

# Diplomacy for Development: Key to Sustaining Democratic Transformation

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## Abstract

Foreign policy has a great bearing on a country's sovereign and independent status as well as overall development. For a country like Nepal sitting in a highly sensitive geopolitical location between China and India that are becoming major global powers, a whole of government approach integrating into itself a coherent, consistent, and credible economic policy alone produces a sovereign and independent foreign policy. No policy works in isolation. Correct communication, coordination, and collaboration between government departments and ministries are essential for any policy to succeed and be effective at home and abroad. The strength of the country abroad comes from strength at home. For a country like Nepal diplomacy stands as its tool of first and last resort. Economic strength is the key to national strength and comprehensive national power. The following paragraphs discuss the close connection between socio-economic transformation and political transformation, and past efforts made to promote economic diplomacy. The moment there appears a disconnect between managing geopolitics and speeding the process of economic transformation, the country becomes a fertile ground for geopolitical play. The write-up towards the end puts up some suggestions to make diplomacy for developing effective and result oriented for the country's development.

## Background

After seven decades of incessant democratic struggle, the elected Constituent Assembly had an inclusive democratic constitution written by the people's representatives that was promulgated on September 20, 2015. The constitution of Nepal 2015 in its preamble speaks of ensuring an equitable economy, prosperity, and social justice. National interest is defined in Article 5 which mentions economic progress and prosperity as one the fundamental subjects of national interests. Article 51 (d) provides "policy relating to economy, industry, and commerce, to diversify and expand markets for goods and services" and Schedule-5 clearly states that "foreign and diplomatic affairs, and international trade, export, port, and quarantine" come under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

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The main objective of foreign policy is to preserve national independence, protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity, promote economic interests, ensure national security, and promote national prestige. Article 51 (m) of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 states that the State policy is “to conduct an independent foreign policy based on the Charter of the United Nations, non-alignment, the principles of *Panchsheel*, international law and the norms of world peace.

Diplomacy is a tool to implement foreign policy. It is a technique of communicating, presenting arguments, and persuading with logic to win over to own side. Sir Ernest Satow called diplomacy “the conduct of business between states by peaceful means.” He calls diplomacy as the “application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states.” The concept of sovereignty and territorial integrity is basic to traditional diplomacy including the acceptance of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. The concept came to be enlarged to include trade, commerce, and investment.

Economic diplomacy constitutes an important component of foreign policy. It is a tool to strengthen international relations. Such a tool helps create a level playing field for all countries. The index of national strength has come to be identified with economic power in the post-Cold War period. Then came the primacy of geoeconomics in the conduct of foreign policy. As the look for markets expanded, trade, aid, investment, finances, services, and technology transfer came to occupy the driver’s seat of foreign policy and rapidly shifting geopolitics.

After the end of World War II, forty-four nations came together to create the Bretton Woods institutions and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to promote economic stability and peace. As the principal architect of the Bretton Woods system, Harry Dexter White, put it, “The absence of a high degree of economic collaboration among the leading nations will... inevitably result in economic warfare that will be but the prelude and instigator of military warfare on an even vaster scale.” This statement underlines the importance of economic collaboration and the central role of economic institutions to back up the political transformation. Thus, economic development becomes the key to the institutionalization of democratic transformation.

Though the term ‘economic diplomacy’ became more pronounced after the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1990 in Nepal, economic diplomacy was at work in various forms in foreign relations. Kathmandu was considered to be an *entrepot* for trans-Himalayan trade long before the coining of the word: economic diplomacy. Development assistance has been the part and parcel of Nepal’s foreign relations. Nepal has been receiving economic assistance from neighbors, major powers, and other countries. This aimed at expediting the process of economic

transformation. Nepal's efforts to expand trade and commerce and steps taken to ensure the effective utilization of foreign assistance show past exercises in economic diplomacy. Development diplomacy, or diplomacy for development, economic diplomacy, and development through diplomacy began to be used interchangeably.

In 1990, the elected government of Girija Prasad Koirala underlined the importance of economic diplomacy and pursued a policy of attracting foreign capital and technology, giving priority to national investment.' Policies adopted thereafter aimed to deepen the interface between foreign policy and international economic relations. The identified areas for economic diplomacy included development cooperation, foreign direct investment, promotion of tourism, promotion of export trade, and foreign employment. Now in addition to trade, investment, and finance, technology, and environmental diplomacy has come to constitute the contents of economic diplomacy. The then Koirala government introduced comprehensive economic reforms and adopted open market economy policies aimed at the integration of the Nepali economy into the global economy. It envisaged an Institute of Foreign Affairs to act as a focal point for economic diplomacy.

### **Efforts at Promoting Diplomacy for Development**

For the first time in the diplomatic history of Nepal, a *High-Level Task Force (HLTF)* was constituted under the convenorship of a sitting member of Parliament in 1996. The HLTF was tasked to make economic diplomacy functional within the institutional framework of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was also mandated to recommend how to strengthen Nepali diplomatic missions abroad for economic diplomacy. The Task Force identified human resource as the critical element and shortcoming in their performance was attributed to the lack of job orientation. It saw the foreign ministry just as a post office. The Task Force attributed weaknesses in the Ministry and missions abroad to the shortage of human resources, lack of training, and proper orientation, evaluation, and assessment system. The absence of a separate Foreign Service was cited as a major impediment to the effectiveness of performance. The HLTF emphasized economic diplomacy for the government given the changed context of international relations and national priorities. Its focus was on forging a workable and meaningful partnership with the private sector for the promotion of trade, tourism, employment generation, water resources, technical and economic cooperation, and private sector investment in the country.

In 2002, the Institute of Foreign Affairs created the *Policy Study Group (PSG)* on Nepal's economic diplomacy. PSG was composed of eminent personalities in Nepal from various fields to look at Nepal's economic diplomacy as a follow-up to the recommendations made by the HLTF and prescribe viable mechanisms to promote Nepal's economic interests. If economic diplomacy is to succeed, the

PSG emphasized the importance of attitudinal changes among Nepali diplomats. It recommended that the Institute of Foreign Affairs take the lead role in training and intensive orientation programs for serving diplomats and also new appointees for missions abroad. The group recommended taking all necessary measures to make economic diplomacy effective and meaningful.

After the People's Movement of April 2006, a *High-Level Foreign Policy Task Force* was constituted to 'recast its foreign policy and make it consistent with the emerging political climate to achieve Nepal's foreign policy objectives. This task force also identified training as a necessary component to improve the overall performance of the Ministry. It recommended the creation of a 'separate professional foreign service so that it could stipulate specific and relevant qualifications including language skills and competencies, that would help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of MoFA and the missions under it.' One of the recommendations made included providing at least 6-month entry-level training through the IFA on history, geography, politics, economics, international relations and diplomacy, social issues, protocol, and consular matters and languages.

In 2009, the Association of Former Career Ambassadors of Nepal (AFCAN) brought out a publication entitled '*Pursuit of Economic Diplomacy: Prospects and Problems.*' This publication focused on trade, investments, tourism, and foreign employment as the core contents of economic diplomacy. The Parliamentary Committee on International Relations and Human Rights Committee of the Legislative Parliament produced a report on '*Nepal's foreign policy in the changed context*', in 2010-11. The part III of the report is devoted to economic diplomacy. The report identifies possible areas for conducting economic diplomacy that include foreign employment, trade, industry, investment, tourism, water resources, service sector, and agricultural and forestry. It also identified some possible areas for foreign investment in construction, industry, and trade in services.

In 2017, the Government constituted yet another 'High-Level Task Force' on '*Reorienting Nepal's Foreign Policy in a Rapidly Changing World*', which submitted its report to the Prime Minister in January 2018. Though the task force was asked to submit its recommendations to the Government of Nepal for "immediate implementation after having consultations with relevant stakeholders," the successive government chose to permanently shelve the report. It is a sad story in Nepal that objective, realistic, and pragmatic thought process gets subordinated to partisanship and preference for personal legacy and imprint. This deprives the foreign policy of consistent, coherent, and consensual messages even on issues of national importance.

## **Diplomacy at Bilateral, Regional, and Multilateral Levels**

Diplomacy for development is practiced at various levels- bilateral, regional, and multilateral. A strong, sound, sustainable domestic base is the fountainhead of successful economic diplomacy. A strong national base provides a strong footing for strong and sound economic diplomacy. The strength of any nation abroad comes from strength at home.

Efforts made in economic diplomacy have focused on gaining access to foreign markets for Nepali products, projecting Nepal's unmatched tourism potential to explore and adventure, an attractive destination for investment, developing hydropotential, and Nepal as a safe tourist destination country. Safeguarding the interests of Nepali migrant workers abroad, ensuring dignified employment, repatriation of remittances and channelizing them to productive sectors, and bringing in technology are also a part of economic diplomacy.

Economic relationships with India and China carry huge importance for Nepal. The top five export destinations of Nepal include India, the USA, Germany, China, and Turkey. India, China, USA, Canada, and Indonesia stand as the top five sources of import for Nepal. Among the top five tourist-contributing countries to Nepal include India, China, the USA, Sri Lanka, and the UK. About 65% of Nepal's trade is with India. Nepal-India cooperation on operating the Motihari-Amlekgunj petroleum pipeline is the first of its kind in the region of South Asia. Indo-Nepal rail services from Jayanagar in India to Kurtha in Nepal cover a stretch of 34.5 km. in Nepal. Integrated Check posts at the Nepal-India border are to facilitate the smooth flow of trade between the two countries. However, the trade deficit is ballooning by leaps and bounds as Nepal's economic base is extremely weak and excessively depends on imports.

Nepal remains engaged with China in various sectors. There have been increased flows of Chinese aid, trade, tourism, and investment in Nepal in recent years. Chinese president pledged to make Nepal a land-linked country during his visit to Nepal in October 2019. China has promised to build a trans-Himalayan multidimensional connectivity network with a view 'to significantly contributing to Nepal's development agenda that includes graduating from the LDC (Least Developed Country), making Nepal a middle-income country by 2030 and realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the same date.'

China's foreign policy is a mix of economic engagement and diplomacy. China launched Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for improving global infrastructures before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Nepal signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to develop Nepal's

infrastructure connectivity network in 2017. The two countries have agreed ‘to intensify the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative to enhance connectivity, encompassing such vital components as ports, roads, railways, aviation and communications within the overarching framework of trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network.’ MoU was signed between the two countries on 21 June 2018 on Cooperation in Railway Project, agreed to conduct the feasibility study which, if implemented, ‘will play an important foundation to launching the construction of the Cross-Border Railway.’

On December 20, 2021, the State Councilor and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China speaking at the symposium on the International Situation and China’s foreign relations in 2021, said, “*China has focused on development as the solution to all problems and made dedicated efforts towards more robust, green, and balanced global development.*” Chinese President Xi Jinping told the General Debate of the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly that, “the world needs to work together to address the immediate challenges threatening the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while promoting more balanced and inclusive multilateral collaboration.” GDI was seen as Chinese intention to lead “what it hopes is a new era in development—not only by investing money but also by leading the conversation.”

Nepal maintains economic relations with other countries. Accordingly, it has signed several bilateral trade agreements with several countries including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the UK, the USA, Japan, Australia, the Republic of Korea, and Egypt. Economic engagements with many European countries particularly Germany, France, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, and Finland are a part of Nepal’s foreign policy. Tourists from European countries constitute a significant number of arrivals. Nepal remains constructively engaged with developed countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). OECD countries are important development partners for Nepal. It is encouraging to note that people-to-people contacts are emerging dynamics in bilateral relations with these countries and provide a strong bond with Nepal.

The USA is Nepal’s long-standing friend and development partner. It is among the top five bilateral development partners, others being the UK, India, China, and Japan. Its contributions to the socio-economic transformation starting from the malaria eradication in the 1950s and 60s are significant. There are various areas of cooperation between the two countries. The USA has extended a bilateral grant of US\$ 500 million under the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). It is in line with the priorities fixed by the government of Nepal namely the construction

of a cross-border transmission line and the improvement of road infrastructure and connectivity. Nepal is projected to have surplus power in a few years and will need a cross-border transmission line for exporting surplus power to third countries.

At the regional level, Nepal remains engaged to promote regional cooperation. Nepal is a founding member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and has been working with SAARC member states by using complementarities within the region. There are several initiatives on trade, investment, energy cooperation, infrastructures, and other sectors of economic cooperation in the region, though very little progress has been made at the regional level within the SAARC framework as SAARC remains completely sidelined due to political differences between two leading members of SAARC – India and Pakistan. Nepal is a member of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), and remains engaged with these organizations for regional connectivity, infrastructure building, and development. Nepal is an observer in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

At the global level, Nepal remains deeply engaged at multilateral forums like the UN both in New York and Geneva, including the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), International Labor Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). Nepal pursues active diplomacy at the international level for realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promotes the cause of Least Developed Countries (LDC), Land-locked Developing Countries (LLDCs), and Climate Change among others, thus contributing to international affairs and multilateralism towards “promoting social progress and a better standard of life in larger freedom,” as mentioned in the preamble of the UN Charter. Nepal has mainstreamed SDGs in its periodic national plans. United Nations is among the top five multilateral development partners of Nepal, others being the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and European Union.

Migration remains one of the defining attributes of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century globalized world. Over 6-7 million, Nepali nationals live and work abroad. The top five destinations for overseas employment include Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait. We have to put in place mechanisms and measures to ensure their safety, and security and keep their employees productive and dignified. The share of remittances to the national GDP is 22.6%, according to the World

Bank (Migration and Remittance). The repatriation of remittances and channelizing into productive sectors are also part of economic diplomacy. Organizing awareness programs about employment opportunities, dos, and don'ts in labor destination countries, identification of new sources of employment, rescuing and repatriating Nepali nationals who are facing difficulties abroad, and claiming compensation for the death of migrant workers become a part of economic diplomacy.

Non-Resident Nepalese (NRN) and Nepali diasporas are other components of economic diplomacy. Nepali diplomatic missions' abroad work in close collaboration with NRNs and the diaspora, their networks have expanded to over 77 countries. They are vital to realizing the objectives of economic diplomacy. Acting as a bridge, they can carry the message from Nepal to the entire world to project Nepal as a safe destination for investment in health, education, tourism, hydropower, and infrastructures, and projecting tourists' attractions of Nepal, exploring, and expanding markets for Nepali products abroad. Nepal needs technology, and skills for its development. NRNs and diaspora stand as strategic assets and can be instrumental in bridging the gaps and uplifting the quality of life of the Nepali people.

### **Challenges and Suggestions**

Economic strength is the key to national strength and comprehensive national power. The strength abroad comes from domestic strength and competitiveness. This makes economic statecraft the catchword, which comes combined with national security, diplomacy, development, and defense. Cash, aid, and diplomacy are needed not only to keep the peace but also to improve governance and bring economic development. Challenges have never been greater than they are now, because of the pandemic that has created havoc, slowed down the economy, affected supply chain disruptions, rising energy costs and labor shortages, and accelerated shifts in geopolitical trends.

Economic diplomacy is to engage development partners and mobilize their goodwill, support, and cooperation to raise the standard of living of the people. Nepal cannot achieve its targeted goals by itself alone. Support from friendly countries and multilateral agencies for promoting tourism, trade, investment, and technology transfer, is vital in attaining the fixed development targets.

Good economics demands good politics. They are mutually reinforcing. A sound domestic base is the foundation of every success. Without good politics, strong and inclusive economic institutions, and connectivity networks of sound infrastructures, talking about increasing trade and attracting investment is like creating a roof without a foundation.

Nepal's neighbors have reached the top table of global politics and economics.



This has brought unprecedented opportunities and challenges to Nepal's doorsteps. This demands that Nepal tread carefully between these two neighbors emerging as global powers and at the same time remain constructively engaged with the wider international community to advance its national interests. Located in an extremely geostrategic sensitive location, Nepal needs to maintain an independent and balanced foreign policy to reap benefits from economic dynamism in the neighborhood and beyond.

### **Suggestions for Effective Conduct of Economic Diplomacy**

- Put the internal house in order and forge a national consensus on issues of vital importance. Separate vital from the vivid and develop clarity, and priority in policies and maintain consistency for credibility. The policy has to be coherent and consistent for safeguarding the national interests, irrespective of the changes in government. Double speaking in foreign policy is dangerous as it sends confusing signals and loses credibility.
- Restructure the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and other related government ministries to ensure effective coordination at intra and inter-ministerial levels. Recognize the lead role of the Foreign Ministry. Anything *foreign* has to be routed through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is important for national interests. MoFA lacks critical support for its efforts. Most crucial is MoFA needs its intelligence agency. This will help identify a crisis before it strikes like the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Good and timely intelligence could have been useful to stop the covid19 outbreak when it had not reached pandemic proportion. Intelligence and Analysis (OIA) within the MoFA is needed as a part of the national intelligence community. MoFA cannot be expected to play a more fulsome role in the national economy if the organization is not fully aware of strategic goals and related information.
- Ministry of Finance is the front line of national economic challenges. Ministries of Commerce and Finance play a critical role in economic diplomacy. Ensure close coordination between them and with MoFA. Coordination is also needed with the Parliament to ensure the timely identification of emerging threats and challenges that the nation needs to tackle.
- Prepare briefing handbooks on economic diplomacy for quick reference, and ensure clear, consistent, and precise directives to diplomatic missions abroad. Integrate economic diplomacy into foreign policy.
- Speak from the same script at all levels. Share the country's position persuasively at bilateral, regional, and international forums. Coordinate to

ensure that all participants including the representatives of the private sector attending meetings use the same talking points in different forums.

- Build a good network of nationwide institutional and regulatory infrastructures related to all areas of economic diplomacy including trade, tourism, water resources, investment, technology, foreign employment, and trade in goods and services.
- Work in close coordination to make the best use of Nepal's comparative advantages. Focus on sectors that have high export potential. Conduct in-house policy dialogues at regular intervals.
- Focus on building capacity and enhancing competitiveness to be able to deal with domestic, regional, and global issues effectively and efficiently.
- Equip Nepali diplomatic missions abroad with human and financial resources. The missions' staff are expected to be fully versed in the economic challenges confronting the country. It is only the human capital that gives life to any organization, unlocks the dormant potentials in the country, and converts words and plans into actions and results. Invest in human resources development. Give the training to upgrade their skills and develop persuasive power of foreign policy establishment.
- Work for a rule-based, fair, equitable, inclusive, transparent, and non-discriminatory multilateral global trading policy.
- Use Artificial Intelligence (AI) that provides the most accurate insight for national policymaking. We live in an interdependent and interconnected world where internal politics and national policies in any country can affect its relations with other countries. AI plays important role in improving policy-making in any country's international diplomacy. AI has emerged as the perfect tool to facilitate digital diplomacy in the current landscape.
- UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) uses Trade Intelligence and Negotiation Adviser (TINA) to assist policymakers in member countries to help make better trade decisions backed by necessary information, finance, and other options. TINA was designed to assist ESCAP member states in the negotiation of trade agreements with the ultimate objective of enhancing trade in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Bangladesh is reportedly using TINA which provides valuable trade insights to negotiate free trade agreements with bigger nations such as India and Pakistan.
- Make multiyear plans and put them into implementation with single-minded determination. There are no magic bullets, work hard and be ready to deal with complexities.

- Encourage public-private partnership, and engage closely and comprehensively with economic and commercial entities including the Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industries (FNCCI), Confederation of Nepalese Industries (CNI), Nepal Chamber of Commerce and Nepal Tourism Board and the private sector.
- Work in close coordination with relevant organizations to ensure the safety, security, and dignity of Nepalese migrant workers. Remain closely engaged with the International Labor Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and other relevant international organizations.
- Launch awareness campaigns at various levels for prospective workers seeking foreign employment throughout the country to ensure their safety, security, and dignity. Regulate strictly relevant recruitment agencies and enforce their compliance with legal channels.
- Establish partnerships among the countries to pave the way for constructive cooperation between countries of origin, transit, and destinations.
- Conclude labor agreements to ensure the safety, security, and dignity of migrant workers.
- Work for the transfer of technology to create the technological infrastructure for economic development and speeding up the process of socio-economic transformation. Today's diplomacy is increasingly driven by technology. This will help facilitate foreign trade.
- Work in close collaboration with NRNs and Nepali diasporas to explore new avenues of cooperation.
- There exists a glaring gap between rhetoric and reality in the country. Reorient governing style and get rid of corrupt practices. No governance sustains when faced with what WFP has called "an avalanche of hunger and destitution." Realize there is no magic executive button to lift the life of the people with empty promises and sloganeering. Also, realize a human being needs more than a piece of bread. They need dignity, they need hope. Think out of the box for innovation.

Nepal has tremendous goodwill across the globe. Leadership must come out with a visionary strategy to use this precious asset for utilizing the enormous potential the country possesses. A coherent, consistent, and credible foreign policy will go a long way in attracting investments for the country's development. What is needed is to develop national capacity and build national credibility. We must think outside of the box to transform our diplomatic institutions, mindsets, and attitudes to address the challenges of change. Continued confusion and uncertain political instability

are not congenial to promoting economic diplomacy. Business as usual is not the way to think and innovate.

Democracy has become a way of life in Nepal. People are not prepared to accept less than full-fledged democracy. Change of government is normal in a democracy. What is more important is consistency in national policy. Democracy is indispensable for development. We pursue economic diplomacy within an overall framework of a democratic polity. Any diplomacy devoid of this perspective is not in tune with the ground realities in Nepal. No nation can be strong in its foreign policy unless it is backed by a strong domestic economy. Since political issues have been settled within a democratic framework, it is time to work to make the Nepali economy sound and strong. Inequality, the first elected Prime Minister of Nepal B.P. Koirala addressing the 15<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly on September 29, 1960, said, is a cause for friction and tensions- both within nations and among nations. This is equally relevant today as it was then. The inequality between the wealthiest countries and the poorest ones is widening. The central point of promoting diplomacy for development is to reduce inequality between and within countries. Once we figure out ways to address inequality then energies and resources can be channelized to confront other equally pressing issues such as climate change, pandemics, and terrorism. Conflicts have appeared in several parts of the globe, because of growing inequality, discrimination, and concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. The majority of the victims have been in resource-rich but poor countries. As the index of national strength has come to be identified with economic power, it is time to get serious and get down to work sincerely to raise the quality of life of the people by making diplomacy effective for development.

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