

NEPAL-CHINA- INDIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF TRILATERALISM

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Abstract

Competition and cooperation are the major characters of international system. China and India exactly are in the same position. They are in the race of being global power. They have very bitter experience of relation in the past as both countries fought the war in 1962 and several issues are still unsolved. However, time has come to be global players which is impossible without the support of immediate neighbors. Nepal, though is a small land- locked developing country, is located in strategically important place. A stable and prosperous Nepal can contribute to healthy relation between China and India. In spite of some issues of controversies, there is prospect of trilateral cooperation because of geographical proximity, culture, civilization, trade, investment, transportation tourism and similar other factors. This accounts to the need of joining hands and developing trilateral cooperation. So, this article aims to access the prospects and challenges of trilateralism between China, India and Nepal. The data required are obtained from secondary sources and are descriptive and analytical.

Keywords : Geo-strategic, land linked, OBOR, prosperous, proximity, vibrant bridge

Introduction

Geographically a landlocked country, Nepal is located centrally on the southern part of Asia between two Asian giants i.e. India and China. The country is bordered in the east, south and west by India and north by China. It shares nearly 1700 kilometers with India and 1414 kilometers with China. Nepal and India

have been enjoying continuous relations since ancient time as both of them share strong geographical, historical, cultural, political, economic and social ties. On the same manner, Nepal and China also share long history of social, economic, cultural and geographical elements.

Nepal has historically been a transit route to and from both India and China. Expansion of Buddhism, travel accounts of Fa- Xian and Huan-Xang during the ancient Nepal stand in testimony that Nepal was used as a short-cut way by the travelers of both nations. During the medieval period the Malla Kings of Kathmandu Valley maintained good relations with both India and China. During the 17th and the early 18th centuries, the city's spectacular monuments were built on the proceeds of trade between India and China. Three wars fought with Tibet in the span of a century during the Shah regime gradually weakened the ties and due to geographical proximate, the relation became stronger with India.

Advanced development in the field of transportation and communication has led to the emergence of globalization. The traditional game of global politics was played by the Europeans and Americans. But there is a paradigm shift in power structure as more focus is given towards Asia. Among the Asian countries, China and India, with nuclear weapons, are emerging as global powers. In such a changing regional and political landscape Nepal is one of the small and poor countries sandwiched between the two giants, which is the most determining factor for its foreign policy (Poudel, 2016:138), The geographic location makes Nepal strategically important for both emerging powers. Beyond the immediate neighbors, the global powers like USA, Russia, EU, etc. have equal interest in the activities of both China and India and Nepal can be the appropriate site to keep an eye

on. So, their engagement in Nepalese affairs is getting active.

Besides the political implication of the region both India and China have made massive progress in economic field with nearly double-digit growth in gross national income (GNI). Both countries are also market for each other. They both have pursued the policy of competition and cooperation in recent years knowing that their strained bilateral relations would not at all be beneficial for fulfilling their expensive regional and global aspiration to become meaningful great power (Baral, 2016:16). China already has the second largest economy next to the USA and India's potential to be an influential power in world politics is equally vital. Both India and China are Nepal's important development partners too. Areas like infrastructures, power development, communication, education, culture, tourism, aviation, health, disaster prevention, migration, trade, business, investment, etc. are considered as matter of common interests. Nepal is equally considered as the sensitive land in relation to security issues of our immediate neighbors.

Nepal shares long borders with India and China but border with the latter is conditioned by large Himalayan range. That the border with India is open has been a major factor to make it more southward-oriented. Such geographical location makes the country strategically important. Nepal strategically carries no importance without China's and India's continuous rise as economic power (Sangroula, 2018:206). In such a situation of a landlocked country, the question automatically arises: can Nepal change its traditional tag of buffer-state into a bridge-state? What are the prospects of trilateral cooperation in maintaining relations between China, India and Nepal and how is it possible to overcome the challenges to materialize the concept of trilateralism into practice? The article tries to answer these

questions.

Objective and methodology

The fundamental objective of this article is to analyze the prospects and challenges of trilateralism between China, India and Nepal. In addition, the specific objectives are:

To identify the possibility of changing Nepal's position from a buffer-state to bridge -state, to access the prospects of trilateralism between Nepal, China and India and explore the major challenges of trilateralism.

In the present day of globalization no nation can remain untouched from incidents around the world, further the landlocked countries like ours are more affected from this change. Nepal's location between two giant economies has several opportunities to be benefitted from their progress. It is realized that tri-lateral cooperation is equally beneficial for India and China too. Some intellectuals and other efforts are also made towards this. So, the study is descriptive and analytical. The required data is obtained through the secondary sources like books, journals, official documents, newspapers and previous research works as well. Library method is used and the data is qualitative in nature.

Theoretical Premises

Several actors are interacting in international system. Generally, states are still considered as the major actors and are simply classified either as small/weak, medium, or great states on the basis of the range of their influence. The states are also explained as small, regional or superpower. This inequal distribution of power in the international system gives rise to various triangular relations whose power, influence and capabilities also vary from one actor to another (Sapkota, 2016:178). In the present day of globalization, nations are seeking partnership especially for

their economic enhancement. But countries like Nepal have quite a minor role to play but they are still important because of strategic location.

The concept of trilateralism is supported by different theories. Since the relation between China, India and Nepal seems paradoxical, history amply supports that the relation between them is characterized by all friendship, animosities, partnership, rivalry and cooperative nature. In this context, the mainstream international relations theories: Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism can be applied in the study of trilateral relation between Nepal, China and India.

Political Realism is a school of thought that explains international relations in terms of power (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2008:43). It is based on pessimistic view of human nature. According to this theory, human beings are self interested and egoistic. The relations are conflictual and may always lead to war and relation is influenced by the value of national security and state survival (Jackson and Sorensen 2013:312). This theory further focuses that individual is primarily selfish and power seeking. Individuals are organized in states, each of which acts in a unitary ovary in pursuit of its own national interest (Mingst 2004:66). In the same manner, the two emerging powers i.e. China and India are found active in increasing their dominance in the Asian continent. They already fought war in 1962 along with border and other several issues are yet not solved. Both the countries have equal interest in Nepal mainly for security concern as Nepal has long and open border with them.

The liberal perspective, on the other hand, focuses great potential for human progress in modern civil society and the capitalist economy. In contrary to the realists, the liberals are more optimistic about the progress of peace and see the rules

of international relations as slowly, incrementally evolving through time and potentially becoming more and more peaceful (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2008:84). From this point of view China and India are two major emerging markets in a more and more interdependent world where trade and commerce, shared possibilities towards global governance institution aspire them to work, to build foundation of peaceful co-existence (Panthi, 2016:9). It is also seen that both of them are trying to be global player which is impossible without working with other powers, especially the neighbors including Nepal.

Social constructivism, a theory newly emerged and introduced by Nicholas Onuf and developed by Alexander Wendt, is equally applicable in the analysis of trilateral relation. According to this theory, the international system is constituted by idea not by material forces. It argues that the internal make-up of states affects their international behavior (Jackson and Sorensen, 2013:229). All three countries have strong faith in the principle of Panchasheel, non - alignment, values of world peace, principles of international law and United nations charter. The relation is bound by several economic, historical, social, cultural, religious and geographical dimensions. We are bound by the value of mutual respect, co-existence and sensitivity to each other's national sovereignty, territorial integrity, concerns and interests and for the fulfillment of the aspirations of their common people for happiness.

Concept and history of Trilateralism

Trilateralism is generally defined as the practice of engaging in three party relations, agreements or negotiations. There are very few examples of the concept in the present day international system. However, this trend became popular during Cold War period (1945-1989). But the idea of trilateral cooperation among

China, India and Nepal arose during last decade. Trilateralism prioritizes partnership between Nepal, China and India in different issues ranging from trade, economy and security. It is a partnership borne out of reciprocity and interdependence between the three countries (K.C. and Bhattarai, 2018: 90). Nepal's relation was more concerned with India because of open border and easy access to conduct the activities. But the traditional pattern has somehow changed. The neo geopolitical dynamism has affected such dominance as China has emerged as a strong economic player in Nepal, though Chinese investment in Nepal's infrastructure building has been significant for a long time. Likewise, greater connectivity with neighbors and other powers gradually reducing India's influence in recent years.

In spite of the above facts, Nepal has historically been a transit route to and from both India and China. Expansion of Buddhism, travel accounts of Huan Xang during the period of ancient Nepal stand in testimony that Nepalese land was used as a short-cut way by the travelers of both nations. During the medieval period, the Malla kings of Kathmandu Valley maintained good relations with both India & China. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the city's spectacular monuments were built on the proceeds of trade between India and China. However, three wars were fought with Tibet citing economic reason in the span of a century during the Shah regime in 1788, 1792 and 1855 (Institute of Foreign Affairs, 2013:3) which gradually reduced the ties and with geographical proximate, the relation became more closer towards India.

The government of Nepal articulated the idea of trilateralism several times. After the independence of India in 1947, its role to influence Nepal was more powerful than that of China. But nearly within a decade king Mahendra started to develop

a relationship of equidistance with both neighbors, which was labeled as China card in Nepal (Poudel 2016:139). It was in 1970 and 1980 that king Birendra forwarded the idea of developing Nepal as a gateway between South and Central Asia (Subedi 2016:52). King Gyanendra, the successor of king Birendra, also expressed Nepal's desire to function as a transit state in 2005. Baburam Bhattarai, the then Prime Minister, first, expressed the idea of making Nepal as a bridge between the two emerging economies of India and China and cautioned that if lagged behind in catching up with these neighbors may submerge Nepal under them (Baral,2016:14). Likewise, the then Prime Minister and UCPN (Maoist) chairperson, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, made efforts to push forward the idea of trilateral arrangement. A discussion was made by him on trilateral cooperation with the new Chinese leadership when he met president Xi Jinping in April, 2013. Thereafter several talks are being conducted between India - China, China - Nepal, Nepal- India on a bilateral and trilateral basis.

Prospects of Trilateralism

Baburam Bhattarai, former Prime Minister of Nepal, while addressing the Legislative Assembly, said that Nepal will be a bridge between China and India. His address reflects the landlocked Nepal's aspiration to revive its traditional status of transit state. Nepal's relationship between Nepal and India and Nepal and China appears beyond bilateral tie and is running towards multilateralism. The prospect of China, India and Nepal trilateral strategic relations, which was flooded in 2016, are developing to take shape in the near future (Sapkota, 2016:111) Highlighting the prospects of trilateralism Indian foreign policy expert S.D. Muni writes (Muni, 2016:5);

The trilateral relationship among India, China and Nepal will

no doubt, also benefit India. It will benefit India by giving India access to Tibet, which it had for centuries but does not have at the moment. When you talk of the old, entrepot status of Nepal and the salt trade between China, Tibet and India, India had access to The Tibetan market. I am very fond of saying that, China, as we know it today, is a new neighbor of India and Nepal. Until the military intrusion of China and its takeover, it was Tibet that we were interacting with through the Himalayas. China was a distant entity and we knew very little of Chinese people and society. If this triangular relationship builds up, it will also facilitate India's access to Tibet and possibly even to Xinjiang, and further on to Central Asia. We are in India struggling to get access to Central Asia....(Muni, 2016:5)

The leaders of Nepal have often said that Nepal can be a dynamic bridge between China and India as well as between China and South Asia. strengthening the interaction and exchanges among China, India and Nepal and realizing the 'win-win benefit' is the matter of common interest. Focusing on the matter, Hu Shisheng, Deputy Director of the Institute of South Asian and Oceanic Studies in China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) (Institute of Foreign Affairs, 2013:17) Says;

Nepal shares border with China's Tibet. Apart from that, geoeconomical element also plays a vital role. Nepal could play the role of a 'golden bridge' between the two emerging economic giants (India and China). The entire population inhabiting the region will be immensely benefitted. In this scenario, Chinese and Indian population will be highly obliged to Nepal. (Institute of Foreign Affairs, 2013:17)

Despite these facts, the trilateral relations among China, India and Nepal is not normal. There are several matters i.e. security,

refugee, migration, border, trade and regional and international engagement that Nepal has been experiencing the direct impact of enmity, cooperation and competition (Baral, 2018:25-45). However, the issue of trilateralism is of vital importance for China, India and Nepal because of cultural, political, geographical and strategic realities.

21st century world relation is mainly guided by economic factor. It is said that Asia will remain the hub of 21st century civilization. Basically, China and India have made massive progress in road, railway and maritime connectivity too. Chinese president, Xi Jinping's ambitious project of BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) has the aim to be connected with about 64 countries of Asia, Africa and Europe. His vision of 'creating a community of common destiny' through 'Go West' and 'Peripheral' strategy (Subedi, 2016:41) have sufficient hopes towards working together in the neighbor. Likewise, significant advancement of India in the field of science and technology and Modi's 'Neighbour First Policy' can be helpful to materialize the concept of trilateralism.

Security concern

No doubt, China, India and Nepal have their own geographical positions and deepening security and economic interest. Both China and India have common interest in Nepal. Nepal occupies an extremely favorable location between emerging two Asian powerhouse, China and India. Only stable, prosperous and peaceful Nepal can assure our immediate neighbors. Security concerns within immediate neighborhood has consistently been a sensitive issue and of paramount consideration for all China, India and Nepal. Enhancement of security within the region has historically stood out as a principal determinant of India's foreign policy for the subcontinent (Bhattarai 2018:37). Because of open border there are several matters of security concern

between India and Nepal. Smuggling, human trafficking, fake currency, increment in terrorist activities, drug abuse, black marketing etc are the major security concerns between India and Nepal (Pyakurel, 2018:154:188). Besides these, growing Chinese influence in Nepal may become a threat to the tread concern and commercial aspect of India.

China is equally cautious about its security when it comes to dealing with Nepal. China's concern related to Tibet cannot be undermined while talking about trilateral cooperation, Chinese scholars have a thought that the Tibet issue might be used to disturb China's rise (Poudel, 2016:147). The Tibet issue has been one of the major pillars for China and suspects all international players who have a base in Kathmandu. China is suspicious that the Tibetan refugees in Nepal conduct anti China activities under the spiritual, cultural and humanitarian cover (Acharya, 2019:256). Even though Nepal has repeatedly expressed its commitment on 'one China policy', Nepal would not allow anti-Chinese activities in Nepalese soil. Nepal finds it difficult to suppress such activities as there are many in Nepal who have spiritual faith on Dalai Lama.

Regionalism and globalization of politics is the emerging trend of international relation. There is the gradual decline of conventional powers and new actors are emerging in the world. The eyes of world community now is on Asia. India and China are emerging as global power mainly because of their economic, military, technological advancement and human and natural resources. Both China and India are also aware about each other's position. Highlighting the possibility of cooperation between China and India, Sambhu Ram Simkhada, a renowned diplomat, writes "the European countries have a long history of rivalry and wars but now are connected through tunnels and

trains underneath the ocean and across the Alps, aircrafts in the sky and remodel their statecrafts through vertical and horizontal evolutions of their institutions" (2018:198). He hopefully adds that the trans- Himalayan civilization that dominated the early world can join them by utilizing their traditional wisdom and modern knowledge for a new stage of China- India relations in the 21st century. Xi Jinping's vision of " win-win relations in community of common destiny", Narendra Modi's "sab ka saath, sab ka bikash" and Nepal's commitment; "friendship with all, enmity with none" can contribute in the common path of trilateralism.

OBOR (One Belt, One Road) and trilateral cooperation

OBOR is an ambitious Mega project introduced by Chinese President Xi Jinping with the aim of promoting connectivity and cooperation among the countries in the region and beyond. President Xi, on his visit to Central Asia in September and South East Asia in October, 2013, raised the idea of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21 Century Maritime Silk Road (Simkhada, 2018:343). Both together became known as the OBOR. It has now been named BRI (Belt and Road Initiatives) which is taken as a development approach for materializing the partnership of countries in development for common destiny and shared future (Sangroula, 2018: 456). It has the aim to be connected with more than 60 countries of Asia, Africa and Europe touching 60% of the world's population, 35% world trade and 30% GDP including India and Nepal.

Nepal and China have already signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2016 that allows Nepal to join the BRI. It was in 12 May 2017, Nepal formally became the part of this Chinese project (Acharya, 2019:217). The other South Asian countries like Sri- Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Maldives also

joined the project. But India, probable trilateral partner and important stakeholder of this project so far, has maintained silence towards joining the initiative (Adhikari, 2018:69). India is reluctant to join the project rather come under the umbrella of US led Indo-Pacific Strategy. As it is evident that India is unhappy with strategic partnership between China and Pakistan through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Indians are of the view that China's close relation (what they called as 'all weather friend') with Pakistan has now gone beyond the latter's role as a proxy to constrain India (Saran, 2017:147). This all has created confusing environment in the way of trilateral cooperation. Unlike India and Pakistan, India and China are not indirect confrontations at present- They have regularly pursued confidence building measures through high level visits and collaboration at different fronts. India's involvement in Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), an initiative undertaken by China is its example. Now the question arises that if India and China can work jointly as partners in BRICS, why cannot they work together in BRI?

Challenges of Trilateralism

Nepal's vision of serving as a land bridge between two emerging world powers is of vital importance for long term prospects of development. Its strategic location itself proves the importance and possibility of trilateral cooperation. Nepal has enough opportunities if it adopts prudential foreign policy. But it is not an easy task to make this concept practical. It is very problematic to run together with the partner having asymmetric position in terms of size, development and number of population as well. Both China and India are in a race to increase their influence in South Asia and Nepal cannot be the exception. Their involvement in their respective neighboring states is seen as

one-off competition and domination. On the one hand, China has started to give more importance to Nepal, especially after Nepal's transformation from Monarchy to Federal Democratic Republic in 2006 (Sapkota, 2016:186). She wants to turn Nepal as an 'all weather friend ' as Pakistan has been for China. On the other hand, India, the southern neighbor, does not feel comfortable in China's deeper involvement with Nepal.

On the strategic side of Nepal, India and China triangular relationship, there is a very interesting phenomenon that if the two ends of a triangle come closer then they both become more distant to, and impinge adversely on the third one. If China and Nepal get closer, India feels uncomfortable. If India and Nepal get closer, China would be uncomfortable and if China and India get closer, Nepal should be uncomfortable for losing its strategic space (Muni, 2016:8). Muni further claims that as long as the Tibetan question remains alive, it will create difficulties in the development of the triangular relationship. Still the countries have several strategic, political and security relationship. If these issues are unsettled, it is hard to move ahead with economic and other engagement.

China is still suspicious that the Tibetan refugees in Nepal conduct anti- China activities under the spiritual, cultural and humanitarian cover which create problems in their relation (Dahal, 2009:39). Despite Nepal's commitment on 'One China policy' and discarding anti-Chinese activity in its soil, Nepal finds it difficult to suppress such activities as there are so many people in Nepal who have spiritual faith on Dalai Lama. Lok Raj Baral, Nepali Diplomat, is not found hopeful to bring this concept into success. According to him, the idea of trilateral cooperation, offered by our leader, is either questioned or considered to be "premature" in the given context of relations between China and

India (Baral,2016:20). He further says that despite developing the Tibetan refugee issue, China's strategic relationship with Pakistan continue to be irritant in China-India relation. Further, China is one of Pakistan's key strategic allies. India has bad relation with Pakistan. So, India does not feel comfortable to join the hands in trilateral cooperation. Besides these, the ideological factor, though it is not much important in determining the relations in the adoption of political system, is another problem. China has the communist system of government whereas India has adopted the parliamentary form of government. Nepal, though is being ruled by communist party, has democratic government. Nepal's role takes significant place in this regard. But there is a strong opinion internationally that one of Nepal's main challenges in foreign policy is to balance its relations between its two giant neighbors; China and India (Acharya, 2019-253). Adjustment of these neighbors is becoming increasingly complex, owing to the geopolitical complexities and the strategic competition between them. The irony regarding this issue is that till date neither meaningful homework is done at government or policy level nor the political parties have shown interest to bring the concept of trilateralism into practice (K.C. and Bhattarai, 2018:93). Former career diplomat Acharya, highlighting the challenges to make Nepal a transit state, writes that geostrategic competition between China and India, physical and geographical difficulties for connectivity, ego and sensitivity of big powers and Nepal's readiness without homework are the major challenges to make Nepal a dynamic bridge.

Controversial Lipulekh Agreement

Focusing on the matter of careful involvement in trilateral cooperation, Nepali diplomat Ramesh Nath Pandey warns that strong attachment and hard detachment between China and

India is dangerous for us. The African proverb says "when two elephants fight it is the grass which gets trampled". This aptly applies to Nepal to the state of conflict between India and China. Again, if they enjoy honeymoon, Nepal lies in serious threat. The Lipulekh agreement is its best example. It was on 15 May, 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping and India Prime minister Narendra Modi were reported to have agreed to use Lipulekh corridor for their interest (Baral, 2016:13). This controversial agreement was signed during Narendra Modi's visit to China. Point 28, in 41 points joint statement, clearly violates Nepal's sovereignty as it was signed without Nepal's involvement. That was not only the first time, the two countries have been mentioning Lipulekh, the tri-junction between Nepal, India and China, in their bilateral statement since 1953, neither India nor China, consulted Nepal before agreeing to open the route through Lipulekh (Acharya, 2019:258-259).

Conclusion

Friends can be changed but neighbors cannot. There is paradigm shift in power politics. The 21st century is the century of Asia. Among the Asian countries, China and India are emerging as world power mainly because of human and natural resources, technology, military might, and industrial capacity. Though both of them were center of ancient civilization, they could not maintain their legacy till the end of 20th century. However, their position is revived now. It is high time to work together for the welfare of the people of the region and the entire world as well. For that the concept of trilateralism became the subject of formal debate since last the 10 years between China, India and Nepal. Their geographical proximity, common agendas for development and their involvement in different international and regional forums has opened several possibilities for trilateralism.

China has already occupied its position in international forum as it is the permanent member of Security Council of the United Nations and India is also seeking its space in global politics.

The relation between China, India and Nepal is paradoxical. China and India have already fought war and still many issues remain unsolved. Nepal also has several cases of debate. India is reluctant to be a part of OBOR whereas Nepal has already signed it. However, geography, trade, tourism, transportation and other dimensions forced China and India to join their hands. Nepal, being located strategically, can be a vibrant bridge between two prosperous countries. But we need to evolve a national consensus in the matters related to maintain relationship with our immediate neighbors by making our own house stable and prudent. We should be able to manage the interests of these two giant neighbors and build its economy in the long run. We cannot go beyond the concept but should develop our capacity to be benefitted from the prosperous neighbors. Nepal should be changing between rising China and shining India.

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