -- to finance infrastructure and connectivity projects in India has been significant. Interestingly, New Delhi is involved in the AIIB despite its reservation over the BRI. Currently, there are 16 proposed and 27 approved projects from AIIB in India (Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank, 2021). In 2021, eight projects of approximately US\$ 1,410.67 million were approved. All these projects amount to more than US\$ 5 billion, and it is reported to be about one-third of the AIIB funding (Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank, 2021).

Strategic *Panchasheel* and Xi Jinping Thought

As China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has drawn severe criticism, including the allegation of “debt trap” and causing “sovereign erosion”, from the western world, Beijing has resorted to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence or *Panchasheel* to shield its ambitious project, which aims to connect East with the West through the land and maritime routes. The five principles include mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, cooperation for mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. The modern concept of *Panchasheel* was introduced by China and India in 1954 when they were dealing with two issues: Tibet and the Himalayan borders. Thus, instead of considering *Panchasheel* as an entirely moral and ethical stance, it was introduced to fulfill the national interest of both countries. Thus, it is not completely deprived of political realism (Dasgupta, 2016). Although India's Gujral Doctrine accommodated the spirit of *Panchasheel* in the 1990s, India today has accommodated a more pragmatic foreign policy driven by multi-alignment. Beijing has also reinvented itself to deal with the neighbors, particularly in the context of the BRI projects (Krishnan, 2014). President Xi Jinping has also emphasized the importance of *Panchasheel* in maintaining friendly ties with its neighbors (Krishnan, 2014).

China has used the principles of *Panchasheel* while dealing with or addressing any concern of its neighbors, especially the South Asia and Southeast Asia (Krishnankutty & Shukla, 2020).

Even in its dealings with India, China has reiterated the principle, time and again. While dealing with the concern of India over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the entire gamut of the BRI, China has resorted to the five principles as an attempt to assure the political leadership in New Delhi that Beijing's actions and involvement in the disputed territory of Kashmir shouldn't be understood as an act of interference (Aneja, 2017). In the future, China looks forward to India joining the BRI on this same ground (Aneja, 2017). China has also demanded to drive the negotiations followed by Galwan skirmishes through the spirit of *Panchasheel* (Krishnankutty & Shukla, 2020) to which India didn't show much interest, possibly because of the dimension of political realism attached with it.

The key economic corridors in South Asia and Southeast Asia under China-led BRI projects have received stark criticism from the western world that perceive China's move as being assertive and expansionist. Beijing has strategically exploited the importance of *Panchasheel* to reassure its neighbors, particularly the small countries that have been lured by the connectivity projects that Beijing's flagship project can bring (Aneja, 2017; Krishnankutty & Shukla, 2020). But China's growing presence in South Asia has also vexed the leadership in New Delhi (Menon, 2021). Although India has largely failed to prevent the countries in South Asia to get attracted to the BRI projects, China knows the art to successfully lure them is to constantly refer to the principle of *Panchasheel*.

While India has pursued the policy of multi-alignment to fulfill its national interest, China has revitalized the five principles of peaceful coexistence in a strategic manner. Both, China, and Nepal have emphasized the principle of *Panchasheel* in their bilateral relations, with the help of which the two countries have been coordinating their relations in different international forums (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Although China has not been able to enter diplomatic relations with Bhutan because of the latter's strategic partnership with India, it has advanced the principle of *Panchasheel* in expediting the China-Bhutan boundary negotiation (Siqi, Xin, & Yunyi, 2021). The MoU was signed between the two countries by adhering to the principles of equality, peaceful coexistence, and win-win results (Siqi, Xin, & Yunyi, 2021). In its bilateral relations with Pakistan, too, China has emphasized mutual respect, mutual trust, mutual support, and mutual assistance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2021). But, New Delhi sees China's reiteration of *Panchasheel* for building bilateral ties with its South Asian neighbors as a strategic encirclement of India. The policymakers in Beijing perceive it as being a prerequisite for a peaceful and stable neighborhood. How should Nepal proceed in such an adverse situation where two Asian giants have not been able to renegotiate their differences, and are more driven by the two conflicting approaches? Should Nepal see NAM in only geopolitical terms or in cultural and civilizational terms to use it to reclaim and reinvent the relevancy of non-alignment in a new way when both of its neighbors have pursued divergent approaches to fulfill their interests?

Besides the principle of *Panchasheel*, Xi's China has also unveiled a new official political doctrine for China, the Xi Jinping Thought, as an attempt to consolidate and strengthen power at the national and international levels. The Xi Jinping Thought promotes the

supremacy of the Communist Party and reiterates that a powerful and unified China can be attained only if the Communist Party is firmly in control of China. The 19th Convention of the Communist Party of China in 2017 accepted Xi Jinping Thought as its guiding principle. It was unanimously passed by the 2,287 delegates to the party congress. The Xi Jinping Thought states that:

The Communist Party of China shall uphold its absolute leadership over the People's Liberation Army and other people's armed forces; implement Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the military; strengthen the development of the People's Liberation Army by enhancing its political loyalty, strengthening it through reform and technology, and running it in accordance with the law; build people's forces that obey the Party's command, can fight and win, and maintain excellent conduct; ensure that the People's Liberation Army accomplishes its missions and tasks in the new era; foster a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation; uphold justice while pursuing shared interests; work to build a community with a shared future for mankind; follow the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration, and pursue the Belt and Road Initiative.

Among the 10 clauses, the first five focus on the military, while the next four on society, and the last one on foreign policy. More precisely, it echoes the concerns of President Xi on Two Centennial Goals. Elucidating the importance of two centenary goals of the CPC during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), President Xi identified it as the foundation stone for achieving the "Chinese Dream." The two centennial goals are: a.) to build "a moderately prosperous society in all respects" by 2021 and to celebrate the CPC's centenary; and b.) To "build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious" by 2049 and to celebrate the centenary of the People's Republic of China. Certain strategies have been devised to achieve these goals. One of the strategies is the Xi Jinping Thought, which is aimed to develop China as a powerful, prosperous, and socially harmonious country, and to establish socialism with Chinese characteristics in China.

Since the beginning of the communist movement in Nepal, the Himalayan country has experimented with different kinds of communist ideologies. At times, the communist parties have merged and there have also been times when they have split. When China had introduced the Xi Jinping Thought, Nepal witnessed the merger of two powerful communist parties—Maoist Centre and Unified Marxists-Leninists (UML). The new unified communist party was perceptively attracted to China's political and development models. The unified party has already split, not because of political differences but because of conflicting interests. In such a situation, the Xi Jinping Thought alone may not be able to bring all the communist parties together in Nepal, despite China's positive image among all the political parties.

From September 24 to 25, 2019, the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) and the Communist Party of China jointly organized a symposium in Kathmandu, where the two sides shared their experiences. While the Chinese side shared the Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with

Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, the Nepali side shared the objectives of forming the NCP by merging the two communist parties, for the overall development of Nepal. It was organized by the NCP's School, Organization, and international departments, and the CPC's Central Party School, Organization Department, and International Liaison Department. There are also instances when such meetings have impacted Nepal's foreign policy of non-alignment (Bhattarai, 2020).

On June 19, 2020, when another virtual meeting was organized between the communist parties of Nepal and China, Indian media went on cynically portraying Nepal's relations with China as anti-Indian. The meeting had taken place when relations between India and China had worsened because of border skirmishes, and a violent clash along the disputed border in Ladakh, and at the time while Nepal's had its own border dispute with India. It not only made India cast doubt over Nepal's non-alignment, but also provided an opportunity for Indian media to endorse the Indian army chief's remarks: "Nepal is acting on the behest of someone".

Although the meeting was scheduled long before the clash between Indian and Chinese troops on June 15, 2020, the timing was not appropriate, and thus drew widespread criticism. Therefore, while mulling over the benefits of the Xi Jinping thought for Nepal's development and socio-economic transformation, it is also equally important to pay heed to the geopolitical implications it could invite for a country located between China and India (Bhattarai, 2020). Learning from the experiences and practices of the communist movement in China may benefit the Nepali communist movement. But it is equally important to be aware of the geopolitical implications of embracing them. Most importantly, in the process of learning, Nepal shouldn't compromise its foreign policy of non-alignment, which is also the constitutional provision on Nepal's foreign relations (Bhattarai, 2020). After all, non-alignment is all about "protecting the weak from the strong" and struggling for "peace, independence, equality, justice, and dignity of all men and nations" (Thapa, 1982). But, confining non-alignment only to the discourse or understanding it only as a philosophy or as a means of intellectual contentment is not sufficient because it must be relevant to the experience of each country and practically meaningful in the everyday conduct of its external relations (Khanal, 1982). To do that, it is best to take refuge in Nepal's civilizational world view of *Madhyama Pratipad*, which prevents extreme proximity to one side against the other and remains vigilant about the interferences (Khanal, 1982).

Conclusion

Nepal's non-alignment faces an unprecedented challenge as India takes the path towards multi-alignment, and China revitalizes *Panchasheel* to fulfill its BRI ambitions and introduces Xi Jinping Thought to consolidate its power and influence domestically and internationally. But this does not mean non-alignment is no more relevant for Nepal. Rather, its suitability and relevance have largely increased. This study has discussed how the relevance of non-alignment for Nepal shouldn't be understood only in geopolitical terms, but more in the cultural, civilizational, and historical significance of *Madhyama Pratipad*. Distinguishing

non-alignment as a global movement and non-alignment as the balancing policy of the Nepali state, this study has reiterated the need to seek the contemporary relevance of non-alignment for Nepal not only in the changing power relations at the global and regional fronts, but more in Nepal's historical acts of balancing and its civilizational world view of *Madhyama Pratipad* which advocates world peace and regional harmony through the avoidance of conflict.

While the geopolitical tensions and territorial disputes between two neighbors have pushed Nepal to recalibrate its foreign policy and diplomatic practices, the antagonistic cooperation between India and China has made the situation more complex and critical for Nepal. In such an adverse condition, Nepal's non-alignment has been mauled as a mere ritual and its effectiveness is being questioned. To reinforce the relevance and effectiveness of NAM for Nepal, this study has demonstrated that geopolitical citations alone are not enough but requires reclamation of the principle of *Madhyama Pratipad* from the historical experiences to argue in favor of non-alignment as the core guiding principle of foreign policy.

Madhyama Pratipad offers Nepal's non-alignment a strategic vision in the context of India's multi-alignment and China's Xi Jinping Thought and may provide policymakers in Kathmandu an approach to accommodate the conflicting interests of the major powers in Nepal. The same concept of the middle path was also espoused by P.N Shah in *Divya Upadesh*. Through the Yam theory, the king had demonstrated Nepal's geostrategic location by comparing the country to a yam between two boulders – British East India Company and Imperial China. For centuries, Nepal survived and sustained amidst the geopolitical vulnerabilities induced by its geostrategic location. But, today, Nepal's geostrategic importance not only invites India and China but also other global powers like the United States and other major powers. Thus, it is best to redefine NAM not only in geopolitical terms but more in civilizational and cultural terms, and in doing so, the philosophy of *Madhyama Pratipad* needs to be applied beyond the neighborhood. By compounding the act of balancing with the spirit of accommodation, *Madhyama Pratipad* offers Nepal the best policy option to increase its soft power capabilities and manage the strategic competition and rivalry of major powers without injuring its own economic and development aspirations. As such, in the words of Albert Camus, Nepal may not have to “follow those who walk in front” pursuing their great power ambitions and instead can walk just “beside of them, being their friend”.

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