

Geopolitics of Nepal and Its Relations with China and India

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Abstract

This paper discusses about the concept of geopolitics and geopolitical theory. Most importantly it tries to analyze the geopolitical condition of Nepal relating to the world powers China and India. Nepal as a landlocked small country of south Asia situated in between the two world's emerging economy and military giants has a complex geopolitical situation. Nepal is poor and underdeveloped country which suffered from a very long political instability for a very long time period. In these circumstances the foreign relation and foreign policy has numerous challenges on its way. Nepal is also being suffered from India's political interventions. There seems number of instances of political interventions and unnecessary political encroachment from either of the two neighbor countries and even western countries. In such situations Nepal should have strong and bold foreign policy and maintain neutrality and non-alignment with other nations.

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Introduction

Geopolitics is the study of the effects of Earth's geography (human and physical) on politics and international relations. While geopolitics usually refers to countries and relations between them, it may also focus on two other kinds of states: *de facto* independent states with limited international recognition and; relations between sub-national geopolitical entities, such as the federated states that make up a federation, confederation or a quasi-federal system. At the level of international relations, geopolitics is a method of studying foreign policy to understand, explain and predict international political behavior through geographical variables. These include climate, topography, demography, natural resources, and applied science of the region being evaluated. Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), Sir Halford Mackinder and Nicholas J. Spykman are the prominent scholars who explained the geopolitical theory in different international relation perspective.

In order to understand the geo-politics of Nepal, we need to understand geographical context of the Indian subcontinent as a whole. It is a self-contained region that includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. We may call the subcontinent “self-contained” because it is a region that is isolated on all sides by difficult terrain or by ocean. In geopolitical terms it is— an island.

The bilateral relation between Nepal and China has been friendly and is defined by the Sino-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed on April 28, 1960 by the two countries. Though initially unenthusiastic, Nepal has been of late making efforts to increase trade and connectivity with China. Relations between Nepal and China got a boost when both countries solved all border disputes along the China–Nepal border by signing the Sino-Nepal boundary agreement on March 21, 1960. The government of both Nepal and China ratified the border agreement treaty on October 5, 1961. Similarly, The Republic of India and the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal initiated their relationship with the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship and accompanying secret letters that defined security relations between the two countries, and an agreement governing both bilateral trade and trade transiting Indian Territory. Nepal is small landlocked country in the Himalayas which is bordered with India in three sides, east, west and south. China borders in the north of the country. This is a complex geopolitical state of Nepal because it is landlocked by two very large and power countries which are rivals. In this scenario Nepal’s geopolitical condition is always in challenging situation which at a time has played a role of buffer state during colonization era. To maintain a good relation among both nations and to adopt strong diplomacy and foreign policy is the vital part of Nepal.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to explore the concept of geopolitics and geopolitical theory in the international relations perspective. This paper tries to analyze the geopolitical conditions and geopolitical strategy of Nepal. The geopolitical circumstances of Nepal being an underdeveloped and landlocked country are important aspect of analysis. Along with the geopolitical circumstances, this paper tries to study the relation between China and India.

Methodology

This paper makes a brief description and analysis about the geopolitics and geopolitical theory in International Politics. It also tries to analyze the geopolitics geopolitical strategy of Nepal and relation with China and India. As this is an analytical descriptive paper, it makes the optimum use of data from the secondary sources on the geopolitical theory and Nepal's relation with China and India.

Concept of geopolitics

Geopolitics (from Greek γῆ *gê* "earth, land" and πολιτική *politikē* "politics") is the study of the effects of Earth's geography (human and physical) on politics and international relations. While geopolitics usually refers to countries and relations between them, it may also focus on two other kinds of states: *de facto* independent states with limited international recognition and; relations between sub-national geopolitical entities, such as the federated states that make up a federation, confederation or a quasi-federal system.

At the level of international relations, geopolitics is a method of studying foreign policy to understand, explain and predict international political behavior through geographical variables. These include area studies, climate, topography, demography, natural resources, and applied science of the region being evaluated.

Geopolitics focuses on political power linked to geographic space. In particular, territorial waters and land territory in correlation with diplomatic history. Topics of geopolitics include relations between the interests of international political actors and interests focused within an area, a space, or a geographical element; relations which create a geopolitical system. "Critical

geopolitics" deconstructs classical geopolitical theories, by showing their political/ideological functions for great powers.

Geopolitical Theory

Geopolitics is the study of power relationships past, present and future. It is the study of the relationship among politics and geography, demography, and economics, especially with respect to the foreign policy of a nation. A branch of political geography that considers the strategic value of land and sea area in the context of national economic and military power and ambitions.

Thus geopolitical theory is ideology and thoughts on the state's power to control space or territory and shape the foreign policy of individual states and international political relations. It is concerned with how geographical factors, including territory, population, strategic location, and natural resource endowments, as modified by economics and technology, affect the relations between states and the struggle for world domination.

The main ideas of geo politicians

Mackinder's Idea:

- advent of railroads released countries from dependence on Navy to move Army
- focus of warfare would be shifted from the sea to the hinterland
- "pivot area" northern and interior parts of the Eurasian continent where the rivers flow to the Arctic or to salt seas and lakes
- railroads would make this area easy to defend and hard to conquer
- Heartland Theory: "He who controls the Heartland controls the World Island (Eurasia and Africa); He who controls the World Island, controls the world."
- Believed Germany would be a threat to controlling the resources of Eastern Europe and the Heartland.

Alfred Thayer Mahan's Idea

- sea power necessary to facilitate trade and peaceful commerce

- the country that possessed power would be one that could control the seas
- development of a strong navy was an essential ingredient to a powerful state as was the country's location
- Most power would be held by a country with accessible relative location and connected with a long coastline and good harbors

Nicholas J. Spykman's Idea:

Nicholas J. Spykman is both a follower and critic of geostrategists Mahan and Mackinder. His work is based on assumptions similar to Mackinder including the unity of world politics and the world sea. He extends this to include the unity of the air. Spykman adopts Mackinder's divisions of the world, renaming some:

1. The Heartland
2. The Rimland (analogous to Mackinder's "inner or marginal crescent" also an intermediate region, lying between the Heartland and the marginal sea powers); and
3. The Offshore Islands & Continents (Mackinder's "outer or insular crescent")

Geopolitics of Nepal

I. Nepal-India relation:

The Republic of India and the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal initiated their relationship with the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship and accompanying secret letters that defined security relations between the two countries, and an agreement governing both bilateral trade and trade transiting Indian Territory. The 1950 treaty and letters exchanged between the Indian government and Rana rulers of Nepal, stated that "neither government shall tolerate any threat to the security of the other by a foreign aggressor" and obligated both sides "to inform each other of any serious friction or misunderstanding with any neighboring state likely to cause any breach in the friendly relations subsisting between the two governments." These accords cemented a "special relationship" between India and Nepal.

II. Nepal-China relation:

The bilateral relation between Nepal and China has been friendly and is defined by the *Sino-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship* signed on April 28, 1960 by the two

countries. Though initially unenthusiastic, Nepal has been of late making efforts to increase trade and connectivity with China. Relations between Nepal and China got a boost when both countries solved all border disputes along the China–Nepal border by signing the Sino-Nepal boundary agreement on March 21, 1960. The government of both Nepal and China ratified the border agreement treaty on October 5, 1961. From 1975 onward, Nepal has maintained a policy of balancing the competing influence of China and Nepal's southern neighbor India, the only two neighbors of the Himalayan country after the annexation of the Kingdom of Sikkim by India in 1975.

III. Geopolitical Dimension of Nepal

Nepal is independent from the date of its evolution. During the British rule in India—its feudal rulers managed to stay relatively independent by offering diplomatic and military support to the British. Britain wanted Tibet as a buffer with China, not Nepal that time. Due to various reasons—British could not conquer Nepal; though it trapped it by supporting autocratic rulers to prolong their regime. The Sugauli Treaty of 1816 has trapped Nepal to become de-facto colonial state of Britain though most historians do not accept this fact. The Nehru doctrine was the continuation of the British philosophy. The Indian regime supported the democratic alliance under the Nepali Congress to abolish Rana autocracy at one side and in a chronicling deal forced Rana ruler to sign the Peace and Friendship Treaty in 1950. Most Nepali think they are deprived of their rights due to this unequal treaty—it is said unequal because there cannot be an equality which is not only landlocked—it is India locked by three sides. Besides to this, there is no comparison on power balance. The privilege and facilities provided by International Conventions are also deprived at times due to this treaty. Most Nepali perceives that India's concern with Nepali politics is focused towards security from the north and economic advantage that Nepal enriched with natural resources. The huge Nepali market is another important source of income for Indian products. To secure all these—India is continuously influencing the weak and fragile politics. The motives behind such intension are proved through several interventions usually aimed to empowering a proxy political force to topple Rana regime in 1950, setting back Late King Birendra's peace zone proposal in 1990 and covert support to Maoist as well as overt support to royal regime to fight each other from 1996 to 2004. India declined its support to royal regime to fight against the insurgency in 2004 due to Ex-King Gyanendra's autocratic move in Nepal.

On the other side, China—though it does not fall in South Asia- carries interest in this region. President Xi Jinping's visit to India in September 2014 was not uncontroversial. He reached to Ahmadabad in Gujarat after the visit to Sri-Lanka. As most speculates- China is eager to open the old sea bound Silk Road from South China Sea via Strait of Malacca - Strait of Hormuz to Middle East, west Asia as well as Africa. Similarly it is advocating for 'one belt- one road' and has plan to develop old land bound Silk Road through central Asia connecting Europe. China is also aggressively laying the railway lines connecting from Beijing to Nepal border to get inside the huge Indian market in the south. Tibet is the nerve point where China is blamed for 'expansionist' by the US and west whereas Sikkim annexation by India was not significantly criticized as well. Geopolitical Dimension of Nepal and Its Impact in South Asia. If we see the past, both India and China have played dirty games to annex the weak neighbors through a chronicle self-made situation in the region. China's interest in Nepal is heavily influenced by Tibetan issue. China could benefit if it can dilute western influence in Nepal. Indo-Nepal relations, though it is cordial needs some flash back to further shine up in the present days scenario. Nepali speaking Bhutanese residing in Southern Bhutan were displaced to India and further to Nepal. The first point of entry for these displaced people was India as Nepal- Bhutan has no common border. They were pushed to Nepal rather to their own country as India had privileged relations with Bhutan (foreign and defense policy was looked after by India that time). On contrary, Nepal is more cautious about its independence, freedom and sovereignty. That is why, from Indian perspective—Bhutan was closer than Nepal. Furthermore, the main cause of antipathy towards Indian hegemony starts from 1989 when India imposed economic blockade to Nepal to punish royal regime but the ultimate sufferer were the people. The blockade was for the cause Nepal's acquisition of Chinese anti-aircraft guns showing the clause of Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 which speaks about consent to be taken while acquiring weapons from third country. If so, has India taken Nepal's consent when it equipped its army as well? The five months 'undeclared' economic blockade in 2015 by Indian Establishment though it does not agree was due to Nepal's declaration of it constitution from the elected constitutional assembly. The case of unique 'open border' between huge India and small Nepal has different connotations. The trade deficit of Nepal is huge and cumulating day by day with India. Besides of realizing the need to regulate the border by both the countries, no initiation has taken from either side in this regard. In the changed scenario of South Asia, India may not be willing to lose its influence in Nepal as it has with Sri Lanka. So, Nepal- India relations should be reviewed and modified with the changed dynamics in this region otherwise the existence of small country like Nepal will be jeopardized. China is more or less mute on the issues concerned to bilateral

relations of the neighbors. The situation has changed after the five month 'undeclared' blockade by India. The popular demand for trade diversification has forced KP Sharma Oli's Government to incline towards China. It insists as the foreign policy should base on the 'principle of panchasil' and has advocated accordingly. Nepal is suspicious with Indian move to annex Sikkim in 1975. Due to this, it was slightly inclined towards China. In the cold war era, Nepal could promote its national interest through 'non-aligned policy' having equi-distance to both the countries. The bilateral relation with India gradually declined after late King Birendra's peace zone proposal to Nepal. The interpretation of the clauses of Indo-Nepal Treaty-1950 remained the 'hot-cake' for both the countries.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) raised the weapon against the system in 1996. Nepal witnessed a decade long insurgency which ended in 2006 via 12 Point Agreement mediated by Indian Establishment. Despite of Nepal experiencing more than 250 years of statehood, still trying to make it 'nation-state' as per modern European philosophy. Having more than six constitutions in six decade of time-frame from 'first revolution' in 1950 against the Rana rulers- Nepal is unable to experience 'true democracy'—through fully people's empowered system. What is the main hurdle? Apparently, Chinese interest in Nepal looks like to dilute western as well as Indian influence to weaken China raising the issues of 'free Tibet'- so it has covertly increased the surveillance activities in Indo-Nepal border. At the same time- to monitor the activities of the westerns, it has increased Chinese presence in the tourist hub areas through restaurants/cafes and even in the travel/trade business in Nepal. Similarly, Pakistan's anti-India elements are using open Indo- Nepal border to smuggle the fake currency to weaken the Indian monetary market, so as Nepali fake currency is smuggled to Nepal. Contra-band drugs and new routes for gold smuggling from China to India through this open trans-national border have undermined the security apparatus of both the countries. The fragile politics of Nepal and like-minded attitude of neighbors has encouraged the anti- Geopolitical Dimension of Nepal and Its Impact in South Asia social elements to flourish in Nepal. In consideration to geopolitical situation, Nepal must be cautious to such elements and promote 'good governance' at one side and good friendly relationship with China and India on the other side.

Conclusion

Nepal is a small and poorly developed state in the Himalayas of South Asia. It is a landlocked country bordered on the either sides with world's giant military and economic power states, China and India. This has been the major factor which plays important role in the determination of the geopolitical strategy of Nepal. It is very delicate circumstance of Nepal. It holds the challenges to maintain the strong foreign policies of Nepal and even move ahead accordance with the waves of economic and political affairs of India and China. Nepal is itself dragged back because of long political instability and in addition it has to face several political interventions and pressures from neighboring countries which aids in the political instability of country. In such circumstances Nepal has to make a strong step ahead so as to maintain a strong and balanced foreign policy and follow the norms of non-alignment and panchasil. Nepal should always play an important role in balancing the power struggle between China and India. The only option for Nepal to have sovereignty, national security, and national integrity and maintain sound environment in relation between neighbors is to not interfere or let any loop holes to cause any threats to them. This might play important role to enhance Nepal's international relation in geopolitical perspective.

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