



Review Paper

Geo-strategic status of Nepal between India and China: A Security Perspective

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Abstract

Geo-strategic significance has always been an important factor in shaping the destiny of a country. Nepal has been well-known for its strategic location and natural resource base in the world. It is sandwiched between two powerful nations, India and China. Because of its proximity to both the countries, Nepal has also been drawing attention of world powers. Nepal's security has always been a major concern for both the neighbours. India, as a close neighbour, has traditionally played a significant role in Nepal. At present, China has also trying to make safeguard for Nepal irrespective to protect its security. As a result of which, both India and China are taking interest in Nepal mainly because of its natural resource base and for security concern. China's role is detectable as it has begun to intervene in Nepal's political process with an intention to weaken Indian influence. In addition to both the countries want to establish a good image in the eyes of Nepal. The present paper is an effort towards analysing the changing geo-strategic relevance of Nepal for India and China in security perspective.

Keywords: Geo-strategic, Security, Natural resources, Foreign policy, Neighbour.

Introduction

The South Asian Region consists of eight countries i.e. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, which share their common historical ties and geography and ecological cycles. These countries also share a common colonial past except Bhutan, Nepal and most part of the Afghanistan. If we recognised the history of last sixty years of the post-colonial period of the region, then we found that South Asia has been the least recognised sub-region across the globe. Lyon asserted that "South Asia has been a region without regionalism"¹. Nevertheless, Nepal is an amusing and mysterious country in south Asia. The country was almost closed off completely to the outside world until the 1950s². Since the emergence of modern Nepal, due to its geographical conditions, its foreign relations with other south Asian countries have been remarkably limited³. In general, Nepal occupies a unique geostrategic position where real politics is seen to get a win-win situation for Nepal continuously. However, most of the time Nepal have tried to maintain a policy of equidistance between India and China⁴. The paper dealt with the changing scenario in Nepal in the present time⁵. Myriad factors play a very crucial role to determine the future of Nepal's dynamics. Also, the geographical proximity of Nepal with India and China regions has increased its geopolitical importance and sensitivity to its regional as well as extra-regional countries⁶.

Geographical Location: Geographical location of the Himalayan range has to be seen in the context of its geological

and geomorphologic features. As far as geographical location of Nepal is concerned, it covers 147181 square kilometers of area, and the shape of its inhabitant is almost in a rectangular shape with an average length and width of 885 kilometers and 193 kilometers respectively. It has been located approximately north-west to the south-east orientation between 80°04' and 88° 12' east longitude and 26°22' and 30°27' north latitude. If we compare Nepal with its neighbouring countries like India and China, it has been found that it is 23 times smaller than India as well as 68 times smaller than China⁷. Nepal's sandwiched location between such a two oversized and mutually hostile neighbours has been metaphorically likened to "a yam between two boulders"⁸⁻¹⁰ and often called upon a decisive importance for marching forwards towards socio-economic development.

The another important aspect of Nepal's location is its a ladder-like style on both sides physical gap in between the Indo-Gangetic plain in the south and Tibetan plateau in the north. In practice, 'India-locked' from the three more accessible sides even though the nearest access to the sea is 1127 kilometers away beyond the Indian Territory. Another significant aspect of Nepal's Land-lockedness is more acute in that the other similarly handicapped countries have alternate access to the sea through more than one country. In addition to Nepal's physical extrovertedness is also more distinct in the sense that the other landlocked countries such as Switzerland or Afghanistan have their most effective parts of the central heartland both in terms of productivity as well as strategically significance whereas Nepal lies along the border with India¹¹. Therefore, as far as

development process of Nepal is concerned political and geographical location play a very vital role.

Nepal and India: The way so far

As it is well known, Nepal and India have been closely linked by history, geography, culture, as well as religious, commercial and economic ties. Mutual trust and friendship, along with the desire for peace and stability, are the cornerstone of the relations between the two countries¹².

Nepal is an important neighbour of India and occupies special significance in its foreign policy because of the geographic, historical, cultural and economic linkages/ties that span centuries. The Nepal-India relationship is determined more by geography and history than any other considerations. The two countries not only share an open border and unhindered movement of people, but they also have close bonds through marriages and familial ties. The open border is a symbol of their deep trust and friendship¹³. But now days the freedom of movement at the open border eases the criminals to commit crimes of burglary, robbery, theft, murder, smuggling, pedalling, narcotic drugs, human trafficking, illegal movements of arms and ammunition and many more¹⁴. These are also the factors, which have provided platform to various irritants and constraints between the two countries¹⁵.

The country was India-opened even at a time when it was cut off from the rest of world until the end of the Rana regime in 1951. After India achieved independence from the British in 1947, Nepal and India signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950 and confirmed that the border between the two countries would remain open to the great advantage of the peoples of the two countries. As such, there is no need of passport or visa formalities among the border inhabitants or other nationals of Nepal and India. Therefore, political instability and adverse security situation in Nepal has been a cause of deep concern to India. There is evidence that anti-India elements have taken advantage of the chronic political instability and poor governance in Nepal¹⁶.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Nepal and China, the rivalry between India and China has been increasing on Nepalese soil. India wants to uphold its traditional leverage in Nepal; whereas China wants to puncture this relationship and seek its own space in different layers of administration, security agencies, army and not the least among the people also. Whereas India, that always had a strong presence in Nepal, is trying to increase its political and economic influence. Also it is mainly for the political reason that the rulers of the country, for centuries, were inspired by India. This shows that the main concern for India has been to keep Nepal independent for safety reasons and not for the idealistic reason.

Nepal and China: The Historical tie-ups

From time immemorial Nepal and China have been close neighbours following political changes in both countries; the

establishment of a diplomatic relationship between them on the August 1, 1955 renewed the relationship in the formal set ups. China-Nepal relationship is relatively new. China has significantly increased its engagement in Nepal since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2006, with a particularly marked increase in 2011. China's engagement in Nepal takes a variety of forms: economic investment, trade, aid, infrastructural development, military assistance, diplomatic exchanges, as well as cultural and educational initiatives¹⁷.

China sees Nepal as crucial to the security of Tibet as Nepal has traditionally been a crossing point for Tibetan refugees. It seeks support from the Nepali government in controlling the twenty thousand Tibetan exiles based there, who often protest against Chinese policies in their homeland¹⁸. Nepal and China relations have become a model of friendly cooperation for countries of different social systems and neighbouring countries to live in friends and harmony¹⁹. In 1961, China and Nepal agreed to construct a 104-kilometer road from Kathmandu to Kodari on the China-Nepal border, with Nepal paying no attention to the Indian criticism that the Himalayas were the natural security barrier to outside forces²⁰.

China's growing interest in Nepal is being viewed with particular concern by India. The increase in the number of visits by Chinese officials and leaders to Nepal, since the end of the monarchy and reinstatement of democratic government in that country in 2006-07, indicates that China is trying to scale up its engagement with Nepal. The concern in India arises from the hypothesis that the growing Chinese presence in Nepal could undermine both India's influence and its strategic equations with the Himalayan country²¹.

Next to Pakistan, Nepal enjoys the second priority in China's strategic calculation. The importance of Nepal to China's strategic thinkers and planners arises not only because of its potential for being used against India in times of peace as well as war, but also because of its potential to India for being used to create instability in Tibet if there are disturbances there after the death of His Holiness the Dalai Lama²².

Security Concerns of Nepal

Security stems from her geostrategic position Nepal's occupies an important place in South Asian region. The country not only placed at the crossroads of two most powerful civilizations but also it is in the heart of the Himalayas, the formidable range of mountains separating Indo-subcontinent from the Tibet-Chinese region. Whilst India is about two thousand miles long and the Himalayan and the Tibetan plateau are the most important features of the physical and political geography of the subcontinents.

Therefore the country of Nepal occupies the central position in the Himalayan and also control about one-third of the mountain range²³.

Since its foundation, Nepal's security has always been a major issues concern. The country's security policy began to evolve during the period of unification (the 1750s to 1760s), but it was conceptualized later by the founder King Prithivi Narayan Shah. Basically, the security was evolved in Nepal against the backdrop of threats posed by the East India Company in India and Tibet in China during 18th and 19th Century. The security perceptions that evolved at that time did not change even with the passage of successive regimes even after India became independent from British colonialism and on other hand, the birth of China as a People's Republic after Communist Party took over the power in the year 1949²⁴.

In recent days, India and China have expressed their great concern about the escalation of violence and its breakdown of law and order in the country. Actually, they see the growing conflict in the country which would have spillover effects on the border area of both the countries. The hijacking of an Indian Airlines New Delhi-bound flight from Kathmandu by the terrorists in the year 1999 has raised the serious possibility of using Nepal's land against India's internal matters. The increasing nexus between various armed groups in Nepal and India human trafficking and uncontrollable migratory movements are issues that India and Nepal have recognised as the newer threats to the security as well as interests of both countries. India has continuously asked Nepal to control the illegal activities of alleged Pakistani intelligence supported groups working against India from Nepal's land. The security concerns of India has become alive after the northern border has become sensitive because of security concern along with China going Communist in the year 1949 and annexing Tibetan in the year 1950²⁵.

As far as security is concern India's anxiety is the use of Nepal's territory for anti-India activities whereas Nepalese Prime Minister has already assured that the country's land will not allow for any security activities against India²⁶. Whilst, the Nepali Prime Minister's assurance seems to be in favour of India but the major concern about it is how long this assurance is going to stay. As the country of Nepal has been increasing closeness with China which will be some security concern for India, on the other hands presently China's concern regarding security is that insecurity and instability in the country of Nepal might strengthen anti-China elements along its Tibet Autonomous area borders which seek China's trouble spot²⁷.

China is also concerned about the country which is being used by other powers country to challenge its strategic interests. Chinese security analysts argued that the country is being used by the United States of America in its larger strategy of encircling China. From the land of Nepal, several demonstrations in the capital of Nepal, as well as Tibet by Tibetan separatists, have been taken place. This has led China to be skeptical on external engagement in the country. The Chinese Ambassador Zheng Xianling raised this issue and also remarked that foreign forces were actively involved in initiating the anti-

China activities in the country. Therefore China developed its relations with the Maoists to serve its security interests in Nepal. The Maoists in Nepal are sympathetic to China due to ideological empathy. Whilst the Maoists extended their hands towards China as they require support from any powerful country. China accepted it as Maoists view, India and the USA as 'imperialist power' and argued that they were also fighting against their interference in Nepal's politics²⁸. The geopolitical location of the country along with China proactive South Asia policy has unambiguously accentuated the security dilemma in the region²⁹.

In this vitiated environment, Nepal has found several of its traditional as well as non-traditional security threats which have been managed by the country. The altering nature and trends of these threats have been found in some of the recently published articles in the country. Indrajit Rai asserted that "when we talk about the perceptions of Nepal's threat, Nepal has least possibilities of direct external arms attack but there are maximum chances of threat for the people of Nepal. In other words, Nepal is not secure from internal threats - insurgency, poverty, education and health problems"³⁰. He further argued that the Nepalese people are not secure at all. Lokraj Baral suggested there is a need for a people centric approach both in reference to theory and practice on the security issues. He also stated that "the recent pro-democracy movement in Nepal has established the fact that the military alone cannot protect the rulers if the people fail to identify their interest with that of the state run by anti-people rulers. The comprehensive security idea has emerged strongly as even democracy without human empowerment and social justice cannot create a congenial atmosphere for the security of the state and people"³¹.

By examining South Asia as a regional subsystem, the discussion which has been made above analyse the strategies that the two giants of regional power i.e. India and China have pursued with respect to the country of Nepal, an insignificant neighboring nation in the region. Indian and Chinese strategies reflect their respective desires to enhance their relative impact over Nepal on the cost of each of them. Both the countries display a lack of satisfaction with current status quo and have pursued strategies that have goals of maximization the share of their regional power. In so far as the strategies of India and China are concerned to the Nepal, an offensive realism seems to be played in the region. In an incessant security competition, the small states seek to preserve their sovereignty by restoring the balance in its strategies.

Therefore, such states promote their country's interest by not explicitly supporting any one great power. But pursuance of their policies that preserve their independent existence that is true in Nepal's case. Nepal has repelled when the attempts have been made by both India and China for saying about its priority on foreign policy. As a small landlocked state, the country of Nepal has been forced to keep good humour with its neighbours. Whilst, Sino-Indian security competition over the increasing the

power and enhance their influence in South Asia has been the major reason in the evolution of Nepal's foreign policy³².

The equity-proximity policy of Nepal needs to be amplified with a credible prevention of self-reliance. Therefore, Nepal must have equal pursuance of sub-regional cooperation for its socio-economic development. However, the future of Nepal lies in Asia Pacific for both the economic and security concerns. Hence, the country of Nepal must consider the international, national and regional environment when determining its domestic strategies for security options. With a potential for internal ethnic and social conflict, as a small landlocked state in the volatile South Asian environment between two powerful states, Nepal's security concerns are enormous. In the multidimensional security atmosphere, the country's approach to the security concern also needs to be multifaceted. Therefore, this is the time of the hour for Nepal to maximise the element of the power of the nation and balance diplomacy with credible prevention for its people and economic growth. In near future, the key concern may be more regional bearing, visualising a comprehensive collective security, but the safety of the part must never be out of sight³³.

Conclusion

From the above description it is clear that Nepal's position has become strategically more important in South Asian region. Situated between India and China, Nepal can become a heart of geopolitical competition between the rising China and a defensive India. Nepal has an immense strategic relevance in the Indian context as Indian security concern and thus feels naturally concerned about any overwhelming presence of foreign interests in Nepal. Nepal strategic importance has led China to focus its policies on preserving and enhancing the Himalayan state's independence and neutrality by trying to reduce its dependence on India in the political, economic and security arena. Cooperation between these three countries (India, Nepal and China) can be in the interest of the region. Stable and secure Nepal can only serve the security concerns of both the Asian giants.

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