

Changes in Global Power Relations, Geopolitical Complexity and Nepal's National Security Challenges

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Abstract

There are clear signs that the balance of power in the globe is shifting. The USA, an established superpower, and China, a developing superpower, are vying for the world's attention. Eventually, Russia is showing strength to establish herself as one of the other axis powers to transform the global order from unipolar to multipolar. India, Nepal's immediate neighbor with an open border and decades-old, strong bilateral links, is also evolving into a regional power, or at the very least, is on track to appear as the world's second-largest economy in near future. In this juncture, Nepal is more of security significance to China, India, and the US due to its geostrategic location. Nepal, which is constrained by a number of treaties with India, has already declared its support for both the US Millennium Challenge Corporation and China's Belt and Road Initiative. The New World Order has seen a new regional security climate in South Asia and growing polarization leading to large power rivalry forming a China-India plus the US. Additionally, attempts are being made to strengthen the security ties between the US and Nepal through the State Partnership Program (SPP) and with China through the Chinese Global Security Initiative (GSI), both of which may pose serious challenges to Nepal's national security. Thus, Nepal must maintain strict nonalignment foreign policy, increase the use of soft powers, and take a proactive, impartial, and balanced attitude in its diplomatic operations in order to face the expanding national security challenges resulted from geopolitical complexity. Also, Nepal needs to maintain strategic balance among the great powers, promoting the value of green energy and nurturing soft power. For Nepal, accomplishments of such goals and objectives through the preservation of the Himalayas, promoting Nepal's rich cultural heritage of the *Buddha* and accelerating military diplomacy in the UNPKO have been indispensable. Nepal's foreign and national security policy should be both inside and outward looking, fostering her regional and the multilateral engagements in SAARC, BIMSTEC, Shanghai Cooperation, and the United Nations.

Keywords: global power relations, geopolitical complexity, national security challenges, international cooperation, balanced relations, soft power, hard power

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Introduction

Liberalism, the more placid brother of the more fiery camps of nationalism and socialism, has never been more polarizing than it is now. Under identity politics, authoritarianism, social media, and a weakened free press, it has both thrived and failed, from Putin's populism to the Trump administration and dictatorial governments in democracies around the world. (Fukuyama, 2022). Since its inception after the post-reformation battles, liberalism has been attacked by both conservatives and progressives, and it is now widely regarded as an antiquated theory. Both sides have pushed its beliefs to their breaking points: neoliberals have built a cult of economic freedom, while communists only emphasize identification over human universality (Fukuyama, 2022).

Though it did not go as planned, Russia's blatant challenge to the Western-led international order has shown the pliable nature of world politics. A new competition for root access to the global system is taking place of an established set of neutral rules. We are inclined to enter into new era of "might makes right" because liberalism has lost the power to persuade a resistant world of the veracity of its values. Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, has made it obvious that he will no longer accept the norms that govern the globe. He desires the establishment of a new order in which Russia is acknowledged as a superpower with a widened sphere of influence.

Russian fossil fuel demand has drastically decreased. Russia produced approximately 10.8 million barrels of oil per day before its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, of which about eight millions of barrels were exported (either as crude or refined products). More oil is available for export as a result of the steep decrease in Russian economic activity, but the European Union, the United States, and their allies are increasingly purchasing crude oil from other suppliers; starting in February 2023, the same will be true for processed products. Alternatively, NATO member nations are, one thinks, safeguarded to some extent by the fear of retribution, but one can expect Russia to engage in sabotage and other defensible attacks against Western energy infrastructure (and similar vulnerable strategic targets).

The Soviet Union was careful not to directly attack the US and Western Europe throughout the Cold War (1945–1989). Instead, both sides employed various forms of pressure, such as proxy wars. But this time, a much more direct conflict is to be anticipated. With a weird set of beliefs—right-wing nationalism on steroids—and long-range weapons, the Russian elite has forced itself into a hole. Giving in to these radicals will simply encourage them to want more, whether you mean it literally or figuratively. What kind of year will 2023 turn out to be after a year of major shocks highlighted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the global jump in inflation rates, and the failure of cryptocurrency ventures? Because consequences of actions spread so swiftly and unpredictably throughout our globalized society, short-run questions like this are challenging to answer.

During his inaugural speech to the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed greater assurance over world affairs. “ We have prioritized our national interests, paid attention to domestic political issues, and maintained a firm strategic resolve in the face of significant changes in the international environment, particularly external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade, and put maximum pressure on

China. We have demonstrated a strong will to never submit to coercive authority as well as a fighting spirit. We have protected China's dignity and fundamental interests throughout these efforts, keeping ourselves in a strong position to pursue growth and uphold security."

Xi also lambasted the global power implicitly towards the US: " We have steadfastly fought against separatism and countered interference in response to separatist activities aimed at "Taiwan independence" and egregious provocations of outside interference in Taiwan affairs, demonstrating our resolve and ability to defend China's sovereignty and territorial integrity and to oppose "Taiwan independence." We have reinforced our support for the one-China principle among the international community and intensified our strategic initiative for China's total reunification"(Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 16, 2022).

In this regard, Joseph Nye observes, "From an American perspective, it is just as dangerous to underestimate Chinese power as it is to overestimate it. While hysteria creates fear, discounting China's recent progress and future ambitions could lead the United States to squander its own long-term advantages (Nye, 2004). Reevaluation of the Chinese strength is occurring as a result of China's zero-COVID policy's failure. Many believed that China's GDP will overtake that of the United States by 2030 or shortly thereafter. However, some observers now assert that even if China succeeds in accomplishing that objective, the US will advance once more. Has "peak China" already been reached?Both overestimating and underestimating Chinese power carry equal risks. Overestimation incites panic, while underestimation prompts complacency, yet both can result in estimates gone wrong. A thorough net assessment is necessary for a good strategy (Nye, 2004). A concerning number of hazards are combining to threaten the extinction of humanity, including climate change, nuclear war, planned pandemics, unchecked artificial intelligence (AI), and other deadly technologies that are still unforeseeable.

The geopolitical competition between the US, China, and Russia is substantially driving the world's power relations toward multipolarity, even if the US and China will be the main players in the present and near future of the world order. South Asian regions will see the effects of the current and prospective world orders, particularly as China's influence grows in the region and India's ties to the US are strengthened. The global order may present difficulties small power nations like Nepal. Therefore, this paper has made an effort to speculatively and analytically examine the prospective global order, South Asia's geopolitical complexity, and its implications.

Methodology, Conceptual Framework and Research Question

This article uses a qualitative research design, and the data come mostly from secondary sources, such as reviews of theoretical and reference books, journal articles, and expert comments. It examines how the global power structure and geopolitical complexity interface to influence a country's regional and bilateral relationships. This research work hypothesized that geopolitical complexity as an independent variable that contributes to Nepal's national security challenges, changing global power structures and geopolitical complexity which can be both independent and dependent variables.

Whatever our opinions, it is impossible to ignore the escalating rivalry between the major powers, especially between China and the US. Therefore, Nepal must exercise caution to avoid becoming embroiled in the great power confrontation while continuing to engage both sides in a productive dialogue and reaping the benefits of their respective positions on the international stage in terms of politics and the economy.

This is because accommodating China's rise is a key component of this big power rivalry in the region and beyond. Thus, this article has attempted to answer the following research question: Whether Nepal should be able to benefit from the shifting geopolitical dynamics in the region and the complexity of global politics, or will this only pose new security challenges?

Changes in Global Power Relations

William Macaskill states, when the Cold War ended a little more than 30 years ago, some intellectuals anticipated an unruly future in a far more tranquil manner. The end-of-the-world fear that had been so vivid in the Cold War imagination had started to fade. The primary ideological disputes appeared to have been resolved when Communism fell a few decades after fascism was defeated in World War II. Both capitalism and democracy would inevitably spread (Macaskill, *Foreign Affairs*, 2022).

The end of the former Cold War (1945–1989) established a unipolar world order led by the United States of America, stating that there would be no chance of any rival power emerging to challenge the US in the near future; this was referred to as "the end of history" by Francis Fukuyama. However, with China's ascent and Russia's resurgence in the Balkans and elsewhere, changes in the world order have already begun to appear after a few decades. The political theorist Francis Fukuyama categorizes societies as being either "post-historical" or "historical," reflecting shifts in global power relations. Conflicts between ethnic groups and religious groups, for example, may continue to exist in some regions of the world. Nevertheless, large-scale wars would eventually become a thing of the past as other nations joined those on the other side of history, including France, Japan, and the United States. The future promised relative peace, prosperity, and expanding individual liberties, but it also provided a limited variety of political alternatives (Fukuyama, 2022).

Despite market globalization's fragmentation and the likelihood of a great-power confrontation rising, ideology remains a geopolitical fault line. With a potential extinction of the human species, the challenges to the future are even greater. One of the perspectives is what needs to change the most. Fukuyama himself self-criticized on his thesis statement of The end of history will be a very sad time, Fukuyama wrote in 1989, when "daring, courage, imagination, and idealism will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of sophisticated consumer demands." Fukuyama looked to the future with a little melancholy, seeing a gray, undramatic expanse—a tableau for technocrats.

Contrary to Fukuyama's "end of history," other international affairs scholars have highlighted artificial intelligence, engineered pandemics, and nanotechnology weapons in addition to nuclear war as sources of existential risks that could endanger life on a global scale. The competition among great powers in the aforementioned areas also indicated a new phase of the so-called "Cold War 2.0." (Fukuyama, 2022). Moreover, microbes and viruses

are also altering a balance of power on the planet. The globe contains hundreds of biological laboratories, despite the fact that there are only nine nuclear-armed governments, with more than 90% of all warheads controlled by Russia and the United States. Of these, dozens—distributed across five continents—have been granted permission to conduct experiments with the most dangerous viruses on earth.

And to make matters worse, the safety record of biological research is considerably worse than that of nuclear weapons. In 2007, despite government involvement, two cases of foot-and-mouth disease slipped from the same British laboratory within week (Fukuyama, 2022). This illness spreads quickly across animal herds and has a potential to easily cost billions of dollar.

Despite an increasing level of risk, the most important problem is painfully known from the recent conflicts in climate diplomacy. Individual nations benefit disproportionately from the use of fossil fuels, but other nations and future generations will face a disproportionate share of the expenses. Unfortunately, the resumption of great-power rivalry raises concerns about the likelihood that these international cooperative efforts may result in economic harm. And lab spills have previously resulted in human fatalities. Even worse, if governments decide that taking the risk will help them advance their security goals, geopolitical tensions may force them to accept a higher level of risk to the globe and to themselves. The next laboratory mishap might start a global pandemic considerably worse than the Covid-19 epidemic if even one state's bioweapons program experimented with extinction-level diseases, possibly in an idiotic attempt to create an ultimate deterrence.

The worst-case scenario would be if the big nations engaged in open warfare in their struggle for world dominion. This idea could appear absurd to persons who were raised in the West after World War II. Even while the idea that violence, even between nations, has long been on the wane, has gained popularity thanks to psychologist Steven Pinker. On the other hand, it is a difficult task to prevent the possibility of World War II while also attaining hitherto unrealized breakthroughs in global governance. But whether you like it or not, it is the problem we have (Pinker qtd. in Macaskill, 2022).

Henry Kissinger, an eminent US national security academic and practitioner, secretly traveled to China in July 1971 to meet with Mao Zedong. Kissinger's trip served as an early precursor to the Cold War's end in 1991 and a brief "unipolar" period in which the US emerged as the only superpower. The two countries' leaders appeared to have a good working relationship that benefited both for more than 40 years. Four decades of working relations between the US and China gave the former hope that Beijing would adopt a new political stance and join the US-led liberal economic and political order, but China developed economically and militarily while using its clout to spread its influence across continents, and successive Chinese leaders built their country to finally pose a threat to the US global dominance.

The US and China are currently embroiled in a trade war that has escalated into a New Cold War, fifty years after Kissinger's momentous visit. The US's desire for China to "decouple" economically might mark the start of China's geo-economic containment. It happens at a time when China is growing both militarily and economically and is posing a serious threat to its neighbors, along with regional giants Japan and India. In China, where nationalism is at its

height as the country celebrates the 100th anniversary of the CPC, the New Cold War has just started (Baru et al., 2021). Tsutomu Kikuchi looks at how Japan could handle a China that is fast becoming aggressive and assertive. How does it address the larger concerns about the future of the Indo-Pacific region? (Kikuchi, n.d., p.Xvi.)

Similarly, Chun Min Lee contends that while Kissinger may have thought the US and China could manage Asia together in 1971, the parameters of engagement have altered under President Xi Jinping. He goes on to say that China is demanding leadership of Asia with the same adamance. This might be verified by the response to it, which takes the form of a quadrilateral grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the US (Kikuchi, n.d. p. Xii). According to Lee, it would be more expensive for China to test or annoy the quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the US, India, Japan, and Australia) and like-minded countries if they spoke with a single voice and clearly articulated their vital interests. The Quad may enable China's foes to prevail peacefully. However, the development of China presents Asia with the same security challenge as the Soviet Union did for Europe during the first Cold War: how to manage a powerful neighbor while managing a distant friend who is much more powerful.

As Emily Dickinson states ` The Future never spoke -Nor will he like the Dumb, reveal by sign a syllable of his profound To Come` (qtd. in Zakaria, 2020). It reveals that there will be a rivalry between the established and growing superpowers at the global, regional, and bilateral levels of international relations, which matches the future world order that cannot yet be seen clearly. Difficulties in the future world order could lead to greater geopolitical and geoeconomic conflicts as well as negatively impact the holders' countries' national security situations.

Since the end of the Cold War, the world has experienced three major upheavals, according to Fareed Zakaria's analysis of the current scenario. 11 September 2001, the 2008 financial crisis, and most importantly, Covid-19. "Every morning in the unending month of March, Americans woke up to find themselves citizens of a failed state," said George Packer in the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic, as noted by Zakaria. Even while the outbreak and America's feeble response caused shock, rising concerns about the state of the nation served as a backdrop to it (Zakaria, 2020, p. 187). Since China's doors were opened to the outside world 40 years ago, it has undergone tremendous economic, political, and social transformations that have fueled unheard-of growth.

China's rise to prominence has challenged long-held beliefs about free markets and democratic institutions, both locally and internationally. The globe has allegedly entered a new Cold War as a result of recent geopolitical, ideological, and economic conflicts between the US and China. On the other hand, it is believed that America has been in a serious trouble ever since the 2008 financial crisis, which damaged the country's prestige. Some economists discussed the "secular stagnation" of diminishing growth and productivity. Others focused on the growing disparity, while still others noted the startling moral decline brought on by drug use, drunkenness, and suicide—the so-called "deaths of despair."

The pandemic followed, which cast a stark light on America's issues, including its weak government, spotty health care system, and brutal polarization pathology. Fareed Zakaria

diagnoses that: “over more than two centuries, the United States has stirred a very wide range of feeling in the rest of the world; love and hatred, fear and hope, envy and contempt, awe and anger,” the Irish commentator Fintan O’Toole wrote in April 2020, “But there is one emotion that has never been directed towards the until now: pity”(Zakaria, 2021, p. 188). Not only did Covid-19 quicken the discourse about American decline, it also did so in the context of worries about China’s ascent. Similar to how China’s glistening cities were frequently contrasted with America’s deteriorating infrastructure. Beijing’s successful eradication of the disease was pitted against Washington’s ineffective reaction to the outbreak. China was able to flatten the coronavirus’s curve and squash it at a spectacular speed and scale despite having the virus’ initial epicenter.

In this regard, Samuel P Huntington coined a term to narrate about American declinists, arguing that America was then within its fifth wave of declinism; the first was triggered by the Soviet launch of the Sputnik, the second in the late 1960s by the US quagmire in Vietnam, the third by the oil shock of 1973, the fourth by the hangover from Watergate and the fifth by the rise of Japan in the late 1980s. By the Iraq War, the 2008 financial crisis, and now Covid-19 have produced what is clearly a sixth wave of declinism (Zakaria, 2021). No matter how passionate and eloquent the forecasts of American collapse may have been, Huntington emphasized that in most cases, they did not come to pass. His contrarian viewpoint has developed its own conventional knowledge over the years, giving rise to a cottage industry of academics and journalists who vehemently refute the myth of American decline.

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office received about 595,700 patent applications in the 2021 fiscal year, which is a modest decline from the 597,000 applications received in the year prior. However, in terms of military spending, the United States was the top country in 2021, spending \$801 billion, or over 38% of all military spending worldwide. Since SIPRI started keeping track in 1949, America has been the nation with the highest military expenditures, accounting for more than 30% of global military spending during the past 20 years. The US spent more on its military in 2021 than all other countries in the top 10 combined, a rise of \$22.3 billion year over year.

On the other hand, in the last five years, China has authorized approximately 2.53 million patents, growing at an average annual pace of 13.4%. The nation approved roughly 695,400 patents in 2021. In China, there are now 7.5 invention patents for every 10,000 people, almost twice as many as there were at the end of 2017. China has established a clear goal for the value of a patent-intensive and innovative industries to contribute 13% of the nation’s GDP by 2025, as per its 15-year (2021-2035) IPR development plan. China came in the second place in terms of military spending in 2021, spending \$293.4 billion, or approximately 14% of all military expenditures worldwide. China has grown its military spending for 27 years in a row, despite the fact that its budget is still less than half that of the United States. China really has the most active military personnel overall, and its military spending has increased significantly over the past ten years.

Geopolitical Complexity

A country’s geographic location determines how easy or difficult interaction with its neighbors and beyond will be. Furthermore, a nation’s ability to cooperate and advance is constrained

by factors such as resource scarcity, historical memory, cultural and ethnic differences, and geopolitical rivalry. In this regard, Kissinger states that geography has been a predominant factor in determining the fate of nations, from pharaonic Egypt to Arab Spring (Kissinger in Kaplan, 2013). In this regard, Kishore Mahbubani observes that Geography is destiny, this is well known, history, too, is destiny, sadly, few notice that the twenty-first century will not see the end of history but the return of history (Mahbubani in Kaplan, 2013).

Robert Kaplan writes that America will actually emerge in the course of the twenty-first century as a Polynesian-comestizo civilization. Why, then, have American strategic thinkers failed to foresee the true challenges America will face? He describes how many old fault lines will once again reemerge. Thus, the development of foreign policy and national security policies must take geography and geopolitics into a much greater consideration than economic and political development. Geography continues to be one of the most significant forces shaping global events today and throughout history. Hans J. Morgenthau calls geopolitics a "pseudoscience" because it erects "the factor of geography into an absolute", similarly, British Geographer Halford Mackinder, states, "to be sure, because the aim of geopolitics is to achieve a balance of power, and the Nazis during the Second World War attempted nothing less than to overthrow the balance of power" (Mackinder, 1982).

For the next ten or two decades, America and China will continue to engage in a geopolitical competition. According to Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Joseph Dunford, "China probably poses the greatest threat to our nation by roughly 2025." According to the executive summary of the United States' 2018 National Defense Strategy, Russia and China are "revisionist powers" looking to change the world to fit their authoritarian model and achieve veto power over other countries' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions (Mahbubani, 2020).

In his seminal book *On China*, Kissinger underlined that the Chinese strategy was influenced by *wei qi*, a Chinese chess game, rather than a Western game of chess. In Western chess, the emphasis is placed on locating the quickest method to seize the king. In *wei qi*, the objective is to steadily and patiently build up assessments to shift the game's balance in your favor (Kissinger, 2012). Since a long-term strategy is prioritized over immediate profits, does this mean that China is patiently and gradually accumulating assets and is gradually tipping the strategic balance in its favor? Thus, America has undertaken two significant attempts to block China's long-term moves to obtain an advantage. The Obama Administration's efforts to stop its friends from joining the Chinese-founded Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2014–2015 failed in both cases. The second was the Trump Administration's attempts to stop its friends from taking part in the BRI, which was started by China. The question is whether the US has the resources to compete in the long term? Does American culture possess the innate fortitude and power required to compete with China's long-term strategy? The goals of posing these questions is to spark a strategic discussion, consider the unthinkable, and analyze the many intricate facets of the US-China geopolitical conflict that will emerge in the next ten years. Consequently, one of the questions an American strategic thinker might have asked before engaging in a significant geopolitical conflict is one that identifies the level of risk involved. The United States may have created and implemented the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Quad, and AKUS-style global security strategies in order to address these global security shifts.

Russia and China were always asymmetrical, but today they are China's economic and, maybe, military adversaries. At the same time, they are significant trading partners with intricate links connecting them via global supply networks. This creates a geopolitical complexity. Regional politics in the Indo-Pacific region constitute one front in the US-China conflict. Both nations are building up their involvement in Southeast Asia, both militarily and commercially. The Obama administration started the US policy of putting its economic and security ties with the Indo-Pacific region first, and it was maintained by the Trump and Biden administrations as well. In order to offset China's aggressive operations in the region, the US enlisted India, Japan, and Australia in the Indo-Pacific and Quad security networks. On the other side, China has staked up territorial claims in the South China Sea, made its displeasure known to Australia by halting some exports, and has increased its activity in the Indian Ocean. Around twenty Indian soldiers died in a clash in a hitherto quiet section of the contentious India-China border in August 2020 and again in the summer of 2022. The Indians are deeply concerned about what they perceive to be a Chinese effort to fabricate fresh facts, despite the fact that talks are ongoing. In what some refer to as "global warrior diplomacy," the tone of Chinese public comments also appears to have changed. Regional politics in the Indo-Pacific region constitute one front in the US-China conflict.

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Biden, while introducing the US National Security Strategy 2022 noted how the US can outmaneuver its geopolitical competitors amidst a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order. He added that the NATO is stronger and more united than it has ever been, as it looked to welcome two capable new allies: Finland and Sweden. Biden noted that the US is active in connecting its partners and strategies across regions through initiatives such as the security partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom (AUKUS). In addition, the US is forging creative new ways to work in common cause with partners around issues of shared interest, as it is with the European Union, the Indo-Pacific Quad, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity. Furthermore, he asserted that in the contest for the future of the world, his administration was clear-eyed about the scope and seriousness of this challenge.

The People's Republic of China harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit, even as the United States remains committed to managing the competition between our countries responsibly. Russia's brutal and unprovoked war on its neighbor Ukraine has shattered peace in Europe and impacted stability everywhere, and its reckless nuclear threats endanger the global non-proliferation regime. Autocrats are working overtime to undermine democracy and export a model of governance marked by repression at home and coercion abroad. Xi Jinping, in the 20th Congress of the CPC asserted that in response to separatist activities aimed at "Taiwan independence" and gross provocations of external interference in Taiwan affairs,

China has resolutely fought against separatism and countered interference, demonstrating its resolve and ability to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity and to oppose “Taiwan independence.” Furthermore, he noted that China has strengthened its strategic initiative for a complete reunification and consolidated commitment to the one-China principle within the international community.

The Indo-Pacific region is a major driver of global economic expansion and will be the hub of geopolitics in the twenty-first century. The US has a crucial interest in seeing an Indo-Pacific region that is open, integrated, wealthy, secure, and resilient. For this, Biden in the US National Security Strategy (USNS) 2022 emphasized that the US would work with other regional states to keep the Indo-Pacific open and accessible and ensure that nations are free to make their own choices, consistent with obligations under international law. And the US would affirm freedom of the seas and build shared regional support for open access to the South China Sea—a throughway for nearly two-thirds of global maritime trade and a quarter of all global trade (The White House, USNS, 2022).

On the other side, China has staked up territorial claims in the South China Sea, made its displeasure known to Australia by halting some exports, and has increased its activity in the Indian Ocean. In a similar vein, many other South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, have joined China's ambitious strategic BRI. India, a key US ally in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, has realized that she needs to be geopolitically defensive as China's influence expands in her sphere of influence, which has brought her closer to the US security networks. The US, Russia, and China are engaged in a geopolitical rivalry that is raging throughout the Indo-Pacific, Indian Ocean, and South China Sea, areas. This geopolitical rivalry has intensified since India, a regional power in South Asia, joined forces with the US in the Indo-Pacific Strategy and Quad, in contrast to many other middle- and small-power nations in the region, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, who signed on to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

National Security Challenges of Nepal

China has a significant presence in South Asia, be it through BRI, bilateral trade, or even aspirations to establish networks with some BRI nations in the region to support her recently announced Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Development Initiative (GDI). As they engaged with China in the BRI despite being perceived as being within the Indian sphere of influence, the small powers of South Asia, such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, are in a difficult geopolitical situation. India is also in a difficult position because it is strategically with Russia and allying with the US in the IPS and QUAD. India, a key US ally in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, has realized that she needs to be geopolitically defensive as China's influence expands in her sphere of influence, which has brought her closer to the US security networks.

We may recall the famous dictum formulated by Thucydides in the fifth century BC: that the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they to accept (Thucydides, 1954). Due to our geo-strategic location, both elephants—the United States of America through MCC and China through BRI—are present in Nepal.

Also, the possible scenario of New Cold War between the US and China, as well as

the presence of a powerful regional neighbor, India, Nepal may be caught in a Thucydides' trap. Moreover, India, one of our immediate neighbors, with whom we share an open border and have signed multiple treaties dating back to 1950 and 1965 as well as the Sugauli Treaty, before India gained its independence, has historically been seeking out the views of "Managed instability," a challenging phrase which may invite trilateral dilemma for Nepal.

Despite having signed up to China's BRI in 2017, Nepal has not been able to begin any of the nine prioritized projects. Nevertheless, Chinese President Xi stated during a visit to Nepal in 2019 that relations between the two countries have reached a "strategic level." Similarly, the US has referred to Nepal as a "critical" ally of the US since the Trump Administration, and especially after the Nepali Parliament approved the \$500 MCC project in 2021. These activities dragged Nepal into a geopolitical quagmire. Due to Nepal's strategic location, the US also appears to be considering Nepal as one of the prospective essential partners to her global security networks.

As Nepal is a close neighbor of China, an emerging superpower and potential rival of the USA, she also may increase her strategic engagements there. Additionally, Nepal would have encountered more complicated circumstances if it had accepted the State Partnership Program (SPP) of the United States and would show favorable gestures toward China's GSI security framework. In light of these circumstances, Nepal should avoid joining any military alliances that might further entwine the country's geopolitical web and put national security at risk. Nepal has conventionally adopted a non-alignment, neutrality, and equidistance policy toward the great power as it cannot afford entering into any kinds of power blocs or strategic alliance, owing to its geostrategic location (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2021).

Conclusion

Small powers have traditionally played a marginal role in the construction and maintenance of national security, while balancing international security order. However, small powers may tend to pursue pragmatic and reactive security policies, adapting to the interests of neighboring powers and aiming primarily to ensure their own survival.

In this regard, Nepal should continue to make every effort to uphold her non-alignment foreign policy and should transition to permanent neutrality (even rolling back the former Zone of Peace idea as a pragmatic proposal to protect her vital national interests) despite the perennially fluid political situations (coalition government forged amid the different political ideals), heterogeneous societal structure, feeble economy, institutional incapacity, and poor consensus culture in foreign policy.

Historically, as a state-nation (as opposed to a nation-state), Nepal has strategically adopted a prudent foreign policy to safeguard its national independence, sovereignty, and geographical integrity. It is better for Nepal to make diplomacy a top priority of her national security strategy in order to maximize benefits through global and regional cooperation. In light of this, it is wise not to reveal excessive leaning towards any particular power and have a tilted outlook in its bilateral, regional, and global interactions vis-a-vis the growing geopolitical complexity. Along these lines, decision-making, earning trust, keeping promises, and proposing a course of action all require statesmanship.

The ability to think and act at the intersection of two axes—the first between the present and the future and the second between the enduring values and aspirations of those they lead—relies solely on visionary leadership. Leaders must act as educators, explaining ideas, allaying concerns, and mobilizing support in order for strategies, policies, and programs to inspire the society. We only have a very small number of people with these characters, though. Therefore, Nepal must put forth utmost effort to achieve consensus in foreign policy, pragmatic and proactive diplomacy and proficient diplomatic actors, economic prosperity to reduce aid-driven policy, meritocracy and rationality in policy formulation and enactment, political stability, active think tanks, and visionary leadership to meet the new challenges brought on by geopolitical complexity.

Nepal's geographic location is both an opportunity and a threat for her national security and prosperity. Long-term geopolitical concerns of neighboring and global powers pose risks to Nepal that stem from their own interests. So, being a small power, Nepal could gain some insight into national strategies from many other smaller nations like Sweden and Israel. Last but not the least, strengthening the Nepali Army to make it more professional in the modern world, involving them more in peacekeeping missions to increase Nepal's soft power, making the National Security Council more proactive, and developing National Intelligence Department as the most elite institution could be prudent strategies to address multi-faceted national security challenges.

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