

Nepal's Survival Strategies During the Shah Era

Phanindra Subba

Abstract

Nepal is one of the few countries in the world which was never colonized during the hey-day of colonial era. She is bounded on the north by China and on the three other sides by India. Compared to these Colossi, Nepal is significantly weaker in terms of demography, economics, military strength and physical size. Nepal is, thus, a typical small state. There are several strategies that small states can employ to compensate for their weaknesses, ensure security, and secure a measure of influence over other actors. Small state literature exposes that such states can choose from strategies such as entering into alliance with a great power, hedging, neutrality, balancing, and band-wakening. Currently, this paper explores a trajectory of survival strategies that Nepal adopted during the Shah era on the basis of the analysis of crucial events that occurred during this period from perspectives of small state theories. The paper is based on the study of relevant books, documents and articles on small states amidst international affairs in global spheres. The joint rise of India and China is transforming the strategic landscape of Nepal's neighborhood and will have a profound and long-term impact on Nepal. Nepal in the past has demonstrated a stubborn ability to survive by adapting to changing geopolitical situations. Although

the present-day world is far more complex, lessons from the past are worth reconsidering because there are instances of similarities to the present. Furthermore, some aspects of strategy are constant.

Keywords: small state survival strategies, balancing, band-wagoning, hedging, neutrality, sphere of influence, hegemony

Introduction

Nepal is the oldest sovereign state in South Asia and among the few Asian countries that successfully resisted being colonized by a foreign power. In terms of area, she is the 95th largest country in the world (World Statistics) and her population size of around 30 million ranks her as the 45th most populated country in the world (The World Factbook). Based on these determining factors Nepal is not a small state. However, the concept of smallness is relative and contextual. Olav Knudsen defines small states as "...any state in a relationship of marked inferiority of power vis-a-vis another state" (Knudsen, 2002, p. 186). Bounded on the north by China and on the remaining three other sides by India, Nepal is significantly weaker than the adjoining states in terms of national power as the 2020 edition of the Asia Power Index shows (Table 1). Nepal is thus a quintessential small state.

Due to power deficit small states cannot

shape the international environment, but neither are they helpless victims or pawns in great power politics. Small states can resort to different strategies to compensate for their vulnerabilities, achieve greater security, and gain a measure of influence over bigger actors. Small states can engage with great powers, *balance against* potential threats, develop *hedging strategies* or stay *neutral* (Vaicekauskaitė*, 2017, p. 10). Although most Nepali leaders obviously did not think about and articulate their policies in such terms, they adopted these strategies during the course of history to ensure the continued survival of the state.

The development and evolution of strategy in Nepal was not the outcome of a systematic and a deliberative process. Apart from *Dibya Upadesh*, a compilation of instructions on statecraft bequeathed by the first king of modern Nepal, Prithivi Narayan Shah, there were no written manuals containing strategic analysis and thus there was no institutionalized basis of strategy. Nepali strategy was largely crafted as pragmatic response to the evolving threats by individual decision-makers assisted by a small circle of trusted aides. The paper will attempt to make a short historical examination of the survival strategies that Nepal adopted during the Shah era on the basis of the analysis of policy choices made during critical phases of this period through the lens of small state theories.

Balancing

Prithivi Narayan Shah

The size and location of a nation are crucial determinants of the way its policy-makers think about strategy (Murray & Grimsley, 1994, p. 7). Nations must adapt

to their environments by devising strategies calculated to capitalize on geographic assets and compensate for vulnerabilities (Handel, 1995, p. 534). In the mid eighteenth century Prithivi Narayan, the ruler of a poor and peripheral micro-state, began the process of welding a unified hill-state from the warring tiny polities that dotted the hills of the Central Himalayas under the watchful eyes of a powerful Qing Empire and the fast-expanding British East India Company. Prithivi Narayan Shah had a long-term strategic vision. The main objective of his policy was to gradually expand the Gorkha kingdom's territory and wealth so as to eventually create a powerful hill-state capable of dominating the whole Central Himalayan region.

The main characteristic of weak states is, indeed, their lack of power or strength, and hence they are continuously preoccupied with the question of survival (Handel, 1990, p. 10). Prithivi was acutely aware of the fledging state's delicate strategic geography and thus his grand strategy was inspired by geopolitics. In the *Dibya Upadesh*, he has alluded to this by prescribing how to handle the neighboring powers and is quoted as saying "This country is like a gourd between two rocks. Maintain a treaty of friendship with the emperor of China. Keep also a treaty of friendship with the emperor of the southern seas (the Company)" (Stiller, 1968, p. 42). Diplomacy was thus to act as a shield for the state in the critical early years.

States balance in two general ways: coalition formation and internal mobilization (Posen, 1984, p. 61). For Prithivi external balancing went hand in hand with internal balancing, that is strengthening the military dimension of power. From the beginning Prithivi's focus was on military affairs. However, even as he patiently accumulated military power

and incorporated other petty states into his domain, he was careful not to unnecessarily provoke the two powerful neighbors because a single decisive defeat could have endangered the very existence of the infant state. Prithivi thus understood his limits, chose his wars selectively, and battles were fought only as a last resort. His willingness to negotiate, his ability to cooperate when it was clearly to his advantage to do so, and his skill at parrying requests he considered to be harmful to his kingdom without flatly refusing them, indicates a sound sense of national self-preservation (Stiller, 1968, p. 56).

A certain accommodation at the tactical level, however, did not mean compromising long term strategic goals. Prithivi was not afraid of taking risks and using force decisively when core objectives were at stake. The crushing defeat his recently formed army inflicted on the technologically superior expeditionary force sent by the East India Company to aid Jaya Prakash Malla, the ruler of Kantipur, in 1767 bought him precious time at a key juncture. This strategically meaningful victory made possible the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley and thereby enabled him to establish the preconditions for Gorkha to emerge as a regional power.

Bahadur Shah

The growth in Nepal's power led to a growing sense of self-confidence and increasing willingness to aggressively assert her interests in the neighborhood. Bahadur Shah, Prithivi Narayan's second son and Regent, was steeped in military culture and brought a more aggressive spirit to the strategic culture of the *Kathmandu Darbar*. It was during this time that Nepal passed definitely from the status of an insignificant state to that of a power in the Indian subcontinent (Stiller,

1995, p. 149). However, there was mismatch between the more expansive strategic goals and resources available and the danger of strategic overextension loomed. Bahadur Shah began to explore of ways to further increase the state's revenues and this led to the reemergence of long simmering dispute over the issue of exchange rate of the Tibetan coins. When talks did not make headway, Bahadur Shah opted to use force and Nepali Army invaded Tibet in 1788. Under duress, the Tibetans agreed to the new exchange rate, which amounted to a fifty percent devaluation of their currency, and to paying an annual tribute of Rs. fifty thousand in 1789. When the Tibetans refused to pay the next year the Nepali troops once more entered Tibet in 1791.

China's emperor Qian Long saw Nepal's moves as a major challenge to China's control over Tibet, which was, in turn, an integral component of China's frontier defense system (Garver, 2001, p. 139). The Middle Kingdom envisioned a "compliant, divided periphery" (Kissinger, 2012, p. 22) as an important prerequisite for her security and did not desire to see the emergence of a strong, assertive state along its outer perimeter. Traditional China saw itself not as a nation-state or even as an empire with clearly identified subject peoples, but as the center of the only known civilization (Nathan & Ross, 1997, p. 29). Chinese security was closely identified with the maintenance of such a world order. The Qing Emperor, imbued with this Sino-centric hierarchical view of the world, was outraged at what he perceived as the temerity of this brash young state and ordered the launch of a pedagogical trans-Himalayan military expedition to put Nepal in her place and demonstrate China's superior status in the international hierarchy.

Bhimsen Thapa

The army renewed its westward expansion with renewed vigor in 1804, but precious time had been lost and the chance to control Kashmir was forfeited. As the Gurkhas advanced westward, they were paced on their southern flank by the British, who were simultaneously pushing back the frontiers of their north-Indian empire (Pemble, 2008, p. 30). In order to secure their territorial holdings, the British were determined to establish their military monopoly over any adjacent state that became a military threat to the emerging British hegemony. Therefore “The strategic situation of Nepal, directly to the north of Bengal, the heart of British administration in India, had long disquieted Calcutta” (Rose, 1971, p. 83). In 1810 the Principle of Limitation was enunciated under which “all lands in the *Tarai* were the right of the Company, while Nepal must confine its possessions to the hills” (Stiller, 1995, p. 284).

For Nepal military prowess was the essence and vital symbol of her statehood and without further territorial expansion military finance would be hit hard since the main source of wealth then was land. Contemporary British authorities credited Bhim Sen as the only statesman in the subcontinent who truly understood the Company’s intentions and methods (Stiller, 1999, p. 50). *Mukhtiyar* (Chief Minister) Bhim Sen Thapa understood that given the nature of British imperialism war could not be avoided through appeasement, only postponed. Nepal, faced with two sub-optimal choices, war with far superior power or de-facto compromised sovereignty, decided to wager her chances on the field of battle because the possible costs of not fighting was even worse. The spark was provided by the dispute over the villages

of Butwal and Siuraj and the East India Company declared war on November 1814.

The Limits of Balancing

Balancing is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat (Walt, 1987, p. 17). Nepal tried to manipulate and exploit Chinese sensibilities about Tibet and the East India Company’s desire to profit from the trans-Himalayan trade to advance her strategic interests. Nepal exhibited archetypical balancing behavior by leaning towards the south or the north as per the demands of the security situation. In mid-August 1792, when the invading army (Chinese) was pushing deep into Nepal, the Regent, in Rana Bahadur’s name, appealed for “ten guns together with ammunition, and ten young Europeans versed in the management of artillery” (Rose, 1971, p. 68). When it became obvious in August 1814 that a British invasion was imminent, a letter was sent to the Amban at Lhasa for transmittal to the Emperor in Peking (Rose, 1971, p. 85) requesting financial aid.

Nepal’s entreaties for help were rebuffed by both the parties. Nepal’s attempt at ensuring her security by balancing against China in 1792 and against East India Company in 1814-16 did not yield the desired results. But balancing was by no means a total failure either; its latent possibility served as a deterrent and constrained wider British ambition regarding Nepal. The records made it clear that Lord Hastings had given up his plan to dismember Nepal from fear of antagonizing China (Pemble, 2009, p. 367).

External balancing, however, was only one part of Nepal’s defense strategy. She was well aware that Nepal’s interests may be dispensable in the eyes of the big powers

and therefore worked tirelessly to strengthen her military power. It was the stout defense mounted by the Gorkha army during the Sino-Nepalese war (1792) and the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814-1816) that convinced the invading armies that the occupation of Nepal would cost more than the gains to be derived from it. The Chinese learned the cost of fighting a trans-Himalayan war and never again threatened Nepal (Stiller, 1999, p. 33). As for the British “during Victorian and Edwardian times it was the only Indian war that the British wanted to forget” (Pemble, 2009, p. 361). By surviving these two damaging wars against these major powers in adverse conditions, the Nepali state demonstrated that she had the capability and the will to maintain her own existence and thus earned the grudging respect of her adversaries and consequently relatively lenient peace terms. In reality therefore, it is wiser to rely on the combination of adequate strength and diplomacy (Handel, 2014, p. 54).

Bandwagoning

One of the principal consequences of the Anglo-Nepal War was that a boxed in Nepal turned inwards. After Bhimsen Thapa’s fall from power in 1837 Nepal was wracked by frequent bouts of vicious power struggle. This trend continued until Janga Bahadur seized power in 1846. After consolidating his position Prime Minister Janga Bahadur became the first Hindu nobility from South Asia to undertake the forbidden journey across the Kalapani to England in 1850. Although his colorful social life has garnered much attention, his true purpose was to gauge for himself the true extent of British power. Unceasing entertainments were offered him, but the real interest of his visit was clearly his inspection of all military and naval concerns and every process of industry

(Landon, 1987/1928, Vol. I, p. 138). He came back convinced that evicting the British from South Asia was not possible given the then correlation of forces and that the changed regional power dynamics was here to stay. Furthermore, persistent Nepali hope of using China as counterweight to the East India Company ended with her defeat in the Opium War in 1842.

States are more likely to bandwagon when useful allies are unavailable, for they will face the threat alone if they choose to resist (Walt, 1987, p. 175). Hard choices had to be made and Janga then started the process of adjusting to this new reality by bandwagoning, that is *‘alignment with the source of danger’* (Walt, 1987, p. 17) in order to avoid invasion, ensure the survival of the state, gain material benefits and to try to be able to exert some measure of influence over policies concerning Nepal. Bandwagoning then was no more than an opportunistic and prudent adjustment to the inevitable reality of a fast-emerging British hegemony in South Asia against which balancing was no longer a feasible option.

Bandwagoning is not cost free. The bandwagoning act, (therefore), necessitates a weaker actor to follow the overall strategic interests of a more powerful actor in the international system (Suorsa, 2017, p. 5). When Northern India erupted against the British in 1857, Janga personally led troops into India to help the British put down the uprising in the hope of profiting from British success. As an immediate reward, the British Crown restored to Nepal the western Tarai (Stiller, 1999, p. 99) His successors continued the practice of providing forces in support of the powerful ally in wars in which Nepal had no direct stake.

Janga, however, remained wary of the British and understood that too close a relationship could lead to the dilution of internal autonomy and erosion of Nepal's distinct identity and continued the policy of isolation. Interactions with the British were limited and stringent restrictions continued to be imposed on the entry of Europeans into Nepal. Between 1881-1925 one hundred and fifty-three Europeans visited Nepal (Landon, 1987/1928, Vol. II, p. 298). Although the policy of isolation hindered Nepal's wider interests in the long term, Janga's policy of bandwagoning and isolation achieved the immediate objectives of external security and internal stability. The 'bending with the wind' strategy yielded another important dividend several decades down the line. In the treaty signed December 21, 1923, at Sugauli-where the 1816 treaty had also been concluded-Nepal finally obtained an "unequivocal" recognition of its independence (Rose, 1971, p. 171).

Alliance

Both the Ranas and the British had grown comfortable with the *modus vivendi* that Janga Bahadur had forged with the British. The emergence of independent India in 1947 as one of the successor states to British India however meant that the relationship had to be readjusted. The Ranas realized that isolation from the international system could prove to be detrimental to Nepal's independence and sovereignty and moved to diversify Nepal's foreign relations. Four months prior to India's independence in April 1947, Nepal and America signed a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce which helped cement Nepal's sovereign status. Nepal also applied for membership of the United Nations in February 1949. At the same time, in an effort to appease the new heirs to the British Raj

in Delhi, Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher affixed his signature to the Indian drafted Treaty of 1950 on July 31, 1950. Under the letters exchanged along with the Treaty, Nepal and India agreed, not to: "tolerate any threat to the security of the other by a foreign aggressor. To deal with any such threat the two Governments shall consult with each other and device effective counter-measures" (Muni, 1973, p. 21).

They (the British) recognized that for the defense of India, strategically, the adjacent lands were vital (Singh, 1999, p. 19). Independent India sees herself as the inheritor of the British Raj and believes that as far as security is concerned India's border lies along the crest of the Himalayas (Kumar, 1989, p. 384). The Treaty was for all practical purposes a defense treaty and was part of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's policy of incorporating the rim states within the Indian defense perimeter in order to gain a more defensible border along the Himalayas in the context of China's claims on Tibet. The Treaty, however, did not buy the Rana regime much time. In the face of historical forces which they could neither stop nor reverse, the Rana regime's attempt to ensure regime rather than state security failed.

An asymmetric alliance (especially in the field of security) between partners whose power is markedly uneven will, by and large, be characterized by a unidirectional dependency between the two (Karsh, 1988, 2011 p. 193). It increases the risk of entrapment a "process whereby a state is compelled to aid an ally in a costly and unprofitable enterprise because of the alliance" (Lanoszka, 2017,p. 3). Close alignment with one big power thus has potential political, economic, diplomatic and strategic costs for a small states and risks turning them into client states. For buffer

states sandwiched between two colossuses the risks are even higher. Moreover, the buffer state's tight relationships with one of the rival powers may provoke the other one's unfriendly response, up to a military invasion (Efremova, 2019, p. 110).

Soon after the conclusion of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, India proposed to Nepal that for strategic and military intelligence purposes, check posts should be established along the Kingdom's northern border. The check posts were accordingly established in September 1951 (Muni, 1973, p. 84). In February 1952 an Indian military mission reached Kathmandu. Among other things, the Mission proposed a reduction in the strength of "ill-trained" and "ill-equipped" 25,000 Nepali troops to "well trained" and "well-equipped" 6,000 troops (Muni, 1973, p. 84-85).

Hedging

As crown prince King Mahendra had quietly watched as insidious Indian penetration of all sectors of the Nepali political system increase. There was a growing belief among important segments of the society that such a process could undermine the country's future as a sovereign state in a way that not even the erstwhile 'alien' British Empire had done. After King Mahendra ascended the throne in March 13, 1955, he quickly moved to take advantage of the changing geo-political situation and increasing competition among the major powers. Prime Minister Tanka Prasad Acharya "expressed his government's determination to modify Nepal's 'special relations' with India in the direction of 'equal friendship' with all countries" (Rose, 1971, p. 209). Nepal henceforth would engage with all countries but would not get too dependent on or too distant with any of the major powers.

This principle gained cross-party support as it was "fully reinstated as an integral part of the Koirala (B.P.) ministry's foreign policy" (Rose, 1971, p. 225).

The tightening Chinese grip over Tibet and the escalating border dispute between India and China had widened the wedge between the two giants and King Mahendra drew in the increasingly willing Chinese to counterbalance the Indians. However, in order to avoid excessive dependence on the Chinese and to keep them in check, King Mahendra believed American and Russian presence in Kathmandu was essential. The two superpowers are now subsidiary but nonetheless vital elements in Nepal's intricate balancing act, partly as offsets to each other but primarily as counterbalances to both New Delhi and Peking-a new twist to an old tactic (Rose, 197, p. 283).

Hedging is defined as "a behavior in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects, under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes" (Kuik, 2008, p. 163). Hedging helped King Mahendra diversify Nepal's economic, political and security relations and led to the mutual neutralization of the major powers. By binding them in strong diplomatic relationships he ensured that all major powers had a stake in the continued survival of Nepal. At the same time Nepal managed to reap the benefits of rivalry among the major powers. Critics say that Nepal has successfully exploited her strategic position to lure \$500-million in foreign aid, over the last 15 years, from India and China, the Soviet Union and the United States (Weinraub, 1974, p. 20).

As a sailboat's course must constantly be adjusted in accordance with the wind, it

is also necessary for a country in Nepal's exposed geopolitical situation to place greater emphasis on its relationship with one or the other of its neighbors as circumstances seem to demand (Rose, 1971, 285). As the Sino-Indian border dispute escalated, fear of the risk of being entrapped in war that was not in Nepal's strategic interest grew. The King stated: "Nepal sees no reason why she should become a victim of the struggle between her two neighbors, nor in fact does she want to be in that position" (Muni, 1973, p. 136). Mahendra maintained meticulous neutrality during the Sino-Indian border war thereby virtually repudiating the India-Nepal Defense Treaty of 1950 which provided for mutual consultation in devising 'effective countermeasures' to meet 'any threat to the security of the other by a foreign aggressor' (Maniruzzaman, 1982, p. 19).

The war eased political and economic pressure on the King as the Indians gave recognition to the political system introduced by him. However, the comprehensive nature of the Chinese victory caused unease in Kathmandu because the disequilibrium in the balance of power could constrain Nepal's strategic options and potentially prove detrimental to her long-term security. After all, Mao Tse-tung had once listed Nepal as one of the "dependent states" the British had seized from China (Rose, 1971, p. 203). Concerned about how China would exercise her dominant position, Nepal quietly shifted from balancing India to balancing China.

The 1962 Sino-Indian border war demonstrated to Kathmandu that reliance could not be placed on the capacity of the Indian army to meet aggression, either direct or indirect, from the north, and that the fighting strength of Nepali Army would have to be increased immediately (Rose, 1971, p.

272). In a classic countervailing move Nepal approached India for military assistance but concurrently she also sought to diversify her sources of arms by reaching out to the United States and the United Kingdom at the same time. In 1965 Nepal signed an agreement with India under which she undertook to approach India first while making arms purchases.

By the late 1960s India had regained her confidence and began to follow an increasingly assertive policy. King Mahendra seems to have sensed that unless Nepal moved quickly and decisively to repudiate the security provisions of 1950 treaty and related agreements the window of opportunity to do so would soon close and permanently constrain Nepal's strategic autonomy. In an interview with the official English language newspaper *Rising Nepal* the Nepalese Prime Minister Mr. Kirti Nidhi Bista announced on June 24 (1969) that the government had cancelled its arms agreement with India, and called for the withdrawal of all Indian military personnel from Nepal (Keesing's Record of World Events Volume 15, October 1969). The Indians were blindsided by these demands and tried to persuade Nepal to back down. However, "by the end of 1969, India had agreed to the withdrawal of the military mission immediately and of the technical personnel by the end of 1970, and it appeared an additional substance might be added to Kathmandu's 'nonalignment' policy" (Rose, 1971, p. 275).

Strategic hedging allows for continuous and delicate fine-tuning of the buffer state's relations to the adjacent great powers, ranging from acceptance to rejection of their domination, or retaining neutrality (depending on certain circumstances) (Efremova, 2019, p. 113). Through deep understanding of international politics, deft maneuverings,

persistence, and daring moves at opportune times King Mahendra made effective use of the hedging strategy and ensured that Nepal's strategic space widened enough to ensure that she emerged as a relatively autonomous actor within the structural constraints imposed by her geography.

Neutrality

King Birendra succeeded King Mahendra during a period of strategic upheaval in South Asia in February 1972. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had forcefully altered the regional strategic balance in South Asia by using military force to help create a new nation Bangladesh in 1971. India's willingness and capability to use military force to further her strategic interests and China's inability to come to the aid of Pakistan in a meaningful way was noted in Kathmandu. It was clear that balance of power alone could not ensure a nation's security. The sense of insecurity was further enhanced after India annexed Sikkim in 1975.

Nepal began to give serious consideration on how to adjust her foreign policy to this new reality. King Birendra proposed that Nepal be declared a Zone of Peace (ZOP) on February 25, 1975. The intent was to gain an implicit guarantee for Nepal's independent status from the international community. India and China's endorsement of this proposal was the key to its credibility. Although China, the USA and a large number of countries backed this concept, India's support was not forthcoming despite Nepal's persistent efforts. India believed a formally neutral Nepal would be to her strategic disadvantage. She did not want to foreclose the leverage provided by the security provisions of the 1950 Treaty in a country of such strategic significance.

Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as PM was marked by an even more expansive definition of what India considered to be her legitimate interests. India's claim of an exclusive sphere of influence (Hagerty, 1991, p. 357) went hand in hand with an increasing inclination to use coercive means to further her interests. The belief that "Nepal's lack of autonomous defense capability was a dangerous void in India's security and that no amount of claims of neutrality by Nepal could fill it" (Singh, 1986, p. 30) was not uncommon among the Indian strategic community. This is a valid concern. Nepal since the fifties had primarily relied on adroit diplomacy to ensure her security. She realized the implications of such assertions could be dangerous for Nepal's territorial integrity in the evolving context and especially in a crisis situation in an anarchic international system.

In order "...to deter pre-emptive attacks, the weaker states should try to develop their military power to a level sufficient to reduce the fear of the great powers concerning a power vacuum" (Handel, 1990, p. 78). Furthermore, it is the "obligation of the neutral state to prevent the rival parties, by use of force if need be, from exploiting its territory-on land, sea or in the air- for military purposes" (Karsh, 1988, p. 24) To avoid fears of a power vacuum and to deter preemptive attacks, Nepal decided to undergird the concept of ZOP with a limited amount of defensive military capability in consonance with her size and capacity. In the early 1980's, Kathmandu approached India regarding the purchase of anti-aircraft guns but India did not reply for several years (Garver, 201, p. 152). In 1984, during his official visit to Washington, King Birendra 'asked for a arms supply relationship with the United States' (Gupta, 1987, p. 58).

At the same time Nepal signaled her intent to defend her neutrality by force if necessary. Nepalese Foreign Minister Ranadhir Subba stated in a newspaper interview that “if China were to march through Nepal for attacking India, we would resist to the extent possible. Similarly, if India were to make Nepal the base for attack on China, Nepal would offer resistance to the extent possible” (Ghose, 1985, p. 1). The Indian military intervention in Sri Lanka in 1987 further heightened Nepal’s unease. During the SAARC Summit in Islamabad in 1988 King Birendra declared, “In Nepal, we certainly applaud the efforts for peace, but we cannot ignore the need to remain vigilant to make sure that none takes advantage of others from the fluid international situation that is prevailing today” (Baral, 1988, p. 15).

In view of the developing situation Nepal decided she needed to accelerate its efforts to make her political declarations of intent more credible. Military doctrines are critical components of national security policy or grand strategy (Posen, 1984, p. 13). Consequently, military doctrine is devised to prepare for the kinds of wars that the armed forces anticipate from the threat environment and national objectives defined by the security policy (Scobell, 2003, p. 45). Nepal did not have a written doctrine but its essence can be surmised on the basis of authoritative statements and stated goals for the military. According to the RNA’s (Royal Nepalese Army, now Nepali Army) strategic review report in 1988, the RNA was expected to fight both external and internal security challenges. Against India, the RNA was to fight a series of prolonging battles for up to fifteen days. In the case of China, taking tortuous terrain into account, the delay in action- to keep the enemy at bay- was to last for twenty days,

during which time Nepal would seek UN assistance and mediation (Mehta, as cited in Nayak, 2013, p. 102).

The building up of an appropriate military capability to give substance to this strategy was given a boost. Nepal’s defense budget was hiked substantially. Nepal’s military outlay in the budget for the FY 1987/88 was “35% higher in comparison with the defense appropriation for FY 1986/87” (Rawal, 1987, p. 37). The appropriation again increased by 17.60% in the FY 1988-1989 (Sharma, 1988, p. 86). The jump in defense expenditure enabled the size of the army to be rapidly expanded from 25,000 in 1985 to 35,000 by 1989 (Figure 1, World Bank).

(Later) in successive wars with Imperial China in 1792 and British India in 1814-16, Nepal agreed to negotiate or to the terms of treaties set by these powers only when the defenses of Kathmandu were gravely threatened or about to be breached (Nepali & Subba, 2005, p. 96). The army’s deployment patterns began to be structured to reinforce its selective area defense strategy; a continuation of the doctrinal principle enunciated by Prithivi Narayan. According to knowledgeable sources after friction began to develop with India in the mid-1980’s, the army, keeping in mind the possibility of an attack from the south, established the No. 6 and 7 Brigades in Baireni and Chanwon (Baral & Adhikari, 17 September, 2004, pp. 23-24).

Conventional deterrence is a subset of deterrence that seeks to prevent the outbreak of conflict during a crisis by maintaining the ability to deny an opponent their goals on the battlefield through the use of conventional forces (Ladwig, 2015, p. 7). Thus, whenever states face security threats and are, by reason of the magnitude of the task or their own

poverty, short of resources, we can expect to see deterrent doctrines (Posen, 2009, p. 37). In case an invasion occurred from either the northern or the southern axes of approach with the intention of occupying Nepal or using her territory as a passageway for military movement, Nepal's objective was to cause losses and delay out of proportion to the advantages gained and thereby prevent the invading force from achieving a swift, costless fait accompli. Nepal's assumption was that her possession of such a capability and legal constraints on the use of force in international relations would have a deterrent effect and enhance crisis stability.

After failing to get a positive response from India and the US, "King Birendra reportedly ordered negotiations for the arms deal (with China) to begin in March 1988" (Garver, 2001, p. 152). Nepal's attempt to further diversify her arms acquisitions and competitively hedge military purchase between different countries drew a sharp Indian reaction. There is little doubt that the selling of weapons to weak states is one of the most important, and perhaps one of the most efficient means available to the powers in their struggle for hegemony (Handel, 1990, p. 86). Nepal was accused of violating the letter and spirit of the 1950 Treaty and the Arms Assistance Agreement of 1965. On March 23, 1989 India imposed an economic blockade on Nepal.

The degree of freedom of small states to act on the basis of their own assessment of the strategic situation depends on the type of the international system. It was Nepal's misfortune that the crisis point in Nepal's long quest to assert her strategic autonomy came as systemic changes were occurring in the international system and undermining the assumptions that underlay Nepal's hedging cum balancing policy. According to one

school, small states enjoy the greatest freedom of action when the international system is controlled by two equally strong powers in tight bipolarity (Dahl, 1997, p. 178). The Soviet Union's unilateral disengagement from the Cold War competition meant that the system had become unipolar, and as a result America no longer felt the need to constrain regional powers.

In the context of Nepal, however, the global balance of power is secondary to the Himalayan balance. Deng Xiaoping initially shifted the course of China's policy toward Sino-Nepal-Indian relations back toward the India-deferring approach of the mid-1950s (Garver, 2001, p. 150). Although some adjustments were subsequently made, his *mantra* of 'hide your strength and bide your time' meant that China was not willing to confront India in a major way. Furthermore "the rapid deterioration of China's relations with the Western democracies in 1989 dissuaded Beijing from running the risk of confrontation with India at that point" (Garver, 2001, p. 160). The convergence of these two factors, disequilibrium in the global balance of power and the temporary tactical rapprochement between India and China, meant that Nepal only received a limited amount of support.

For small states the first line of defense against external pressure is internal unity. The social forces unleashed by the expansion of the educational system and economic development during the past three decades had accelerated the clamor for more meaningful and broader participation in the governing process. The political establishment's failure to accommodate these changes and reach a consensus with the political opposition on issues facing the nation had led to growing discontent and the spiraling inflation caused

by the blockade further eroded popular support for the government. The first thing to note is that no blockade in the past 200 years has coerced a country into surrendering its sovereignty (Beckley, 2017, p. 92). Fortuitously for India its blockade coincided with the third wave of democratization underway all over the world and India sought to advance its security objectives in the guise of democracy promotion in Nepal (Nepali & Subba, 2005, p. 83). The movement for the restoration of multiparty democracy launched on February 18 by the Nepali Congress and the United Left rapidly gained momentum.

Hoping to capitalize on Kathmandu's precarious position, New Delhi, at the height of the movement, presented Kathmandu with a new draft treaty. This new draft treaty would have given New Delhi considerable powers over most of Nepal's major decision-making process from the choice of development projects to the selection of weapons wanted for its defense (Hagerty, 1991, p. 29). The fusing of domestic and external pressure made the situation untenable. Confronted with the choice of giving up the hard-earned gains of the preceding decades made under the watch of the Shah dynasty and a chance to prolong his rule, King Birendra chose not to be disloyal to the state founded by Prithivi Narayan Shah. On April 8, 1990 the ban on political parties was lifted.

Conclusion

The destiny of small states, unlike that of major players in the international system, is especially dependent upon the power structure of the system and fluctuations in the regional power relations (Inbar, 1997, p. 155). As a result, a small state's physical geography may remain fixed but strategic geography evolves as global and regional

power balance shifts. Over the years Nepal's status has thus undergone changes—initially a regional power, then a rim state of British India and currently a non-aligned buffer state. The concurrent rise of China and India is once more profoundly changing the strategic landscape around Nepal.

This brief survey of Nepal's strategic history of the past two centuries has highlighted the critical importance of leadership. Only a deep understanding of the lessons of the past and a clear-eyed assessment of the present can give Nepal's current crop of policymakers a sense of direction and help them safely navigate Nepal through these challenging and potentially dangerous times. The future will show if they are up to the task of reinventing Nepal's survival strategies for the new era in which national security strategy is no longer the concern of the government and the army only. Strategic issues have become the business of the people. Only policies developed on the basis of interaction and unity among the trinity will have broad legitimacy and stand the test of times.

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Table 1

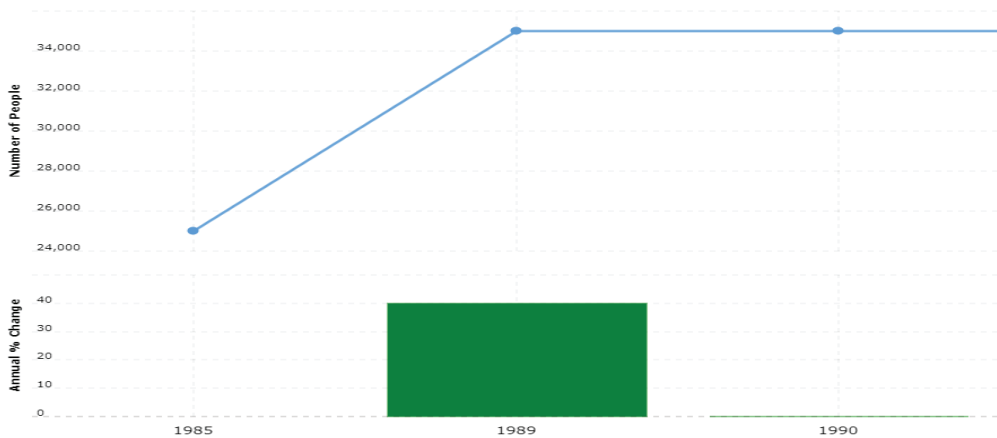
Overall power rankings 2020 Asia power index

Country	Score	Rank	Trend	Rank change
United States	82	1	↓	0
China	76	2	-	0
Japan	41	3	↓	0
India	40	4	↓	0
Pakistan	15	15	-	0
Bangladesh	9	18	↓	0
Sri Lanka	8	21	↓	0
Nepal	4	25	↓	0

Source: Adapted from Lowy Institute Asia Power Index, Key Findings 2020.

Figure 1

Nepal Military Size 1985-1989



Source: World Bank. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/NPL/nepal/military-army-size-world-bank>. Retrieved 2020-12-11.