

# Geopolitics and the Federalism in Nepal: A Study of Internal and External Influences

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## Abstract

Nepal adopted a federal system of governance with the promulgation of its 2015 Constitution. While the implementation of federalism has been widely discussed in terms of ethnic identity, decentralization, and good governance, the role of geopolitical factors remains unexplored. Considering such a gap in research literature, this paper examines the influence of Nepal's geopolitical realities on the implementation and stability of its federal structure. Employing a qualitative research method, the study draws on secondary sources such as books, policy documents, academic journals, newspapers, and relevant online resources. The findings reveal that Nepal's federalism is significantly shaped by both internal and external geopolitical factors. Internally, demands for political representation and autonomy from various ethnic and regional groups, coupled with disputes over resource distribution and governance, have posed substantial challenges. Externally, Nepal's strategic location between India and China has subjected it to competing influences from both powers, affecting economic policy, security, and the balance of power across government tiers. The study concludes that to sustain political stability and promote effective federal governance, Nepal must strategically manage its internal diversity and external geopolitical pressures. Such strategies are inclusive governance, balanced diplomacy, maintaining equilibrium in relations with neighbours and the international community, security and preparedness.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Representation, Federalism, Geopolitics, India-China Relations, Political Stability

## Introduction

Federalism is a political system in which governance is constitutionally divided between a central government and sub-national entities such as provinces or local governments. It emphasizes the decentralization of power and fosters cooperation

among different levels of government (Shrestha, 2008). Unlike a unitary system, federalism promotes political inclusion by enabling local autonomy and encouraging democratic participation. This governance structure has proven effective in diverse and territorially large countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia (Sharma, 2006). In Nepal, federalism was introduced as a political response to longstanding ethnic, cultural, and regional disparities. Following a decade-long civil conflict and subsequent political movements, the 2015 Constitution established a federal system aimed at promoting inclusive governance, decentralization, and equitable resource distribution. The system empowers marginalized communities by enhancing provincial autonomy and broadening political representation.

Geopolitics, the study of how geography influences political power and international relations, is particularly relevant to Nepal's situation. Nepal is geographically divided into three ecological zones: the Himalayas, Hills, and Terai. It lies between two major regional powers, China and India. It spans from 26°27'N to 30°27'N latitude and from 80°4'E to 88°12'E longitude, covering 147,181 square kilometre. A landlocked country, Nepal lies 1,127 kilometres from the nearest sea, the Bay of Bengal. Historically, prior to the unification campaign led by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769, the territory now known as Nepal was fragmented into numerous principalities. The subsequent unitary state persisted until the 2005-06 People's Movement led to a democratic republic. With the 2015 Constitution, the unitary structure was officially replaced by a federal one, comprising three levels of government: federal, provincial, and local. The country now consists of 7 provinces, 77 districts, and 753 local units.

While Nepal's federal structure was intended to resolve internal inequalities, it has also introduced new tensions among various ethnic and political groups. Contentious issues include resource allocation, political representation, and administrative authority (Singh, 2010). These challenges are further complicated by Nepal's strategic position between India and China, each seeking to expand its influence. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's historical, cultural, and economic ties with Nepal exemplify their competing interests.

Nepal's sovereignty and governance are increasingly shaped by these dual pressures. Internally, ethnic demands and regional inequalities continue to test the system's resilience. Externally, Nepal must navigate the geopolitical interests of its powerful neighbors while preserving national autonomy (Bhatta, 2018). These internal and external geopolitical dynamics are interwoven and directly affect the implementation,

stability, and future of Nepal's federal system. Thus, Nepal's adoption of federalism is marked a significant political transformation aimed at inclusivity, decentralization, and balanced development. However, the successful implementation of this system is constrained by the impact of internal diversity and external geopolitical forces. Internally, ethnic aspirations and regional disparities present ongoing governance challenges. Externally, the strategic interests of India and China exert substantial influence over Nepal's political and economic decisions.

### **Objective of the Study**

This study aims to explore the existing state of geopolitics and federalism in Nepal. It envisages to examining both the internal and external influences of geopolitics in the federal political system. So, the research questions addressed during the research process focused on exploring the internal and external geopolitical influence on Nepalese federalism.

### **Review of Related Literature**

As the study is on geopolitics and its impact on political system of the nation, some theories and theoretical underpinnings have been reviewed here from the related literature. Among the various theories of geopolitics, one of the influential ones is of Nicholas Spykman (1940s). Nicholas Spykman was Est known for his concept of Rim land, which he developed in contrast to Helford Mackinder's Heartland theory. He wrote the 'Geography of the Peace' in 1944 which was the most influential work in the discourse of geopolitics and the political structure. Pykman argued that control over coastal fringes or Rimlands was essential for achieving global dominance. His theory emphasized the strategic importance of maritime power and the containment of the Heartland, asserting that the balance of power in Eurasia hinged on the control of key coastal regions. Geopolitical theory explores the interaction between geography and politics, addressing themes such as regionalism, power dynamics, state sovereignty and the role of geography in shaping international relations (Spykman,1942). The key concepts of geopolitics include the borders, nationalism and how geography influences state behaviour on the global stage which have significant impact on political system. As a landlocked country situated between two powerful neighbors-India and China-Nepal's geopolitical reality profoundly influences its federalism and political dynamics. While the aim of federalism is to empower diverse regions and ethnic communities, external pressures from India and China often push Nepal toward centralization in order to maintain national unity. Nationalism, though essential for preserving sovereignty, can

suppress regional autonomy and generate internal tensions. Geography, once a source of diversity, has now become a challenge for balanced development. Therefore, Nepal's federalism remains caught between the aspiration for inclusion and the necessity of geopolitical survival, requiring a careful balance between internal demands and external realities. In this context, Spykman's theory has been used as a guiding framework in this study.

In his paper "*Geostrategic Imperatives and Prospects*" (2025), Gautam highlights that Nepal, situated between two global power-India and China-must navigate a complex geopolitical environment while safeguarding its sovereignty, promoting economic development, and asserting its strategic autonomy. He argues that Nepal needs a timely reassessment of its traditional foreign policy. Evaluating the impact of contemporary global trends-such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the U.S.-China rivalry-the paper emphasizes the need for institutional reforms, a more proactive economic diplomacy, and enhanced engagement in multilateral platforms.

In the article titled "Another Geo-Political Rivalry of Global Powers in Nepal" by Bista (2023), the author primarily highlights how the power competition among major global players has influenced small states in choosing geopolitical interests and how it has affected Nepal's national security. The article analyses the strategic interests of major powers in Nepal, Nepal's geopolitical location, and the internal domestic factors at play.

Sharma (2018) in his paper on The Federalism in Nepal: Challenges and Opportunities examined the aspects of federalism in a multicultural context and addresses structural difficulties in implementation. His study explicates the need for administrative capacity and governance. While recognizing the empowering potential of federalism for marginalized groups, it also warns of increased risks of conflict. Sharma emphasizes the importance of political consensus, equitable resource distribution, and institutional accountability for a stable federal system.

Similarly, Bhandari (2020) examined Geopolitics of Federalism in Nepal: The Impact of Regional Dynamics. This study explored how regional factors, particularly the influence of India and China, shape Nepal's federal governance. It presents the tension between local autonomy and external influence, urging a balanced approach that integrates internal aspirations with foreign policy considerations. Bhandari argues that federalism, if well-managed, can reinforce national unity.

In the same way, Poudel (2019) studied the Interaction of Federalism and Local

Governance here in Nepal. His study interpreted the importance of decentralization for democratic system. Poudel examined the evolving roles of local and central governments, focusing on coordination, resource allocation, and the risk of jurisdictional overlaps. It concludes that local governance, when well-integrated with federal principles, can promote social justice and sustainable development.

In a study on *Federalism and Ethnic Identity in Nepal: A Critical Analysis*, Ghimire (2011) explores how federalism aims to accommodate ethnic diversity by promoting autonomy and representation. It assesses the dual potential of federalism: empowering ethnic groups and triggering identity-based conflict. This study implies for the need for a balanced approach that fosters inclusion and avoids fragmentation. Likewise, a study on *Nepal's Geopolitical Balance: Federalism and Foreign Relations*, the Diplomat (2022) made a critique on Nepal's foreign policy within its federal framework. The study identifies challenges Nepal faces due to its position between India and China and discusses the complexities of regional governments engaging in foreign relations. It advocates for a unified national strategy to balance regional autonomy with coherent international diplomacy.

Besides, some studies have been undertaken to examine the Geopolitical Impact of Federalism on Nepal's Economic Development and one of them is by Khanal (2021). Khanal studied on how Nepal's federal structure interacts with regional tensions and economic goals. It emphasized the importance of decentralized economic governance, local engagement with neighbours, and strategic investment planning for equitable development. Economy has been perceived as one of the components for the sustainability of the political system be it a federal or the centralized. In their study on *Federalism and Economic Resilience: The Role of Regional Autonomy in Nepal's Geopolitical Context*, Sharma and Joshi (2020) explored how regional autonomy can enhance innovation and investment. They assert that coordination among government levels to effectively manage Nepal's geopolitical complexity and boost resilience.

## **Methods and Procedure**

The methods and procedures employed for the study are qualitative in nature though the focus has been given on descriptive interpretation of the themes related to geopolitics and the political structure the nation. Document analysis guided by a qualitative approach involves an in-depth study of textual or visual materials to identify meanings, patterns, and themes. It focuses on understanding the context, purpose, and perspectives

embedded in the documents. As this method is flexible, it is useful for deeply exploring social, cultural, historical, political, and contemporary aspects. Thus, this study is entirely based on secondary sources of data elicited from the review of related books, academic journals, government documents, newspapers and credible online sources related to geopolitics and federalism in Nepal. The study adopts a descriptive approach in the discussion and interpretation of the results. The collected data have been analysed thematically in alignment with the research questions.

## **Results and Discussions**

Geopolitics has had a significant impact on the political or ruling system of a nation. The different yet integral components of the geopolitics cause for internal and external influence. Considering the objectives, this study has come up with the following discussions with reference to the internal and external geopolitical influences on the federal political system of Nepal.

### **Internal Geopolitical Influences**

Various internal influences have been identified from the discussion of the documents available while reviewing the literature which are discussed herewith:

#### **Inequality in Resource Distribution**

Nepal's federal structure, designed to reflect the Himalayan, Hilly, and Terai regions, faces resource distribution challenges. Despite federalism's intent to meet diverse regional needs, disparities remain in economic resources and development. The Terai region is better equipped in terms of roads, healthcare, and irrigation, while remote Himalayan areas lack essential services. Such inequality has widened economic gaps and fostered regional dissatisfaction (Sharma, 2009).

#### **Power Struggle**

Geopolitical instability often prompts the central government to centralize authority, which limits provincial autonomy. Federalism was introduced to decentralize governance and promote equity, but legal ambiguity and coordination failures have led to tensions between federal, provincial, and local governments. In some quarters, calls for eliminating the provincial level altogether have emerged (Belbase, 2012).

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## **Political and Ethnic Tension**

Federalism has magnified existing ethnic and regional tensions. Ethnic groups, particularly in geographically isolated areas, have expressed frustration over inadequate political representation and access to resources. In the Terai, the Madhesi community has raised concerns about marginalization. Additionally, external actors are sometimes perceived to support specific ethnic or regional agendas, complicating the internal political landscape (Strasheim, 2018).

## **Economic Dependency**

While federalism aims to promote regional economic self-sufficiency, Nepal continues to depend heavily on India and China. Border blockades and trade disruptions with India significantly impact Nepal's economy. Although China offers alternative trade routes, logistical challenges and underdeveloped infrastructure limit their viability (Upadhyay, 2021; Sangralla, 2020). Foreign investment is also unevenly distributed, promoting regional economic disparities.

## **Impact on Security and Administration**

Geopolitical dynamics influence administrative and security policies. The government often prioritizes regions of strategic importance, leading to uneven development. Remote regions suffer from poor administrative access, cross-border crime, and challenges in disaster response. Federal and provincial cooperation is crucial but often hampered by unclear mandates and intergovernmental disputes.

## **External Geopolitical Influences**

Besides the internal influences, impacts on Federalism have also been seen because of external aspects like the relationships with neighbouring countries, international affairs, bi-lateral and multi-lateral treaties and so on. The external influences have been discussed here:

### **Influence of Neighbouring Countries**

India and China significantly influence Nepal's internal affairs, often backing political factions or initiatives aligned with their strategic interests (Sharma, 2021). India supports Terai-based parties, while China invests heavily in infrastructure through the

Belt and Road Initiative. These actions have the potential to upset the federal balance (Menon, 2021; Shrestha & Gurung, 2019).

### **Border Issues**

Nepal–India border disputes, often driven by shifting natural features, trigger local and national tensions. Local governments sometimes assert control over disputed territories, complicating federal dynamics. Military buildups on both the Indian and Chinese borders place additional geopolitical pressure on Nepal and threaten the cohesion of federal governance (Bhat, 2024).

### **Political Influences**

India's involvement in Nepal's internal political affairs including the Maoist peace process demonstrates the extent of external political influence (Pandey, 2022). Political parties in Nepal often shape their agendas based on foreign alliances. INGOs and foreign donors also influence development priorities, which may disrupt federal coordination.

### **Cultural and Ethnic Dynamics**

India and China's cultural influence is reflected in changing traditions, language, and festivals in border areas. In response, local groups have launched cultural revival movements to preserve indigenous identities (Gurung, 2070 BS; Sharma, 2018). While Nepal's federal system was meant to accommodate diversity, foreign cultural influences risk destabilizing this balance.

### **International Relations and Treaties**

Nepal's geopolitical strategy involves balancing relations with India, China, and the broader international community. Treaties and aid often come with policy expectations that affect internal governance. While such relations promote development and rights recognition, they also increase dependency and complicate federal policymaking (Menon, 2021).

Thus, Nepal's journey toward federalism has been deeply shaped and in many ways constrained by the complex interplay of internal and external geopolitical influences. Internally, federal governance was introduced with the goal of decentralizing power,

promoting inclusion, and ensuring balanced development across geographically and ethnically diverse regions. However, the unequal distribution of resources continues to hinder this vision. While accessible regions such as the Terai enjoy better infrastructure, healthcare, and economic opportunities, remote Himalayan and hilly areas remain deprived of basic services. This disparity has fuelled regional dissatisfaction and widened economic gaps. Additionally, political instability and security concerns have led the federal government to shift back toward centralization, which weakens the core principles of federalism and undermines the autonomy of provincial governments. Ethnic and regional tensions especially among historically marginalized communities such as the Madhesi, Janajati, and Tharu have further complicated federal implementation, as their demands for identity-based governance often clash with nationalist sentiments that fear national fragmentation. Economically, most provinces remain reliant on federal grants and lack sufficient capacity to mobilize local resources, which undermines their fiscal autonomy. On the administrative front, unclear jurisdiction, weak coordination among federal, provincial, and local governments, and uneven prioritization of strategic regions have affected service delivery and governance. Externally, Nepal's federal system faces additional challenges due to its sensitive geopolitical position between two powerful neighbours India and China both of which exert direct and indirect influence over Nepal's internal politics. For example, India has supported Madhes-based political parties, while China has invested heavily in major infrastructure projects through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Such external interventions pose a risk to the balance of federal power. Foreign donors and international non-governmental organizations also influence development priorities, which may sideline provincial plans and needs, thereby weakening local governance. Cultural influence from India and China particularly in border areas has affected language, festivals, and traditions, raising concerns over the preservation of indigenous identities. Meanwhile, international treaties and foreign aid programs often come with expectations of centralized control, which restricts provinces' ability to design and implement independent policies tailored to their specific contexts. Altogether, these internal and external pressures have made it difficult for Nepal's federalism to function as a truly autonomous system of governance. These influences limit provincial decision-making capacity, increase regional inequality, and

pose serious challenges to the stability, effectiveness, and inclusivity of Nepal's federal governance system.

The literature reviewed signifies that federalism in Nepal cannot be viewed in isolation from its geopolitical context. Instead, it must be understood as a dynamic and contested system that requires continuous negotiation between internal aspirations for self-governance and the external imperatives of regional diplomacy. For Nepal's federalism to become sustainable and inclusive, it must be rooted in a politically aware, economically resilient, and geopolitically informed framework. Strategic planning, intergovernmental coordination, equitable resource distribution, and a balanced foreign policy are essential for strengthening the federal structure in the face of evolving geopolitical realities. Nepal's federal experiment is a work in progress deeply influenced by its geography, demography, and geopolitical surroundings.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the multifaceted impact of both internal and external geopolitical factors on the structure and sustainability of federalism in Nepal. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks and empirical insights, the analysis reveals that geopolitics significantly shapes Nepal's federal political landscape. Domestically, enduring regional disparities, ethnic tensions, intergovernmental power struggles, and economic dependencies present formidable structural challenges to the effective implementation of federalism. While the federal model aspires to promote equitable representation and balanced development across Nepal's diverse socio-geographic landscape, these objectives are frequently undermined by administrative inefficiencies, overlapping jurisdictions, and the entrenched centralization of power legacy of Nepal's historical governance practices. Externally, Nepal's strategic geopolitical positioning between two major regional powers, India and China, imposes additional complexities. Foreign investment, transboundary infrastructure initiatives, political influence, and binding international agreements intersect with domestic governance processes, often complicating federal coordination and constraining national autonomy. Moreover, persistent border disputes, cross-cultural influences, and the strategic interests of external actors further challenge the cohesion and inclusivity that federalism seeks

to institutionalize. A nuanced understanding of these internal and external dynamics is essential not only for scholarly discourse but also for the formulation of effective policies aimed at strengthening Nepal's federal system. The long-term sustainability of federalism in Nepal depends on the state's ability to address internal divisions while skill-fully managing its foreign relations. Enhancing internal unity, institutional capacity, and strategic diplomacy will be crucial in ensuring a resilient, inclusive, and responsive federal governance structure.

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