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Abstract

Security Challenges of Nepal: Perspective from National Security Policy

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Nepal has always remained cautious in its security since the very beginning of nation building. A sensitive geostrategic location and internal political dynamism have consistently remained pivotal in shaping its national security. Even today, the country has been facing numerous traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Hence, the article aims to analyze the security challenges of Nepal in the light of 'National Security Policy- 2016'. The policy seems to be a guideline for fostering the state's capacity to preserve sovereignty, integrity, independence, and the overall dignity of the state in the comity of nations. The article adopts a qualitative document analysis method gathered from secondary sources. The security issue has become more crucial mainly because of geopolitical position and the growing influence of global power shift. Further, there has been a gradual shift in the traditional notion of security, focusing on human-centric elements. Hence, the policy states that political instability, economic dependency, governance problems, erosion of state's capacity to maintain laws and order, growing danger of natural calamities, degrading environment, and the rise of extremist tendencies are the primary sources of challenges to national security. All these fragilities in internal security has led to an increasing external security threat. The study shows that Nepal needs to strengthen its institutional capacity and capitalize resilience policy consideration to maintain security intact. Thus, the study receives theoretical insights from political Realism, Liberalism, and Wales and English school of international relations, Critical, and small power approaches.

Keywords

Critical theory

Human security

Security policy

Small state

Traditional security

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SECURITY IS THE crucial concept in the study of international relations. Human society accepted the presence of security since the very beginning of its origin as it is old as the evolution of creatures. As the human society gradually turned toward civilization, security became the pivotal concept and primary concern of all individuals, society and the state as well. State, the original institution to organize human society, had formed with the responsibility to ensure security in the given territory (Gaub, 2009). It became the prime responsibility of state to protect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of the nation. However, the concept is very contested and there lacks unanimity among the scholars associated with the concept.

It was evident that the concept of security was mainly concerned with national security. This includes the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence. It is for that very reason, 'national army' is still taken as an essential factor of state. Kautilya, the prominent thinker in Eastern civilization, in his famous treatise 'Arthashastra' aptly incorporated 'Army' as an essential element of the state (Baral, 2017). It is assigned with the task to protect national boundary from external invasion.

Security, in traditional literature, was mainly concerned with state machinery. State and security were considered as the two sides of the same coin. Security was viewed from state centric approach. But there have been sea changes in the interpretation of security. Over the last 3 decades, traditional notion of security has adopted a new dimension. Despite the primary role of state in protecting national boundary, the state has to do a lot to protect its citizens. Security has new outlook that is viewed from a human-centric approach. The basic elements for human survival i.e. food, health care, employment, environment, education and other social factors, are the issues that come under state's responsibility (Upreti et al., 2013). 'Security', thus "aspires to denote such machinery for maintaining survival, safety and stability. It seems equally applicable to the individual, society, state and the entire nature as well" (Balzacq & Cavelt, 2017, p.6). These issues, defined as non-traditional issues seem to be the challenges for small countries like Nepal. These states are struggling hard with poverty, illiteracy, trafficking, environmental degradation, epidemics, civil war, bad governance and several other elements posing a challenge upon the security of the state.

Whatever the issues may be, the government has the responsibility to tackle with the challenges that threaten national security. Hence, the principal job of government is to identify the issues related to both traditional and non-traditional security issues. Considering the evolving changes, the government of Nepal has introduced 'National Security Policy- 2016', stating the overall security framework. Although adopted in 2016, it has been working as the principal guideline in Nepal's security framework. Efforts are being made to make proper management of the challenges caused by internal and external factors. The policy with broader conceptual depth continues to be comfortable with emerging security challenges. The question still arises regarding state's capacity to implement the policy to attain its strategic goal in security matters. The evolving internal and external security environment requires a critical assessment of the challenges and state's capacity to make proper implementation of the declared policy.

Despite a comprehensive framework in security policy, challenges still exist in Nepal's internal and external security patterns. There exists an adequate gap between policy assessment and its implementation in the evolving security threat. It is common for every student of security studies, to question whether the existing policy can offer a pragmatic framework in responding growing internal

and external security dilemma. Hence, the article aims to make academic effort in addressing the problem.

Theoretical Framework

Security as a complex concept, scholars have their own approach to its interpretation. Exploring the contested nature of the subject, Wolfers (1952) states that “security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked” (p. 485). For this, the state is responsible for creating a fearless environment for the protection of acquired values that the society owns. As a multi-dimensional concept, ‘security includes sovereignty, national integrity, physical, social, economic, cultural and humanitarian aspects of a nation’ (National Security Policy, 2016). The complex job of providing security needs adequate policy. The policy includes the promotion of national dignity and respect, lives and property, socio-cultural norms and values and the aspects of good governance, human rights, and environment.

Security is often considered as a ‘policy science’. Traditionally, it was concerned with the use of threat and the control of military force considering the safety and security of the state (Multimer, 2017). With the passing of the world in the nuclear age, the concept of security has undergone a significant shift from the traditional notion to contemporary viewpoint. This concept has gradually shifted towards rights based citizen friendly security (Wagle, 2021). Two crucial trends: gradual decline of military power and understanding of global context from human-centric approach, have created a broader outlook on security realm. Following the post-Cold War period, the seven-fold concept of human security underwent a significant transformation. These included economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, community security, political security and personal security. The matter is more cautious while talking about small states like Nepal. Hence, leading international theories- political realism, liberalism, critical and small state theories provide a theoretical base in the analysis of ‘Nepal’s Security Policy- 2016’.

Political realism, the prominent theory of international relations, traces back to human civilization. Kautilya in the Eastern civilization and Thucydides in ancient Greece, have their contribution in the development of this theory. This was followed by St. Augustine in the middle ages, Machiavelli during renaissance, Thomas Hobbes during 17th century and Morgenthau in early 20th century. As a school of international relations, realism regards sovereign states as the dominant actors of an anarchical world characterized by power politics. Groupism, egoism, and power-centrism are its basic assumptions (Wohlforth, 2017). All these tendencies make the state sensitive to the issues related to national security.

Contrary to realists, national security, according to liberalists, is attainable through abiding law under institutional arrangement. Democratic constitution, interdependency character, and established norms serve better in international peace and security (Walker & Rousseau, 2017). Further, constructivism has its own interpretation of security. In contrary to realists, this theory offers different concept in international security. National identity and ideas are the key instruments that drive national security rather than national interest, anarchy, and material power (Clarke et al., 2021). In addition, Copenhagen school, Welsh school, English school and Marxist school have their own interpretations of security matter. The Copenhagen school focuses on regional level analysis that emphasizes the interaction among geographically clustered regional entities. It is the English school

of thought that views security from a global perspective. Multilateral corporations, international law and diplomacy are far better to ensure international security than that of balance of power. It is Welsh school that views security from human centric approach. It regards security as the condition of emancipation from all sorts of physical and human constraints (William, 2012). The critical school which regards international society characterized by inequalities in terms of economic and social factors. Elite dominated structure promotes injustice, poverty and political exclusion, where insecurity arises not only from external factors but also from biased governance (Kitler, 2021). Finally, national security is deeply concerned with small power theory. Most small states are often peripheralized in the world structure and are the victim of internal instability, economic dependency, migration, environmental degradation, bureaucratic inefficiency, power asymmetry, and poor institutional performance (Jesse & Dreyer, 2016). Besides these, Nepal has been tackling several non-traditional security threats that have not yet systematically examined (Baral, 2025). The National Security Policy-2016, conceptualizes several security challenges that need to be addressed through academic debate and recommends structural strengthening.

Objective and Methodology

Security is the matter of primary concern of every state. The concept carries a pivotal position while talking at regional and global interaction. Balzacq and Cavelty (2017) state that “security is variably seen as a condition, a value, a part of policy, a practice, and a utopia” (p. 1). Hence, this article primarily aims to analyze Nepal’s evolving security challenges as stated in Nepal’s ‘National Security Policy- 2016’. The article also explores the major internal and external dimensions of security in the realm of diversified structure of Nepal’s society. Attempt has been made to explore the growing level of challenges despite a comprehensive policy framework.

The philosophies like ontology, epistemology, and axiology aptly provide philosophical ground for this article. From an ontological viewpoint, the policy states that several observable internal and external phenomena have created threat in Nepal’s national security. Epistemologically, knowledge has been acquired through the scholarly analysis of policy documents. It includes the constitution of Nepal- 2015, National Security Policy- 2016, and Foreign Policy- 2020. Further, the norms and values like Nepal’s commitment to the charter of the United Nations, principle of *Panchsheel*, non-alignment and pledge to contribute in world peace provide axiological base to the study. This article adheres to qualitative document analysis. Hence, the required data is obtained from qualitative secondary sources like published and unpublished literature, government documents, books, journal articles and declarations. Creswell (2012) states that these secondary sources can assist in identifying research gap, debate, theoretical framework and empirical data.

Findings and Discussion

The notion of security is as old as the origin of the individual and the state. It is vital for the existence and development of each individual, society and state. The history witnessed that police and intelligence agencies were formed to maintain internal law and order, whereas army administration started to work for the protection of the nation from external invasion. But there have been sea changes in the role that the security agencies play. Still, the security issue is vital for every individual, society, state and international community as well (Sussex, 2021). Hence, the history of Nepal’s national security traces back to the regime of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of modern Nepal (Budathoki, 2025). Though several security issues were raised during the journey of state building, the

issue carried vital importance along with the existence of larger powers in the immediate neighborhood. Nepal has always remained cautious in protecting its sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence. Though the global security trend has significantly transformed over the last 30 years, Nepal's concern seems more serious mainly because of the global power shifts in neighborhood (K.C., 2024). Rise of China as a superpower, India's role as an established regional power and growing interest of donors and great powers have added more threat to the country's security (Mulmi et al., 2023). Taking the fact into consideration, Ministry of Defense, has introduced a comprehensive security policy. The succeeding writings discuss the issues of national security challenges of Nepal.

Policy Framework

Constitution is the fundamental policy that guides the policymakers. The constitution of Nepal (2015) has explicitly stated the foreign policy concerning national unity and security. The policy guides the state to keep national unity intact in relation to the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of Nepal (Constitution of Nepal, 2015, article 51(a)4). Considering the diversity of country, policy is directed towards promoting national unity. This can contribute to developing cooperative relations between the federal units by maintaining mutual cohesion, harmony and solidarity among various communities (Article 51 (a)2). The policy is also directed towards maintaining law and order along with guaranteeing the overall human security system. Nepal Army, Nepal Police, Armed Police Force and National Investigation Department are the structures made responsible for bringing these policies into operation. The constitution further guides the stakeholders to keep 'national interest' promoted by making better utilization of the knowledge and experiences of stakeholders (Article 51 (a)7). The national security council, under the prime ministerial chairmanship, has the responsibility to make recommendations to formulate the required policies and mobilize overall security mechanisms.

Security studies primarily focus on national interest. National Security Policy- 2016 clearly states the paramount matters of national interest. The policy includes "safeguarding of freedom, sovereignty, territorial integrity, national unity, dignity and guarantee of security of people" (National Security Policy, 2016 (1.6)). The matters related to the protection and promotion of the federal democratic republic, maintain national unity, promote religious tolerance, and social cohesion are also included in the policy. The policy is intended to protect national identity, respect fundamental rights of the people and ensure political stability by maintaining law and order. Environmental protection, proper utilization of available resources, and guaranteeing of rule and law are the issues already included as subjects of national interest. As an active member of global community, Nepal's interest is repeatedly expressed in promoting world peace and regional solidarity by making honest adherence to the charter of United Nations Organization. The interest is also concerned with developing cordial relations with immediate neighbors and donors by not allowing its territory to conduct any activities against any friendly country. However, the policy itself has pointed out the threats and challenges that often appear in Nepal's security concerns.

Challenges and Threats

'National Security Policy- 2016' takes political challenge as the central threat to national security. Long-run political instability and prolonged transition in political transformation have added to the challenges of governance. The growing influence of extra-constitutional forces, division among

political powers, and dividing decision making character have eroded policy clarity and institutional capacity in security decision making (Kunwar, 2024). Several criminal and violent groups, as non-state actors, are found to be active, causing security challenges (Wagle, 2013). The policy further states that polarization of unwanted groups has added to the challenge in maintaining law and order.

State is the primary institution to maintain law and order. But the country itself found as the victim of a growing trend of politicization of crimes and criminalization of politics, the security policy states. There appears to be a serious deadlock in maintaining law and order. It is further stated that the trend of violation of law and impurity, abuse of modern technology in crime, drug trafficking, unlawful import of arms and explosives, and degrading social security caused by increasing violence have turned security into a challenging mode (National security policy, 2016). Additionally, human trafficking, communalism and regionalism instigated by cyber-crimes, looting and kidnapping have added challenges in keeping security under control. White collar crimes and corruption remain a regular challenge to peace and order.

Social diversity is the fundamental character of Nepali society. However, this diversity often creates threats to national security. Diversity in ethnicity, religion, language, culture, and social values has appeared as an emerging threat upon national security. 'National Security Policy- 2016' further states that dependency, growing unemployment, trade deficit, economic inequality, unequal distribution of population, revenue leakages, and increasing financial crimes and these economic factors have added challenges to national security (Kumar, 2021). Industrial disharmony, fragile investment environment, decreasing economic activities, and a culture of seeking 'table work' among the youth has direct or indirect impact in security. Economic challenges such as the declining condition of financial activities, outgoing trend of physical and mental labor, insecurity in industrial enterprises, and eroding attractiveness of investors have also added challenges to national security.

Nepal lies in the prone zone area of natural disasters. This often becomes a challenge to national security. Security policy states uneven land topography often becomes the cause of soil erosion, landslides and floods. Security is full of hardship due to uneven land structure and climatic variations (Baral, 2017). Unplanned development, overexploitation of natural resources, waste management problems, deforestation, and climate change have their impacts on security planning and operations.

In recent years, various forms of extremism have influenced Nepal's politics and security system. A series of violent movements, disorder, terrorism and insecurity stand as a security challenge. Illegal and undesirable activities in tourism and investment, smuggling of arms, explosives and narcotic drugs, external collision and undesirable movements, both trans-border and intra-country are taken as the primary causes of security threat (National Security Policy, 2016). It is a matter of worry that the extremists are involved in smuggling, misuse of foreign currency, and creating disorder of various types. The landlocked countries like Nepal, are suitable for the extremists to conduct their activities. Nepal has a similar geographical site that pose more threat in national security.

Though overused, the 'yam' theory still exists to denote geopolitical complexities of Nepal (Aditya, 2021). Nepal's unique geo-strategic positioning has been a serious threat upon its security. The country's geographical position, sandwiched between two emerging powers (China and India), and their rivalry, make it vulnerable to external security challenges (Briguglio et al., 2021). National Security Policy- 2016, recognizes open international border, frequent border encroachment, energy

and fuel crisis as the external security threats. Growing Indo-Pak tension in the region and shifting global order present a persistent security challenge in Nepal. The country had bitter experience of energy and fuel crisis, especially during the time of global and regional unrest causing external dependency in energy supply. Moreover, Nepal's security dimension is more concerned with changing regional and international security environment. Amid shifting global power dynamics and rivalry between immediate neighbors and donors, an additional security threat arises in Nepal's security dynamics. A society enjoys maximum guarantee of external security where internal stability and security is better managed. But external challenges are increasing due to security vulnerabilities and political instability within the internal affairs of the country.

Discussion

Nepal, a tiny Himalayan country, is often termed as a 'small power' (Baral, 2025). Nepal adopted an expansionist policy till the formation of modern Nepal. It successfully resisted the repeated attacks from its powerful neighbors and maintained its sovereignty intact. But the shifting global order amid growing rivalry between the two immediate neighbors and donors, has imposed several security challenges in Nepal. In this context, 'National Security Policy- 2016' adopts a vital policy shift towards a comprehensive security framework. The policy acknowledges multi-dimensional aspects of security including political stability, maintenance of law and order, economic development, environmental protection, social harmony, and the balance relations with regional and global powers. As per the realists, Nepal's geostrategic position at the center of South Asia has always made Nepal cautious about its survival. The policy states that sovereignty, freedom, territorial integrity, independence, national unity, dignity, protection of rights and interest of Nepali people, border security, economic advancement, and prosperity are the bases that guide the national security policy.

There has been a paradigm shift in the traditional notion of security. 'National Security Policy- 2016' covers a broader concept of security incorporating the elements of human security. As advocated by the Welsh School of thought, national security policy is viewed from human centric approach. This approach incorporates the issues like environment, natural disasters, human trafficking, trans-national crimes, cyber-crimes, corruption, migration, control of epidemics, social security and border harmony as well. Beyond this the English School has a significant influence in Nepal's security policy with its focus on engaging with various regional and global platform, to ensure a secure international environment.

Economic and social factors are the pivotal elements of society. The policy considers economic dependency, poverty, inequality, unequal distribution of resources and industrial disharmony as the challenges to national security. The critical school has a similar opinion that socio-economic factors are more responsible for posing challenges upon security. Finally, though medium in size, Nepal is often considered a small power. It has several geopolitical, economic, social, and cultural constraints in its security landscape. In addition to external factors, small powers are often insufficient to manage internal law and order. Emigration, economic dependency, environmental degradation, political instability, and eroding institutional capacity to maintain internal affairs are some of the common security challenges of small powers. But the Gen-Z revolt of September 8 and 9 of 2025 has confirmed that Nepal's security apparatus itself is unsecured. This has raised serious questions about institutional capacity to bring security policy into operation.

Conclusion

Security and survival are the primary concerns of every state. The issue is particularly vital for a small, landlocked country like Nepal. The notion of security was first mooted by the late King Prithvi Narayan Shah. The issue continued to remain the subject of worry during various phases of history. But the twenty-first century witnessed a significant shift in global power dynamics. Traditional security has gradually shifted towards human-centric approach. Nepal, a small power between two rival powers, has several internal and external security challenges. With the aim of creating an environment to utilize opportunities and freedoms guaranteed by the constitution, 'National Security Policy-2016' came into operation, covering multi-dimensional and comprehensive security framework. The policy states several traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Besides sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence, the policy incorporates several non-traditional issues. This policy awakens stakeholders towards degrading internal and external aspects of national security, which requires sincere attention for the preservation of national sovereignty. The policy seems more comprehensive in theory, but its operational aspects are more vulnerable. The recent past Gen-Z revolt witnessed that the security mechanism itself was found to be unsecured. It resulted in the degradation of public faith, which requires comprehensive security outlook with institutional strengthening and pragmatic policy in the operational field.

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