

Understanding Nepal's Geopolitical Dynamics: Connected History Disconnected Future

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Abstract

The debate on geopolitics has gained momentum at various layers of society in recent years. Yet, there is paucity in clarity as to what geopolitics entails and how Nepal has become geopolitically important. There are, however, multiple opinions, where the tendency has been to project geography as the main tenet of geopolitics. This may partially be true given the changes brought about by the new technology-driven political economy. Likewise, there is a tendency to associate every success and failure in the domestic politics/development with geopolitics, while other undercurrents are not taken into consideration even though they might have implications for keeping the society and state together in the long-term. What is still important for the states like Nepal is the role of powerful countries both in the neighborhood and beyond. Geopolitics certainly is not new, but its manifestations may differ, and this article looks into them and their possible consequences for Nepal. In this regard shall also carefully considers how foreign policy should be articulated when geopolitics is entrenched. The article largely builds on an analytical approach based on certain facts/events to understand and explain the geopolitical underpinnings.

Key words: Foreign policy, connected history, civilizational geopolitics, development

The debate on geopolitics has gained momentum at various layers of society in recent years. Discussions on *bhurajñiti* (Nepali equivalent to geopolitics) are underway from small tea shops to the university department(s), and from newsrooms to the board rooms. Such discussions often are based both on rumors and facts. The discussion on geopolitics is centered around how geopolitically powerful states under various pretexts such as development, democracy, and social transformation are putting their own agendas and making other states pawns in the broader geopolitical games. Often such discussions become concealed to the point where politics itself becomes a product of rumors. Yet a majority are of the view that Nepal's internal political, social, and developmental policies are not only defined but also implemented by them. There certainly may be some grain of truth in the beliefs but what we should not also forget is their contribution towards Nepal's infrastructural development. What we are not clear about is how much of geopolitics could have been involved regarding development, democracy,

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and social transformation. This is, for sure, not easy to answer at least in the case of Nepal. Nevertheless, what could be true, though, is that the geopolitical momentum has increased in other parts of the world as well. Covid-19 scaled up both its momentum and intensity.

The influence of geopolitics in Nepal's internal political, economic, and social dynamics is, however, not new. They were raised some 250 years ago by Prithvi Narayan Shah. His "Yam doctrine" is the case in point. Apart from that, the central Himalayan region has always been important since time immemorial both from a spiritual and strategic point of view (Bhatta, 2019). Over time, some of the Himalayan states have withered away. Their connected history (Subramaniam, 2022) has either been dismantled or has become irrelevant. Remaining of the independent states in the region, including Nepal, are on the verge of becoming flash points in the wake of the new geopolitical dynamics. Yet one may still ask a question what geopolitical importance do countries like Nepal possess? In that regard every state will have their own share on geopolitics, what may differ, though, is their capacity to maneuver in a given geopolitical situation. Any position on the state of geopolitics and its consequences, however, can only be developed when actors, agencies, and issues involved are well understood. For this, the nature of relations among major states/powers needs to be taken into consideration from the geopolitical vantage point. In this regard, how the relations between and among the emerging powers – India, China, and the resident powers – US and its allies (Mahbubani 2020a)– in the region are evolving and the major factors that define such relations need to be carefully studied. That will be helpful to understand the consequences for Nepal as well. Against this background, this article investigates – the Alpha (Pacic 2020) and Omega of geopolitics – and how have they changed or are changing over time and the direction they will take in the future. It also considers how foreign policy should be framed in a situation where geopolitics is deeply entrenched.

Background

Chanakya's Arthashastra provides an excellent analysis of *Bhurajñiti*– although the word is not mentioned – but the essence of geopolitics has been succinctly explained². Yet with regard to the modern-day geopolitics there are at least two scholars: Alfred Thayer Mahan and Harford Mackinder (Pacic 2020,146) who define geopolitics succinctly and convincingly. Scholar(s) have reached a consensus to explain that geopolitics is the interactions or interface between geography and politics over space and time (Starr 2015). That is how geography of a state shapes its politics or how politics, in turn, should be conducted in certain geographical contexts, where time is crucial. The consensus among various scholars is that geography is the fundamental unit of analysis (Mackinder 1904and AlfredMahan³), and for that the size and location of the country becomes important. Taking cue from them, it become true to the extent when geography defines limits and maximizes opportunities of the nation-states in the international politics. But there are also other who argue geopolitics is not only about geographic determinism (Owens,

² The exact meaning of Arthashastra is: the livelihood of human being is called artha, the land that gives livelihood is also called artha, and the shastra that protects both is called Arthashastra. The Arthashastra, therefore, is overall statecraft.

³ See at <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/mahan> (accessed on 26 Feb, 2022).

2015). Also, geopolitics is not static in the sense that one may witness frequent clustering of powers at the global, regional, and local level. What makes it dynamic, however, is the interaction among people on the one hand, and technology and economic development on the other. The dynamism can have impact not only on the geopolitical landscape – the political geography – but also in the areas of political economy and societal structure.

The nexus between society and space is seen as a basic element of the geopolitical imagination and the nation-state as the fundamental “territorial trap” of that imagination (Agnew 1994). From the beginning of the 20th century, when the term geopolitics was first used by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (Engelbrekt 2018), the range of explanations and geopolitical priority have kept on changing from the first European war (World War I) to the 9/11 attacks. Geopolitics also has become more event oriented in recent years. Most of the scholarship on geopolitics stems from the Western hemisphere (ibid)⁴ for obvious reasons and is power centric in nature and is influenced by acquiring and accumulating power, wealth, and land – which is akin to imperialist ambitions – than anything else. From 1492 when the doctrine of discovery was signed in Europe for the exploration and conquest of the New World (Basu 2017). Geopolitics appears to have taken various routes / methods and has reached to the point where we are now.

Three most important geopolitical scholars Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford John Mackinder, and Nicholas John Spykman emphasize that control is main instrument to implement geopolitical objectives vis-à-vis various of its other schools – land, sea, ecology, and polity (ibid). While Mahan believed that those who control “sea power” would control world, Mackinder came up with the “Heartland” theory. For him Eurasian region is the heartland and anyone controlling that part would eventually control everything⁵. Likewise, Spykman, was of the view that controlling the Rim land was adequate to control the world (ibid). Most of these theories were developed in certain geography, geoeconomics, and cultural context, that too, during certain periods to serve their own purposes. Yet they are still valid, even though the situation has fundamentally changed. Mere control overland, sea, and rim land alone is not sufficient and there has been noticeable shift in this regard. Technology has brought changes which were never imagined, because of which the nation-state – the building block of geopolitics – is on the verge of being replaced by the “networked” state⁶. In the network state, individuals become important, not necessarily the territory, as they can be used for multiple purposes. Developing narratives to control minds of the people and not letting countries/people to have necessary skills/technology appears to have emerged as the new field of the geopolitical battle. Given the current situation, one cannot rule out the likelihood

⁴ The words/concept like globalism, geopolitics, and multilateralism gained traction in the early twentieth century are the product of imperial great-power politics and World War I. See at https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/the-clash-of-cultures-5642/?utm_campaign=en_966_20220113&fbclid=IwARoEWLMYfW9rBdt1kqdw3lCsmCFM63LnRydQSDGhze-3Ovc_OH7qoW_SRFI. (accessed Jan 26, 2022).

⁵ In 1919, Mackinder summarized his theory thus: Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.

⁶ See at <https://foresight.org/salon/balaji-s-srinivasan-the-network-state/> (for detailed info about network state). Accessed on Jan 6, 2022.

of a tech war being combined with the currency war between China and its allies on one side, and the United States on the other.

Taken together, geopolitics certainly has returned but in different forms and formats. Multiple factors such as ideology, geography, civilization, and market forces dominate discourses. With this in place, what can be claimed is that new technology driven actors likes of Facebook, Twitter, UTube, TikTok, and many more, and new issues such as blockchain to the decentralized finance (The Economist, 2022) will dominate geopolitical space and decide the fate of the nation-states. While earlier geopolitical actors were either soldiers or political geographers, those in the game today come from diverse backgrounds. In this regard there is more than one geopolitical alpha (Papic 2020) that is pushing countries towards the geopolitical vortex in many ways.

Locating Nepal's geopolitics

How do we locate Nepal's geopolitics? It certainly is a difficult but not necessarily and impossible question. Looking at the events occurring in the central Himalayas – the heartland – one may conclude that there are issues of geopolitical significance. The central Himalayas have always been important, but modern geopolitical rivalry only began in the 20th century – the Great Game – when the Young Husband mission was sent to checkmate Russian influence in Tibet by the British (Horpriik, 1992, 2006). And it has, once again, fallen under tremendous pressure, whose consequences are felt in Nepal as well. This time around, more than one factor might have been pushing Nepal towards the geopolitical whirlwind making difficult for it to conduct independent foreign policy.

In its modern political history, mainly after the demise of P.N. Shah, the Nepali court could not handle foreign policy prudently. The intermittent rivalry among courtiers in tandem with external conditions certainly were not favorable for Nepal. There was an ever-expanding British Raj on the one side, and China on the other and both were looking for an opportunity to have foothold in Nepal under various pretexts. Nepal (Kathmandu then), then, was some sort of entrepot not only for trade and commerce but also for Christian missionaries who were also targeting Tibet⁷. Yet there was no direct impact as Rajas, then, skillfully balanced its relations with India and China for centuries and safeguarded its national independence (Kissinger, 2014). The situation, however, changed, when Nepal fell to the British and was forced to sign Sugauli Treaty in 1816 which unofficially made Nepal a British protectorate and cut down its geographical size. Likewise, Betrawati Treaty signed with Tibet shrunk Nepal from the Northern side. The Great Britain, however, recognized Nepal as an independent and sovereign state through the 1923 treaty⁸. That treaty with British, in principle, made Nepal eligible to participate in the world order that was created in 1945. But that did not really work out.

⁷ The Capuchin mission to Nepal and Tibet was sanctioned by the Congregation of the Propaganda in 1703. Also see Alsop, Ian, 1996, "Christians at the Malla Court: The Capuchin 'piccolo libro'" in ed. Siegfried Lienhard, Change and Continuity: Studies in the Nepalese Culture of the Kathmandu Valley, (containing the papers read during the International Conference-Seminar of Nepalese Studies, which was held in Stockholm from June 9th to 12th, 1987) (Torino: CESMEO) pp 123- 135.

⁸ Another reason was signing of Sarda Barrage treaty in 1920 also known as the Indo Nepal water treaty that was signed with British India.

Nepal's application for UN membership was flatly rejected by the Russians on the ground that Nepal was not a sovereign state and the treaty that was signed with the British does not make Nepal sovereign as it was a colonial power⁹. Moreover, the treaty was also a kind of a slap in the face of that state which was among the oldest not in the Vedic sense of the term (Nepal has been mentioned in the Atharva Veda) but also in the chronology of state formation. In fact, in return for services provided to the empire, Britain was kind enough not only to grant sovereignty to most of states located in this part of the world (the word South Asia was not coined then) including Nepal but also oversaw the disintegration of the Bharatvarsha/Jambu Dweep also known as *aryavarta* – into many parts and becomes – a sub-continent – by drawing artificial lines and providing false interpretation of history/culture¹⁰ which, now have become the source of border and societal conflicts among and between the states/communities in the region. Paradoxical, as it may be, in the process most of these countries became “junior” in the chronology of the state formation. The politics of imperial state formation was such that India became independent a day after Pakistan. This cut short the uninterrupted history of Prithu's Bharat¹¹ and gave birth to India. For Nepal, despite having pronounced a non-aligned foreign policy doctrine, it could not contain outside influences on its domestic politics at least for two centuries. In contrast, successive rulers used foreign policy to preserve their own personal gains. For example, during the Rana regime, they became too close with British India and offered troops to the Britain during two European Wars of the 20th century (again not necessarily world wars) and protected the regime. Immediately after the Great Britain left the region, Ranas were also ousted from power. That was largely the influence of the democratic wave sweeping across the world from the US – a country then on the verge of becoming another leader in geopolitics – which led to the collapse of many traditional elites/regimes/systems from power¹². Nepal's northern neighbor – China – was taken over by Mao Zedong and fell to communism in 1949. When two contrasting political ideologies governed both sides of Nepal's border – north and south – and that also influenced Nepal. China, to a great extent, has been motivated by Mao's brochure – The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party of December 1939 – which upholds the palm theory, one that puts China in the center (Palm) and posits other Himalayan states as its fingers¹³. This theory further terrified Himalayan states and – perhaps – this explains why they were either forced to have multiple treaties with India or become

⁹ Why Russians opposed 1923 treaty has more than one reasons but they saw it part of a 'Great Game' which was under play between and among central Asian states, Tibet, British, and Russians. Yet, the treaty has been brought into discussion and hailed as the one which provided Nepal sovereignty. Perhaps, this is the solid evidence how geopolitics is still under play around certain issues. Nepal's U.N. membership application in 1949 was rejected by the Security Council due to a veto against it by the Soviet Union on September 7, 1949. This news even made it to the New York Times. The newspaper wrote: “The Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal was kept out of the United Nations today by the thirty-first veto registered by the Soviet Union.” See Birat Anupam at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/5-facts-about-nepals-un-membership/> (accessed on 20 Feb, 2022).

¹⁰ One such was the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT) that divided India into Aryans and Dravidians.

¹¹ Prithu is “celebrated as the first consecrated king, from whom the earth received her (Sanskrit) name Prithv. See Nagendra Kumar Singh (1997). *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*. Anmol Publications. ISBN 978-81-7488-168-7.

¹² Any debate on governance that followed afterwards are either in favour of democracy or against it.

¹³ Most of the Himalayan states, then, were forced to enter into treaty with India perhaps for their own survival. Mao's Five Finger theory – Palm Theory -, then under play, was really terrifying along with ideology for all the practical reasons and many would not agree on this today.

closer to the US – the, then, rising power in a period which also coincided with an official shift of global power from London to Washington. The Panchayat rulers, tried to strike a certain level of balance in Nepal’s foreign policy but there were limits to the effort, and quite a few pitfalls. Both Rana’s and Panchayat rulers had adopted a regime centric foreign policy for their own survival during the troubled times – for the Ranas it was a period when European imperialism was at its zenith, and it was the peak of the Cold War for the Panchayat rulers.

The democratic era from 1990 saw a flurry of democratic activities with political parties of various colors conducting foreign policy in erratically mainly to suit their partisan interests. This was a period of party centric-foreign policy (Bhatta and Yadav 2021). After the political change of 2006, foreign policy either became leader oriented or Nepal had to reorient not only foreign policy but also the politics, time and again, as per the need of others –both in the neighborhood and beyond. While considering these various phases, it appears that Nepal’s foreign policy is not necessarily practical for enhancing the position of the state and society and is instead more influenced by a power centric approach of the leaders. In the process whatever changes have occurred about foreign policy have been cosmetic as they have failed to understand more than one dimension of issues transpiring both in the neighborhood and beyond. One may notice some sort of mismatch between change and continuity in Nepal’s foreign policy orientation. What certainly has been missing, is the notion of having an independent foreign policy.

Alpha and Omega of geopolitics

Nepal may have little significance in the world politics of its own, but it certainly provides considerable strategic leverage for others. Its location between the two rising, competing, and conflicting powers of Asia – China and India – makes it important for Western powers to strike a strategic balance in the region (Ayadi, 2021). This situation existed even before Prithvi Narayan Shah came into power and has not changed much even today. Three factors, at least, make Nepal’s position geopolitically vulnerable. First, its geographic location, second, its dependency on the outside-world for development and democracy building, and third, is the consequences of the re-emergence of Asia as the center of global geopolitics¹⁴. However, two most important factors need to be carefully assessed whilst understanding the current geopolitical dynamics. First is the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in September 2001, which was also considered to be an attack on the symbols of western liberalism and capitalism which prospered after 1990s. This attack has falsified the End of History thesis of Francis Fukuyama (although it was already disapproved when Samuel P Huntington, his guru, wrote Clash of Civilization). The 9/11 attack has compelled US and its allies to reorient development and security policies and the Millennium Challenge Cooperation (MCC), was the product of this thinking so that countries would not fall either in the trap of terrorism or go against the liberal values, to say the least, for which (re)democratization was made mandatory for many

¹⁴ The rising economy, demographic dividend, emerging markets, and centre of civilisations as the major religions of the world have their roots in Asia For any sort of market from evangelical to the economic activities Asia can be the centre. These factors can certainly have impact in that regard. What Adam Smith calls the Wealth of Nation can truly be found in Asia.

countries. Another event, which is equally important, is the unprecedented rise of China both economically and politically. These certainly are two major factors shaping the post-2001 global geopolitical discourse.

The spectacular rise of China has forced the US to develop policies and create lobbies that can contribute to contain China. The competition between China and the US became more visible when in 2013 Xi Jinping launched the One-Belt-One Road (OBOR) that was later to be renamed as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – as its signature project. This was later joined by many countries including Nepal. In response to these endeavors, the US took further steps and two events in that regard have played key roles to take geopolitics to the situation where it is now. First, the “pivot Asia” policy of the Obama administration in 2011 and second, the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy. In the process, the Asia-Pacific region has been renamed as the Indo-Pacific, which certainly elevates US policy in the region (from trans-Atlantic to trans-Pacific) and persuades India significantly in the extant geopolitical rivalry between China on one side and the West on the other. Further, the formation of economic and security related alignments under Free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region (FOIP) by the West has its own consequences in the region. It was also the time, when the Indo-Pacific strategy came more aggressively and tried to channel developmental endeavors under the security framework. There were also reports where the MCC was shown as an important part of Indo-Pacific strategy¹⁵. In addition, the US has floated competing security frameworks where economic liberalism through geoeconomics and political realism are mixed with geopolitics making it difficult for many countries, including Nepal, to differentiate one from the other. What followed is interesting, both China and the US are coming up with competing initiatives under various formats either to develop new alliances or to checkmate each other’s influence in the region. For example, in recent years to counter China’s BRI framework, G7 countries, for their part, came up with the Build Back Better World (B3W) in 2021. Moreover, the earlier regional security frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) has been revived and even projected as Asian NATO¹⁶. In response, China also appears to be rallying countries behind it in many ways to consolidate its own position vis-à-vis the West’s security and intelligence arrangements in the region. The formation of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – primarily a regional security organization focusing on the central Asian’s region but – was formed somewhat in line with the NATO format but its sole objective is counter and

¹⁵ See Roshan Nepal “MCC Important Initiative Under Indo-Pacific Strategy” at <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/millennium-challenge-corporation-compact-programme-important-initiative-under-indo-pacific-strategy> (accessed on 20 Feb, 2022). Also, while the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnership, and Promoting a Networked Region (June 2019) of the Department of Defense did not refer to MCC, the Department of State in its report entitled A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision clearly mentioned that MCC supports the economic pillar of the USIPS at Dr. Naresh Kumar available at https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=6519&lid=4480 (accessed 20 Feb, 2022). Full details available at The Department of State, A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision, November 04, 2019, Available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>. This, however, has been removed in the recent document(s). See new Indo-Pacific strategy at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf> (accessed on Feb 26, 2022).

¹⁶ The NATO analogy has been flatly rejected by India. See “Don’t slip into the lazy analogy of referring Quad as Asian NATO” - Jaishankar at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/dont-slip-into-the-lazy-analogy-of-referring-quad-as-asian-nato-jaishankar/articleshow/89700696.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on 20 Feb, 2022).

minimize western influence in Central Asia. Yet, both embody geopolitical interests regarding their approaches in central Asia. Additionally, China has also developed other parallel institutions not necessarily to mitigate the western influence in the region but to promote its own model of engagement¹⁷. The formation of the Boao Forum for Asia is another mechanism that works in line with the World Economic Forum. China was also instrumental in forming the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – putting it in the Centre of Asia's trade. Earlier, the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) was floated, as part of a strategic pivot to Asia by the former US President Obama but was withdrawn by the Trump administration in 2017¹⁸. What is apparent is that the US is still in the trial and error¹⁹ phase about its new strategy to counter and contain China in the region. The classic example is that despite having QUAD, there was another trilateral security pact between Australia, UK, and the US (AUKUS) developed in 2021 September²⁰. Not only were these instruments developed, but there was also a kind of academic rabble rousing going around to build new narratives. While some Western scholars came up with China collapse theory (Chang, 2001 and Shambaugh, 2015), others underlined its peaceful rise (Herrick, Gai, and Subramaniam, 2016). Amidst this, what is more visible, is the shift in the traditional geopolitical order of the region in which China is setting new norms as well as becoming a kind of a norm modifier. While the west came up with the pivot Asia approach, China, has focused on the entire globe through its BRI framework.

This shift in power structure has been seen as a challenge by the West which only reinforces power struggle between the resident and the re-emerging power sometime even reaching closer to what is called a Thucydides Trap (Chan, 2020 and Allison, 2017). Yet China doesn't necessarily buy this trap theory as its civilization is neither built on Alpha approach nor does it have the intention to displace the existing world order. Yet the formation of alignment and realignment have become more frequent making difficult to discern who is friend and who is foe in this geopolitical battleground. The resident and the re-emerging powers also appear to have adopted their own objectives in this new power configuration in the region. For example, the US wanted to maintain status quo in Asia in general and South Asia in particular²¹. Resurgent China, for its part, has not only developed its modus operandi of engagement in South Asia but it is also seeking its fair share in global governance (not necessarily changing the order as said earlier) for which it has also been using soft power to convince others as how the global governance would look like when it comes to the power. China certainly has been consolidating

¹⁷ China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation – which is quite active in Nepal's Terai region is another examples that provides alternative to USAID and DFID with regard to development. See for detail at https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/nepals-tarai-plains-have-a-chinese-dream-3957?fbclid=IwAR3_e3tQnoVTS7-mzvKPTotJitz2UdA3zz4NjDJG4tlY3ubqATMupbieVz8 (accessed on Jan 10, 2022). There is also Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) of which Nepal is also the member.

¹⁸ See <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-trans-pacific-partnership-tpp> (accessed on Jan 12, 2022) for detail.

¹⁹ In this regard Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi has called the Indo-Pacific an 'attention-grabbing idea' that 'will dissipate like ocean foam' (see https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/projekt_papiere/BCAS_2019_Medcalf_Indo-Pacific_Long_Game.pdf for detail.)

²⁰ See Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/can-quad-and-aucus-synergise/>. (accessed on 26 Feb, 2022).

²¹ This is also evident from the fact that those who have controlled Asia in the past became the great empires/and superpowers. Perhaps, this may be the reason why the world politics is always revolving between East and the West. No other regions are that important in that regard.

its position in more than one way. For example, to woe smaller states in South Asia, China came up with the Health Silk Road policy during the Covid-19 crisis. Recently, it has also exhibited a trident method (*trishul*) of engagement in the region – local, national, and regional levels²² and is footing the sub-national regional frameworks of its own kind. Apart from that, and alongside initiating debate on democracy in Chinese way, it has also floated a China-led Global Development Initiative (GDI) to support development, strengthen international development cooperation and promote post-pandemic global economic recovery in the region²³.

Three regions, South Asia, Central Asia, and South China Sea have become important in this power struggle. These are also other places where major powers are coalescing. The consequences of this geopolitical competition in the region are being felt by all the states in one way or the other irrespective of their size and level of development. Yet India –which is another power in the remaking of Asia is worth discussing precisely because it is Nepal's immediate neighbor with whom engagements are highest at all levels and will certainly have consequences as well. To say the least, in this geopolitical whirlwind, it appears that India is in the doldrums. Its relations in the neighborhood are not moving in the right direction. Despite skirmishes in the borders, India's economic engagement with China²⁴ is very significant. Yet India is forced to enter various security pacts with the West – mainly the US to counter China and has signed foundational pacts for deep military cooperation with the US²⁵. India imports a major chunk of military hardware from Russia. In this geopolitical rivalry between China and the US, and their parallel engagement in South Asia puts India in a difficult situation. It appears to have positioned itself as a junior partner in the US Camp. While China, like the erstwhile USSR did during much of the Cold War period, has become prominent power in the region. When two powerful countries of Asia are divided, it certainly will have consequences for the much-touted Asian Century (Mahbubani, 2020b). Yet, there are scholars who argue that world is entering into G"Zero" international order (Bremer, 2012) where every nation and alliance stands for itself/themselves. Considering these dynamics, what can certainly be argued is that once again – the region – has been divided in two camps but this certainly is not a new phenomenon. Back in 1950s and during the Cold war, there was a similar situation while the modus operandi was different. It was largely manifested in the form of modernization of both governance and development

²² See Mahendra P Lama at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/the-chinese-trishul-in-south-asia/story-qUKiiJB66Dx-6QtD6aQTTJ.html> (accessed on 10.01.2022).

²³ See Kamal Dev Bhattarai at <https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/have-nepal-china-ties-soured-under-the-deuba-government-4144> (accessed on 2nd February, 2022).

²⁴ Despite many ups and down in the border, the trade volume between India and China stood at USD 100 billion. See for detail at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/2021-a-year-of-record-trade-amid-frozen-india-china-ties-over-ladakh-chill/articleshow/88468514.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on Jan 14, 2022).

²⁵ See at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/beca-india-us-trade-agreements-rajnath-singh-mike-pompeo-6906637/> (accessed on Jan 6, 2022). Troika of agreements: Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement which, along with the two agreements signed earlier – the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) – completes foundational pact.

Indo-Pacific as a new theatre

The growing Asianization of the international economy is leading toward gradual Asianization of international politics (Kurecic, 2017) as well. There are many layers of dramas and many players in this theatre (Medcalf, 2021) and this may bring, at least, four powers India, China, the US (including its allies), and Russia either in direct competition, conflict, or realigning themselves in the region and elsewhere (Bhatta and Yadav, 2021).The growing geopolitical and geo-economic competition as well as rivalry between the emerging contender state(s) and resident powers (Mahbubani, 2020), will bring further challenges for the region. What may then be witnessed is the new Cold War (old Cold War was Euro centric) and the swath from Iran, Central Asia to Myanmar emerging as the geopolitical chessboard. This could poses threat to the territorial sovereignty, economic prosperity, and civilizational continuity of the region. While the first Cold War led to the collapse of USSR, the new Cold War that is brewing in the region, too, will have consequences which is not yet clear.

In this rivalry, Nepal may become a geopolitical flash point serving strategic interests of those powers. Nepal, for its part, has its own compulsions wherein it must engage with all those countries, however, it certainly will not be easy. Yet Nepal has finalized a trade and transit agreement with China and signed the BRI framework. China has also included Nepal as a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Nepal also is the member of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. All these certainly have diversified Nepal's relations in more than one way to escape from the constraints of a landlocked geography (Kaplan, 2012). However, there are also challenges regarding consolidating democracy and enhancing development. While Nepal's political actors are divided along geopolitical lines based on their ideology – at least for public consumption – people are aligned with the West. At least one family from each and every village of Nepal --may be even more -- today resides in the US and other anglophone countries. Nepal's economic and banking system is tied up with India and the larger employment market is in the Gulf region. Likewise, Nepal's cultural geography is closer to the neighbors. But the geopolitical dynamics are evolving differently: while we have had strategic relations with China, our development partners and governance system, has largely come from the Western perspectives²⁶. This perhaps could be the reason, among others, why there have been many mismatches between the two projects BRI of China and Millennium Challenge Cooperation (MCC) of the US. The policy confusion at home has forced the international partners to reposition themselves putting Nepal in a paradoxical situation. Neither can it say no to the MCC, nor can it ignore BRI as both will have consequences for Nepal as the political parties have divided foreign policy along ideological lines. Also, neither China nor India would like to see Nepal tagging completely along the US line (Bhatta and Menge, 2021). For the US, being Nepal's development partner for more than 70 years and a growing Nepali diaspora in the US and for its own geopolitical calculations, definitely does not want Nepal to fall into the Chinese fold. Internal political

²⁶ Nepal Army frequently engages with American, Indian, and Chinese Army and Nepal has expressed to take relations with China at the strategic level.

crisis is inevitable if Nepal fails to strike a right balance between the two. Any tilt to either India or China would upset its internal strategic balance and create a security dilemma for them owing to open border with India and pro-Tibet stirs against China²⁷.

Connected history-disconnected future?

In this geopolitical vortex, how the connected history further unfolds in the region requires further study. Already, the changing geopolitical dynamics and dimensions are creating their own momentum and constituencies. They are, however, not new, their form may be. To understand, how connected history is becoming disconnected (at least at the people's level), one must go back to the state formation process in South Asia. At the outset, what one can argue is that the modern state formation process in South Asia has brought more animosities than the camaraderie in the region²⁸ even though the majority of South Asian population share common civilizational roots. From Himalayas (Lord Shiva's abode) to the *Kshir Sagar* or Hind Mahasagar (Lord Vishnu's resting place), and from Kampuchia (Akash Bhairav) to Kasthanadap, and Kashmir to Kailash and from Hingla Devi to Kamakhya – the region has been connected in more than one way and have also created unique social interactions. For example, the *kuldevata* of the Chand Thakuris's living in the Pithoragarh and Almora districts of Uttarakhand lies in the Patan, Baitadi. Yet this connected history somehow has shrunk while these types of connections are becoming more important in today's highly globalized world both regarding power balance and geopolitical maneuvering. The future power balance and geopolitics would largely hinge on these factors as well. In fact, what was historic and pre-historic is increasingly becoming relevant in modern times. The cross-border connections and the relations between the states is determined by more than one factors. The adoption of Westphalian model of governance in tandem with globalization factors, however, have brought more problems than the solutions to the region. This has created conceptual ambiguity as who they are: nation-states, state-nations or civilizational states? Geopolitical dynamics at play does not also provide conditions that can allow South Asian states to work together. Among many other factors, inactiveness or near failure of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could well be associated with this factor (Bhatta, 2018).

State formation in South Asia is challenging as issues related to that have not yet settled down. In contrast, things are becoming more complicated, in this age of technology, unsung melodies are often more alluring than the sung ones where information war plays a key role²⁹. During that war, it is not about whose army wins but whose story wins, and whose narratives prevail (Nye 2014). While developing new narratives, various methods are being

²⁷ During Xi's visit to Nepal in 2019, he surprised everyone when he said 'attempts to split China will end in shattered bones' (Bhatta and Yadav 2021). See "Attempt to split China will end in shattered bones: Xi Jinping in Nepal", available at https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/any-attempt-to-split-china-will-be-crushed-prez-xi-warns-during-visit-to-nepal-119101300744_1.html?fbclid=IwAR2zf6xA6S2OgV8OR3kej6phnnuHn5zq6fMX6cojxYBCEHuCEhTjvC89Hvg (accessed on 13 July, 2021).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See M K Bhadrakumar at <https://asiatimes.com/2021/11/chinas-belt-and-road-chugging-along-in-central-asia/> (accessed on 26 Feb, 2022).

used in which existing norms and values are being continuously questioned and often (re)construct tension among various societal groups. The civilizational geopolitics (Agnew, 2004) is certainly becoming important under the pretext of social transformation. In the course of civilizational geopolitics, various parts of the world/region are categorized in people's mental maps according to the civilization to which they belong to (ibid) with potential to invoke conflict between the nation and the state (Ryser, 2012). If that occurs, which it has already in some part, it will not only disconnect the state from society but the spillover effect, for sure, may also have consequences to the relations in the neighborhood and beyond. One standard example in this regard is how co-ethnics, irrespective of their geographical locations and statehood, groups together for their ethnic rights during the time of crisis.

Central to the whole gamut of that geopolitics is constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing narratives and informing people who they are (Mamdani, 2012). Perhaps, how the past is narrated in relation to connected geography and how present is developing future connections is important to (un)keep the societies intact – both internally and externally. However, in many cases, the past has been not only problematized but also politicized for political, social, and cultural gains, and is anchored in more than one way. Yet there are those who are worried about the future. For example, in the past, diversity in Nepali society used to be expressed through celebrated differences and was not necessarily exclusive. The celebration of diversity was coming from the teachings of Hindu/Buddhist philosophies and other animistic teachings. However, the state itself has become secular and such teachings do not play important roles. This can also be said about Nepal – India relations as well. While both the countries are secular the religious symbols/connections have little space when it comes to the point of interaction at the state level. Diversity, in contrast, has been projected through manifested differences which only disassociate people from such celebration. This perhaps may be the reason, among others, why Ram is often projected as Indian and Buddha as Nepali. The new social movements (Dahal, 2004) building around gender, region, religion, and nationalism (largely on the issues related to primordial identity) are now turning into new geopolitical fault lines. In the long-run, geopolitics played around these lines would only harden the differences and risk freezing historically acquired humanistic identity (Parekh 2008:36). Such politicization of differences will not necessarily lead to national cohesion as it has potential to be exclusive as well as to reify those which collective actors want to change (Bernstein, 2005 and Fraser, 2000 and Parekh 2008). Yet, nobody really knows how to solve thorny questions of many historical, cultural, and traditions inherited from the past, at a time when past is compared with the present (Bhatta, 2021). Whatever path we take, the first step will be to acknowledge complexity of this dilemma and accept that simplistically describing past into good and bad leads nowhere (ibid).

Factors relating to the political economy should also be held responsible for the lesser interactions in the neighborhood. While all South Asian states, including Nepal, have increased their interactions outside the region, engagement in the neighborhood has decreased. In the case of Nepal and India, it has shifted from Benaras to Boston. For Nepal, its engagement with the West has increased by leaps and bounds.

Nepal's relation with India is timeless, emotional, spiritual, and presupposes the idea of statelessness. There are five such factors which makes relations with India – that is Bharat (Deepak, 2021) - so unique that the day-to-day life (from birth to death) of the people living on both sides of the border is governed by what we call, 5Gs: *Gotra, Gayatri, Gai, Ganga, and Gaya* (Bhatta and Yadav, 2021). Nepal's engagement with China has also increased in recent years but there are some limitations to that. The Chinese model may be attractive at the political party level but not definitely at the people's level.

The Rise of Geopolitical Alpha³⁰

There are many factors that can be referred to as the geopolitical Alpha. Countries like Nepal do not necessarily have larger geopolitical ambitions (Khanal, 1988). Their main concern has been to advance and achieve developmental goals for their people and strengthen democracy. Nevertheless, the problem arises when development, democracy, and social transformation become geopolitical tools. Thus, understanding geopolitical dynamics vis-à-these factors is certainly important for Nepal. For that, one must start from 1950 when development and democracy became priority for so-called First World in the Third World, including Nepal. Along with many countries, this was also the time when Nepal began its journey towards democratization and development subtly under the modernization drive. However, it also came with heavy price. In the course of modernization, many traditional institutions of governance and economic (re) generation processes were dismantled as they were portrayed as being conservative, obsolete, obstacles and unfit for development and democracy building³¹. What transpired in that process was that both governance and developmental activities began as “trial and error” undertakings keeping countries like Nepal in a permanent state of transition thereby putting democracy and developmental efforts always at bay. Regarding democracy, Nepal still finds itself in the categories of a states in the infant stage. From the developmental perspective, what Nepal certainly has become is the bazaar where marketisation of development has become kind of phenomenon (Bhatta 2017) than real development. Many call it “development of development”, which is driven by highly educated people, who develop policies to justify their own expertise (Mosse, 2005). Considering these factors, one may argue that sometimes development becomes more geopolitical than geopolitics itself. This may be the reason, among others, why it took nearly seven decades for Nepal to be considered for graduating from a least developed country to a middle-income country. The marketisation of development has hijacked the real issues of people and diversified dependency for everyone – state, government, and people in more than one way. While government and its machinery increasingly became dependent on donors, society, for its part, has for all practical purposes had to rely on overseas employment for livelihood (Bhatta, 2017). In fact, the modernization theory adhered during the Cold War era and neoliberal orthodoxy of post-1990s period have generated multiple crises both for development and democracy. In

³⁰ Taken from Geopolitical Alpha: An investment Framework for Predicting the Future, Marko Papic(2020).How civilizational geopolitics is increasinglybecoming Alpha and dominating geopolitics in recent years albeit in a different way.

³¹ See “Measures for the economic development of under-developed countries : report / by a Group of Experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations” at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/708544?ln=en> (accessed on Jan 11, 2022).

this context, while democracy became procedural and ritualistic, development lost its relevance for people (Shrestha 1997) not necessarily for the development planners though. Apart from that failure to ascertain between the various paths of development (Poudel, 2021) then suing strategic interests apparently complicated everything. If strategic interests may not have been the cause, how come Nepal's development partners – both close and distant – have realized that its infrastructure needs to be strengthened? Nepal has become victim of strategic development and foreign aid that often gets tied up with geopolitics (Khadka, 1997), which simultaneously creates the developmental trap akin to *chakrabyuhua* that was mentioned in Mahabharata. This, however, began right after 1950s – when four major countries, USA, China, USSR, and India, started aiding Nepal. Foreign aid, then was largely the spillover effects of superpower rivalry --the US and the USSR – and now being played out between US and China, and India today. One certainly can argue that very little has changed, for Nepal, since then regarding development and strategic interests. The arrival of non-state actors, later, also turned out to be nuisance not only for development but also for democracy building. Their contributions in the awareness-related programs may be important but, some of them have also been found to have been advancing their own geopolitical interests by creating fault lines under the veil of social transformation.

Similarly, in recent years, civilizational factors, are emerging as new geopolitical fault lines. The roots of civilizational geopolitics lie in how particular societies are to be studied from certain methodological vantage points. In many cases, such studies have only divided societies along various lines. There are those who appreciate the history, and others who strongly feel that their history has been erased/ignored (Bhatta, 2021) by the Gorkhali rulers and this narrative has been forcefully established. The consequences of such a situation is that P.N. Shah –the unifier of Nepal –has not only been polarized but the whole unification process has been questioned by certain groups/scholars. What led to such a situation is that one single standard is used to (re)define history and society, which, yet again, does not necessarily understand reality, diversity, and plurality. Instead, they disregard the past as well as civilization for which it stands for. If that is true, the question arises, who should, then, be held responsible? Perhaps academic activism that took place in the name of developing alternative narratives wherein imaginary issues became more real than the real itself as Johnny Walker once claimed to have said about himself. Such activism can have profound impact in connecting societies within and outside. Moreover, we are also transiting from one way of life to another, under the influence of materialistic civilization premised on money and weapons. This materialistic civilization has always lived in a binary such as men vs. God, men vs. nature, men vs. society, men vs. women and now men vs. men and is exporting some societal problems, or they have the same imagination of other societies as they have about their own³². The materialistic ideas – capitalism and communism –could neither produce capital nor could they guarantee justice as Marx and many of his later followers envisioned. What certainly can happen is the binary way of life, which yet again, will turn everybody against everybody. George Orwell satirically once said, rich countries do not need anything – the wealth they have can even buy the civilization, but for those who are not so materially reach, their wealth is their civilizational and cultural values. However, under the influence

universalizing, so-called “civilizing standard”(Sripati, 2020) countries like Nepal are not only losing their cultural and civilizational capital but also getting internally divided³³.

Conclusion: geopolitics and foreign policy?

Countries like Nepal face a double-edged sword in geopolitics. While they already must be careful with their geographic locations, they also need to advance their relations not only in the neighborhood but also beyond, and at a time when geopolitical struggles have reached both the outer and inner spaces. Regardless of the situation, Nepal must conduct its foreign affairs more prudently and keep its house in order rather than engaging in the blame game. In this context, while its dependence to close and distant neighbors is inevitable and undeniable in many ways³⁴, it will also have to strike a fine balance between development, democracy, and social transformation. No doubt, there are some contradictions as well. While, from the statistic approach, Nepal certainly will have to be closer with the neighbors for survival, people, for their part, do not necessarily have the same choices – their interactions with the West has increased significantly. That interaction is also changing traditional cultural connectivity which earlier was limited largely with India and China (Sen, 2018). In this context, the most pressing foreign policy issue for Nepal, is how to deal with three powers – India, China, and the West and one region, the Gulf (although the Gulf itself is also divided). The 64-thousand-dollar question, as they say, is whether Nepal can have its own independent foreign, development, and social policies? Can it turn geopolitical challenges into opportunities, or will it be forced again to adjust its foreign policy as per the requirement of its neighbors and the so-called development partners? For all practical reasons, having an independent foreign policy in this interdependent world is certainly difficult yet Nepal is positioned to have all the capacities to navigate from the existing geopolitical undercurrents and defend its interests– core, vital, peripheral, and other time-bound ones. In this regard, neither Nepal should neither be a prisoner of geography (Marshall,2015) nor should it hold the view that geopolitics is only for the big powers. In fact, what should certainly be kept in mind yet again is that in the geopolitical struggles, big powers always need small and medium-sized states on their side to advance their strategic goals. Also, it is not always the states which would be driving geopolitics in the future, in contrast, they will largely be influenced by the private companies, corporate houses, and individuals. Therefore, geopolitics has more than one dimension.

Moreover, Nepal's political history informs that outside involvement that largely began from the 1940s continues in one form or another. Many see such involvements being part of the broader geopolitical game – even though there is no strong evidence to support this. The fact, however, is that some of those involvements were also solicited. Also, not all outside assistance

³² See Prof. Kapil Kapoor at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCeC9sCIPuk>

³³ Such an approach is also used to ethnically divide the society. The classic example is the constitutional division of people along ethnic lines not necessarily along civic lines which would have promoted civilizing standard. The current approach is dividing whole into parts.

³⁴ This can be demonstrated from the fact that remittance contributed around 29 percent to national GDP and that mostly comes from the West and the Persian Gulf.

for democracy or development is geopolitically motivated. That judging every external effort for democracy and development building from the geopolitical perspective might be closer to naivety in this globalized world where boundaries regarding those have long been eroded by the nation states themselves. In the same vein, cultural homogeneity is also disappearing, and diversity and pluralism are taking the center stage –perhaps for the first time in the human history. Yet we do not truly have the mechanism – the grammar, at least --with the way modern nation-states have been built. They are, too, statist power oriented, and for that reason, will not understand how civilizations or people from both sides of the border (in the case of Nepal-India) and beyond think about each other or how their livelihoods are connected. The commonality and emotions that exists at the societal level has not been reflected at the state level. Overall Wesphalian states are different – they are built on the legitimate monopoly on violence – in the Weberian sense of the term – not necessarily on the emotions and traditions that *Rashtra or Desha (even it was Be-dehsa)* used to carry in this part of the world.

For more than one reason, Nepal's capacity and freedom to maneuver has drastically eroded over the years. We certainly need to enhance that for which formula-based response to foreign policy largely built around ideology, concepts of balance of power/ bandwagon, non-alignment, distance, or some vision of regional order (Bastedt 2020: 356) may not be suitable. While some of them were developed in an era when politics was more adversarial in nature (Bhatta and Yadav, 2021) others were simply for internal consumption. For all practical reasons such responses, at the outset, cannot be pursued, if pursued, they can only narrowly define national interest in today's context. The international system is not only anarchial (Bull, 1977) but also hierarchal (Doshi, 2021). They may be suitable for the survival of the regime, but for the state, we certainly need to understand which direction the threats are coming from. For the state like Nepal, we should, focus more on balancing the threats rather than power. When the former is suitable for states like Nepal, power is suited for powerful states. This is where it becomes important regarding developing future alignments. While some of them could certainly be beneficial, others may come up with their own security commitments/obligations and may even pose risks as well. Hence, comparative advantage should be factored whilst doing so as it would alone enhance the bargaining capacity and allows us to reject certain things that are not congruent with national interests. We must understand the fact that there are competitive offers for developmental projects, and international relations is becoming competitive. Foreign policy and relations with the states should not be decided in the street or under duress of the crowd as has been the case since 1990 when foreign policy has been taken to the street for political benefit.

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