

NEPAL BETWEEN DRAGON AND ELEPHANT

Saroj Kumar Timalsina

Saroj.timalsina@bkmc.tu.edu.np/ timalsinasaroj82gmail.com

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Abstract

Nepal, a landlocked country surrounded by mountains, enjoys the strategic advantage of being sandwiched between two rising global powers—the Elephant (India) and the Dragon (China). There is opportunity as well as danger. Nepal benefits from improved connectivity, border trade, foreign investment, and infrastructure support because to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's development partnership. Because of its closeness to two of the world's largest markets, Nepal has the potential to serve as a transit hub, fostering regional integration and economic diversification. However, historical weaknesses, economic exposure, and geopolitical competition also present Nepal with a wide range of challenges. Nepal's dependence on India for its transit route and commercial corridor, as well as boundary disputes with both of its neighbors, limit its strategic autonomy. However, expanding Chinese involvement and offering options could force Nepal into a great power struggle, which is risky. Such actions further jeopardize Nepal's sovereignty and national political equilibrium. Nepal has adopted an equidistant diplomacy strategy, which leverages its geopolitical location to create developmental gains without resorting to overt alignment to maneuver in this difficult situation. Nepal strives to turn its geopolitical factors into advantages by emphasizing regionalism, multilateralism, and non-alignment. Nepal needs improve its infrastructure, diversify its trade, foster good governance, and bolster its internal capabilities in order to ensure sustainable national progress. Last but not least, Nepal's success is a result of its ability to protect its sovereignty and advance inclusive development while balancing the competing interests of its neighbors through a dance-like orchestration of tactics. Its in-between Dragon and Elephant's status is therefore both advantageous and a test of its future direction.

Keywords: *Nepal, Geopolitics, China, India, Dragon and Elephant, Strategic Position, Sovereignty, South Asia*

Introduction

The fate of Nepal's topography has always been set. Between China in the north and India in the south, east, and west, the country has a unique place in South Asia. This mountainous landlocked country is not only a physical ridge but also a geopolitical pivot between two of the most powerful states in Asia. Traditionally, the nation of Nepal's leaders used to have a policy of prudence so that the nation could remain independent, but those policies are now not feasible in the globalized world of today. Today, Nepal cannot stay aloof from the influence of its two giant neighbors. India and China are not only Nepal's largest business partners but also its big political, security, and cultural drivers (Muni, 2016).

In its iconic Dragon form, China represents swift economic expansion, bolstering military might, and expanding influence both in Asia and globally. Its ambitious ambitions, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aim to change international trade patterns and establish China as a major global force (Pant, 2019). India, often known as the Elephant, is a democratic giant with strong linguistic, cultural, religious, and historical ties to Nepal. India has been and remains Nepal's most significant political influence in the nation, as well as its first infrastructural, commercial, and security partner (Baral, 2020). Nepal is seen as a neighbor by both giants, but more significantly, it plays a significant role in their respective foreign strategies in South Asia and the Himalayas.

The "Dragon" and the "Elephant" are used to symbolize the rivalry and contrast of Nepal's neighbors. India's has always been based on political dependency and cultural proximity, but China's is mostly economic and infrastructure based. Such duality has benefits and drawbacks for Nepal. On the plus side, having two of the biggest economies in the world nearby offers unparalleled opportunities for regional integration, border connection, and economic growth. On the down side, Nepal's reliance on both of its neighbors, especially India, for trade and transit makes it susceptible to external pressure, power imbalances, and strategic manipulation.

The Strategic Significance of Nepal

Nepal is significant from a geopolitical standpoint for both China and India, going beyond bilateral commerce and diplomacy. Three criteria determine its strategic significance: location, linkage, and security. First, because of its position atop the Himalayas, Nepal is an organic buffer state. Nepal's northern border is essential to India's national security because it keeps Chinese intruders out of the densely populated Gangetic plain. China's geopolitical flank towards Tibet is Nepal, an area of monolithic political and cultural weakness. Second, Nepal's ability to connect with others is the key to its strategic significance.

China sees Nepal as a potential entry point for building rail, road, and energy links between Tibet and South Asia. Similarly, India sees Nepal as essential to its regional connectivity agenda through initiatives like BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal). The inclusion of Nepal in plans for a trans-Himalayan connection might significantly change the subcontinent's economic power dynamics, as both hegemonies are aware. Third, Nepal's security needs make it more valuable in the geopolitical calculations of its neighbors. India has long viewed a foreign presence in Nepal as a danger to its northern border.

On the other hand, China views Nepal as a state on the front lines of stopping Tibetan rebel activity and Western attention from approaching it. Therefore, both nations make an effort to buy Nepal's political favor through diplomatic engagement, infrastructural development, and financial assistance.

Historical Context of Relations

India and Nepal formalized close relationship but also sowed seeds of suspicion through differences in perception of unequal commitment through the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Political interference, economic sanctions, and unstable borders pushed Nepal–India relations to the limit throughout decades. China, however, progressively extended its reach by offering a diversification partnership. Beijing's investments in trade diversification, energy, and infrastructure were

providing Nepal with room to deinstitutionalize its overdependence on India, especially after crises such as the 2015 Indian blockade (Poudel, 2019). This twin interaction has not been free from complications. While Chinese assistance is accepted in general as a counterbalance to India, debt dependence, sovereignty, and political strings still erode. Similar to this, conflicts still arise from worries about paternalism and meddling, even though Nepal and India have strong people-to-people and cultural links. This drawn-out exchange serves to emphasize Nepal's delicate balancing act between its relations with both neighbors in terms of autonomy and sovereignty.

Research Objective

The objective of this piece is to critically analyze how Nepal may transform its geographic requirement into a vision for long-term, sustainable national growth. The paper outlines how Nepal can envision its sovereignty and advance inclusive development by analyzing its diplomacy-balancing strategy, exploring the opportunities presented by interactions with China and India, and conceptualizing the threat of asymmetry and competition.

The Elephant and the Dragon ultimately decide Nepal's destiny. Its location is strategically significant and exposed. Nepal's challenge is to minimize strategic costs while optimizing economic and diplomatic gains. Nepal's story is therefore not one of two giants fighting for survival, but rather one of formulating a reasonable, workable foreign policy that transforms geographic necessity into an opportunity for development.

Analytical Framework

To understand Nepal's place between the Dragon and the Elephant, it is essential to consider the dynamics on four interrelated dimensions. Nepal's economic ties to China and India as traders, investors, energy cooperation partners, and infrastructure development partners offer both incredible growth opportunities and the potential for dependence on any country.

Politically, Beijing and New Delhi are fighting for control over Nepal's internal policies, and the country's domestic alliances typically stay on conditional terms due to external pressures.

Although Nepal has strong cultural ties to India in the form of culture, language, and religion, it is also dealing with China's growing soft power through media, education, and cultural interchange, all of which have an impact on Nepal's identity and foreign policy course. In terms of security, Nepal's sovereignty and stability are directly impacted by unresolved border disputes, strategic vulnerabilities, and the larger great-power competition. When taken as a whole, this multifaceted framework makes it possible to evaluate the potential and difficulties Nepal faces due to its distinct geopolitical situation.

Theoretical Framework Conventional theories of international relations provide the best explanation for Nepal's geopolitical position between China and India. Theory is capable of advancing Nepal's foreign policy beyond description and situating it among the big patterns of small-state behavior in situations of hegemonic powers. Three of the strongest theoretical lenses—Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism—illuminate some of the most crucial aspects of Nepal's challenges and actions as it balances between the Dragon and the Elephant.

Realism: Power, Survival, and Balancing

Realist theory emphasizes power asymmetry, survival, and pursuit of national interest in an international state of anarchy. Nepal, from this perspective, is a "small state" surrounded by two regional hegemony that have immensely superior military, economic, and political power (Muni, 2016). Realism explains Nepal's susceptibility to coercion, for instance, during the 2015 Indian blockade, and the danger of becoming a Chinese loan-dependent state under the Belt and Road Initiative (Pant, 2019). Nepal's astute balancing approach—coming close to both India and China but aligning with neither to any meaningful extent—is in line with the realist prediction that small states attempt to maximize their autonomy by balancing against one power through the other (Bhattarai, 2018). Realism thus locates Nepal's foreign policy as broadly defensive: ensuring sovereignty, repelling threat, and ensuring regime continuity within a hostile outside environment perceived to be threatening.

Liberalism: Cooperation, Institutions, and Mutual Benefits

In the Nepalese context, liberalism contends that economic interaction with India and China in the form of trade, investment, and connectivity can create win-win scenarios that reduce the threat of coercion. The existence of regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC, as well as the potential for trilateral agreements between China, India, and Nepal, demonstrate a high degree of liberal optimism regarding the laws and institutions that promote collaboration (Shrestha, 2021). Infrastructure along the borders, tourism, and the use of hydropower all demonstrate how dependency may benefit both sides to the fullest extent possible. However, liberalism also makes reference to Nepal's predicament, which is that the mistrust between China and India has limited the ability of regional institutions to operate honorably, so preventing Nepal from fulfilling its full potential under cooperative regimes. However, liberal analysis demonstrates how Nepal might choose economic diplomacy, diversity, and multilateralism in an effort to improve security and lessen vulnerability.

Constructivism: Identity, Norms and Cultural Linkages

Nepal's foreign policy is influenced by its historical and cultural connections in addition to its material might. Shared Hindu heritage, free borders, and linguistic bonds bring Nepal closer to India, and Buddhist heritage and cultural exchange through Tibet make Nepal firmly wedded to China (Baral, 2020). Issues of identity shape mass opinion, elite rhetoric, and policy inclinations. For instance, anti-Indian nationalism has come to occur in the midst of political crisis, compelling leaders to look towards China. Similarly, China's soft power projection through cultural diplomacy, Confucius Institutes, and scholarships is an attempt at reorienting Nepalese mentality and alignment of sentiments. Constructivism can explain why discussions about Nepal's foreign policy are always bipolar between "pro-India" and "pro-China" alignments since it emphasizes ideas and narratives at the expense of material interests.

Small-State Theory: Autonomy and Vulnerability

According to it, small states have no capacity to make any contribution to great-power politics in any direct manner but can use tools such as neutrality, bandwagoning, balancing, or hedging to preserve their independence (Ingebritsen, 2006). Nepal's foreign policy of non-alignment,

equidistance approach, and reliance on multilateral forums are the manifestations of such behavior. Small-state theory highlights the role of domestic resilience—political stability, economic diversification, and institutional capacity—to strengthen the bargaining power of such structurally handicapped states as Nepal. Four theoretical frameworks i.e. Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, and Small-State Theories are used to explain Nepal's geopolitical conduct. Nepal's survival tactics in the face of India and China's unequal power dynamics are the main emphasis of realism. According to liberalism, rivalry can be transformed into interdependence through opportunities for collaboration, trade, and institution-based interaction.

Constructivism considers cultural affinity, narrative past, and politics of identity that condition Nepal's policy choices. Small-State Theory synthesizes them because it tells us how a small state like Nepal can maintain independence through balancing, hedging, and multilateral diplomacy. Together, these perceptions explain Nepal's vulnerabilities and agency in responding to the strategic rivalry between the Dragon and the Elephant. Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework



Note: Above is the Conceptual Framework diagram that graphically explains how Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, and Small-State Theory explain Nepal's strategic position between India (Elephant) and China (Dragon).

Nepal's Strategic Significance

Nepal is not just a miniscule nation under the control of mighty nations; Nepal is actually strategically located as a hub of South Asia.Nepal has historically been a buffer state between India and China and has served a role that became particularly noticeable after the 1962 Sino-Indian War when the Himalayas were turned into a regional competition border (Bhattarai, 2018). Its geography places it equally as important as a gateway: as an entry point to Tibet and the Himalayan front, Nepal is an entry point to Tibet for India, and Nepal is an entry point to South Asia and the Indian subcontinent for China (Shrestha, 2021). Geographically speaking, Nepal has so many water resources that they are strategically significant to the extent that its rivers supply India's northern plains, providing India with direct access to agricultural support and water security (Muni, 2016).

At the same time, Nepal's central location makes it a transit site for the prospective trans-Himalayan connection and provides commercial routes that link China and India and advance regional integration (Baral, 2020). Because of these strategic reasons, Beijing and New Delhi

never attempt to expand their influence in Kathmandu because Nepal is not just a neighbor but also a key factor in their security and development ambitions.

Advantages to Nepal

With proper management, Nepal's unique advantages from its advantageous location between China and India may significantly boost the nation's development. Nepal, which is home to more than 2.8 billion people, is economically privileged to be near two of the world's biggest marketplaces (Pant, 2019). One of the main factors driving expansion is tourism, with Chinese and Indian visitors historically accounting for the majority of arrivals, generating income and promoting interpersonal relationships (Shrestha, 2021).

It is also bordering Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) that drives Nepal's economy, particularly in the hydropower, infrastructure, and manufacturing industries (Bhattarai, 2018). Connectivity and infrastructure are also a possibility: India invested years building roads, electricity corridors, and border rail connectivity (Muni, 2016), while China only embarked on expanding its footprint in terms of highways, dry ports, and the ambitious venture of building a railway from Tibet to Kathmandu (Pant, 2019). Significantly, the rivalry between the two powers will compel them to bid increasingly higher and higher over each other so that Nepal could receive better terms and good deals (Baral, 2020). Nepal diplomatically has a chance to exercise some bargaining power with equal distance relations with both powers.

This balance enables Kathmandu to receive assistance, concessionary loans, and political backing by temporarily siding with one of the neighbors but not letting go of relations with the other (Bhattarai, 2018; Shrestha, 2021). In the social and cultural domain, Nepal has had common Hindu traditions, porous border, intermarriage among border people, and large mobility of labor with India (Muni, 2016), and Buddhist heritage ties and rising cultural interactions with China, predominantly through Tibet (Pant, 2019). Lastly, Nepal is well placed within the security sphere of both nations, where it is never forgotten in world or regional politics (Baral, 2020). All these factors converging provide Nepal huge development, diplomatic, and world stage opportunities.

Threats for Nepal

Even though Nepal is privileged with a myriad of advantages as a result of its position between India and China, Nepal also faces some serious challenges that compromise its sovereignty, stability, and sustainable development.

Political, the country has been chronically susceptible to external pressure and invasion: India has exercised significant influence over Nepal's internal politics, consistently backing one group or individual (Muni, 2016), while China's increasing intervention since 2015 has created concerns of ideological intrusions and added hegemony over Nepali political actors (Pant, 2019). Economically, Nepal remains vulnerable to regional dependence. India's control over strategic trade routes was brought into sharp relief in the 2015 informal blockade, striking against essential supplies and demonstrating how dependent Kathmandu is on its southern neighbor (Dixit, 2015). China's growing power under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers much-needed infrastructural assistance, but it also runs the risk of making Nepal indebted (Shrestha, 2021). One aspect of Nepal's predicament is border disputes.

Nationalist emotions are still fueled by the unsolved Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh historical dispute with India (Bhattarai, 2018). In addition to being largely steady, the northern Chinese border saw a few minor incursions that raised questions about territorial integrity (Baral, 2020). Additionally, Nepal runs the risk of being targeted by China and India's rising geostrategic competition, which might expand their influence in South Asia and transform Kathmandu into a battleground for opposing viewpoints (Pant, 2019).

Additionally, the actions of extra-regional actors like the US and EU, whose actions often balance out Chinese influence, are added to this (Shrestha, 2021). The worst problems Nepal faces are those of sovereignty: too close ties to either neighbor jeopardize national autonomy, and domestic politics, which are becoming more and more divided into "pro-India" and "pro-China" factionalism, jeopardize stability and administration (Muni, 2016; Baral, 2020). Because of this, Nepal is positioned between the Dragon and the Elephant, which presents both potential and significant vulnerabilities.

Table 1

Nepal's Dragon vs. Elephant SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Strategic positioning between two giants	landlocked, dependent on transit
Cultural linkages with both China & India	Small economy, weak bargaining power
Future center for trade & connectivity	Vulnerable to political pressure
Plentiful hydropower & tourism opportunities	No robust infrastructure
Opportunities	Threats
Leverage rivalry for infrastructure investment	India-China rivalry bleeding into Nepal
Transit corridor between South Asia & Tibet	Risk of being a geopolitical pawn
Check and balance	China debt dependency, India trade dependency
Diversification of energy & trade markets	Border disputes & sovereignty threats

Discussion

Nepal's geopolitical location is truly a double-edged sword. There is both enormous potential and challenges associated with being sandwiched between China and India, two developing countries. The benefits of being close to them include increased economic opportunities, cultural growth, security assurances, and international recognition. On the down side, their strategic imperatives might eclipse Nepal, leaving its sovereignty vulnerable to foreign interference and its policy autonomy vulnerable to the Dragon and Elephant's conflicting interests being vetoed. Due to close linguistic, cultural, and religious ties as well as an open border that promoted trade and interpersonal interaction, Nepal used to be friendly to India.

The 1950 pact of Peace and Friendship codified the closeness, but it also stoked resentment in Nepal because many people saw the pact as unfair (Muni, 2016). The hegemony of India over Nepalese politics and economy had bred dependence, which always translated into leverage. This dynamic was perhaps most starkly revealed in the 2015 unofficial blockade, when essential supplies were severed, leaving Nepal on the threshold of humanitarian crisis. The blockade was a

pivot moment, which further entrenched perceptions of India's hegemonic role and forced Nepal to seek alternative options. Kathmandu reacted by diversifying its foreign affairs more assertively to China.

Nepal signed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017, trying to end its excessive dependence on India and become part of trans-Himalayan connectivity initiatives (Pant, 2019). China-funded infrastructure development in the form of proposed railway links and hydropower schemes brought enhanced economic autonomy. The transition came with new risks, particularly the fear of debt traps and involvement in economically non-sustainable projects. It is argued by critics that while Chinese credit may appear inviting, it can weigh down small nations with limited capability to repay in the long run (Dixit, 2015). Nepal's diversification effort has thus bitten into India's monopoly but put the country at greater risks. Theoretically, Nepal's dilemma can be approached through realist and liberal perspectives.

Realist analysts note that Nepal's limited hard power requires cautious balancing in its survival. Between two regional heavyweights, Nepal's strategy must reduce protection of sovereignty short of over-alignment with either of them (Muni, 2016). Liberal theorists argue that regional cooperation can convert rivalry into opportunity. Mutual expansion is made possible by groups like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) or a possible trilateral strategy between China, India, and Nepal. Theoretically, this would strengthen markets, foster the growth of cooperative infrastructure, and lessen mistrust. However, ongoing tensions between China and India, as seen by their ongoing border disputes and geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, undermine the effectiveness of such collaborative efforts (Bhattarai, 2018). Nepal's external balancing is also limited by domestic politics.

Establishing consistent long-term foreign policy objectives is hampered by often changing governments, shaky alliances, and unstable institutions (Baral, 2020). Political leaders are constantly seeking short-term gains, and they occasionally trade short-term gains with their neighbors at the expense of longer-term national ones. This destabilizing tendency of the policy leaves Nepal vulnerable to outside influence. While political polarization between self-styled "pro-India" and "pro-China" groups widens rifts and exposes the state to foreign manipulation, foreign policy is typically made without national consensus (Shrestha, 2021). Despite these obstacles, Nepal has avenues for agency.

Because of its topography, it can be used as a bridge rather than a buffer. For instance, with the right administration, plans for trans-Himalayan connection might turn Nepal into a hub for connecting East and South Asia. Nepal can use its soft power as an attractor to draw in millions of Chinese and Indian tourists while simultaneously practicing cultural diplomacy. Similarly, Nepal can join non-aligned blocs, the UN, and multilateral organizations like BIMSTEC to create its own diplomatic space separate from its bilateral relations with its neighbors. Lastly, rather than picking a side, Nepal needs to balance between the two geopolitical realities.

Relying too much on one neighbor might cause the other to become hostile, but forming alliances without a strategic objective could make Nepal a reactive force. The difficulty is in using economic diversity, realistic diplomacy, and internal reforms to enhance governance to transform

geographic necessity into opportunity. By fortifying its internal forces and persevering through adversity through foreign diplomacy, Nepal will be able to avoid being overshadowed and instead make the most of its location at the junction of Asia.

Conclusion

Nepal's geostrategic placement between the Dragon and the Elephant presents both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Although geography gave Nepal a unique chance to act as a link between two of the world's fastest-growing economies, it has also created weaknesses that pose long-term threats to stability, economic independence, and sovereignty. The placement provides access to mammoth markets, possibilities of infrastructure growth, and an ability to enhance global relevance. At the same time, geopolitical rivalry, economic dependence, border disputes, and foreign intrusion are age-old risks. It is Nepal's control over its strategic environment on which it will either fall prey to or benefit from its geography. Nepal can utilize its geography as strength if well managed.

Nepal can be a bridge between India and China and be a force for good in promoting Himalayan connectivity, trade, and cultural exchange. Since it is situated in the center, it can now aim to become a transit for linking South and East Asia, becoming economically competitive as well as strategically more significant. In addition, by projecting diplomatic balance, Nepal can be the best example of small states' resilience, proving that one small state could handle great-power politics tactfully without relinquishing sovereignty. However, if not properly managed, Nepal can end up being a mere pawn in the great strategic game between Beijing and New Delhi.

Excessive growth depending on either of the neighbors would undermine Nepal's independence, and political instability at home and policy incoherence would make it vulnerable to external intervention. In addition, poorly conceived infrastructure projects that meet foreign purposes at the expense of indigenous requirements have the likelihood of creating economic burdens, adding to debt or perpetuating dependency. If so, Nepal's geography would be more curse than blessing. The path forward is complicated.

Nepal initially must build domestic political stability through stronger institutions, less partisan infighting, and agreement on common foreign policy interests. Domestic stability underpins the ability to resist unwarranted external pressure. Second, it must diversify its economic relationships beyond India and China to prevent risk of dependency. More engagement with regional and global actors, such as the United States, the European Union, Japan, and ASEAN, will enhance trade, investment, and development cooperation. Third, infrastructure expansion should be led by long-term national priorities and not other powers' strategic agenda. In this situation, careful project evaluation, open funding, and giving sustainability top priority are essential. Fourth, Nepal ought to continue its balanced diplomacy approach, which is summed up in the adage "friendship with all, dependency on none." It necessitates expert balancing, where Nepal is able to leverage partnerships for progress gains while avoiding being dragged into zero-sum alliances. In the end, Nepal should acknowledge that, despite its diminutive size in comparison to the Dragon and the Elephant, its location makes it a powerful force that is out of proportion to its size. Nepal can turn its geographic necessity into a source of opportunity for fair diplomacy and sustainable

development by exercising strategic vision, national cohesion, and foresight. The challenge is to forge an autonomous path that reaps the benefits of opportunity without compromising sovereignty, not to pick between China and India. In addition to securing its own future, Nepal will set an example for tiny states to follow in order to prosper in great-power competition.

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