

NEPAL'S POST-PANDEMIC DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of prioritising health and other social and environmental issues and treating them as national security concerns. Taking a small state policy capacity approach—a small state's ability to make informed policy decisions, this article looks at the nascent efforts being made to pursue regional cooperation in dealing with non-conventional threats in South Asia; and both implications and opportunities for Nepal to diversify its diplomatic engagement with a view to bridging its own domestic capacity gap-heightened by the pandemic. This analytical article argues that this is the right time for Nepal to reframe the issue of health and other emergencies, recalibrate the roles of its domestic institutions and diversify its diplomacy with the regional players and pivotal middle powers for building domestic capacity.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Non-traditional Threats, Nepal, Foreign Policy, Small State, Policy Capacity.

Introduction

COVID-19 has thrown the spectre of existential crisis, particularly for the poorer and smaller states with weak health infrastructures (BBC, 2020) underscoring the importance of securitising infectious diseases control mechanisms through adequate allocations of resources. This pandemic is likely to reflect in every country the adequacy, or lack thereof, of the existing domestic response mechanisms. For the developed countries, it is a matter for putting in place systems and ensuring adequate resources to the frontline agencies. For poorer countries, the task is taller and would invariably require support from other countries (Berglöf et al., 2020). But as the pandemic spreads against the backdrop of an intensifying cold war, the choices are not straight forward. For countries like Nepal that are caught in big power rivalry, deepening ties with the regional players and middle powers while also engaging with the big powers may be a more acceptable proposition and attractive balancing tool. This is important in light of the vaccine diplomacy or rivalry, however one characterises it, coming into play (Wesley, 2020). For Nepal, both the internal

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reflection and emphasis on regional and global cooperation must be an integral part of the adaptation process. The country's need to build domestic capacity and recalibrate the response mechanism is particularly evident, and addressing these gaps will be critical for successfully dealing with future outbreaks.

There are clearly two interconnected parts to the pandemic response. The first step is to get the domestic response and coordination right, which means identifying the gaps in domestic systems and processes, and ensuring availability of resources, including technical capacity and personnel. The second equally important aspect is to build the external outreach with a view to securing support for pandemic response. This article revisits Nepal's foreign policy towards the regional players and middle powers (also referred to as secondary powers in this article), particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic. Taking a small state's capacity approach and drawing on the literature around non-conventional security threats, this study argues that there is an absence of strategic coherence in Nepal's diplomacy towards secondary powers in international politics.

This study first takes stock of the existing literature on small state capacity and then looks at the COVID-19 regional diplomacy. It subsequently offers an overview of the state of Nepal's bilateral relations with select countries to highlight the lack of strategic coherence in Nepal's diplomacy. Finally, this article makes an argument for diversifying and deepening relations with the regional players and middle powers to build domestic capacity.

Small State Policy Capacity

Small states have capacity constraints in terms of what they can achieve both internally and externally. They often must deal with a 'naturally imposed and predictable condition' in which room for flexibility is strictly inhibited (Cooper & Shaw, 2009, p. xviii). Devising a coherent strategy that is a 'goal-oriented, higher order policy' is beyond the 'intellectual and bureaucratic capacities' of small states (Jenne, 2020, p.111). Yet there are plenty of examples of small countries punching above their weight by taking unconventional approaches to diplomacy. Malta has leveraged its passports, and Qatar has taken 'extraordinary risks to promote active international diplomacy' (Cooper & Shaw, 2009). Between the 1950s and 90s, Nepal's effort to play an outside role in the UN system through contributions to the peacekeeping missions and the proposal to declare Nepal a 'Zone of Peace' were examples of outside-the-box thinking. But Nepal's state capacity has not kept up with the pace of globalisation and technological development.

The literature on small states is 'overly state-centric' despite evidence of the role and influences of other actors. There is a clear need to pay attention to the

'roles of national and global civil societies, private companies and other diverse and competitive actors'. Each of these actors 'amplify the opportunities and risks that influence the behaviour of small states' (Cooper & Shaw, 2009, p.8). Since 2010, there has been growing recognition among small states that human resources are important aspects in this era of globalisation. This is evident in the way some developmental island states, 'from Malta to Singapore and Mauritius to Bermuda and Caymans', have approached the issue of capacity. This approach relies on the 'role of diasporas in terms of technology transfer and policy development' (Dawson, 2007 p.15).

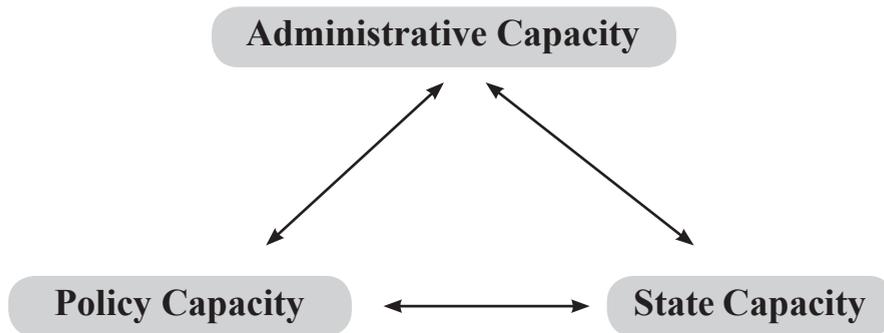
Baldacchino (2009) argues that small states are the norm; in contrast, large states are 'quirks and anomalies' (p.23). In a conflict between a small and a large state, often the smaller state tends to get more concessions as 'large states do not want to be seen to be bullying smaller states, unless that smaller state can be convincingly depicted as harbouring communists, terrorists or other reprehensible categories'(p.28). Prasad (2009) points out that 'small states are able to use their sovereignty and political status, rather than their economic influence, to advance their cause-often using non-market solutions or non-orthodox approaches'(p.43). Small states may be dependent on other large states and donors, yet they have developed 'ingenious systems to overcome the difficulties posed by their smallness' (p.60). Baldacchino and Milne (2000) go on to liken small states to 'modern day pirates', always on the lookout for 'exceptions, loopholes, special arrangements and derogations in the world systems'.

Thorhallsson (2009) argues states can 'choose their own size' by how they decide to act on the international stage. For example, Iceland, in the mid-to late 1990s, decided to punch above its weight by seeking to play a visible role in the UN system, NATO and other multilateral organisations (p.138). During the Doha round of the WTO negotiations in 2005, four small African countries, namely Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali, had remarkable success and were able to force the larger countries to change the text of the trade agreement (Lee, 2009, p.195). "By raising their own collective game in the WTO and encouraging other groups to support their demands, they have shifted from being mere objects of trade talks to being subjects in the trade negotiations" (p.197).

The above examples underscore the fact that policy capacity of the small states is not always lacking-where there is a strong domestic will to create a niche. Policy capacity is defined as the 'ability to marshal the necessary resources to make intelligent collective choices and set strategic directions' (Painter & Pierre, 2005, p.2). Policy capacity has strong correlation with state and administrative capacity. "Administrative capacity refers to the ability to manage efficiently the human and physical resources required for

delivering the outputs of government, while state capacity is a measure of the state's ability to mobilise social and economic support and consent for the achievement of public goals" (p.2). These 'three concepts are analytically distinct but interdependent components of governing capacity' and can be best illustrated in the 'form of a triangle' (p.3).

Capacity Triangle



Where small countries lack domestic policy capacity, it is logical for them to 'piggy-back', in the case of small EU states, on transnational organisations (p.40). There are many examples of countries developing their domestic capacity through agreements and exchanges with other countries, including under the banner of South-South and North-South Cooperation. A crisis such as the pandemic can create perfect opportunities for small countries to influence the behaviours of larger states, regional bodies and international organisations while 'piggy-backing' on the expertise and resources of competent states to build their own domestic policy capacity.

Regional Diplomacy

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's initiative for a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) video conference on instituting a regional response to the pandemic came as a bold gesture, yet it was short-lived. As the domestic challenges became paramount, regionalism was put on the backburner, and the move by and large remained just that: a gesture (Kugelman, 2020). During the video conference, countries agreed to create a SAARC COVID Response Fund, but it may be sometime before anything more meaningful and actionable flows from the initial video conference. Because the spread of the virus was so quick and overwhelming, countries have not had the time to formulate a clear national strategy, let alone one for regional cooperation. Ideas for instituting a regional response mechanism with teeth may only emerge after governments in the region contain the first wave of this pandemic, which has strained both the capacity and resources in almost

all countries. With economic activity on a standstill for months, few countries can spare resources. But once countries can document lessons from their own national response and its effectiveness or lack thereof, a framework of regional response may appear from the reflective process. But smaller countries like Nepal will have to play a much active role in nudging the larger countries to commit to a regional framework.

Despite severely constrained national capacities, some bilateralism and multilateralism have been on display even without a regional framework, as India, the US, China and other countries lent a helping hand to Nepal (“India, China Assure Nepal Of Unrestricted Assistance During COVID-19 Pandemic”, 2020). But as the rivalry over vaccine development heats up, the already complex geopolitics is getting further compounded (Kitney, 2020)-seeking to constrain the ability of countries like Nepal to independently decide on which vaccine to purchase-offering a flavour of the geopolitical entanglements Nepal could find itself in the post-pandemic period. If not handled properly, this evolving cold war will seek to further limit Nepal’s degree of autonomy in conducting its foreign policy. Unlike the previous cold war, this is being fought in Nepal’s own neighbourhood, and, hence, the ramifications of miscalculation or perceived slight are that much higher. Yet the pandemic and the geopolitical undercurrent also open doors for creative out-of-the-box thinking in pursuit of Nepal’s national interests. Nepal, as the current Chair of SAARC and as a country with good relations with all the member states, has the ability to influence the behaviour of larger states towards shaping a regional response to the pandemic.

Overview of Nepal’s Bilateral Relations

Out of 193 UN member states, Nepal has bilateral relations with over 167 countries and the Holy See (MoFA, n.d.a). Nepal’s external engagement seeks to ‘enhance dignity of the nation by safeguarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and promoting economic well-being and prosperity of Nepal. It is also aimed at contributing to global peace, harmony and security’(MoFA, n.d.b).But is there strategic coherence in terms of achieving these goals? Have these goals been translated into an actionable programme of actions? While there have been attempts to push for economic diplomacy (MoFA, 2019), the lack of brainstorming on targeted approaches in dealing with each country, and the general tendency to see all countries as donors, has perpetuated a rich donor-poor recipient mindset. In practical terms, what this has resulted in is a supply-driven rather than demand-driven development assistance framework.

This select snapshot of the state of bilateral relations with a mix of big powers and regional players below captures the ad-hocism at the individual level in the conduct of our foreign policy.

Prior to the lockdown, Nepal and China had entered a phase of accelerated connectivity with the opening of new border crossings, upgradation of roads and facilities leading up to the borders and burgeoning engagement over cross-border railways and transmission lines. This is likely to be affected in the aftermath of the crisis. The extent of how the disruption will play out remains to be seen, but for starters, the massive shortfall in revenue as a result of economic contraction is certain to affect funding for the flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Boo, David, & Simpfendorfer, 2020). BRI, as Chinese experts point out, is a trade programme (Republic, 2020), not an aid programme. Hence, our overreliance on China for implementing national development priorities without assessing the financial viability of such projects is problematic.

Bilateral relationships between Nepal and India have gone through a rollercoaster during the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The recent dispute over Nepal's western borders (MoFA, 2020) against the backdrop of escalating tensions between India and China over Ladakh has generated misleading narratives in the Indian media about Kathmandu taking orders from Beijing. Such a perception can have far-reaching repercussions in bilateral relations.

Nepali officials and strategic thinkers have long complained about India's neglect of its neighbourhood, particularly during the Manmohan Singh administration (Ghosh, 2014). That changed for the better in the first year of Modi's tenure, yet it resulted in a border blockade in the second year of the Modi administration. The 2015 blockade (Dixit, 2015), though harsh, came as a blessing in disguise for Nepal as it forced Kathmandu to seek ways to diversify its trade dependence-which culminated in Nepal signing a transportation and transit agreement (Giri, 2019), including importing petroleum products, with Beijing. New Delhi's punitive action against Kathmandu for ignoring its advice in the drafting of Nepal's constitution created a rare moment of strategic autonomy for Nepal that led to the Himalayan state formally joining Beijing's flagship BRI (Parajuli, 2018). Nepal joining the BRI may have come out of desperation, but this created an exceptional space for the country to push its foreign policy envelope. The reflections from this pandemic should trigger a similar response for Kathmandu to look beyond the big powers and diversify relations with other countries, albeit without the high-stake political brinkmanship.

Capturing the nuances in the bilateral relationship between Nepal and the United States requires a much more in-depth discussion, but, suffice to say, for this article that they have been mostly cordial (MoFA, n.d.c), except for some bilateral irritants. Geopolitics and rivalry between the US and China have delayed and complicated the implementation of the Millennium Corporation Challenge (MCC) in Nepal (Jha, 2020).

Nepal and Bangladesh have seen renewed engagement in the last few years, and trade between the two countries is on the rise. Bangladesh has also shown considerable interest in importing power from Nepal, and a memorandum of understanding (MoU) has been signed to this effect (The Kathmandu Post, 2018). There is strong potential for the two countries to enter a more strategic relationship given the many areas of common interest.

Nepal-UK relations have seen their ups and downs. While the UK remains a key development partner (MoFA, n.d.d), the lack of strategic focus in Kathmandu has meant that Nepal has not been able to leverage the over 200-year-old association to its maximum. The UK may not be a major power it used to be, but there is considerable room for a much more substantive bilateral relationship that goes beyond the mere traditional donor-recipient dynamic.

Nepal-Japan relationship remains cordial as Tokyo is a strong supporter of Nepal's development efforts (Embassy of Japan, n.d.). Although there have been several high-level visit exchanges, Nepal has missed opportunities to elevate the ties to much more strategic levels. In 2011, in the aftermath of Japan's earthquake and tsunami, as the country was looking for partners to secure its food supply, Nepal was approached to allocate space in the Dang Valley. "In early 2011, our bureaucracy sat on a request from Japan that would have created a potential export industry. In the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in March 2011, Japan faced severe shortages of food supplies as the twin disasters caused disruptions to its supply chains" (Parajuli, 2019b).

Even though the EU continues to provide significant development and humanitarian assistance to Nepal, the ties are far from cordial. This is partly due to Nepal's neglect. The Europeans want a much deeper engagement with Kathmandu than currently exists. In fact, EU officials have openly called for a 'political partnership' between Nepal and the EU (Ghimire, 2019). The relationship with the EU, in general, and Germany and Scandinavian countries, in particular, has been overlooked by Kathmandu. They deserve to be given much more importance. That is a significant missed opportunity in

terms of pursuing Nepal's grand strategy of security and prosperity. Regional players and pivotal middle powers-such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Israel, among others-have the capability of not only complementing the assistance of other big powers but also becoming a source of improving domestic capacity in Nepal. It is imperative that Nepal cast a wider net and use bilateral relations to build its own national capacity for future pandemic response and development as well as economic opportunities.

Implications for Nepal

The pandemic's implications for Nepal are far reaching. It has highlighted just how devastating the social divide can be during pandemics that demand strict social distancing. Millions of people have lost their livelihoods. The economic ruin this pandemic promises to leave behind is even worse. The economy is expected to contract significantly as remittances, tourism and service sectors-the key pillars of the economy-come to a standstill and are unlikely to bounce back to pre-pandemic levels anytime soon. The state of the economy is in a similar shape across the region, and if the countries are to contain the virus and jumpstart their economies, some level of regional cooperation is imperative. Nepal, as the current Chair of SAARC, is in a position to convene regional meetings to deliberate on the modalities of regional cooperation.

The World Bank revised its forecast for Nepal and stated that the growth rate would fall to a "range between 1.5 and 2.8 per cent in FY 2020, reflecting lower remittances, trade, tourism and broader disruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak". The Bank expects the contraction to remain in FY 2021 with only some recovery in 2021. While the overall poverty headcount had declined to 8 per cent (\$1.90), the Bank estimates that 31.2 per cent of the people in Nepal live between \$1.9 and \$3.2 a day. This section of the population faces a heightened risk of "falling into extreme poverty, primarily because of reduced remittances, foregone earnings of potential migrants, job losses in the informal sector and rising prices for essential commodities as a result of COVID-19" (Nepal Overview, 2020). Again, these forecasts are not very different from those of other countries in the region.

The global shortfall in revenue both in the public and private sector, which is estimated to be around \$12 trillion (Jensen et al., 2020), will have a knock-on effect on Official Development Assistance and Foreign Direct Investment in Nepal. Meanwhile, Nepal's internal revenue collection has also dropped significantly (Shrestha, 2020). The government is also under pressure to provide a bailout package for the private sector. With increased financial demand and reduction in revenue collection, there have been calls to trim the government machinery and do away with the many commissions, committees and advisors. This is likely to have some effect on the government structure

and the decision-making process. With the need for strong health surveillance becoming imperative, there is fear that this will lead to erosion in certain civil liberties. Security forces will be an integral part of pandemic prevention going forward. This is in line with the global trend (Trenkov-Wermuth, 2020). Armies have been called to help civilian administrations in many countries. In Nepal, even the procurement of medical equipment has been assigned to the Nepali Army. In addition, the Armed Police Force (APF) and the Nepali Army, along with the Nepal Police, have been tasked to build quarantine facilities.

But if Nepal is to be ready for another pandemic, these calibrations of domestic institutions need to go further. Protecting public health clearly should be a part of the broader civil-defense strategy, with clearly defined roles for the public health apparatuses, civil administration and security forces. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) must be put in place with strict protocols for different government and security entities to follow in the event of an outbreak. In addition, a gap analysis needs to be conducted to identify both capacity and resource gaps while putting in place a system to minimise external dependence on critical equipment and drugs. This may mean either state-owned enterprises producing them or the private sector producing with state support. Both the APF and the Army should increase their capacity to rapidly construct field hospitals. This requires more specialised medical staff, engineers and medics within their ranks. Given Nepal's neighbourhood and the size of the militaries of neighbouring countries, our armed forces may need to revisit their organisational structure and allocation of resources to tackle pandemics and other natural calamities. Personnel from specialised units of the Army, APF and Police should complement the National Disaster Management Agency and subsequent line agencies in the provincial and local levels.

This pandemic calls for a comprehensive national security strategy that needs to not just provide intellectual architecture to tackle traditional security threats but, going further, also include non-traditional threats, such as pandemics and climate change. The Army and security forces are being called on a regular basis to help, and so a revised policy built on the foundation of added strategic coherence can make the task flow with greater efficiency. Security is about survival, and yet the narrow focus on the traditional security dilemma without factoring in the emerging issues that threaten human security is problematic. As the pandemic has shown, issues that are outside the domain of the traditional security agenda can throw a spectre of existential crisis. Securitising health or according priority akin to national security threats, is not a call for handing over responsibilities to the military apparatus but rather ensuring that such a potent issue receive the priority it deserves. "Security is a move that takes politics beyond the established rule of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics" (Buzan et al, 1998, p.23).

Internally, Nepal's security forces have been an essential part of the pandemic response (The Rising Nepal, 2020 a). This needs to be recognised and further strengthened through a variety of legal and institutional measures as a part of a broader civil-defense strategy with clearly defined roles for the public health apparatuses, civil administration and security forces. There is strong intellectual argument for widening the debate on security beyond just the traditional issues (Ullman, 1983; Jahn, Lemaitre, and Waever, 1987; Nye and Lynn-Jones, 1988; Matthews, 1989; Brown, 1989; Crawford, 1991; and Waever et al., 1993). Clearly, this pandemic, in line with the securitisation theory put forward by Buzan, Waever and De Wilde in their 1998 seminal book (*Security: A New Framework for Analysis*), calls for a comprehensive national security strategy for dealing with non-traditional threats, such as pandemics and climate change. In order to implement such a strategy, a great deal of expertise and resources need to be made available. This is precisely where deepening and diversifying Nepal's foreign policy engagement with the regional players and pivotal middle powers can come into play. There is huge potential for further leveraging Nepal's existing relations with the EU, the UK, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Israel, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, among others, for building its domestic capacity aimed at providing better response to citizens and residents during crises and disasters.

The Nepali Army and the security establishment need to be realistic about assessing Nepal's threat environment. Given the power asymmetrical neighbourhood that we live in, it should provoke our strategic thinkers into revisiting the strategic focus and composition of the security forces. "Recognising the military's role in relief and humanitarian activities in response to disasters and the increased possibility of climate-related disasters, it is vital that the armed forces in the region conduct re-assessments of their capabilities in various response scenarios and develop revamped Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for adapting to climate change. This should also include a situation when national forces are asked to engage in international humanitarian operations" (Karin, 2013, p. 3). This can begin by the government revisiting the Nepali Army's roles and responsibilities in light of the pandemic and recurring natural calamities. It is critical that the government articulate policy goals for the use of the military and put in place guiding doctrines linked to national priorities, including strategic development works, disaster management and mitigation and counterterrorism. Much of these renewed priorities can be implemented by building strong partnerships with foreign partners, particularly with secondary powers.

To be fair, the Army and the APF already perform several non-traditional roles, including protection of parks, customs, revenue, industrial security and

anti-poaching surveillance. With the right strategy and adequate resources, both the Army and the APF can be model military organisations in the region, ones that are fit for tackling these unconventional threats. As the frequency of these unorthodox security threats increases, it may not be far-fetched to think that Nepal's security forces could even be called to assist at the regional level-serving pretty much the same functions as peacekeepers. Again, given Nepal's neutral position, that is not an improbable proposition.

Undoubtedly, there will be some protests towards the attempt to securitise public health, but without elevating pandemics to the level of national security threats, there simply would not be an adequate structure (Monaco, 2020) and resources available to tackle the crisis with the iron discipline as would be required-more so for poorer countries with weaker health systems. As is evident from what has happened in the United States and other developed countries, simply having the capacity and awareness alone does not cut it. Unless there is a clear structure in place with trigger mechanisms, systems will not kick in. As a result, there will be commotion instead of coherence, wasting valuable time in red tape and demagoguery, and resulting in high fatalities and systems being overwhelmed. The civilian set-up often does not provide ideal conditions for implementing a response in a war-like situation. Therefore, as researchers have noted, 'certain characteristics of the armed forces' make them perfect for pandemic response: "crisis management capabilities, rapid mobility, and immediate availability of trained personnel throughout... They are task-oriented-acting towards defined goals, and practiced at multitasking under difficult conditions" (Kohn et al., 2010, p. 259).

Piggy-Back

This section offers some example of some regional and secondary powers with policy capacity that Nepal can piggy-back on to bridge its own domestic capacity gap. Israel's experience and emergency response structure are of relevance to Nepal.

By 2005, the Israeli government had taken steps and put the Ministry of Defense (MoD) "in charge of managing national preparedness and response during advanced phases of a severe influenza pandemic", with the Ministry of Health (MoH) responsible for coordinating medical aspects of the response (Kohn et al., 2010, p. 259). Subsequent pandemic protocols drafted in 2006 have further refined this civilian-defense cooperation guideline by making the MoH fully liable for all the responses up to WHO Alert phases 3 and 4 ("WHO Pandemic Phase Description and Main Actions by Phase", n.d.). The MoD would take charge in phase 5 or 6 if the pandemic posed a threat to national

security or the civilian system is overwhelmed (Kohn et al.,2010, p.260).

While Israel has developed capability in tackling unconventional security threats through a unique blend of civilian-defense cooperation, it must be noted that their current response to the pandemic is far from exemplary. After being hailed as a model, the second phase of Israel's measures has been a 'cautionary tale' to the world (The Times of Israel 2020). But that just goes to show the complex and evolving nature of this virus. Nepal has had cordial relations with the Jewish state going back 60 years, and clearly there is a desire to deepen the engagement on both sides (The Rising Nepal, 2020 b). Israel has offered Nepal technical assistance in many areas, and there clearly is room for leveraging the ties further.

The Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) is an example of another security organisation that excels in disaster management and response in the Asia-Pacific region (Kato, 2019). As Japan is prone to earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and, recently, even nuclear meltdowns, the SDF is in a capacity to offer both state-of-the-art training and resources to our armed forces. This support for building the capacity to ensure human security during disasters neatly fits into the Japanese foreign policy objective of promoting human security. With the right pitching and strategy, Nepal can tap into this very special bilateral relationship to augment domestic capacities. Nepal-Japan relations have several dimensions, and there is desire on the Japanese side to further deepen engagements (The Himalayan Times, 2019). While successive governments have seen Japan as a friend, Kathmandu's approach is often limited to seeking funding for infrastructure projects with little strategic coherence in the dealings of successive governments.

Nepal's relations with South Korea, another pivotal power, are multi-faceted and deepening. Bilateral trade is growing and so is the volume of Korean tourists and foreign direct investments (MoFA, 2019). Seoul's development assistance to Nepal is also on the rise, and the country is keen to share its experience and technology with Nepal (Khanal et al., 2019). Similarly, there is considerable scope for further strengthening already booming ties with Turkey, Thailand, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. There are many areas of common interests, and while these countries are pursuing their strategic interests in pushing for a deeper relation with Nepal, it clearly takes two to tango. Rather than putting them all in one basket, Kathmandu needs a much more meticulous approach in deepening ties with these above-mentioned countries by examining the strength of each of these countries and relating it to Nepal's needs and areas of common interest. Rather than what is being

offered from the vantage point of these countries, Nepali officials can be more proactive and start sending feelers on what Nepal wants from the bilateral ties with these regional powers. This is where institutions like the Institute of Foreign Affairs can contribute by offering research and policy options on each of these countries to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A vaccine may provide immunity against this virus, but it would not be the last deadly virus to go on rampage, or the last disaster. With accelerating effects of climate change, more unconventional threats are likely to appear in frequent intervals. It is imperative that an unconventional civilian-defense capability be built to tackle recurring unconventional threats.

Nepal's COVID-19 Response

Nepal's COVID response initially was welcomed as the country took swift measures to lock down the country, but an absence of subsequent proactive actions meant that the time afforded by the lockdown was not properly utilised to put in place systems to minimise risks of transmission when the country gradually opened up (Poudel, 2020). The government took the right decision to integrate the security apparatus with the response, yet instead of clarifying the trigger-points and protocols while delegating the responsibilities, other ministries were forced to play second-fiddle (Sijapati, 2020). Clear capacity gaps emerged in several key areas: management of quarantine facilities (Poudel, 2020b); coordination with neighbouring countries over repatriation of citizens; ability to quickly construct COVID field hospitals; procurement of essential supplies; ability to mobilise and leverage the expertise of NGOs and the private sector.

On managing the quarantine facilities, the private sector and NGOs could have been mobilised throughout the country to assist the local authorities and security forces. These non-governmental sectors have the resources and assets to both build and repurpose the existing facilities for quarantining suspected individuals. This would have prevented some quarantine facilities from becoming potential sources of further infections (Poudel, 2020b). Inadequacy was also seen in terms of coordinating with neighbouring countries, particularly India, in ensuring an orderly repatriation of thousands of Nepalis. Given the porous border, an influx of returning Nepalis in the border areas was to be expected, and yet very little arrangement was put there to help the local authorities deal with the situation (Shrestha, 2020). Again, the non-governmental sector could have been reliable partners in this.

While these above shortcomings are by and large a product of inability to think outside-the-box, two important gaps stood out. Our security forces have

limited medical capacity, including building field hospitals rapidly. The second was related to procurement of emergency supplies. Valuable time was lost during the wrangling on how to quickly procure supplies, and the attendant policy paralysis in general was equally problematic (Bhattarai, 2020). Concern among officials about being potentially dragged into a corruption investigation is understandable, yet one fails to understand why there is no system to have a pre-vetted roster of suppliers for emergency procurement or even an emergency provision to offer no-bid contracts for emergency purchases.

COVID-19 has highlighted the extent of policy capacity gaps in Nepal together with administrative and state capacity. One way to respond to this is to deny the shortcomings; another equally bad response is to accept it as the fate of small states. A more helpful approach is to try to analyse what went wrong and then take the corrective path. It is correct that small states clearly have inherent weaknesses, but to accept them as fate would further erode policy and state capacity-making the state in question further vulnerable to a range of insecurities.

Conclusion

This paper, using a small state policy capacity approach, analysed Nepal's state of bilateral relations with secondary powers, regional diplomacy and policy capacity through the lens of the pandemic response. As discussed above, as a small state, Nepal inherently has capacity gaps, which have been heightened partly by an ineffective response to the pandemic. This paper also outlined how the policy capacity gap in Nepal can be bridged by further diversifying relations with the secondary powers and piggybacking on their expertise.

The spectre of existential crisis thrown by the pandemic to small states like Nepal requires a much more proactive and diversified foreign policy that can help produce domestic policy capacity to deal with future disasters. Nepal's relations with the secondary powers while cordial have tremendous untapped potential. This needs to be leveraged going forward.

Regional players and pivotal middle powers-such as Australia, South Korea, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Israel, among others-have the capability of not only complementing the assistance of other big powers but also becoming a source for improving Nepal's domestic capacity. As examples above highlight, many of these countries have strong state capacity and proven track-record of handling unconventional threats. But there is one little caveat here: without strategic coherence in Nepal's policies, simply lobbying for more aid and assistance will not do the country any good. Instead of building the internal capacity and systems, such an approach will only compound the

existing dependency syndrome in the country-leaving the country ever more vulnerable to external interference.

While much energy has been spent deliberating on the country's political system, it is high time for a similar debate to be held for building the internal capacity-particularly in maximising the potential of the country's armed forces and transforming the existing military organisations into smart and agile units geared towards ensuring human security-while offering more value for money to the taxpayers. Nepali leaders and officials can begin by asking tough questions on the domestic pandemic response and subsequently identify resource and capacity gaps in our domestic institutions. This can take the form of a formal report or an informal brainstorming. This can be complemented by a process of identifying countries that had a generally good response to the virus-and with whom Nepal already has diplomatic relations. A list of countries has been mentioned in the paragraphs above, but there could be more from whom Nepal can benefit.

As a country sandwiched between two big powers, historically Nepal's foreign policy had been dominated by the instinctive balancing act designed for survival. Between the 1950s and 90s, there were efforts to diversify Nepal's relations, and this period was characterised by Kathmandu successfully establishing diplomatic ties with a diverse group of countries (Khanal, 2019, p.99). There was also emphasis on punching above the weight by trying to play a bigger role in the UN system. Hence, Nepal's emergence as one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping missions. The change towards democratic dispensation in the post-90 period and rise of India and China gradually ended that push for diversification-bringing the focus back to the idea of a 'bridge' between India and China. Until the 90s, there were fears about Nepal being 'absorbed' by either of the two neighbours, and hence the diversification and counterbalancing act beyond the neighbourhood and active diplomacy to promote Nepal as a 'Zone of Peace' were an existential necessity. Even though there are 39 Nepali diplomatic missions abroad today, more than ever, the sheer number of Nepali embassies abroad does not necessarily indicate quality of relationship with the secondary powers. This issue goes to the heart of state policy capacity to strategise and formulate coherent foreign policy doctrines.

Getting ready for the next pandemic calls for bold diplomatic ambitions and concrete steps towards more calibration of domestic institutions and systems. A broader civil-defense strategy needs to be put in place to protect civilian lives with clearly defined roles for the public health apparatuses, civil administration and security forces. With a clear strategy and high-level engagement, Nepal

can partner with the regional players and middle powers to build domestic capacity. Concerns about security forces playing an outsized role and undermining the civilian government are likely to follow-and these valid apprehensions can be addressed through a clearly defined trigger system and provisions of accountability. Pandemics warrant the same priority as national security threats as it would help ensure adequate structures and resources to tackle the crisis with iron discipline. There are already best practices to learn from.

Nepal's future security and prosperity depend on the ability and agility of Nepali strategic thinkers and actors to recalibrate the country's grand strategy-a strategy that is realistic about the external and internal threat environment and ambitions about leveraging the country's unique position-within and beyond the immediate neighbourhood. States determine their own size by how they choose to act on the international stage. Nepal, given its population and landmass, is not a small state, yet its influence, or lack thereof, on the international stage, makes it one.

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