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Implications of Geopolitics on National Security of Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal's strategic location between India and China defines its geopolitical significance and impacts its national security. This study examines how Nepal's geographic position influences its security policies and international relations, emphasizing its historical efforts to balance ties with neighbors while safeguarding sovereignty, based on the review of existing literature on geopolitics and national security, particularly focusing on Nepal-India-China relations. Despite its neutral stance in international conflict between or among the countries, Nepal faces increasing internal security challenges amid shifting regional and global dynamics. The research identifies Nepal's location as crucial to its security, particularly in energy, water resource management, trade, and in the region. While traditionally maintaining a balance between India and China, Nepal now encounters heightened external competition and internal instability, creating both strategic opportunities and vulnerabilities at a same time. Adapting its national security strategy to address these challenges, it is essential to take care of including managing trade routes, border control, and resource cooperation. The study concludes that Nepal must navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape by leveraging economic and diplomatic opportunities while addressing internal challenges like political instability and internal security. A balanced approach to diplomacy, security, and development will be vital for ensuring resilience and stability in an increasingly competitive region.

Key Words: Geopolitics, strategic location, National security, Nepal-India relations, Nepal-China relations.

Background

Nepal's geopolitical significance is intricately defined by its strategic location between two regional powers China to the north and India surrounding it on the south, east, and west. This positioning has profound implications for Nepal's

national security, shaping its foreign policy, economic priorities, and strategic outlook. Historically, Nepal has navigated complex relationships with these neighbors, striving to balance its sovereignty with economic cooperation and security alignment. However, the evolving security landscape increasingly highlights internal challenges such as political instability, ethnic tensions, and economic disparities, which now overshadow traditional military threats. This underscores the multifaceted difficulties Nepal faces in maintaining stability within its geopolitically sensitive environment.

As a landlocked country, Nepal shares borders of around 1,590 kilometers with India and 1,414 kilometers with China. This geographical reality renders Nepal vulnerable to external influences, aptly described by King Prithvi Narayan Shah's metaphor of Nepal as a "yam between two boulders." "Over time, regional and global powers have sought to leverage Nepal's strategic location for their interests. Despite its importance, Nepal has struggled to establish a coherent foreign policy that fully capitalizes on its geostrategic potential while safeguarding its national interests (Sharma, 2013)."

Nepal, by its geographical location, remains like a buffer state between the two global giants. For the India, Nepal is located to the northern frontiers that safeguard them from the northern threat directly. Similarly, for the China, Nepal's Himalayas are the geographic safeguard the Tibet from any southern threat. Hence, geography and the geopolitics, the study of how geography influences political dynamics, plays a critical role in shaping Nepal's foreign policy and national security strategies. Nepal's landlocked status and proximity to two major powers create a complex security environment where national security transcends military concerns to encompass political stability, economic development, and the preservation of territorial integrity. Both internal and external factors, including regional power rivalries and global trends, influence Nepal's security strategy. "As the nation contends with growing internal and external pressures, a deep understanding of its geopolitical realities is essential for developing an effective and sustainable national security strategy (Bhatta, 2018)."

Objectives

The overarching goal of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Nepal's geopolitical situation and its significant implications for national security. Positioned between two of the world's most powerful and influential nations – India and China – Nepal holds a unique and strategically critical location within South Asia. This geographical reality has historically shaped Nepal's foreign relations, domestic policies, and national security strategies, compelling it to navigate a complex web of external pressures and internal dynamics. As a result, Nepal must carefully balance its relationships with both neighboring countries while ensuring its sovereignty and political stability are preserved. This research aims to elucidate the complexities of Nepal's geopolitical landscape by investigating potential

opportunities and vulnerabilities arising from its strategic position. The study also explores how this location impacts Nepal's regional and global role, including its bilateral interactions with neighboring countries, and how it informs its overarching security policies. Given the evolving internal and external challenges, including political instability, economic development concerns, and shifting global alliances, understanding Nepal's geopolitical realities is crucial for formulating a sustainable national security strategy.

Study Method

This paper examines the geopolitical dimensions of Nepal's position and its role in shaping national security, with a focus on qualitative analysis. To achieve this, the paper employs an explanatory and qualitative approach, conducting an in-depth critical review and analysis of existing secondary sources, including government documents, academic publications, research papers, and reports from international organizations. By comparing and synthesizing this diverse range of information, the paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of Nepal-India relations. Furthermore, the gathered data will highlight some of the unexpected and contentious actions taken by both India and China in their dealings with Nepal, providing a nuanced perspective on the diplomatic and socio-political dynamics between the countries. The analysis will particularly focus on the opportunities, constraints, and vulnerabilities within these relationships, shedding light on the complexities of Nepal's foreign policy and its security considerations.

Historical Perspectives on Geopolitics of Nepal

Nepal's geopolitical history has been significantly shaped by foreign involvement, driven by internal political instability and a recurring reliance on external support for regime stability. Since the mid-19th century, rulers like Prithvi Narayan Shah, Jung Bahadur, and King Mahendra have strategically aligned Nepal's foreign policy with the interests of regional powers, including India, China, and Britain. This reliance on external actors for political legitimacy has heavily influenced Nepal's foreign relations (Thapa, 2011; Kshetri, 2012). Notable examples include the economic blockades of 1989 and 2015, largely attributed to India, which highlight Nepal's vulnerability as a landlocked nation (Garver, 1991). Additionally, Nepal's foreign policy has frequently been shaped more by the personal agendas of political elites than by a cohesive national strategy (Jaiswal, 2010).

The unification of Nepal in the 18th century had important international implications, particularly in relation to China and India. Conflicts such as the wars with Tibet in 1793 and 1855 and strategic interactions with British India were pivotal moments in shaping Nepal's geopolitical trajectory. After the re-establishment of multiparty democracy in 1990, political parties, notably the Nepali Congress, worked to rebuild strained relations with India following the economic blockade (Garver, 1991). Similarly, Nepal's communist parties adapted their ideologies to

align with democratic principles and recalibrated their foreign policy approach, especially towards India and the United States (Hachhethu, 1999).

To understand the geopolitical environment of Nepal, various geopolitical theories and frameworks are pertinent. Alfred Thayer Mahan's theories on maritime power and Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory are especially relevant. Mahan's focus on naval power and Mackinder's emphasis on the strategic significance of the Eurasian heartland illustrate the global competition for influence over critical regions, a concept that applies to Nepal's position between India and China (Dugin, 1997). The ideas of other theorists like Karl Haushofer and Nicholas Spykman also shed light on how regional powers leverage geographic advantages. According to them, the nations needed to expand their territory to secure resources and maintain economic strength further (Brzezinski, 1997).

From a Chinese geopolitical perspective, realist theories suggest that both China and India, as rising regional/ global powers, shape their foreign policies based on their national interests, sometimes to the detriment of smaller countries like Nepal (Kaplan, 2012). In recent times, China's economic engagement with Nepal has surged, driven by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and large-scale infrastructure projects that underscore China's growing influence in South Asia (Karki, 2015). On the other hand, liberal theories argue that regional cooperation through organizations such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) provides opportunities for Nepal to engage with China in a manner that benefits all parties (Karki, 2015).

Rising India, China and Nepal's Position

India's relationship with Nepal has long been influenced by its geographical proximity, strategic security interests, and cultural connections. The open border shared by the two nations exemplifies their deep historical and cultural ties. However, India's use of hard power in regional diplomacy has sometimes led to tensions, particularly in response to Nepal's political instability and foreign policy challenges (Nayak, 2014). India's interest in Nepal dates back to the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, but recent border disputes and water-sharing issues have strained bilateral relations.

Historically Nepal-China relation has been determined by the cultural export from Nepal to China i.e. The Buddhism and the architect like Araniko and so on. Similarly, the marital ties between the king of china and daughter of Nepal, Bhrikuti exemplify the cultural knot between the two neighbors. However, the modern China has shown the keen interest to expand more economic relations than the cultural one, with its neighbors. Nepal has remained no exception from this influence. This time, China's interaction with Nepal is more economically driven, focusing on development and infrastructure projects, which is evident in the growing trade and investments in Nepal's energy and transportation sectors.

China's ambitions to expand its influence in South Asia have positioned it in direct competition with India. Kaplan (2012) argues that this rivalry is particularly significant in Nepal, where both nations seek to strengthen their influence.

Nepal's geostrategic location between China and India makes it a focal point in regional geopolitics, impacting the security and stability of both neighboring powers. Its position near key Indian states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal emphasizes the importance of Nepal's stability to Indian security. The intensifying geopolitical rivalry between India and China highlights Nepal's strategic value; Kaplan (2012) notes that this competition could turn Nepal into a "chessboard" in potential geopolitical conflicts.

Basically, after 1990s, the movement towards democracy and economic development in Nepal has increased its vulnerability to external influence. Major Powers, including the U.S. and the European Union, acknowledge Nepal's strategic importance, and how Nepal navigates this complex geopolitical landscape will shape its future (Kaplan, 2012).

Economically, Nepal has significant potential, particularly through its rich natural resources like hydropower and tourism. It holds one of the highest per capita hydropower potentials in the world, estimated at 43,000 MW (Adhikari, 2014), although only a small portion has been utilized, indicating the need for greater investment and development in the sector. Tourism is another crucial economic driver, contributing approximately 2% of Nepal's GDP (Nepal Rastra Bank, 2014). Activities like mountaineering and trekking, especially those related to Everest, play an essential role in the economy. However, Nepal's landlocked status presents a challenge by limiting direct access to international markets, leading to reliance on neighboring countries, particularly India. Recent agreements with China have opened new opportunities for alternative transit routes (Sudha, 2016).

Culturally, Nepal embodies a mix of Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid traditions, incorporating Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism. Despite its closeness to India, Nepal maintains a distinct cultural identity with notable Tibetan influences. Nonetheless, Nepal faces challenges related to the influx of external cultures, particularly through Indian media and the spread of Islamic and Christian practices (Karki, 2015). Political changes, including the adoption of a secular constitution and federalism based on ethnicity, have ignited debates over national identity and the unity of Nepalese society (Sudha, 2016)

Rise of China and Indian and its Implication to Nepal: Opportunities and vulnerabilities.

Nepal's strategic importance extends far beyond its immediate regional context, drawing global attention due to its unique geopolitical location between the emerging powers of India and China. As Gurung (2015) states, "whoever rules Nepal will rule India and China," underscoring Nepal's pivotal role in both South Asian and global geopolitics. This potential positions Nepal as a key player in

regional dynamics and a possible "world hub" as major powers seek to assert their influence in the area. Nepal's significance for China is primarily rooted in its geographical and cultural proximity to Tibet. Historically, Nepal has acted as a gateway to Tibet, a region vital to China's national security. Nepal's position provides China with a buffer zone against potential external threats, particularly those from Tibetan refugees in India. China fears that Nepal could be used as a base by other powers to destabilize Tibet (Nayak, 2014). China's interests in Nepal revolve around three main areas: controlling Tibetan refugee activities, diminishing India's influence, and securing vital infrastructure projects, such as airports and highways. To bolster its presence without resorting to force, China has employed soft power strategies, such as establishing Confucius Learning Centers, encouraging Chinese tourism, and promoting cultural exchanges (Nayak, 2014).

For India, Nepal is of immense strategic importance due to shared geographical and cultural links. Nepal's topography mirrors that of India's northern borders, making it a potential conduit for any Chinese military maneuvers into India's heartland (Kumar S, 2011). As such, Nepal's stability is viewed as critical to India's security. Both countries have invested in military modernization, and strategic projects in Nepal further emphasize the region's importance in the context of rising power dynamics in Asia. India's policy towards Nepal has historically been motivated by the desire to maintain strong political, cultural, and security ties. A peaceful, stable, and democratic Nepal is seen as essential for regional stability due to the extensive cultural and historical connections between the two nations. However, India remains cautious of growing external influence in Nepal, particularly from China, as it would disrupt the regional balance of power (Nayak, 2014).

Nepal's strategic significance has also drawn increased attention from the United States, which views it as an integral part of the South Asian security landscape. U.S. foreign policy towards Nepal has been shaped by efforts to counter the spread of communism, especially following the Chinese revolution. During the Cold War, the U.S. positioned Nepal as a buffer against expanding Chinese influence in the region (Nayak, 2014). The U.S. has focused on three main objectives in its engagement with Nepal: fostering peace and stability in South Asia, supporting Nepal's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and aiding economic development through foreign assistance. Nepal's status as one of the world's least developed countries has made it a recipient of U.S. economic and technical support aimed at promoting democratic governance and growth. While strategic interests exist, U.S. involvement has largely emphasized humanitarian and diplomatic initiatives (Nayak, 2014).

The European Union (EU) has been engaged in Nepal's development since the 1970s, focusing on democratic governance, human rights, and sustainable development. This involvement became more significant after the Cold War, when

Nepal's geopolitical importance waned for both the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. By the early 1990s, the EU emerged as a major source of development aid and diplomatic support (Nayak, 2014). The EU has targeted socio-economic challenges such as poverty, education, and governance improvement. It has also supported democratic institutions, human rights, and regional cooperation. Through programs like those of the European Commission, the EU has played a vital role in Nepal's long-term development, enhancing its connections with Western countries.

Implications on National Security of Nepal

Geopolitical elements, both external and internal, play a significant role in shaping the national security framework of any nation. Nepal, situated between two powerful Asian nations—India and China—encounters distinct challenges in maintaining its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and socio-political stability. This chapter examines how these geopolitical factors impact Nepal's national security, referencing theoretical insights from earlier sections. Central to Nepal's national security strategy is the safeguarding of its sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and the well-being of its citizens. The overarching objective is to achieve a stable, democratic government, with national security serving as a foundation for freedom, economic development, and adherence to the rule of law. Key national interests include:

- a. Sovereignty and independence
- b. National integrity and unity
- c. Protection of citizens' rights and prestige
- d. Border security
- e. Economic development and social prosperity

These national interests shape Nepal's foreign policy and national security strategies, aiming to protect the nation from external threats while ensuring internal stability. However, national security is no longer viewed solely through the lens of military defence but includes broader concepts of human, societal, and economic security.

The examination of Nepal's geopolitical landscape is vital due to the growing significance of Asia in global geopolitics. With China and India emerging as dominant global powers, Nepal's strategic location between them has become increasingly important (Dahal, 1997, p. 60). As a small, landlocked country, Nepal's security is heavily influenced by the policies and interests of its powerful neighbors. This study seeks to enhance understanding of how Nepal can safeguard its national interests, preserve its sovereignty, and ensure its security amid an increasingly unstable regional context (Nayak, 2014, p. 112).

Nepal's national security is heavily influenced by both external and internal factors within its geopolitically volatile region. The primary external threats stem

from its powerful neighbors, India and China, who have significant strategic interests in Nepal. While direct military aggression from either country is unlikely, both possess the ability to exert influence through political, economic, and psychological means. The strategic competition between India and China has profound implications for Nepal's security. As both powers seek to strengthen their influence in the region, Nepal becomes a focal point of their rivalry. Although the likelihood of military conflict between India and China remains low due to nuclear deterrence and limited military ambitions, historical territorial disputes like the 1962 Sino-Indian war show that tensions can escalate (Simon, 2013).

Nepal's geographic position between these two major powers means that any shift in its allegiances can be perceived as a threat by one or both nations. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between India and Nepal exemplifies this complex dynamic, suggesting a link between Nepal's security and India's defense strategy. Any external aggression against Nepal is likely to trigger joint security measures by India and Nepal.

China's historical ties with Nepal date back to the 18th century and have evolved over time, including the 1792 Sino-Nepalese Treaty and the 1856 Treaty of Thapathali, which established Nepal's status as a regional power with influence over Tibet. In the 20th century, relations shifted to a more practical approach, emphasizing economic cooperation in trade, infrastructure, and tourism. China's growing investment in infrastructure, like roads and airports, reflects its increasing influence in Nepal, partly as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While China does not pose an immediate military threat, Nepal must navigate its ties with China carefully to avoid becoming entangled in Sino-Indian rivalries. Internally, Nepal faces various challenges that could undermine its national security. As a nation marked by ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, Nepal's internal unity is fragile, with several factors potentially leading to conflict. Ethnic tensions are a significant threat to national stability. The diverse population, which includes numerous ethnic groups with distinct languages, cultures, and identities, has led to demands for autonomy and independence, such as those from the Madhesi community in the Terai region. If such tensions are heightened by external influences or political mismanagement, they could compromise state unity (Gurung, 2015).

Religious extremism also poses a potential risk. Despite Nepal's historical religious tolerance, recent growth in the Christian population and the politicization of religion could lead to divisions. The expansion of Christian missionary activity, supported by foreign donors, has been criticized for undermining the country's Hindu-majority culture (Ghimire, 2015). Such religious tensions, if not managed properly, could destabilize Nepal, particularly under its secular constitution. Nepal's role as a transit point for refugees—especially from Tibet, Bhutan, and Bangladesh—presents both humanitarian and security challenges. The unregulated movement of people across porous borders strains resources and raises security

concerns, including the risk of extremist infiltration and illicit trade. Since the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990, Nepal has faced persistent political instability, marked by power struggles, factionalism, and ideological divides that often paralyze governance. The inability of political leaders to implement reforms and address marginalized groups' needs has deepened public dissatisfaction, weakening the government's response to internal and external threats and impeding national security policies.

Economic vulnerabilities further contribute to Nepal's insecurity. Reliance on remittances exposes the country to risks tied to foreign labor migration, while issues such as unemployment, underdevelopment, and limited resources exacerbate economic instability. Natural disasters also pose a significant threat, with earthquakes, floods, and landslides being common. The 2015 earthquake was a stark reminder of Nepal's susceptibility to such events. Climate change amplifies these vulnerabilities, with rising risks of drought, floods, and landslides threatening infrastructure and economic stability. There is no doubt that Nepal and India both are close neighbor but many incidents like Lipulake dispute, economic blockade, not responding EPG report and anti-secular intension towards Nepal are major controversial area as incident (Ghimire, 2024).

Some scholars have given ideas regarding Nepalese geopolitics and its strategic from different point of views which are reviewed as such;

a) **Geopolitics of Nepal: Survival Strategy of a Small State**

In *Geopolitics of Nepal: Survival Strategy of a Small State* (1997), Dev Raj Dahal examines how Nepal has struggled to maintain a consistent foreign policy due to frequent government changes. Dahal stresses the importance of establishing a stable regime capable of fostering internal unity and developing a coherent security strategy to ensure the nation's survival and prosperity (Dahal, 1997, p. 61).

b) **Strategic Himalayas: Republican Nepal and External Powers**

Nihar R. Nayak's 2014 work, *Strategic Himalayas: Republican Nepal and External Powers*, highlights the strategic importance of Nepal for major regional powers like India and China, as well as global players such as the United States and the European Union. While Nayak provides an in-depth analysis of Nepal's geopolitical relevance, his focus leans more toward economic and diplomatic impacts rather than a thorough exploration of national security challenges (Nayak, 2014, p. 115).

c) **Geopolitics of Nepal and International Responses to Conflict Transformation**

Rajan Bhattarai's 2005 article, *Geopolitics of Nepal and International Responses to Conflict Transformation*, discusses the geopolitical context during the Maoist insurgency, addressing how regional geopolitics affected internal conflicts. However, Bhattarai's analysis does not extend to the wider national security implications of Nepal's geopolitical situation (Bhattarai, 2005, p. 50).

- d) **The Revenge of Geography: Implications for International Relations**
In *The Revenge of Geography*, Robert D. Kaplan explores the influence of geography on global politics. While Kaplan discusses geographical factors shaping power dynamics worldwide, his book does not delve deeply into the specific geopolitical realities of Nepal or its security challenges (Kaplan, 2012, p. 143).
- e) **Geopolitical Realities of Nepal and National Security After 2006**
Col. Nirman Singh Gurung's research paper focuses on Nepal's geopolitical realities post-2006 democratic transition. Gurung examines the involvement of external powers in Nepalese geopolitics and analyzes the implications of these external influences on national security. However, the study, while comprehensive on post-2006 dynamics, does not cover all dimensions of Nepal's security challenges, indicating a need for further research on this topic (Gurung, 2015, p. 145).

Findings and Conclusion

Nepal's geopolitical positioning affects its national security in different ways. It underscores that being situated between India and China heavily influences Nepal's diplomatic and security strategies, necessitating a balanced approach to mitigate external risks and protect national stability. Both India and China heavily concerned with Nepal from their security perspective due to its strategic location.

The changing political and economic dynamics of present day in relation to India and China could have different implication to Nepal's national security. Nepal cannot and should not underestimate the concerns of both the neighbors, otherwise, it might be harmful for its existential threats. Therefore Nepal should have the balancing policy and capacity between the countries for its survival. Historically, Nepal has always balanced the two big powers for its one benefits. Nepal should build internal capacity for the effective dealing with both powers convincingly about its internal and external limitations. India and China themselves have a greater competition for market and the power. Sometimes, these competitions even have demonstrated in their border conflicts. In this situation, Nepal should not favor to any of the bloc. Rather, Nepal should urge both the neighboring powers for not having any disagreement between them for the cause of Nepal. Nepal could have both opportunities and challenges in the changing economic and political scenario of India and China.

Arguing the Nepalese context, geographic location may provide multiple opportunity to Nepal for the further development. However, if Nepal fails to handle its internal and external affair more carefully and with strategic preparation, the geographic sensitivity itself can be the cause of internal and external catastrophe.

Nepal's strategic location between these two emerging global powers provides several opportunities for economic growth, trade, and development. Nepal

can capitalize on its position to act as a vital trade conduit between India and China, potentially benefiting from increased cross-border trade and infrastructure projects like the China-Nepal rail link. Moreover, Nepal can attract foreign investments, particularly in sectors such as hydropower, tourism, and infrastructure development, where both India and China have a vested interest. Nepal could also leverage its position in regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) to further strengthen its diplomatic and economic ties with neighbouring countries, providing opportunities for regional cooperation. In the long run, when we succeed to navigate the transportation link between India and China, Nepal will have the large opportunities link between to global market. Similarly the same transportation may help Nepal to grow for the tourism promotion.

However, Nepal's proximity to India and China also exposes it to several vulnerabilities too. As both neighbours vie for greater influence in Nepal, there is a risk of becoming a battleground for their competing geopolitical and economic ambitions. Nepal could face external pressure to align with one side at the expense of its neutrality and sovereignty. Additionally, Nepal's dependence on India for trade and transit, while also seeking to engage China economically, may create an imbalance in its foreign policy, leading to economic and political vulnerabilities. Frequently appearing internal instability, such as political fragmentation and social unrest, could further complicate Nepal's efforts to navigate these external pressures. Nepal must also address concerns regarding its territorial integrity, particularly in areas like the disputed border with India, which has the potential to escalate tensions and undermine its security.

In conclusion, Not only the economy, or even the military power alone can protect Nepal's sovereignty, but the smart diplomacy can. The importance of historical insights into diplomacy and non-alignment is emphasized as crucial for navigating these challenges. Nepal's freshwater resources, representing 2.27% of the world's supply, are critical for domestic needs and regional cooperation, particularly in maintaining water-sharing agreements with India. The open border with India, while supporting trade and movement, also creates challenges related to migration, especially in the Terai region. Effective management of the border is essential to control migration and ensure security. The research concludes that national security extends beyond external threats to include internal factors such as political stability, social inclusivity, and economic growth. Addressing basic human needs is fundamental for promoting development and ensuring security. The study emphasizes that the interconnected nature of Nepal's geopolitical position, foreign policy, and national security requires a comprehensive strategy. An adaptable approach that prioritizes diplomacy, economic development, and internal stability is essential for safeguarding sovereignty and achieving long-term stability.

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