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## Emerging geopolitical dynamics in Nepal-China relations, after 2008

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### Abstract

Since Nepal and China established formal diplomatic relations in 1955, their ties have been characterized by mutual respect and cooperation. China has consistently viewed Nepal as a close and important neighbor, honoring its sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, while offering assistance during times of need. In return, Nepal has steadfastly upheld the "One-China" policy. However, geopolitical dynamics complicate their relationship. Factors such as geography, resources, political ideologies, and regional power structures significantly influence domestic and international policies. Nepal's southern neighbor, India, has long expressed concerns about Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in Nepal. This unease dates back to the construction of the Kodari Highway in the 1960s and continues today with ongoing many projects and hydropower ventures involving Chinese investment and contractors. India's refusal to purchase electricity from these projects has cast doubts on their economic viability. Meanwhile, China seeks a stable and strong government in Nepal to foster ongoing economic collaboration and mutual trust. Nepal must also ensure border security to prevent anti-Chinese activities, maintaining smooth bilateral relations. The 2019 trade and transit agreement between Nepal and China, which aims to ease Nepal's landlocked status, should be fully implemented, with the proposed railway linking the two countries acting as a potential gateway to Nepal's economic growth. To ensure stability, India must recognize and respect Nepal's sovereignty in its dealings with China. This study employs a qualitative, exploratory approach, utilizing secondary data from journal articles, books, and reliable sources.

**Keywords:** Nepal-China relations, bilateral relations, financial cooperation, security interest, geopolitical concerns

### Introduction

Nepal-China relations have experienced numerous fluctuations throughout history. In its modern political history, Nepal has cultivated friendly relations with both China and India. Positioned between two major Asian powers, Nepal has consistently sought to maintain a delicate balance in its relations with both countries. The land connectivity between Nepal and China provides a strong foundation for their bilateral ties, fostering economic and logistical cooperation. However, the relationship is also shaped by geographical constraints, which often present challenges. Nepal's location, nestled in the Himalayas, plays a significant role in the dynamics of its relationship with China. The geopolitical landscape—especially in relation to Nepal's strategic proximity to Tibet—adds a layer of security significance to their ties, influencing both countries' diplomatic and security policies. As a result, Nepal's foreign relations, particularly with China, are intricately connected to broader regional and security considerations.

Nepal shares a 1,415 km border with China's Tibet Autonomous Region. The relationship between Nepal and Tibet was strengthened in the 7th century when Princess Bhrikuti married Songtsan Gampo, the Tibetan king. Later, in the 13th century, the visit of the renowned artist Araniko to China and his role in constructing the White Pagoda Temple (Bai-Ta Temple) in Beijing further deepened the socio-cultural ties between the two regions (Sangroula, 2019, p. 413).

Nepal's geopolitical position, strategically situated between East Asia and South Asia, grants it the potential to influence global politics. Its location makes it a pivot of strategic importance for major world powers. Consequently, the political and economic interests of influential nations such as the United States, China, the European Union, and India play a

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significant role in shaping Nepal's foreign policy. These powers, through both direct and indirect involvement, often influence Nepal's macro and micro-level governance (Pokhrel, 2021) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Efforts to bolster Nepal's security ties with the U.S. through the State Partnership Program (SPP) and with China via the Global Security Initiative (GSI) could pose significant challenges to Nepal's national security (K.C., 2023, p. 231) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Geostrategic encompasses a tactical military perspective, a political dimension, and a culturally defined territorial context, focusing on the spatial distribution of resources, populations, and geophysical systems. Since 2008, Nepal-China relations have been increasingly shaped by various geopolitical factors. As China's economic and military power has grown, and tensions between China and both India and the United States have intensified, Nepal's ties with China—and with other major global powers—have become more deeply entwined with geopolitical considerations. Given Nepal's strategic location, geopolitics has become an unavoidable reality in its relationship with China.

### Review of Literature

**Tibet Issue:** Nepal-China ties are still tense when it comes to the Tibet issue. Nepal adheres to the "One China" policy and acknowledges Tibet as a fundamental component of China. It is difficult to handle this situation while balancing the Tibetan community's feelings within Nepal. Besides, India and China follow two ideologically different political systems. While parliamentary democracy India has adopted with adult franchise, China has continued with its Communist system (Adhikari, 2012, p.1) <sup>[1]</sup>. Adhikari additional states that the boundary dispute continues to haunt the relationship between India and China for the past 50 years and the problem might trigger into a violent conflict between the two neighbors (Adhikari, 2012, p.39) <sup>[1]</sup>. If this happens, Nepal might be in the receiving end of the conflict it has absolutely no role in creating.

India, Nepal's immediate neighbor with an open border and long-standing bilateral ties, is steadily emerging as a regional power and is poised to become the world's second-largest economy in the near future. At this critical juncture, Nepal holds growing strategic importance for China, India, and the United States due to its geostrategic location. Despite being bound by several treaties with India, Nepal has expressed its support for both the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation and China's Belt and Road Initiative, highlighting its balancing approach to international partnerships (K.C., 2023, p.231) <sup>[4]</sup>.

China, in its bid to expand its global influence, has introduced several strategic initiatives that complement the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These include the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and Global Security Initiative (GSI)—all central to President Xi Jinping's vision of reshaping global governance.

Positioned as alternatives to the Western-led international order, these initiatives underscore China's ambition to lead on the world stage. Nepal has already joined the GDI, with China executing select projects under this framework in collaboration with the China Foundation for Rural Development. Additionally, Beijing is actively encouraging Nepal to align with its broader strategic vision (Bhatta,

2024) <sup>[2]</sup>.

### Methodology

The qualitative analysis of secondary materials for this study drew from books, journal articles, and select reliable websites. Exploratory research methods and deductive procedures were employed. Key focal points encompassed shifts in China policy toward Nepal, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Indo-Pacific strategy, geopolitical rivalries between China, India and the US, and strategic partnerships between India and the US. Adopting a realist perspective, the study scrutinized facts and phenomena through the lens of realist theory.

### Emerging Geopolitics in Nepal

**Geopolitical Balance:** Maintaining a delicate geopolitical balance is difficult given Nepal's critical location between China and India. Nepal must balance its own interests with those of both main regional actors, China and India, while preserving its own national sovereignty.

Geopolitical interests and concerns in relation to Nepal-China cooperation, however, is not a recent phenomenon. When China built Kodari Highway, Nepal faced blockade by India. Over the years, geopolitical interest in Nepal-China relation has been felt to be more intensive and visible. This can be substantiated by the fact that despite signing the BRI agreement with China in 2017, Nepal has not been able to implement a single BRI project in Nepal. India and some Western countries, principally the US, stand against BRI. India argues that BRI is the "debt-trap diplomacy". Not only BRI, other Chinese financial cooperation projects are also facing the geopolitical problems. There is a fear of Pokhara International Airport made by Chinese aid and Gautam Buddha International Airport built by Chinese contractors remaining idle as India has not provided air routes from its space apparently because it is averse to any project built with Chinese assistance and funding or by Chinese contractors. This type of non-cooperation by India also poses a challenge to the foreign policy conducts of sovereign nation like Nepal.

It is said that the Nepal embassy in Beijing has also suffered from pressure from Indian geopolitics in Nepal. Rajeshwar Acharya, who has become the Nepalese ambassador to China, has mentioned in his book *Diplomatic Diary* that the Indian Embassy in China has alarmed the employees working in the Nepali Embassy by monitoring and investigating all the activities between Nepal and China (Acharya, 2079 B.S. p. 115).

### India Factor

Nehru times, India has expressed the wish that its bordering states, including Nepal, be parts of India. Leo E Rose mentions that the definition of policy toward the three "border states" of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan had been a perplexing problem for in-dependent India. "Several high-level Indian officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Sardar Vallabhai Patel, are reported to have urged at one time the accession of the Border States to the Indian Union on the same basis as the Indian "native states" (Rose, 1971, p.195) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Geographical proximity, historical ties, shared socio-cultural identities, and Nepal's need to access the nearest sea have all contributed to a greater interdependence with India than

with China. India and Nepal do not consider each other a security threat. While occasional irritations arise in their bilateral relations, they are generally manageable through dialogue and mutual understanding (Shrestha, 2015). Furthermore, India has played a significant role in Nepal's political history, from helping bring an end to the Rana rule and shaping the 1990 constitution, to facilitating the Maoists' transition into peaceful democratic politics. Notably, the well-known 12-point agreement between the Maoists and the seven political parties was made in New Delhi (Bishwokarma, 2080). But sometimes India has been showing the British-era mindset regarding to Nepal.

### China Factor

Since 1956, Nepal and China have maintained a long-standing relationship centered on economic assistance, with China consistently being one of Nepal's key donor countries. China's support spans a wide range of sectors, providing both financial and technical aid in areas such as infrastructure, transportation, industrial development, healthcare, education, and hydropower development (Dahal, 2018). Nonetheless, Nepal is cautious about limiting its relationship with China to a purely strategic move. Instead, it seeks a partnership based on mutual benefit while striving to avoid getting entangled in regional power struggles (Bhatta, 2023) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Nepal is geographically close to China's autonomous region of Tibet, and China is keen to prevent any anti-China activities from taking place within Nepal. Protecting its security interests is a top priority for China, especially since protests demanding an independent Tibet occasionally occur in Nepal. To mitigate this, China seeks to prevent such situations from escalating. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, China kept the Tatopani border point closed for an extended period. Media reports suggest that the border closure was largely due to concerns over the rise in anti-China activities near the border. China decided to reopen the Tatopani port in September 2023, coinciding with Nepalese Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's official visit to China.

At the bilateral level, China expects Nepal to uphold several key positions: recognizing Tibet as an integral part of China, supporting the One-China policy (which has evolved into the One-China principle) concerning Taiwan, and ensuring that Nepal's territory is not used by other parties to act against China. However, Nepal does not make similar requests or demands from China. This leads to the question: does China offer reciprocity with the same level of commitment and approach? (Bhatta, 2024) <sup>[2]</sup>.

### U.S. and European Strategic Interests

Economically, China's rise has shifted the global power structure from a unipolar to a multipolar world. While Western economies are facing decline, China's economic influence continues to strengthen on the global stage. In response to this, Western powers have united in efforts to counter China's expanding influence. Given that China's autonomous region borders Tibet, Western nations are closely monitoring anti-China activities in Nepal. Investments and activities from Western countries have increased in Nepal's monasteries and regions near the China border, including Manang, Mustang, Sindhupalchok, and Rasuwa.

Western powers view Nepal as a strategic location to halt

China's rise and are aware of its potential role in balancing the influence of both China and India. The involvement of Western nations in anti-China activities within Nepal has been revealed intermittently. Particularly within Nepal's monasteries, there are reports of anti-China activities, with noticeable Western influence in these regions. Western countries seek to curb the influence of both China and India, recognizing Nepal's geopolitical significance in understanding the dynamics of both neighboring powers.

The Sino-US dispute could lead China to view Nepal as a strategically important nation, positioning it as a key destination for significant investments. This shift in focus could enhance Nepal's standing with the US, EU, and India, while reducing its long-term reliance on these powers. Moreover, increased Chinese investments would foster capital accumulation and contribute to economic growth throughout Nepal (Prasai, 2023) <sup>[8]</sup>.

Lamichhane (2023) <sup>[5]</sup> argues that the study highlights the importance of the United States maintaining an active presence in Nepal, given that both China and India now regard the country as strategically significant. As these nations increase their involvement in global politics, they find themselves in competition with one another. In this context, Nepal's non-aligned foreign policy plays a crucial role, with similarities to Ukraine's position due to its geographic location. The research stresses the need for Nepal to cultivate a balanced relationship with international powers to ensure economic growth and avoid becoming a geopolitical flashpoint. The report also discusses the strategic partnerships between the US and India in the Indo-Pacific, largely driven by a shared concern over the growing Chinese influence.

### Post-2008 Dynamics of Nepal-China Relations

From 2008 onward, there has been a sequence of significant progressions in Nepal-China relations, fostering closer ties between the two nations across various domains. With the collapse of the monarchy and the inauguration of a republic in 2008, Nepal's political landscape underwent a significant sea change. After undergoing this change, Nepal moved to strengthen its diplomatic and economic ties with its neighbors, notably China. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, marking the official conclusion of Nepal's decade-long Maoist insurgency, was signed in 2006, marking one of the significant turning points in Nepal-China ties. China demonstrated its commitment to regional peace and stability by constructively promoting talks between the Nepali government and the Maoists. The bilateral connections between the two nations were further reinforced by this cooperative endeavor.

The year 2008 became the starting point of China's changing Nepal policy. After China's reliable and trustworthy monarchy was ended, there was a major change in the China-Nepal relationship, and China's activity in Nepal increased. The year 2008 was the year China started its international activism massively (Sharma, 2081 B.S.).

China has grown in significance as a partner for Nepal's economy. The Transit and Transport Agreement between the two nations was concluded in 2016, opening up Chinese seaports to Nepal and promoting commerce between the island country and the rest of the world. With the help of this arrangement, Nepal was able to diversify its trading channels and lessen its reliance on India. China has also made significant investments in Nepal, mainly in



infrastructure initiatives like hydropower, highways, and telecommunications, which have helped the country's socioeconomic growth. Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by China has created new opportunities for cooperation between the two nations. Nepal has indicated that it is interested in taking part in the BRI due to its advantageous location between China and India. It is possible for Nepal's commerce and transportation networks to change due to the development of cross-border connectivity projects like the China-Nepal Railway, which would improve the country's economic development and regional integration.

Cultural exchanges and interpersonal contacts have both accelerated in recent years. An increasing number of Chinese tourists are discovering Nepal's natural and cultural attractions because of China's aggressive promotion of travel between the two nations. With more chances for academic collaboration and Chinese scholarships being provided to Nepali students, educational exchanges have grown. Relations between CPC and Nepalese communist parties have become stronger. Leaders and cadres from both sides frequently visit Nepal and China for ideology exchanges. When Nepal Communist Party was a unified entity, NCP and CCP had frequent exchanges. CPC leaders delivered the theoretical lecture on Xi Jinping's thought on 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristic' to NCP leaders in Kathmandu.

In recent times, however, difficulties have arisen in Nepal-China relations. The two nations continue to disagree on the delicate matter of Tibet. While Nepal adheres to a "One China" policy and recognizes Tibet as an autonomous region of China, China views Tibet as a fundamental component of its territory. Due to Nepal's geographical proximity to Tibet and its historical links to Tibetan Buddhism, maintaining this part of the relationship requires careful balancing. Additionally, Nepal's geographical location between China and India and two powerful nations needs cautious diplomacy to sustain a balanced foreign policy. It has been difficult for Nepal to maintain the proper balance while handling the interests and worries of both China and India.

The democratic parties jointly launched a new People's Movement in April 2006, concentrating the majority of their efforts in Kathmandu and major cities in Nepal, which resulted in a 19-days curfew. After the restoration of dissolved (2002) 19-days second Mass Movement was ended. Nepal Government and Maoist committed to democracy and peace for the advancement of the nation and its citizens when they signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on November 21, 2006. Election for the First Constituent Assembly was held on April 10, 2008. The first meeting of First CA ended 240-year-old monarchy on May 28, 2008 and declared Nepal as Federal Democratic Republic. In Nepal today, the Prime Minister leads the government, and the president is the ceremonial Head of State. The 2008 marked a big political change in Nepal but it also marks a new era in Nepal-China relations, especially after the Himalayan kingdom was declared the Federal Democratic Republic.

China, too, has undergone a drastic change in terms of innovation and economy. China's vast geographical size might create unease among its smaller neighboring countries. However, a deeper understanding of China's historical contributions to humanity could foster a fresh

perspective on the country today. For instance, China was the birthplace of significant innovations such as the printing press and paper. Additionally, gunpowder, a transformative invention in the field of warfare, was first utilized in China (Adhikari, 2012, p.1) <sup>[1]</sup>.

China's geography and development are the opportunity and challenges for its neighboring countries. Through several infrastructural initiatives and trade agreements, Nepal's economic links with China have become stronger. China has grown to be Nepal's main source of foreign direct investment, with an emphasis on industries including telecommunications, transportation, and hydropower. The China-Nepal Friendship Bridge, which connects the two nations and fosters connection and trade, is one noteworthy project. Nepal is also a signatory of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, which aims to improve regional connectivity and foster economic cooperation throughout Asia.

Since 2008, Nepal-China ties have seen major advancements and expanding collaboration. This period, which is marked by improved economic cooperation, stronger political engagements, and strengthened people-to-people contacts, constitutes a significant chapter in the bilateral relationship. The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Nepal, which put an end to a decade-long Maoist insurgency, and started a new era of peace and political change, also turned out to be one of the key turning points in Nepal-China ties. China helped to facilitate the peace process and subsequently aided Nepal in its efforts to achieve political stability and growth. In recent years, political interaction between China and Nepal has also increased dramatically.

The frequency of high-level visits and interactions between the two nations has increased, promoting understanding and collaboration. High level visit from the Chinese side, especially the presidential level visit, had almost come to a stop after the visit of Jiang Zemin in 1996. For over two decades there had been no visit of Chinese president to Nepal. Chinese President Xi Jinping broke this record in October, 2019 when he made an official visit to Nepal. Several agreements, particularly those concerning infrastructure development and transportation facilities, were signed during his visit. Xi Jinping announced Rs 56 billion Chinese grant for Nepal during the visit.

People-to-people interactions have remained an important aspect of Nepal-China relations. The two nations have been attempting to improve travel, tourism, and academic collaboration. The second largest number of tourists has visited Nepal from China to see its natural beauty and rich cultural legacy. Similarly, the number of Nepali students receiving scholarships from the Chinese government to study in China is increasing in recent years. However, it is important to understand that, at times, these good aspects of Nepal-China relations are dampened by geopolitical factor. Occasionally, there have been differences of opinions and worries about issue related to geopolitical dynamics of Nepal-China relations.

Post-2008, Nepal-China engagements appear to have increased after Maoist party a key actor of mainstream political party. After several interactions with Maoist leaders, China began to feel quite comfortable with the Maoist-led government. After Xi Jinping became president of PRC in March 2013, Maoist leader Prachanda was the first leader to be invited by China for an official visit to

meet President Xi (Sapkota, p.188, 2016) <sup>[10]</sup>. China tried to maintain closer relation with Maoist party when Maoist party became the largest party in Nepal.

In May 2017, Nepal signed the understanding on cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2018, during six days visit to China, K.P. Sharma Oli signed a pact to build a strategic railway link connecting Tibet with Kathmandu. Theoretically, Nepal became land-linked from land-locked after that. The pact was signed in the context of India's blockade during the constitution promulgation in September 2015.

Issues surface occasionally between the two countries but both nations have demonstrated a dedication to settling disagreements via diplomacy and diplomatic channels. In conclusion, since 2008, Nepal-China relations have made notable strides and experienced mutual collaboration. Economic and political links between the two nations have become stronger, as have cultural and educational exchanges. The relationship between Nepal and China is likely to continue to improve as both nations work toward their own development objectives, promoting peace and prosperity in the region.

### **Nepal's Foreign Policy and Its Relations with China**

Nepal's foreign policy is guided by the principles of independence, non-alignment, mutual respect for territorial integrity, equality, non-aggression, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Article 51 (m) of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) outlines the nation's foreign policy framework, emphasizing adherence to the United Nations Charter, the principles of Non-Alignment, Panchsheel, international law, and global peace norms. The policy prioritizes safeguarding Nepal's sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and national interests (Bhattarai, 2023) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Landlocked Nepal has consistently sought to maintain a balanced approach in its international relations while safeguarding its sovereignty and national interests. Strategically positioned between two regional powers, China and India, Nepal shares a long history of diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties with both nations. Nepal and China, in particular, enjoy a deep-rooted relationship, characterized by centuries of people-to-people connections and a shared border spanning 1,415 kilometers. In recent years, Nepal has strengthened its partnership with China, focusing on trade, investment, and infrastructure development. China has emerged as a key economic partner for Nepal, bolstered by the bilateral free trade agreement signed in 2019, which has facilitated growth in commerce and investment. China is also a major source of foreign direct investment in Nepal, particularly in sectors such as hydropower, tourism, and manufacturing. Chinese companies have played a pivotal role in constructing critical infrastructure projects in Nepal, including roads, bridges, and airports, contributing significantly to the country's development.

Nepal has shown significant interest in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance regional connectivity and promote economic cooperation through infrastructure development. Nepal views the BRI as an opportunity to upgrade its infrastructure, boost trade, and attract investment. Diplomatically, Nepal maintains strong ties with China and has consistently upheld the One-China policy by recognizing the People's Republic of China as the sole legitimate government of China and severing all

diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Nepal has also reaffirmed its support for China by acknowledging Tibet as an integral part of the country. However, challenges exist in Nepal's relationship with China. The Tibet issue, due to Nepal's shared border, remains a sensitive matter. While Nepal upholds the One-China policy and recognizes Tibet as a part of China, occasional tensions arise due to Tibetan refugee movements within Nepal's borders.

Certain segments of Nepalese society have expressed concerns about sovereignty and over-reliance on a single nation due to Nepal's strengthening ties with China. This has sparked discussions on the implications of China's growing influence in Nepal and highlighted the importance of adopting a diversified foreign policy. At the same time, Nepal has also been working to enhance its relationship with India, its long-standing neighbor and largest trading partner. With deep historical and cultural connections, Nepal views India as a crucial development partner. Maintaining a balanced relationship with both China and India remains a cornerstone of Nepal's foreign policy.

The political revolution of 1950 marked a significant turning point in the evolution of Nepal's foreign policy framework. In 1951, Nepal established an independent Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the first time. Diplomatic relations were subsequently formalized with several nations, including the United Kingdom (via the East India Company) in 1816, the United States and India in 1947, France in 1949, China in 1955, and Japan and Russia in 1956. Nepal's foreign policy is shaped by guiding principles such as the United Nations Charter, Non-Alignment, Panchsheel, the SAARC Charter, and the Constitution of Nepal. Additionally, Nepal's unique geopolitical position has significantly influenced its foreign policy and its relations with China.

In conclusion, Nepal's foreign policy aims to preserve the country's independence, uphold non-alignment, and foster peaceful coexistence with all nations. In recent years, Nepal has witnessed substantial growth in trade, investment, and infrastructure collaboration with China. While this partnership offers significant economic benefits, Nepal must navigate its relationships with both China and India thoughtfully, balancing its foreign ties while addressing sensitive issues such as Tibet with care and diplomacy.

### **Conclusion**

As a Chinese proverb states, "If you point one finger at others, do not forget that three fingers of the same hand will be pointing toward you." This wisdom resonates with the dynamics of Nepal-China relations. Since 2008, Nepal-China ties have deepened considerably, marked by enhanced cooperation in politics, economics, and culture. Despite this progress, challenges remain, including Tibet-related issues and maintaining a delicate balance between China and India. It is imperative for Nepal to adopt a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy, safeguarding its national interests while capitalizing on the opportunities presented by its northern neighbor. During his visit to Nepal in October 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared the establishment of a "Strategic Partnership" of friendly strategic cooperation, oriented toward development and unity. The future implications of this partnership warrant further study. Nepal should continue to cultivate equitable diplomatic relations and leverage its national strengths to secure economic and technological advantages from major

global powers and emerging regional players.

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