



Geo-political Rivalry of Global Powers in Nepal: An Impact Analysis

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Abstract

In a public statement on 12 June, 2021, five former Prime Ministers of Nepal expressed their concerns over foreign intervention in Nepal's internal affairs. Based on recent literature in the area of international relations arguing that small states are being coerced to choose the geopolitical interest of the superpowers; similarly, in the conviction that Nepal has been facing a trilateral push, this paper argues that the push and pull factors regarding the same have remain unexplored. In this context, this paper primarily deals with the question of how the power contestation between big players has impacted Nepal's national security. The objective of this research is threefold: first, to probe how the strategic engagement of big powers in Nepal augmented by the new cold war has become explicit; second, to identify how the geopolitical position of Nepal has played an imperative role in such interference; third, to investigate the domestic factors other than geography responsible for making such engagements possible. In light of the new cold war, the research adds knowledge to the existing scholarship on the newer geopolitical developments in the Himalayan nation by focusing on how multiple variables are inviting such interventions to weaken Nepal's national security. The article will also posit how these interferences would problematize Nepal's 'survival strategy' and the steps that need to be taken to minimize the risks.

Keywords: new cold-war, small state, national security, geopolitics, global powers

Introduction

Now I shall go far and far into the North, playing the Great Game - Rudyard
Kipling

On 12 June 2021, five former Prime Ministers issued a statement expressing their concern and caution about foreign intervention in the affairs of Nepal. According to them, it is the choice of Nepal and Nepali citizens to decide on the internal concerns of the country. Further, they also asked people to be vigilant against any direct or indirect foreign influence in domestic politics (Five Former Prime, 2021). As Peter Hopkirk recounts the incredible tales of several early

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British and Russian officers and soldiers engaged in the epic imperial war for dominance in Central Asia in his book *The Great Game* (Hopkirk, 1990). With five former Prime Ministers cautioning about foreign interference against the sitting Prime Minister, it does hint at the situation in the Northern Himalayan nation same as the phrase immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his compelling novel *Kim*.

On this issue, Heywood asserts that 'Geopolitics is a method of foreign policy analysis that understands the actions, relationships, and significance of states in terms of geographical considerations' (Heywood, 2011). Further, Hagan states, 'Geopolitics as a contemporary rationalization of power politics' (Hagan, 1942). Due to its wide-ranging effects, geopolitics has received considerable attention. For example, the shift in geopolitics directly impacts peace and stability. As noted by Keohane in the World System Theory approach to analysing state actions in foreign policy, it is much more significant and lethal in the case of system-affecting and system-ineffectual states (Keohane, 1969). Because these states face structural scarcity at a massive level so that the powerful states can compete for a tiny state because of the scarcity they face (Neumann & Gstohl, 2006). Additionally, Realists and liberals each have their own viewpoints on how international politics is conducted; realists firmly believe that the international system is anarchic, whereas liberals assert that small states are still under the control of powerful nations despite participating in multilateral forums.

It is, however, difficult to refer to Nepal as a small state. Given that it is not included in Keohane's classification of states into two groups of four, which are primarily system-determining and system-influencing states. However, it undoubtedly fits several of the criteria listed by Maurice East when tracing the conduct of foreign policy by small states, most notably the incapacity to expertly navigate international relations due to policy instability caused by factors such as institutional lacunas for example, they experience due to structural scarcity (East, 1973). Geopolitics in Nepal is undoubtedly a difficult subject to study, but it's also not impossible because the central Himalayas, the country's "heartland," consistently portend major geopolitical changes. Meanwhile, the British sent the "Young Husband Mission" to counter Russian dominance in the Tibetan region, which is where modern geopolitical rivalry began (Hopkirk, 1992). Nepal has always maintained neutrality and non-alignment as its primary foreign policy stances despite being sandwiched between two enormous neighbours; yet, on occasions, it has been forced to choose sides between the two fighting competitors to cooperate. For instance, the conflict between China and India in 2020 almost led to the allying of minor South Asian nations (Bhattarai, 2021). Furthermore, China made serious comments and paid significant visits in response to the MCC agreement's parliamentary approval, which clearly suggests that China and the US confront each other in Nepal. This certainly does not bode well for Kathmandu (Bhattarai, 2022). This evidence exposes how big players are competing for one another's influence in Nepal. With this context, the researcher in this study first bases Nepal as a small state experiencing multiple geopolitical shocks. The geopolitical jolts are mostly produced by the geographical variable, however, there are other intervening variables that play a major role in tempting big powers in the Himalayan country and impacting her core national interest. Further, it aims to fill the gap left by recent literature that have placed less emphasis on internal variables for example domestic political actors and their role in supplementing such activities. The scope of this research is to add a scholarly article on small-state literature about

how small states get caught up in power struggles between rival states. In addition, the paper discusses how these events fuelled by the projection of the 'new cold war' might complicate Nepal's security strategy and what efforts can be made to reduce the risks.

Literature Review

For the proposed study, I have reviewed literature of two categories thematically. First, available literature on small states is assessed thematically and put forward. Second, essential literature which positions Nepal as a geostrategic centre for big power rivalry is also assessed.

Because it might be difficult to categorize a state as small or large, there are many international studies experts with differing viewpoints on what constitutes a state with a feature of smallness. However, because of definitional obscurity certain academic publications with a clearer definition of the term "small state" largely trace a state's behavioural pattern. For example, Baldacchino & Wivel (2019) have tried to define small states, they further believe that the way of defining a small state has both political and analytical implications. First, the most literal and straightforward approach to describe a small state is to say that it is one that is not a big power and is subject to political restraints in questions of foreign policy. Like the present categories of being a P 5 member of the UN or owning nuclear weapons, this definition suggests two traits of the states, namely norm setters and norm followers. Second, the material capability of a state is another threshold between small and big that separates them; the material assessment mainly concentrates on the possession of power resources like military capabilities because military strength allows a state to project authority outside of its borders, opens the door to military conflict with or against other states, and strengthens a nation's ability to defend itself from invasion. Third, the idea of a small or a big state is more reliant on perceptions and social constructs than on reality, according to a political theory of small states (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2019). According to Shoemaker and Spanier, small states are occasionally drawn into the patron and clientelist relationships of great powers. In their argument, they contend that large countries generally need three types of services from small states, namely client states ideological convergence (loyalty to, or at least acceptance to, the major tenets of the ideology of either superpower), strategic advantages (The client state's territory is used to improve the patron state's geostrategic position and rip benefits from it), and international solidarity (It is necessary for a client state to streamline its foreign policy in accordance with patron state) (Shoemaker and Spanier, 1984).

Baniya (2020) identifies that Nepal's unique geo-location is what signifies its geopolitical value. At the same time, Upadhyay insists that the geopolitical contest between China and India has a swinging feature altogether, the changes in other external big power that deescalates their presence in the Himalayan nation (Upadhyay, 2021). Additionally, Nepal's temperament has been negatively impacted by its position at the center of the geopolitical chessboard since it has put the nation's traditional survival techniques of neutrality and non-alignment to the test (Bhattarai, 2021). Furthermore, the trilateral push for the sphere has halted small state with security dilemmas further hampering the chances to escape from small state syndrome (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2021). Purna Silwal, a Retd Maj Gen of the Nepal Army, brings abundant operations base and theoretical perspective to support the argument that the crisis is boosted by domestic instability (Silwal, 2021).

Most of the literature that is currently available on Nepal's instability does not consider the perspectives of small states. They also stress on geography as a key factor in bringing about the geopolitical conflict between rival states. There is a gap in the literature because not enough study has been done on a few important intervening aspects that are key to understanding Nepal's conundrum. This new effort will examine the geopolitical effects of great power engagement from the viewpoint of small states, divulging how state capacities shape foreign policy goals and how important domestic political actors' roles are for a nation like Nepal.

Conceptual Framework

The researcher has attempted to apply a few IR concepts applicable to the proposed study. As Strausz-Hupé puts it, 'Geography neither focuses the way one perceives them nor one wish them to be, but it is concerned the way how things exist' (Strausz-Hupé, 1942). Dahlman and Renwick (2021) define geography as the field of study that focuses on the study of the land, its features, and the inhabitants of the area. According to Strausz-Hupé, geography is therefore neither debatable nor modifiable; rather, it just is what it is (McDougall, 2000). However, the infatuation with the prefix "Geo" in international relations makes matters more complicated than they initially appear because geographical factors are crucial for how things interact across political spectrums. To reiterate Hagan's conception of geopolitics as a rationalization of power politics, geopolitics cannot be understood taking 'geopolitical theories' aside. Unlike, how it was previously defined, geopolitics has now taken on new forms. Different scholars have presented geopolitics in different ways. Although some theorists disagree with the concepts provided by earlier theorists for which other theories have been formed, some of which are the outgrowth of fundamental geopolitical theories. Rudolf Kjellen concurred that the state's behavior should be viewed as a living being, which is an increase in the body mass, and Friedrich Ratzel's description of the state as a living creature in which the state's evolution was compared to that of biological beings. Spykman, who believes that control of the outer shore is equally important and has added to geopolitical understanding by coining the term "Rimland," disagrees with Mackinder, who places the heartland as the primary calculator of power and mentions that dominance over East Europe (Khadka, 1992). However, geography is what shapes political events, according to all geopolitical theorists. Control over the world's oceans was essential to the development of the European empire and is still essential to European and neo-European supremacy in the postcolonial world (Mancke, 1999). Geopolitical centre points are constantly shifting from one location to another throughout time. There are indications that the "Heartland" has moved to the Himalayan country on the boundary of China and India (Poudyal, 2022). Furthermore, the stress of defining small state and categorizing the small state and categorizing the small states has played a dominant role in the study of small states because it has created a "fundamental definitional ambiguity." The recent problem brought on by Nepal's political change and recent crisis posed by political transition can be theorized as a 'structural scarcity' during the transitional phase. Furthermore, the researcher for the proposed study also examines the topic with levels of analysis, according to Rourke, a variety of factors can be grouped into three general categories as levels of analysis: individual, state, and system. The domestic factors that influence foreign policy decision-making are the focus of state-level analyses of foreign policy decision-making. In addition, governments like that of Nepal are affected by the international political system, a particular country's dominance, participation

with, and relationships with, international players, all of which can be analysed under the system levels of analysis (Rourke, 2008).

Operational definitions

Foreign Policy

A nation's foreign policy is a course of action. It chooses to pursue its overall national interests in dealing with both state and non-state actors on a global scale whose objective lies in the attainment of national interest through international engagement (Beach, 2012).

National Security

National security, however, includes other dimensions of security for a nation that are equally vital to physical security, such as political, economic, and societal security. Therefore, it is beyond territorial safety (Buzan, Waever, & Wilde, 1998). Protecting and enhancing sovereignty, maintaining a secure and resilient population, securing national assets, infrastructure, and institutions, and fostering a favorable regional and global environment are considered the basic four pillars of national security (Basnyat, 2017).

Geo-politics

“Geopolitics is a doctrine of spatial determinism of all political processes based on the broad foundations of geography, especially of political geography” (Cohen, 2003). It is a blend of geographical and political factors.

Methodology

Research Design

This study's qualitative and exploratory research design is based on the deductive method. By locating feedback loops, path dependencies, tipping points, and complicated interaction effects, the researcher also employs the process tracing method to identify the complexity anticipated in the study issue.

Data

The paper relies on information available in the public domain as a secondary source. Thematically selected reports include books, government agency reports, news announcements, and other publications that are pertinent to the research problem. Research on the triangular competition amongst big powers in Nepal is examined in reports written by renowned think tanks. To collect the variegated viewpoints, media sources are also consulted and examined. The researcher's objective is to use content analysis to complement the analytical and interpretive approach as well as to discover certain features methodically and impartially inside text for analysis. All relevant materials acquired from secondary sources have been compiled by the researcher. Finally, in this qualitative research, the data analysis based on narrative interpretation has been carried out, and the results presented in an acceptable narrative. Furthermore, the importance of ethical concerns has been given careful consideration in the proposed study.

Discussion and Analysis

As a key determinant of foreign policy, a country's foreign policy attitude is significantly influenced by geography, which also plays a critical role in determining the nature or outcome of foreign relations priorities and outcomes (Sharma, 2014).

In international relations, size prevails (East, 1973). Small states have different priorities and vary in their foreign strategies because of their country-specific vulnerabilities. Furthermore, East has noted how small-state syndrome is portrayed, for instance, by their incapacity to handle shocks from the outside world. With Nepal sandwiched between two enormous Asian nations, China and India, several discourses have been assigned to its geolocation, which in turn affects how each discourse is employed in rhetoric (Pulami, 2022). Prithivi Narayan Shah succeeded his father Nara Bhupal Shah as the ruler of the Gorkha Kingdom. In 1801 B.S., following the conquest of Nuwakot, Prithivi Narayan Shah, a foundation stone was placed with an intent of building a contemporary sovereign state which he eventually completed in his sprint to unification by conquering Kathmandu (Mishra, 2001). Prithivi Narayan Shah described Nepal as a "Yam between the two boulders" because it was sandwiched between a rising China in the Northern Himalayas looking to push into Tibet and a British East India Company slowly and steadily gaining control in the South (Acharya, 2005). With the same background in mind, Nepal sees its current geography as part of a long-standing tradition of a buffer state (Rose, 1971).

As Robert D. Kaplan puts it, after the creation of the current structure of sovereign nation-states, the Himalayas have always been standing tall for security (Kaplan, 2012). In addition, for a longer time in history, the sea was seen as a sign of sin, and therefore crossing it was viewed as sinful. In consequence, Kathmandu's elites maintained an isolationist foreign policy for a very long time (Rose, 1971). It is important to comprehend how Himalayan countries came to get such attention. The Himalayas became an important route and an economic crossroads after economic activity began, which increased their vulnerability to geopolitical actors and led to their securitization (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2021).

Neighbours and big powers have shown a keen interest in enlarging their circle of influence in Nepal. Geography has always been a crucial element in determining its survival strategy based on foreign policy (Baniya, 2020). Geography exposes vulnerability by igniting reality and can present both opportunities and challenges. Nepal sits at the intersection of two large neighbours whose interests are both compatible and antagonistic (Khanal, 2022). Additionally, the United States' shifting of its geopolitical radar to South Asia has undoubtedly increased the value of geopolitical competition among the major powers in Nepal (Khanal, 2021). Furthermore, As Shoemaker and Spanier have identified three key elements that allure big powers to engage with small states this part dwells upon how geography is drawing Nepal into a trilateral push.

Geopolitical impact of Sino-Indian Contestation to Nepal

In 1951, Mao Zedong stated that Sino-Indian ties have been marked by "great friendship" for thousands of years in a speech given in recognition of the first anniversary of India's constitution (Government of India, 1962). As newly created republics, China and India began their ties with

the popular phrase "*Hindi-Chini bhai bhai*," which means Indian and Chinese are brothers, in reaction to common ideologies against imperialism and cold war politics. However, that didn't last long due to a border skirmish in 1962 (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010). China and India's interests are both congruent and conflicting (Khanal, 2022). However, some of the leaders of China and India have said things over the years that, in truth, reflect the reality of relations between the two neighbours' (Malone and Mukherjee, 2010). For instance, current Prime Minister Narendra Modi before being elected as a Prime Minister made a significant comment during his speech at a rally in Pashighat expressing his opposition to border problems with China in the northern section of the state:

China should give up its expansionist mentality and adopt a development mind set, no power on earth can take away even an inch from India. I swear by this land that I will not allow this nation to be destroyed, I will not for this nation to be divided, and I will not permit this nation to bend down (Panda, 2014).

This captured the attention of the Chinese government instantly with Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying saying that China never waged a war to occupy others' land because China believes in peaceful settlements of things (Panda, 2014).

During B.P. Koirala's state visit to China, Mao Zedong suggested Nepal receive less financial aid from China than India, stating that doing so would send a negative signal to India and that Nepal was inside India's sphere of influence (Sharma, 1998). However, due to the competition for providing Nepal with financial aid, development funding, and military budget, things have altered significantly. Therefore, for obvious reasons, they have been announcing a lot of policies and initiatives that are centred on Nepal and have announced some financial support and development projects for Nepal (Wagle, 2020). Tao Leu, executive director of the Institute of South Asian Studies at Sichuan University in China believes Nepal to be a key entry point into South Asia (Tao, 2017). India, however, regards South Asia as a strategic region. The Chinese side's trilateral drive is almost impossible to comprehend. For instance, India views the INCETC proposal with distrust and believes Nepal is trying to weaken India's strategic position (Singh, 2018). India's demand for not purchasing electricity produced by Chinese firms arose a few months ago, pointing to the geopolitical contestation between the two countries. Indian hydropower companies have since replaced Chinese companies in the West Seti hydropower project (Kumar, 2022). Also allegedly claimed by some Indian officials: "We cannot afford to purchase power from a Chinese corporation while our men are losing their lives on the frontiers" (Shrestha, 2022).

Modi released a joint statement with the UK shortly after Nepal's new constitution was enacted by the parliament while he was in the UK, and the economic blockade quickly followed (Kumar, 2015). A Trade and Transit Agreement that KP Oli struck with China in 2016 was viewed by many as a means of Nepal avoiding transit dependency with India. While Xi Jinping stressed during his official visit to Nepal that China is willing to support Nepal's land-linked aspirations (Dahal, 2020). However, Nepal being caught in the push and pull between China and India is not entirely a new situation. For instance, when Nepal purchased weapons from China, the small landlocked state was penalised with a suffocating blockade (Silwal, 2021). Nepal has had her geopolitical position perceived as a small state—a buffer in the

middle of two big states. It has been conventionally adhering to the principle of neutrality and non-alignment as a security strategy. Which equally fits well in today's time, as Article 51 (m) (1) of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 envisions:

To conduct an independent foreign policy based on the Charter of the United Nations, non-alignment, principles of Panchsheel, international law, and the norms of world peace, taking into consideration of the overall interest of the nation, while remaining active in safeguarding the sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and national interest of Nepal (*Constitution of Nepal, 2015*).

For centuries diplomacy has had a crucial value in keeping her safe among China and India (Kissinger, 2014). Her non-alignment and neutrality-based survival strategy will undoubtedly be harmed by China and India's divergent and conflicting perception of Nepal, for instance during the 2020 border skirmish (Bhattarai, 2021). On the one hand, due to asymmetric dependence on multiple levels, India regards Nepal as a dependent state with India, while China somehow finds Nepal as a key strategic partner for engagement in the South Asian region. These vague and compelling ambitions of two major powers in South Asia have contributed to augmenting Nepal's geopolitical vulnerability challenging her basic survival strategies.

Rise of China and Sino-US Dissension: The Great Game in Himalayas

In October 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Nepal on his way back from India to China. It was a noteworthy visit because the Chinese President had made his first trip to the landlocked Himalayan country in 22 years (Panda, 2019). During his stay he made a strong statement "Anyone trying to separate China in any region of the country would result in crushed bodies and shattered bones," Xi stated during a meeting with Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli. He continued, "Any external forces supporting such efforts to split China will be seen as pipe dreams by the Chinese people." (*Reuters, 2019*). Many believed this was a counter statement to US President's remarks over Hong Kong that the US will find it difficult to cooperate with China if the Hong Kong issue boils further without reasonable solutions (*Khabarhub, 2019*). Why Xi made such a statement from Nepal is significant to understand.

Owing to China's development, the current political situation between China and the US is often referred to as a "new cold war" (Marcus, 2021). Recent geopolitical changes are a result of China's rise (Brown, 2020). Some refer to it as a "Thucydides Trap," made popular by Harvard-based researcher Graham Allison, who states that whenever a declining hegemon perceives a growing force as a threat, conflict is inescapable. As a neighbouring country to China, there's a chance Nepal will fall for this ruse. This explains the ongoing dispute between China and the US (Mohammad, 2018). For instance, all the nations have been keenly watching the BRI's port construction initiatives and the maritime silk route through the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean has both trade and geographic value, as it connects important nations in the North Atlantic and Asia-Pacific. More than half of all petroleum products pass through these small straits (Albert, 2016). China and the US both want to persuade other nations to cooperate with them because of this, additional alliances are now being formed to constrain China in the Asia Pacific region. To counter China's BRI, the G7 leaders have decided to develop a B3W plan. China would be opposed to these countries as part of the Quad, which comprises the US, India, Japan, and Australia. Similar objectives are shared by the BECA between India and the

US; however, strategies may vary for example BECA targets for geospatial intelligence in the Himalayan region (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2021). Since the geopolitical radar has been shifted to contain the rising China, Nepal has been in a geopolitical hot pot with a chance of getting boiled anytime (Khanal 2022). There are signals of Sino-US competition in Nepal when the Nepali parliament approved the long-awaited Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project of the US. Because the United States acknowledges Nepal's role in keeping a balance against Chinese aspirations by assisting Nepal through the MCC (Ghimiray, 2022). China condemns "coercive diplomacy," the spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry declared at a press conference shortly after word circulated that Nepal was being forced to join the MCC (*Global Times*, 2022). The Sino-US heat was further exposed with this statement. What big powers expect from Nepal is still an important question that needs to be carefully examined, but Nepal, which has adhered to the "One China Policy" and relies on neutrality and non-alignment as constitutional principles for the conduct of foreign policy, may find it challenging to meet these expectations which are also fatal to her national interest.

Both China and India find Nepal as a sphere of influence, and the presence of other international actors like the United States has further added complexities to Nepal's national interest (Upadhyay, 2022). As discovered by Shoemaker and Spanier, essentially a big state looks for in a less powerful state ideological alignment, cooperation in international affairs, and strategic advantages. In recent times the high-level political visits from three geopolitical actors have been increasing, these footprints clearly hint at geopolitical great game in the Himalayan state that is closer to what Shoemaker and Spanier have identified.

High-level visits recently from China, India, and United States respectively:

China		
S.N.	Date of Visit	Remarks
1.	June 14, 2012	Chinese Premier visited Nepal
2.	June 24, 2015	Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Nepal to participate International Conference on Nepal's Reconstruction (ICNR)
3.	August 14, 2017	Wang Yang Vice Premier of the State Council of the PRC visited Nepal
4.	October 13, 2019	Chinese President Xi Jinping made his visit to Nepal after 22 years of gap by a sitting President of PRC
5.	March 25, 2022	Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Kathmandu
6.	July 10, 2022	Liu Jianchao, chief of the Communist Party of China's International Liaison Department, arrived in Kathmandu with a delegation of seven people before rumors of coalition between political parties for upcoming provincial and state election
7.	September 5, 2022	Li Zhanshu, Head, Standing Committee of the Chinese National People's Congress, put an appearance in Kathmandu

India		
S.N.	Date of Visit	Remarks
1.	August 3, 2014	Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Nepal after 17 years of void by a sitting Indian Prime Minister
2.	June 24, 2015	Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj arrived in Kathmandu to participate International Conference on Nepal's Reconstruction (ICNR)
3.	September 18, 2015	S. Jaishankher arrived in Kathmandu as a special envoy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi two days before the promulgation of the constitution
4.	November 2, 2016	Indian President Pranab Mukherjee arrived in Kathmandu
5.	February 1, 2018	Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj Arrived in Kathmandu after the parliamentary and provincial election
6.	May 11, 2018	Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Nepal on the invitation by Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli
7.	October 20, 2021	Chief of Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), Samantha Goel arrived in Kathmandu
8.	May 16, 2022	Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Lumbini Nepal, he first landed in India and came by helicopter

United States		
S.N.	Date of Visit	Remarks
1.	February 10, 2015	Dana Hyde, CEO of Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) visited Nepal
2.	March 19, 2017	Harry B. Harris, Commander of US Pacific Command, visited Kathmandu
3.	September 9, 2021	Vice President of Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) visited Nepal amidst the dilemma of MCC awaiting ratification by the Nepali parliament
4.	November 17, 2021	For the first time, Donald Lu, United States Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Affairs came to Kathmandu
5.	May 21, 2022	Urza Zeya, US Under-Secretary, coordinator for Tibetan issues under Joe Biden administration visited Nepal
6.	July 28, 2022	Donald Lu, United States Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Affairs visited Kathmandu. This was his second visit within less than 10 months' time

Big states footsteps are an attempt to exert influence in delicate geopolitical zones for a variety of reasons, including pursuing their own goals, thwarting those of rival states, enticing smaller states, creating pressure points, etc. As a state already facing geopolitical jolts from two of competing hostile neighbours”, United States presence in the region has further put Nepal into a balance or engage dilemma worsening the geopolitical burden.

Beyond Geographical Variable

Five former prime ministers of Nepal voiced their concerns about foreign interference in the country's internal affairs in a public statement on 12 June, 2021. This raised the eyebrows of many Nepali citizens because it is a serious matter of concern for five prime ministers to warn against a sitting prime minister of foreign intervention (*The Kathmandu Post*, 2021).

Soon after this Nepali Prime Minister made a statement hinting that he is being tried to unseat as a Prime Minister (*The Kathmandu Post*, 2021). Controversies were also drawn against Nepali Prime Minister again when he spoke about India's disputing role in Lipulekh-Kalapani area (Panda, 2020). Many people believe that the growing involvement of China in Nepali political spectrums is unchecked (Karki, 2020). Same as how India used to do, China's growing involvement in Nepal is no different (Shahi, 2020). While the US asserts that it should be made sure that from the Chinese investments Nepal should be the first to get benefitted (Giri, 2019). At the same time China asserts that Nepal has been coerced and pushed into difficulty recently (*Global Times*, 2022).

In addition to complex topographical factors, Nepal has been plagued by such outside influences because domestic political actors lack a strong sense of national interest. Prateek Pradhan Prime Minister Sushil Koirala's press advisor insisted that domestic political actors themselves are responsible for inviting such meddling (Paudyal, 2017). Following the adoption of a new constitution in 2015, India imposed a harsh embargo on Nepal while downplaying its worries about the new constitution (Kumar, 2015). India insisted that Nepali demonstrators were the ones preventing goods from entering the country (Nepal border blockade, *BBC*, 2016) which Ranjit Rae in his book further reiterates in the same line (Rae, 2021). It is nothing new for Nepali officials to disagree on major national issues and for Kathmandu although potential external meddling is different in forms but it's not entirely new (Rose, 1971). For example, from Rana Bahadur Shah's anti-national activities from India (Mishra, 2001) to a parliamentary session to ratify the MCC agreement with the United States, where legislators from the ruling party and the opposition party each accused the other of betraying the country (*The Himalayan Times*, 2022). B.P. Koirala has confessed in his autobiography about how his intentions to bring King Tribhuvan to Palpa were foiled for several reasons, and B.P. himself thought that King Tribhuvan was the one who deceived the plan and went to the Indian grip inviting for influences (Sharma, 1998). Decade-long Maoist insurgency also trapped the country in a state of instability (Silwal, 2009). The hook was laid down by the domestic political forces including Durbar, Maoist, and political parties at home (Sharma, 2019). Therefore, it is domestic political actors who are making things more critical by adding difficulties to already present geopolitical vulnerabilities.

Conclusion and Recommendation

A small state discourse was applied in the qualitative study design which relied on content analysis and process tracing techniques, and a deductive approach to reveal Nepal's geopolitical vulnerabilities, which were exacerbated by a variety of factors. First, the Himalayan state sitting between China and India is challenged with geopolitical jolts because of its geostrategic location alluring major powers to compete with one another. Second, foreign strategic engagement in

Nepal has become more frequent and explicit after the rise of China and the projection of the 'new cold war'. Finally, the research concludes by discovering that along with the attractive geographical location enticing big powers, the domestic political actors' weak sense of national interest is also providing fertile ground for such insecure engagements.

For a small state like Nepal, derailment from non-alignment is tough and dangerous at the same time conventional security strategies are equally viable for Nepal in all regards like balancing, neutrality, accommodation, and equiproximity. Additionally, as said in a well-known verse "you cannot change your neighbours" Su, sticking to the neighbours-first policy fits well in the current context, which is also embedded in the policy framework of Nepal. Having confidence in both neighbours is advantageous for Nepal's security strategy. Domestic political players should play a significant role to first forge a consensus among themselves on matters of national interest and foster trust among great powers as domestic actors are losing their credibility.

Furthermore, South Asia's regionalism is primarily impacted by aspirations fuelled by the regional sphere of influence and global power competition. For instance, the rivalry between China and Pakistan, China and India, and the United States have had a significant negative impact on regional integration goals. Regional power politics and great power rivalry have had a significant adverse impact on regionalism, particularly in South Asia's SAARC, which is regarded as the least integrated area in the world. As a result, chances of economic development are hindered because they are entangled with the geopolitical aspirations of powerful nations. The multilateral world of today implies that it offers a platform for small governments to act internationally and exercise influence. Small states currently play a role in a majority of the multilateral forums globally, and they have established themselves in numerous regional and international fora. Being a member of such institutions maintains their parity with powerful powers. As a result, promoting regionalism and participating actively in international forums is both possible and appropriate.

Finally, as East outlined several shortcomings of small states, he noted that structural scarcity—which indicates both a deficiency of and an efficiency in the available institutions, which are more extractive in nature—is a major gap that these governments face. A country's incapacity to assert itself internationally is mostly caused by "structural scarcity" (East, 1973). Structural scarcity increases distrust in government agencies and bureaucracy, fosters patron-client relationships, and widens the field of competition between strong and weak governments for influence. For that, creating strong state institutions and preserving them could prevent structural constraints mainly to abide by a policy that safeguards national interest and the efficient operation of international relations. Therefore, decision-makers and leaders in Kathmandu should exercise greater caution in the face of any pressure that could position Nepal as a likely scene of confrontation between big countries. A sovereign country with its own foreign policy should be equally aware of the events taking place in the international arena and understand that siding with major powers can have detrimental effects on the nation's ability to survive and thrive.

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