



The Thriving Strategy for Nepal amidst Triangular Competition of China, India, and the United States

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Abstract

Nepal's geostrategic position between the world's emerging 'rival' powers, China and India in the South Asian Region (SAR) has shaped the Nepali people's psyche. Our neighbors are competing for their economic and security interests over Nepal. Nepal is also strategically important to the United States (US) because of its geographical proximity to China's Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and increased Chinese footprints in the region, including Nepal. As a result of the relative weakening of America's dominant position and the gradual shifting of the geopolitical and economic gravity to the Indo-Pacific, the US aims to reshape alliances and partnerships to counterbalance China's rise in this new geostrategic space. The Sino-Indian silence over ongoing the Russo-Ukraine war, the Sino-US trade war, Indo-China border dispute, a strong China-Pakistan cooperation, a multi-faceted Indo-US strategic partnership, including the former's dominant role in the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and Quad Security Dialogue (Quad) to counter the growing significance of China's Bridge and Road Initiative (BRI), and the BRI vs. the IPS are major developments taking place in the periphery of Nepal. Nepal's strategic significance has been further enhanced as a result of the US' efforts to include it in its IPS so that Nepal could be used as a lever in targeting Chinese influence in the region. In an environment of such conflicting interests, immediate neighbors and the US are trying to expand their influence in various forms over Nepal. With this background, this article endeavors to highlight the latest developments in Nepal's bilateral relationship with these powers, analytically examine the triangular competition with its implications, and forward relevant recommendations for its security and survival by diplomatically balancing these powers and forestalling their undue pressures. The article is subjectively prepared by analytically reviewing the literature on Nepal under the strategic significance of China, India and the US.

Keywords: bilateral relationship, geostrategic position, Indo-Pacific strategy, psyche, strategic partnership, survival strategy, triangular competition

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Introduction

There is an emerging convergence in the Indo–US interests that contradicts the Chinese interests in the SAR and the greater Indo–Pacific. To a greater extent, there is strategic competition rather than cooperation between China on one side, and India and the US together on the other side. Nepal is becoming an integral part of their strategic interests in the region because of its unique geostrategic position. Cordial Sino–Nepal relation has offered an opportunity for China to develop multi–dimensional engagements including the BRI in Nepal; those were earlier exploited by India (Dahal, 2018, p. 50). Indian hegemonic attitude with the number of problems in Indo–Nepal relations such as unequal treaties, border dispute and other controversial issues (political instability in Terai Madhesh, water resources, Trade and Commerce, etc.) has contributed to the rise of Chinese influence in Nepal (Kavitha, 2016, p. 12).

Amid consensus opinion about the eastward shift of economic gravity following the rise of China and India as global economic superpowers, the US has also readjusted its strategic focus on Indo–Pacific by means of its IPS. Our geopolitical vitality has motivated the US to include Nepal in its IPS (directly or indirectly) by means of its assistance in socio–economic development, democracy, defense, security, and humanitarian engagements.

The US has granted a dominant position to India in the IPS and Quad consisting of Australia, India, Japan and the US. India’s Act East Policy also justifies a strong Indo–US strategic alignment (Bhardwaj, 2020, pp. 11–13). Nepal’s strategic vitality has been further enhanced as a result of the US’ efforts to incorporate Nepal into its IPS targeting the Chinese sphere of influence including the BRI. In an environment of deep Indo–US strategic partnership, Sino–Indian border disputes and adverse Sino–US relationship, our strategic position is becoming an indispensable part of their geopolitical and geo–economical interests. Enhanced Chinese footprints will invite more Indo–US rivalry against China (and vice versa) in Nepal. Hence, the trends of strategic competition among big powers indicate that Nepal is facing a dilemma in balancing and benefitting from the triangular rivalry between India and the US together against China within and beyond its border (Bhattarai, 2020, pp. 25–28).

Nepal – US Relationship

The US is the second country after the United Kingdom (UK) with which Nepal established diplomatic relations on 25 Apr 1947. Since Jan 1951, the US began providing varieties of aid to Nepal to achieve its foreign policy goals (Vaughn, 2006, p. 17). The strategic location of SAR and the risk this region was exposed to communist powers always motivated the US to provide aid to countries like Nepal. Americans perceived that any communist influence on Nepal could have a spillover effect within and beyond the region (Khadka, 2000, pp. 77–95).

The primary US objectives include supporting a stable and democratic Nepal that respects the rule of law; promotes investor–friendly economic development; prevents Nepal from being the safe haven for terrorism; improves disaster risk management; and ultimately the protection of the key US interests in Nepal (Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2020). Years of diplomacy, development and military engagements have advanced US interests as Nepal has evolved into a more peaceful and stable democracy with significant economic

potential. The US remains committed to building Nepal's resilience in the event of any future disasters. Its support during the 2015's earthquakes was significant and provided US \$ 40 million in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Fact Sheet, 2021).

Despite deep political controversy followed by the repeated US threats of reviewing Nepal-US relation, Nepal ratified the US \$ 500 million grant in aid MCC (Nepal Compact) on 27 Feb 2022 though the agreement was signed on 14 Sept 2017. Following ratification, the US Under Secretary of State for civilian security, democracy, and human rights and the US special coordinator for Tibetan issues Ms. Uzra Zeya visited Nepal from 20-22 May 2022. In the meantime, the US pushed ahead with Nepal's pending request to join the State Partnership Program (SPP).

Another high-level visit was made by the Commanding General of the US Army Pacific, Gen Charles A Flynn from 09-12 June 2022. He would have requested the Prime Minister and the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) to put Nepal in the SPP. However, the SPP widely believed to be part of the IPS was rejected as that would push Nepal into a geopolitical conflict by violating its neutral and non-alignment foreign policy (Balachandran, 2022). Lately, COAS Gen Prabhu Ram Sharma paid a goodwill visit to the US from 27 June-01 July 2022.

Nepal – India Relationship

Nepal and India established diplomatic relations on 17 June 1947. The 'India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950' forms the bedrock of our special relations. The friendship and cooperation between two countries are characterized by an open border and deep-rooted people-to-people relationships and culture. Founded on the age-old connection of history, culture, tradition and religion, these relations are close, comprehensive, multidimensional and are pronounced more in political, social, cultural, religious, economic and military engagements. The strong foundation of our bilateral relations is based on the principles of peaceful coexistence (Panchasheel), sovereign equality, and understanding of each other's aspirations and sensitivities. Our relations are much more than the sum of treaties and agreements taking place between two countries. The frequent bilateral high level visits and interactions constitute the hallmark of the good relations between the two countries (Government of Nepal, 2017).

It is noteworthy to mention here the latest developments in the Indo-Nepal relations. India is one of Nepal's major development partners. India was the first country to provide humanitarian assistance to Nepal after 2015's devastating earthquakes. However, India's relationship with Nepal worsened after the 'Blockade' due to their dissatisfaction with the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015. India published its political map by including Nepalese territory Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Lipulek areas (335 sq km) on 2 Nov 2019. On 8 May 2020, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated the 79 km Pithauragadh – Lipulekh link road to Mansarovar as its 19 km section passes through Kalapani areas. The Government of Nepal protested with a 'Diplomatic Note' to the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu on 10 May 2020. When protests in Nepal began despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian Army COAS Gen. M. M. Naravane issued a statement on 15 May 2020 blaming China saying, "there is reason to believe that Nepal might have raised this issue at the behest of someone else".

Then, Nepal's House of Representatives made a constitutional amendment by incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura areas in its map and national emblem on 13 June 2020 (Shakya, 2020).

In its bid to reset the country's relations with India, Nepalese Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli greeted Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the occasion of India's Independence Day on 15 Aug 2020. Subsequently, three senior-most Indian dignitaries, including the RAW Chief Samanta Goel; COAS Gen. Narvane; and Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla visited Nepal. Jointly chaired by the then Nepalese Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali and Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar, the Sixth Meeting of Nepal-India Joint Commission (Set up in 1987) took place in New Delhi on 15 Jan 2021 to discuss all bilateral issues. India provided one million doses of Covishield vaccines in Jan 2021 as grant assistance to generate goodwill with Nepal (Jha, 2021). The high-level visits – Nepali Army COAS Gen. Prabhu Ram Sharma (9–12 Nov 2021) and Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba (01–03 Apr 2022) in India; and Prime Minister Modi (fifth visit as the Prime Minister, 16 May 2022) in Lumbini during Buddha Jayanti and Indian Army COAS Gen. Manoj Pandey (04–08 Sept 2022) in Nepal – are believed to further harmonize and strengthen Nepal India bilateral relationship.

Nepal – China Relationship

Nepal and the People's Republic of China (China) formalized their diplomatic relations on 1 Aug 1955. Their bilateral relationship has been defined by the 'Sino-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship' signed on 28 April 1960. Bilateral relations were boosted when both countries resolved their border problems by signing the 'Sino-Nepal Boundary Agreement' on 21 March 1960 followed by its ratification on 5 Oct 1961 (Government of Nepal, 2017). Their relationship has been marked by the consistent reliance on the ideals of the peaceful co-existence, friendliness, understanding, mutual support, cooperation and respect for each other's sensitivities.

Nepal strongly supports the 'one China policy'. Nepal took a leading role in supporting China's admission to United Nations (UN) and other international agencies. Nepal articulates that only with the meaningful role of China, decisions and acts of the UN achieve greater support from the world community (Sutter, 2013). For such support at the international forum, China deeply appreciated and thereby supports Nepal's efforts to safeguard national sovereignty and independence. As the founding member of the AIIB, Nepal holds the status of Dialogue Partner in the SCO. Both countries are also members of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue. China is the observer of the SAARC. Thus, cooperation in international forums, including the UN has greatly promoted the mutual relationship between both countries (Government of Nepal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 2019).

China stands as Nepal's major development partner. China supported Nepal spontaneously and substantially following the 2015 earthquakes. Some of the latest events of Nepal China relations are – 10 points agreement for Nepal's right to sea access as a landlocked nation and the right to transit freedom through the Chinese territory was signed during Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli's visit to China from 10–27 March 2016. Nepal formally entered the BRI club on 12 May 2017. Another 14 points agreement on key connectivity deals was signed

during Oli's second visit on 19–24 June 2018. A protocol on implementing the Agreement on Transit and Transport to permit Nepal to use four Chinese seaports (Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang, and Zhanjiang) and three land ports (Lanzhou, Lhasa and Shigatse) for third-country imports/exports was signed during the visit of President Bidhya Devi Bhandari to China in April 2019. Nepal and China also agreed to develop six trans-border overland trading point to include Kodari–Nyalam; Rasuwa–Kerung; Yari (Humla)–Purang; Olangchunggola–Riyo; Kimathanka–Chentang; and Nechung (Mustang)–Legze.

Both countries vowed to elevate their bilateral relationship to a 'strategic partnership' by working on the cross-border railways linking the TAR with Kathmandu during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal on 12–13 Oct 2019. It is expected that such agreements will give rights to Nepal's access to the Chinese seaports and will end India's monopoly in Nepal's sea transportation system. Similarly, China donated 800,000 Sinopharm Corona vaccines to Nepal on 17 May 2021 (*The Kathmandu Post*, May 22, 2021). Latest high-level visits – Nepalese Foreign Minister Dr. Narayan Khadka (09–11 Aug 2022) to China; and Minister of International Department Liu Jianchao (10–12 Jul 2022) and Speaker of National People's Congress of China Li Zhanshu (12–16 Sept 2022) to Nepal – are expected to further boost the Sino–Nepal bilateral relationship.

Implications of China – India – US Triangular Competition over Nepal's Survival

Nepal has tremendous assets (unique geostrategic position, connectivity potential, abundant natural assets) and capabilities (proven diplomatic skills in the past, membership with many regional, international and multilateral organizations and strict adherence to international rules of law) to ensure its independence and survival. However, the triangular competition between these powers in the Indo-Pacific, SAR and Nepal has made Nepal an important part of their geopolitical calculations. Hence, it will be relevant to examine the implications for our security and survival.

Xi Jinping's visit at a time of heightened Sino–US trade war and the Sino–Indian border dispute puts Nepal at the center of regional geopolitics (Mann, 1998). His commitment to supporting Nepal becoming a 'land-linked' demonstrates China's readiness to play a dynamic role and exploit limited strategic depth to reach out to other parts of the region via Nepal (Yadav, 2021, pp. 17–19). After the US \$ 63 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, Beijing is keen to utilize Nepal's strategic location to serve BRI objectives. The biggest geopolitical change after the 2015's Indian blockade is the rise in the Chinese interest in Nepal with economic alternatives to avoid over-dependency on India. This kind of competition has made Nepal an indispensable component of their strategic interests and contributed to enhancing our vitality not only within SAR but also in the Indo–Pacific.

The US believes that it could use Nepal as an instrument to exploit Chinese vulnerabilities in TAR. China will then take necessary measures to do whatever is necessary to prevent this. Former Indian Ambassador Shyam Saran (2021) stated: "If India is perceived by China to be working according to the American agenda, its hostility to India will get much sharper. India should meet the Chinese challenges in Nepal by drawing upon the considerable assets it has in its relations with that country, assets that China is unable to replicate. It is by positioning India as a partner of choice for economic and social development so that India can retain its

considerable presence in Nepal. Nepal that gets caught up in great power confrontation is not in India's interest and we should not encourage this for ephemeral short-term gains" (Saran, 2021). Though there is a deep Indo-US strategic partnership, India would not be happy with the presence of big powers in Nepal.

China and India have had a significant influence on the decision-making process of Nepal (Nehru, 1961, pp. 42–43). An unstable or hostile Nepal can twist geopolitical equations in the SAR and divert the attention of the Asian powers away from accelerating their economic growth due to its impacts on their security. Thus, while both neighbors need to keep Nepal in their sphere of influence, they can only do it gently; otherwise, there arises the delicate balance of power by Nepal. Here lies Nepal's opportunity to be closer to one neighbor than the other to maintain its independent stature and sovereignty (Mohan & Hao, 2020, pp. 52–55).

Small states lying on the periphery of regional powers are often subjected to pressure threatening their sovereignty (Waltz, 1979, pp. 72–73). Nepal has formulated its new foreign policy strategy at a time when it is struggling to reconcile the growing and competing interests of big powers in Nepal (Dabhade & Pant, 2004, pp. 6–7.). Growing the Sino-Indian conflict in the background of the Indo-US strategic partnership has added further challenges to Nepal's foreign policy maneuverability. The all-weather Sino-Pak relations and Chinese assertiveness over the Taliban-governed Afghanistan will also contribute to the big powers' rivalry in the SAR including Nepal. Hence, ensuring a balance with them has been the 'core foreign policy challenge' of Nepal.

The ruling regimes of Nepal have always tilted towards China for its survival whenever it has perceived any threat from India. However, the duration of each tilt toward China was short-lived as India either mended its relations or succeeded in overthrowing the government with an alternative political force. Most of the democratic governments in Nepal had stronger relations with India. Though Nepal tilted towards China occasionally, China was careful in its response. Even though Prime Ministers – Dahal and Oli – sought stronger ties with China, the Chinese advice to Nepal was to maintain closer relations with India because of its geopolitical realities (Jaiswal, 2020, p. 50).

There is a tri-national aid competition over Nepal. For Nepal, China ranked the fourth largest bilateral development partner after the UK, the US, and Japan, whereas India occupies the fifth place. Nepal imports more than two-thirds of its trade goods from India, and only around 14 percent from China. India also receives 60 percent of total exports from Nepal, compared to China's 2 percent (Trade Competition, Economic Times, 2020). During the visit of Xi Jinping to Nepal, China announced to provide NRs. 56 billion in assistance to help Nepal's development programs. This is equivalent to the amount to be provided to Nepal under the US \$ 500 million MCC Compact (Shrestha, 2020). However, Nepal's inability to implement BRI projects since six years of agreement has undermined our diplomacy in handling such sensitive issues with maturity.

The Sino-Indian competition has also been seen in Nepal's connectivity sector. The all-weather Qinghai-Tibet railways (253 km) from Lhasa to the closest Tibetan city to Nepal, Sighatse is operational since 2014. China has agreed to extend the 72 km railway from Sighatse–

Kathmandu and then to Pokhara and Lumbini. The proposed Sighatse–Kerung–Kathmandu railway as a part of BRI would be a game changer in Nepal's aspiration for economic prosperity as it will end India's monopoly in Nepal's sea transportation. To prevent Nepal's inclination towards China, India has also announced to construct six trans–border railway links such as from West Bengal (Jalpaiguri–Kakarbhitta); Bihar (Raxaul–Birgunj, Jogbani–Biratnagar and Jayanagar–Bardibas); and Uttar Pradesh (Gorakhpur–Sunauli and Nautanwa–Nepalgunj) (Jaiswal, 2010). Other links from Raxaul–Kathmandu and east–west railways lines (Kakarvitta, Jhapa–Gaddachauki, Kanchanpur, 924.80 km) are also proposed (Shah, 2019). With 72 km between Sighatse–Kathmandu and 200 km between Kathmandu–Birgunj, the road distance between the northern and southern borders is not more than 300 km. Hence, Nepal can comfortably link two giant economies through its territory. At present, Sino–Indian trade is taking place by over 5000 km of rails/roads plus sea transportation. This connectivity through Nepal would create wonders to boost the economies of all the countries involved.

The US argues that Nepal's role in the IPS should be an opportunity as it provides an unprecedented window to lift from its geographical constraint of being pressed between China and India. However, the geopolitical situation of Nepal restricts being part of such military alliances or similar groupings. Therefore, IPS is not relevant for Nepal as it violates our neutral and non–aligned foreign policy and equi–proximity relation with our immediate neighbors and cordial relation with friendly countries (Sigdel, 2018. p.5).

In the US, the Biden Administration's towards China would contrast with that of the Trump Administration. At this end, President Joe Biden would keep China in check by strengthening ties with the US allies. As China's growing economic and military power has been a big challenge for both India and the US, India is playing a lead role under the IPS in the SAR to encircle China. Hence, being an immediate neighbor of China and India, Nepal's strategic importance is on the rise not only for the neighbors but also for the US. The US and Nepal have good relations despite some traditional divergences – especially on the Tibet matter and most lately with the controversial IPS / SPP.

The US security interpretation is highlighted as a result of Chinese investment in building deep sea ports along the rim of the Indian Ocean from Gwadar (Pakistan)–Kyaukpypu (Myanmar)–Chittagong (Bangladesh)–Hambantota (Sri Lanka), also referred to as 'String of Pearls'. The US anticipates the 'String of Pearls' as a Chinese strategic alliance in the containment of the US along the Indo–Pacific region. Hence, the US continues to expand its presence in various forms as a result of enhanced Chinese footprints in the SAR. China and India as the second and the third largest economies of the world naturally lie in top US foreign policy priorities. Biden has no alternatives but to calibrate policies in the region forced by Trump. It is self-evident that some of Trump's aggressive policies have led to a major trade war with China (Wagle, 2021).

The US engagement in SAR is expected to be inversely proportional to the level of improvement in its relations with China. Beijing also fears that unlike Trump, who was largely taking decisions in isolation, Biden may lead 'an alliance of democratic countries' to contain the growing Chinese influence in and beyond the region. Biden would gradually normalize tensions in trade and transit affairs with China. He is likely to move with cautious diplomacy

with respect to the increased Chinese connectivity in the SAR through BRI projects, including the ports of Gwadar, Hambantota, and Chittagong.

After the MCC ratification, the US pushed Nepal to join the State Partnership Program (SPP). The US military alliance of SPP is widely believed to be another component of the Indo–Pacific Strategy (IPS). The SPP, once approved, would draw Nepal one step closer to the US military alliance. Nepalese society sees the SPP as a military and security initiative closely linked to the IPS and considers it against its long–held non–aligned and balanced foreign policy. Since the Trump Administration, the US has been trying to include Nepal in the IPS, so that it could accomplish its multiple political and security goals towards China.

Washington's promotion of the SPP in Nepal comes at a time when its IPS is accelerating. The US competition with China through working with neighboring countries has never changed. Although the SPP purportedly emphasizes disaster relief and counter–terrorism efforts, its military essence has been clear in its implementation. It has served as an important foreign security cooperation tool for the US to achieve its foreign policy goals (Yuwei, 2022). It could harm the Sino–Nepal friendship and mutual understanding had Nepal approved the SPP. The relatively balanced relationship is the geopolitical urgency of Nepal towards her immediate neighbors.

India is an important partner of the US security strategy of containing China in the Indo–Pacific. The Indo–US nuclear deal was signed in 2005. Since its inception in 2007, India has been a part of the Quad which is believed to be the hard power tool of the IPS. On the one hand, India sits on the pivot of the US regional engagement. On the other hand, the US failure in the Afghanistan war has prompted China to fill the security void there. The US–Pakistan relations have drastically altered after the increasing Chinese presence in Pakistan with CPEC, though it was a credible ally during the Cold War. The recent engagement with Nepal through its MCC compact is also viewed as a counter to BRI. Such unprecedented trends demonstrate that Nepal is in a sensitive position in balancing its relationship with these powers and maintaining its sovereignty and independent status.

There is another recently established triangular defense grouping, AUKUS (Australia, the UK and the US) in the Indo–Pacific. This pact is about the deeper integration of Australia into the US military efforts to balance the dominant power of the region, China. India believes that AUKUS will help strengthen deterrence against China's maritime assertiveness and naval power projection hence it is not complaining about being excluded from AUKUS even though it is an active member of the Quad. India however is distressed by the rupture of a stable balance of power in the Indo–Pacific by the formation of AUKUS and believes that France and Europe have a critical role in the Indo–Pacific resolution (Mohan, 2021). More containment by the grouping of states (Quad and AUKUS) against China would create more instability in the region, which could present domino effects to Nepal as well.

The US paid a high price for the wars fought in Vietnam, Korea, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Instead of confrontation with China, it is now pushing India and other powerful allies (Quad and AUKUS) in the Indo–Pacific. India and the US signed a ‘Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)’ on 27 Oct 2020. It is a major defense pact for the exchange of classified

geospatial intelligence between their armed forces. BECA aims to enhance the interoperability of the Indo–US militaries and facilitate cooperation in countering growing Chinese influence in the Indo–Pacific (Hali, 2020, pp. 11–15).

The signing of BECA comes amidst the intensification of three rivalries in South Asia: the US and China; China and India; and India and Pakistan. Although the US has tried to balance relations with both India and Pakistan to achieve its strategic objectives, the rise of China has upset that balance. With heightening regional tensions and the far-reaching consequences of BECA, two opposing blocs, the Indo–US vs. Sino–Pak may emerge in South Asia, further complicating the prospects for regional peace and cooperation in the SAARC.

India has announced a restructuring of its military into five commands by 2023, including a Northern and Western Command focusing on China and Pakistan respectively (Gupta, 2020). The Sino–US competition has fueled regional polarization. India expanded its cooperation with the US as its relations with China soured. Meanwhile, China and Pakistan have strengthened bilateral ties in a time of deteriorating US–Pakistan relations. Such relations threaten the delicate balancing of power in SAR. The US’ mutual interests and China’s aggressive moves towards India are pushing India towards establishing a meaningful Indo–US strategic partnership. The signing of BECA is one such gesture.

The US’s willingness to partner with India demonstrates a continued focus on curbing Chinese influence, as can be understood through the 2018 US Strategic Framework for the Indo–Pacific. The framework states, “A strong India, in cooperation with like-minded countries, would act as a counterbalance to China” (Turker, 2021, pp. 11–20). It also details desired end states for the IPS: “India is the preferred partner on security issues in the US. The two cooperate to preserve maritime security and counter South and Southeast Asia and other regions of mutual concern”. China’s growing influence has accelerated the need for a strong Indo–US regional partnership (Turker, 2021).

On the other hand, China and Pakistan countered the enhanced Indo–US defense cooperation (BECA) by signing a military memorandum of understanding (MoU) on 30 Nov 2020. The MoU includes the sharing of intelligence and technology to track and monitor Indian troop movements along the disputed border. Former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan called for “closer strategic cooperation to raise the iron-clad Sino–Pak brotherhood to a new height” (Aamir, 2020, pp. 2–4). Enhanced Indo–US cooperation has given Sino–Pak greater incentive to strengthen their military cooperation.

Pakistan’s security is important to China because of shared and collective economic interests, most notably through the CPEC. Khan has endorsed CPEC as “a manifestation of Sino–Pak friendship” and vowed that “Pakistan will complete it at any cost”. He even asserted that “Pakistan’s future is tied to China. We should be clear on this that our country’s [economic] development has now been intertwined with China”. Both militarily and economically, Sino–Pak interests are intimately tied and will likely continue to deepen in light of Sino–US developments.

The signing of Indo–US BECA and the Sino–Pak military MoU signifies a growing split in South Asia, though current alignments are still relatively loose. The US continues to

maintain strong trade relations with Pakistan as it requires Pakistan's assistance in Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics (CAR). The US and India are not formal allies, and varying levels of trust between the two militaries cause experts to question their actual levels of mutual commitment. The coincidence of Sino-Indian interests against the US interests in the Ukraine war justifies this assumption. On the other hand, the Ukraine war has compelled the US to have its commitments on two fronts – East Europe and Indo-Pacific – both against China's rise in regional and global affairs. Weaker Russia in its quest for legitimacy against the Ukraine war may support China in countering the US in the Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, the two military agreements (Sino-Pak vs. Indo-US) signed between the two 'global-regional powers pairs' in South Asia are indicators of accelerating bipolar blocs in the region. It is too early to tell whether or not those blocs will ultimately solidify, and what effect they will have on regional security. South Asia need not be divided along great power fault lines, though the tremors of Sino-US competition in the region are already being felt and Nepal lies within their interests.

Recommendation

The latest development in Nepal's diplomatic relations with these countries along with their triangular competition and unfolding geopolitical and strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific and SAR impose significant implications for Nepal's survival. Foregoing in view, an attempt has been made to present relevant recommendations so that Nepal can diplomatically balance these powers, virtually enlarge its presence in the outside world and ensure its independence and survival in the contested geopolitical environment.

Diplomacy is the 'vane guard' and an invaluable asset for the security of small states like Nepal (Riordan, 2007, p. 161). The trends of chronic political instability with inter-party conflict, corruption, rampant nepotism and criminalization of politics made our diplomacy weaker to secure national interests abroad. The national interest has been replaced by our selfish, clannish and partisan behavior. Political interference in foreign affairs has made diplomacy defunct. Ambassadorial appointments based on political patronage have done no good to improve our reputation. More than half a dozen Nepali embassies and missions have remained leaderless for a long time. As a result, Nepal is losing its dignity and failing to consolidate and fully mobilize its diplomatic missions. Putting the right person in the right place based on expertise should be accorded a top priority while nominating ambassadors and high-ranking officials in diplomatic missions. The diplomatic capacity needs professional and institutional leadership to reduce or avoid the risk of conflict or confrontation with these powers.

A small state's goal is not the pursuit of hard power but the preservation of the little power it possesses. We need to make up for this deficiency through diplomatic excellence and efficient foreign policy. The emergence of India and China as 'rising powers' and the presence of the extra-regional powers in the region are likely to present challenges as well as opportunities to Nepal's sovereign status. Therefore, we should revamp our weak foreign services and correct our course to address new challenges and exploit emerging opportunities. High-quality diplomacy must be a constant phenomenon in Nepal's external relations. As we cannot become a military power, we need to have a visionary and knowledge-based diplomacy

for our security and survival. Nepal needs to achieve its 'security through knowledge and wisdom' not by hard power.

Foreign policy is the extension country's domestic policy. The political instability has ruined our image regionally and globally and will impact the struggling economy already devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic. If small states want peace, if they want their independence stature and sovereignty to be respected, they should be internally democratic and externally law-abiding. In such environments, Nepal's foreign policy design is likely to foster two contrasting consequences: either Nepal can serve as a bridge to neighbors or it will be a proxy battlefield of neighbors and extra-regional powers. To avoid being the proxy battlefield, the political parties must have a 'common consensus, consistency and unity on foreign policy' so that we can bridge the contending concerns of immediate neighbors and established powers (Bhattarai, 2021, pp. 3-4).

In today's globalized world, economic diplomacy has gained much importance for both developed and developing countries. Nepal could reap huge benefits by attracting investment from emerging economies, established powers and multilateral institutions. Considering our landlocked position, underdeveloped status and low level of economic activities, the enhancement of economic interest abroad should be a fundamental prerequisite in ensuring long term peace, prosperity, stability and security of the nation (Acharya, 2000, pp. 13-19). We could be self-reliant by the effective utilization of our abundant natural resources such as hydro power and tourism, which have also drawn huge strategic relevance to our neighbors demanding collective efforts for utilization. We need to make economic diplomacy one of the priorities of our foreign policy (Acharya, 2008, p.15). Similarly, the military is one of the main instruments of national power, 'military diplomacy' can be a great asset in furthering our national diplomacy.

It will be difficult for small states to remain distant, non-committal, non-aligned or neutral to the gravitational pull of powerful states in international relations. Nepal is no exception. Our geostrategic position demands that Nepal cannot be a part of any strategic alliance which ultimately violates our neutrality and non-aligned foreign policy (Giri, 2019, pp. 5-7). Nepal needs to assure China, India and the US that acceptance of BRI and MCC are purely driven by 'our dream of economic prosperity' and Nepal will never utilize these mechanisms in containing one against another country. Nepal needs to maintain neutrality, compliance, trustworthiness and magnanimity. Sino-Indian-US triangular competition in diplomacy, economy, trade and connectivity here shows the bigness of Nepal. Rather than just limiting ourselves to the traditional way of receiving major aid from them, political and diplomatic engagement of this level will enhance our regional weight, diplomatic clout and visibility, which otherwise has always been depressed under neighbors, particularly from India (Sigdel, 2020, pp. 16-19).

The American policy in the SAR is not solely about aligning with Indian interests, their interest is also to make sure that China and India will come closer, in which Nepal has a space to maneuver. This will help the US integrate China into the liberal order in the region. While China itself is much worried about the Western resistance towards BRI and anti-China policy, Nepal fully relying on China will not be wise. After the Indian blockade in 2015, Nepal realized

that over-dependency on a single neighbor could be risky, which encouraged Nepal to sign the ‘Sino–Nepal trade and transit agreement’ to use four seas and three land ports in China for Nepal’s overseas transportation. India’s border encroachments and refusal of accepting the Nepal–India Eminent Persons Group (EPG) joint report have raised many questions about Nepal’s security and survival (Poudel, 2018, pp. 23–25). Therefore, Nepal should take advantage from the economic policies of the US. Hence, Nepal simply cannot ignore the US leadership in the region.

Nepal’s stability, progress and survival rest on how it manages the vital interests of neighbors and extra–regional powers and becomes relevant to the international community (Rose, 1971, p. 288). Nepal enjoys excellent historical, political, and socio–cultural bonds with India. At the same time, China’s economic might presents an opportunity for Nepal to pursue rapid economic growth. Their prime concern—security—overlaps in Nepal. By maintaining equi–proximity relations, the best Nepal can do is to address their security concerns, assuring that Nepal would not be used against them and asking to abstain from interfering in internal affairs. Nepal should reassure that a stable Nepal is also in their interest, as only a stable neighbor can properly address their concerns. Therefore, our foreign policy needs to elevate to bridge the contending concerns of our neighbors with a careful balancing act (Acharya, 2008, pp. 25–27).

The US seeks the opportunity to enhance its influence in Nepal in multiple ways. After the MCC ratification, the US is pressing hard to include Nepal in the SPP, which Nepal perceives as a trap to involve it in an anti–China military alliance, hence straightly rejected. Had Nepal accepted SPP with stronger Nepal–US military ties, the impact on Sino–Nepal relations would have been catastrophic. At the same time, India might not be pleased either. India feels that the SPP would unsettle the unique relationship between the Indian and the Nepali Army. These moves would hurt Nepal’s balanced diplomatic relations with China, India, and the US. The SPP seems to be a multi–purpose mechanism to advance the US’ wide–ranging political and strategic objectives under the umbrella of humanitarian and counter–terrorism engagement. Nepal made a wise decision not to be part of the SPP and must avoid association with similar groupings in the future also (Giri, 2021, p. 6).

Nepal is a party in the BRI. The BRI can potentially project Nepal as a strategic force in the region. Nepal wants China and India to have a harmonious relationship and cooperate in infrastructure building in Nepal, for which BRI can be a useful framework. At the same time, we need to be cautious to avoid any possibility of being a ‘debt trap’ of the BRI like present days’ Sri Lanka. Nepal needs to put efforts to transform our ‘landlocked constraints’ into a ‘vibrant economic bridge’ between the two economic powerhouses of the world—China and India. The BRI and MCC could be useful to serve this endeavor.

In such a trend of globalization, no nation can remain untouched by incidents taking place around the world. Latest trends show that external influence in Nepal will increase if Nepal remains unstable, internally vulnerable and incapable to resist foreign interference. However, we can exploit the opportunities and become a center of geopolitical competition between the rising China and a defensive India. Both neighbors should come forward for economic

development if they want to serve their economic and security concerns from Nepal. Probably, trilateral cooperation between India, Nepal and China can be in the interest of the region (Baral, 2020, pp. 25–29). Tri-lateral cooperation between these countries would generate an ideal condition for Nepal’s security and survival.

The strategic location bordering the TAR always encourages the US to engage Nepal through multiple means. Both India and China are also sensitive to the possibility of Nepalese territory being used by one against others as part of a larger encirclement plan. With varying geopolitical interests of three world powers, Nepal should be proactive and vigilant to balance them diplomatically as more security tensions are rising in the Himalayan region such as in Arunachal Pradesh, Akshai Chin–LAC, Kashmir–LOC and Taliban’s Afghanistan (Davis, 2020, pp. 3–6).

Geography is the most important determining factor of Nepal’s foreign policy behavior and strategy. Nepal undoubtedly wants US support, but equally fears increasing Indian dominance and also wants to keep China on its side for balance (Rafiq, 2020, p. 5). However, we should not feel Nepal is a “prisoner of geography”. Geostrategic connectivity, geopolitical environment and technology, etc are contributing to mitigating geographical constraints and promoting Nepal’s strategic significance in the international community. We must have to exploit the advantages provided by geography for our survival.

Politically unstable countries, often become the victims of external interference, Nepal is no exception. Therefore, we should have harmonious Civil-Military Relations for our political stability and development. Since the military is the ‘mirror of the society’, developing the armed forces as an integral part of the society, incorporating civilian values and making it more inclusive would greatly contribute to the political stability of the country. Janowitz (1971, pp. 427–430) claims that “once the military considers itself as a part of the society, it does not operate against societal interests and meaningful integration with civilian values guarantees civilian control and political stability”.

Joining the UN on 14 Dec 1955, Nepal served as a Security Council member twice (1969–70 and 1988–89) and is active in several UN specialized agencies and regional mechanisms. Nepal hosts many offices with regional scope – UN Disarmament Office for Asia, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, International Center for Integrated Mountain Development, SAARC secretariat, etc. Nepal has demonstrated its diplomatic efficiency by conducting the 3rd, 11th and 18th SAARC summits and BIMSTEC’s 4th summit successfully. Multilateral diplomatic engagements at such international and regional levels will enhance visibility and create a favorable environment for our security and survival (Baral, 2020, p. 42).

Nepal has become a synonym for the UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs). Nepal as the 3rd largest troop contributing country (TCC) is participating in the UNPKOs since 12 Jun 1958. It has made a record by contributing to 44 UNPKOs in 43 countries (Nepali Army DPKO, 2022). Our participation in the UNPKOs has been respectfully acknowledged by the UN. Therefore, Nepal should not only continue but needs to diplomatically lobby for senior UN appointments (such as Secretary General, SRSG, USG, ASG, Military Advisor, etc.) and greater participation in future peacekeeping missions. Expanded participation in the UNPKOs

should be one of the major foreign policy agendas of the country (Shrestha, 2012, p. 48). This will contribute to creating conducive environment for Nepal's security and survival.

Nepal's hard power inferiority needs to be compensated by means of soft power (also by smart power). Nepal's soft power can be generated by making the fullest use of its geostrategic position; neutral and non-aligned foreign policy with various forms of diplomacy; history and culture; political stability, democracy and development; human rights and inclusiveness; tourism and abundant hydropower; adherence to the UN principles, Panchasheel and regional / international instruments; technological adaptation; cyber and social media; etc. Soft power is much more than an image, public relation and temporary popularity. The encompassing output of these factors provides 'strategic deterrence against all forms of political instability and external challenges'. This kind of deterrence constitutes a very real power to gain political objectives (Nye, 1990, pp. 5–7). This explains the reason why some small states in the developing world formulate a pragmatic foreign policy even though they have limited hard power.

Conflict resolution and mediation have developed as a 'key niche practice' for many small states. Countries such as Switzerland, Norway, Austria, Denmark, Finland and Sweden have all developed successful and focused strategies in the fields of international peacemaking, conflict prevention, and mediation. These countries have become synonymous with such practices (Henderson, 2016, p. 61). Nepal has tremendous experience in the peaceful resolution of Maoist conflict with its neutrality and non-aligned history and can come out as a 'neutral and unbiased arbitrator or mediator' in the international community. Nepal's niche diplomacy could create a favorable environment for its security and survival.

The unresolved Indo–Nepal border dispute is one of the main causes of the unharmonious relationship with India. Therefore, Nepal needs to resolve this problem with India on win – win basis, otherwise, there is a likelihood in the rise of ultranationalist movement in Nepal that would provoke Indian retaliation in many sectors of Indo–Nepal relation. In this context, the Indo–Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement 2015 would be an ideal model for resolving Indo–Nepal border dispute. The historic agreement facilitated the transfer of 111 enclaves (17,160.63 acres) from India to Bangladesh and 51 enclaves (7,110.02 acres) from Bangladesh to India respectively (Banerjee, Chaudhury & Guha, 2017, pp. 15–19).

China, Nepal and India share the geography of the Himalayan range and the environmental challenges, especially the need to mitigate and adapt to the consequences of global warming. Environmental degradation resulting in melting glaciers, management of water resources for consumption and related transboundary issues would be expected to force all three countries to collaborate to minimize the climate change effects. If there is one area in which the common interests of all three states align, it might be that of environmental preservation under the specter of global climate change. The US might be interested to provide technical support in this endeavor (Rijal, 2015, pp. 58–60). In that case in point 'counter–terrorism' efforts will be another area of mutual cooperation between Nepal and these powers.

Let us have a short glance at the Ukraine war 2022. Nepal is among the 141 members of the UN that voted against the so-called Russian invasion in Ukraine (Giri, 2022, pp. 2–4). On the one hand, there are arguments that the Russian invasion against a sovereign neighbor

gravely undermined the UN's effectiveness by violating international rules and laws. On the other hand, this war would have been avoided, had Ukraine anticipated the security implications upon Russia as a result of its membership in the EU/NATO. Nepal needs to learn the 'ocean of lessons' from the Ukraine war. Since we cannot change our geography, our sovereignty and survival will always be at risk if we ignore the vital interests of neighbors and align with distant powers.

Nepal's neutrality and non-alignment during Indo-China wars/conflicts (1962, 2017 Doklam and 2020 Galwan Valley) and Indo-Pak wars (1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999) proved to be effective in the delicate balancing of immediate neighbors. By the integrated effort of national unity; political stability with self-reliant economy; consistent foreign policy; knowledge-based diplomacy; democracy and good governance; active participation in the regional and international/multilateral organizations; and the best use of soft power and suitable 'niche' (if possible); the 'balancing act with Neutral and Non-aligned foreign policy having equi-proximity relations with neighbors and cordial relations with established powers' would be the best strategy for our security and survival. It is time to demonstrate that Nepal as a small state is the synonym of this strategy. We need to promote this ideal as the national identity in the fast-changing geostrategic situation. We must ensure our security and survival by knowledge and wisdom not by hard power. We must ensure our security and survival by knowledge and wisdom not by hard power.

Conclusion

The economic center of gravity is shifting from Europe to Asia. The growing Sino-US rivalry, Indo-US strategic partnership, including India's dominant role in the IPS and Quad, all-weather Sino-Pak relations in the environment of chronic Sino-Indian and Indo-Pak border disputes, pronounced Chinese footprints through BRI, diminishing Indian influence in the region, and the US' AUKUS/IPS/MCC/QUAD countering BRI (and vice versa) are the major developments taking place in the Nepali periphery. Such developments have greatly shaped the Nepali people's psyche. Inept leadership with political instability; weak diplomacy; donor-driven economy; and American design to include Nepal in the IPS have all contributed to the China-India-US triangular competition over Nepal. This trend has added challenges to Nepal's independent stature and survival.

The story of Nepal is the story of extraordinary survival. Nepal cannot remain isolated from the developments that are taking place in the region and the wider world. We have to accept the ongoing triangular competition as an opportunity to transform our country from land-locked to land-linked independent and sovereign state. Having a unique geostrategy with connectivity potential, impressive national assets and proven diplomatic skills evidenced also from the past, Nepal possesses tremendous potential to ensure its sovereignty, independent status and security. Hence, Nepal needs a regime that fosters domestic forces for a committed and strong leadership with political stability, self-reliant economy and integration into the regional and international /multilateral frameworks by a means of proactive diplomacy and consistent foreign policy. Integration into such frameworks shall lead to international recognition and visibility; the opportunity to promote own interests in an international forum; and the security and survival of the country. Hence, a balancing act with a neutral and Non-aligned foreign

policy with an equiproximity relation with neighbors and cordial relations with established powers would be the best strategic option for our security, survival and thriving. Diplomacy always remains the ‘vane guard’ of our external security.

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