

Blending Foreign Policy with Nepal's Geostrategic Location

Gopal Khanal¹

Abstract

Over the course of a century, the Western world's power hegemony has gradually shifted to Asia. China is emerging as a superpower with technological advancement, cashless transactions, 5G development, and one of the most powerful military forces. China's power in Asia has added worries to the United States of America. The purpose of this research is to emphasize Nepal's geostrategic location and its impact on foreign policy. Nepal is located between the two rising economies in the world, China, and India, who have had conflicting and competitive relations, and therefore requires to delicately balance its relations given the sensitive geopolitical location. But it doesn't mean Nepal should compromise her sovereignty and territorial integrity while maintaining geopolitical balance. Similarly, India and China need to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Nepal. This has been a major challenge for Nepal to design its foreign policy based on sound geopolitical theories. Although literature on Nepal's geostrategic importance is limited, this paper explores the impact of its geographic location on foreign policy in the changing global order.

Keywords: *Geopolitics, balanced relationship, equal proximity, non-alignment, sovereign equality, Heartland thesis.*

Introduction

Geography encompasses not just lands and plants, but also people, settlements, social traditions, human migration, and economic activity. Such geographical features have had an impact on foreign policy and international relations. Boundaries have long been a key component of political geography. They have usually been studied at the state level because international political borders are the most visible examples of the link between politics and geography. Political geography is often brought into discourse with geopolitics. Romanczuk (2009) says "it is primarily geopolitics that leads to the adoption of geographical determinism, which treats factors that result from the shape and character of the territory as absolute features- timeless and unchanging" (p. 84). The factors that influence and determine the foreign policy of a country are its determinants. There are several internal and external determinants of foreign policy. According to Rizwan (2009),

¹ Foreign policy analyst who has also authored a book "Bhurajnitii". Mr. Khanal often writes and speaks on the issues of geopolitical importance in Nepal's foreign affairs.

Internal determinants of the foreign policy include territory, geographical factors, culture and history, economic factors, technology, national capability, social structure, public mood, political system, leadership, political accountability, press, and bureaucracy. The external determinants of the foreign policy include international organizations and institutions, perception of other cultures, standing at the international level, and groupings. (p.1-11)

The geographical location of Nepal and its domestic and external problems are inextricably intertwined. Nepal is mainly situated in the Himalayas, but also includes parts of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, bordering Tibet of China to the north, and India in the south, east and west. It is narrowly separated from Bangladesh by the Silguri Corridor and from Bhutan by the Indian state of Sikkim. Nepal's geopolitical location is undeniably important. The geopolitical position of Nepal has been described metaphorically as being 'a yam between two bounders' - India and China. Khadka (1992) says, "Nepal's situation indicates how geopolitical factors have been, at certain times, a positive element in evolving policies and strategies for countering perceived threats from neighboring countries" (p. 134).

As a neighbor to China and India – two powers with nuclear capability that have often had conflicts – Nepal's geopolitical relevance has grown as the global power balance shifts to the east. Geographical location is significant because it includes a state's ability to protect itself. According to Dahal (1998), "as a portion of the Asian landmass, Nepal has a critical position in the Himalayas - between the central and South Asian areas" (p. 27). The global diplomatic system has taken on a new structure, which has been named the "Asian Century". The center of the gravity of the world economy and politics is returning to Asia. The United States and European nations have shifted their attention to Asia through various aid programs and development projects. India's "neighborhood first" policy has been interpreted as an attempt to rebuild India's "traditional sphere of influence" in South Asia, while China's periphery diplomacy has been interpreted as an attempt to break that sphere. When China and India compete in their neighborhood and the Indian Ocean, the United States has concentrated its accumulated might to contain China's rise. With such a geopolitical location and rising geopolitical complications in Asia and South Asia, Nepal must devise ways to establish a conducive foreign policy to preserve its national interests. This study is divided into two sections. The first section examines the shifting dynamics of geopolitics with a focus on critical and current geopolitical theories, while the second part examines Nepal's geographical constraints and prospects as it shares international boundaries with two of the world's largest and fastest-growing economies. The second part covers Nepal's geopolitical evolution and its impact on foreign policy.

From the "Heartland" to "Geography's Revenge"

Before delving into Robert Kaplan and Tim Marshall's contemporary geopolitical views, it's important to understand how geopolitical theories have evolved. Geopolitical theories should not be seen in absolute terms; instead, they should be examined in relation to one another. It is because the emergence and spread of geopolitical ideologies are all linked to the passage

of time. There were four primary ideas of geopolitics, excluding the current views of Kaplan and Marshal. In 1904, Sir Halford Mackinder introduced the Heartland theory. It supports the concept of world dominance. Mackinder begins and sums up his thinking with this oft-quoted grand and simplistic dictum "who rules East Europe commands the Heartland, who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island, who rules the World-Island commands the World." (Fettweis, 2000, p.38). This theory was introduced while witnessing Hitler's despotic regime. The Nazi Party's whole focus was to capture the heartland and rule the world. This theory of Mackinder does not apply in the current geopolitical study of Nepal. Further, Mackinder's heartland has shifted to the Indian Ocean. Before the Heartland Theory was introduced, there were two theories of geopolitics. The Organic State Theory and The Sea Power Theory. The Organic State Theory was theorized in 1897 by Friedrich Ratzel, a 19th-century German geographer and ethnographer. The name "organic theory" comes from Ratzel's assertion that political entities, such as countries, behave in a way not too dissimilar from that of living organisms. According to Kaplan (2012), the organic theory states that political entities continually seek nourishment in the form of gaining territories to survive in the same way that a living organism seeks nourishment from food to survive. Essentially, the analogy is that food for an organism is territory for a country, and the more territory that it conquers the more that the particular political entity can sustain and preserve itself.

Nepal has never tried to expand its territories and has instead shrunk from Kangada (west) to Tista (east) to its present boundaries. The unification drive of King Prithvi Narayan Shah can be argued to be a manifestation of the Organic State Theory. However, it was solely for the purpose of uniting the domestic Baisi and Chaubishi territorial kingdoms inside Nepal. The Sea Power Theory, introduced by Alfred Thayer Mahan, interprets the importance of sea power, which Nepal has never been experienced as a land-linked nation. In 1942, Nichols J. Spykman introduced The Rimland Theory, which countered Mackinder's Heartland Theory. Kaplan (2012) highlights the concept of Rimland thesis. "Spykman stated that Eurasia's rimland, the coastal areas, is the key to controlling the World Island. The rimland contains the Heartland" (p.89). If Indian Ocean is considered as heartland, the peripheral landmass is rimland, including China, India, and other Asian countries. These geopolitical theories do not apply to Nepal, even though the Indian Ocean is dominated by China and India's strategic allies, and Nepal may experience waves of violence.

All these theories intended to extend and dominate territories of other countries and serve as a backdrop for understanding the current geopolitical upheaval. In recent years, geopolitics has undergone significant changes. Today's geopolitics uses both hard and soft power to affect states, but it seems less interested in territorial expansion. The advent of technology, the emergence of the world's fastest-growing soft powers, and the notion of influencing the globe through economic aid has all altered the geopolitical dynamics. Geography is always significant, and it has played a major role in shaping the fate of nations from South America to South Asia. How have past and present human conflicts been shaped by geography or geographical configurations? How has geography been one of the most potent movers of

international events throughout history? Robert Kaplan responds to these questions in *The Revenge of Geography*. In his book *Prisoners of Geography*, Tim Marshall depicts how geography influences the decisions of international leaders. While recognizing and incorporating the theories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries of Mackinder and Mahan, Kaplan and Marshall share a commonality that has influenced current geopolitics.

According to Kaplan (2009), technology, population and other natural resources have changed the importance of nations along with the geographical locations. He elaborates this comparing the Middle East and Eurasia. “A century’s worth of technological advancement and population explosion has rendered the most greater Middle East not volatile but dramatically more relevant, and where Eurasia is most prone to fall apart now is in the greater Middle East’s several shatter zone” (p. 96-105).

The Revenge of Geography is a sagacious account of how geography has shaped the world we know and what this means for the future. Kaplan’s wedding of historical and present-day analysis on a region-by-region basis makes for a well-researched, entertaining, and informative reading. Kaplan (2009) sums up, “it is the revenge of geography that marked the culmination of the second cycle in the Post-Cold War era, to follow the defeat of geography through air power and the triumph of humanitarian interventionism that marked the end of the first cycle” (p. 28). Geography informs, rather than determines. Geography, therefore, is like the distribution of economic and military power, a major constraint on and instigator of the actions of states. Geography is an instigator of the actions of states and returns again and again to naive determinism. “Africa is currently poor because its long coastline lacks many good natural harbors,” Johnston (2013) argues, “Geography constitutes the very facts about international affairs that are so basic we take them for granted” (p. 30).

In *Prisoners of Geography*, Tim Marshall highlights the importance of geography. He says, the landscape imprisons their leaders, giving them fewer choices and less room to maneuver than they might think. The land on which we live has always shaped us. It has shaped the wars, the power, politics, and social development of the people that now inhabit every part of the earth. Technology may seem to overcome the distances between us in both mental and physical space, but it is easy to forget that the land where we live, work, and raise our children is hugely important. Marshall (2016) argues airpower has changed the rules, as in a different way has the internet. But geography, and the history of how nations have established themselves within that geography, remain crucial to our understanding of the world today and our future. Accordingly,

Geography has always been a prison of sorts - one that defines what a nation is or can be, and one from which our world leaders have often struggle to break free. Of course, geography does not dictate the course of all events. (p. 288)

According to him, China and India are separated by the Himalayas but they may eventually come into conflict with each other, and then geography will determine the nature of the fight. Nepal’s opportunities and challenges both lie in its geographical location. If geography is revenge as claimed by Kaplan and if geography is prison argued by Marshall, Nepal can explore opportunities and face challenges too.

Heartland shifting towards the Asia Pacific

The geographic explanation of world politics starts with Europe, and all geopolitical theories are founded on Europe's desire to expand its empire throughout the world. But Nepal was never colonized, thus, European expansion does not apply to Nepal. The European empires, on the other hand, had thawed. Eurasia was Mackinder's stronghold, and European powers had struggled for control of that strategic continent to rule the world. The heartland of the world is no longer Eurasia, and it has relocated to Asia Pacific. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean, the South China Marine, and the East China Sea have all become important sea areas. World powers have concentrated their attention on the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea in order to control these waters and hence rule the world. The United States has increased its military presence and drills in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, which have been interpreted as an indication of increased military engagement. The Asia Pacific Strategy (APS) of the Obama administration has made significant progress, and it has been aggressively relaunched as the Indo Pacific Strategy (IPS), which is more military-oriented. Despite assertions that it wants to build a free and peaceful Indo-Pacific region, the US Indo-Pacific policy tries to slow China's rise.

Similarly, the US launched the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with India, Australia, and Japan in 2007 to counter China, while another military pact, AUKUS, between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, was announced on September 15, 2021. "The quadrilateral alliance is a clear example of an offensive containment strategy aimed against China" (Sangroula, 2018, p. 44). The Indo Pacific Strategy is deemed as a counter-strategy to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious flagship program of China, announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013.

Nepal signed the BRI in 2017 but it has not become a member of the IPS. Nepal's declared foreign policy would not allow it to be a member of any alliance or program, which is more of a military nature. The US's request to Nepal to be a part of the IPS is obviously strategically motivated. However, Nepal has been offered a grant of US\$ 500 million from the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) of the United States, which has been awaiting approval by Nepal's parliament. Due to its geopolitical location and the emergence of a new global order that targets Nepal's rising neighbors, Nepal is presently in a difficult situation. The China-US rivalry has been manifested through such development work not only in Asia or South Asia, but also in Nepal.

Kaplan (2012) concedes that China would eventually guide the world by,

... building for a quarter of humanity a new civilization, neither quite Eastern nor quite Western. The fact that China is blessed by geography is something so basic and obvious that it tends to be overlooked in all the discussions about its economic dynamism and national assertiveness over recent decades. (p. 189)

China is not only blessed by geography, but it also has been the inventor of advanced technology. Technology has not defeated geography, but it has shrunken the globe making it possible to have business relationships with the northern neighbor even though the coastal

locations lie almost 3300 km away from Nepal's northern border. Asia has been increasing its influence in the world, largely because of China's exceptional economic growth. A study of the global economy's center of gravity, which indicates the average location of economic activity across geographies, says that in 1980 that center of gravity was the mid-Atlantic, by 2008 it had moved to the east of Helsinki, and by 2050, it is predicted to be located between India and China (Quah, 2011). Nepal's policy of equal proximity to both its neighbors, India and China, allows two growing economies to support Nepal's economic efforts. Nepal has guaranteed both of its neighbors that its territory will not be used against them.

As the two fastest growing economies of the world, China and India have the potential to prove themselves as Asian powers though both the countries share rivalries and cooperation simultaneously, which has largely obstructed regional development. They still have unsettled border and territorial disputes. These ongoing disputes will make the creation of an Asia-led international order unlikely. Thus, unless these internal issues are resolved, the region cannot achieve an Asia-led or China-led international order, which is vital for the realization of the "Asian Century."

Disputes have both continued and intensified between China and other Asian countries in the South China Sea and East China Sea. The disputes - which are reshaping the politics of Asia - are not about ideas or ideologies; rather, they are about naked control of precious space in the map --cartographic space occupying crucial sea lines of communication and containing significant energy deposits. (Kaplan, 2012, p. 348). China's President Xi Jinping's policy of "community of common destiny" is the motivating force behind China's future foreign policy. Over the past five years, new policies have been combined with new institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and new initiatives like the BRI, to build what Xi Jinping refers to as a "community of common destiny" (Sangroula, 2018, p.30).

Nepal's geographical location creates a geostrategic context that is vital for India's security and stability in its heartland, the Gangetic belt, where a large portion of the country's human and resource base is concentrated. Nepal, on the other hand, has long been regarded by China as a link in its concentric inner Asian defensive system, and it is still vital to the security of China's underbelly, Tibet, where a considerable number of anti-Chinese groups have covered interests. As a result, the global power balance is moving towards Asia, and Nepal is naturally becoming the focal point of proxy games of powerful nations. On one hand, Nepal has been in a difficult geopolitical situation because of India and China's disputed status, which is exacerbated by the US and its allies. On the other hand, Nepal has adopted a foreign policy of equal proximity to both of its neighbors and is attempting to maintain that non-aligned posture.

From a "yam" to a "land-linked" nation

Nepal's identity has changed from the country created by King Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769 with the creation of the democratic republic by the major political parties in 2015. Although there appears to be no change in the geopolitical opinions of its two neighbors, Nepal has overcome many geographical barriers to establish connectivity with the neighborhood. It is landlocked

in terms of geography, but if transit and transportation services are made available under the agreements in place, Nepal can become a truly land-linked country. How did Nepal go from being a land-locked country to a land-linked country? Understanding this requires a look at the evolution of geopolitics and the importance of geography in foreign policy formulation. Nepal's foreign policy, which was initially formed by King Prithvi Narayan Shah and centered on the country's geostrategic location, has seen many ups-and-downs, but the core aspect has remained the same. The fundamental cause for Nepal's unification was geopolitical, with the goal of integrating and protecting the country's territories. The aim of the unification was not to gain power.

According to Sangroula (2015), "the main aim or ideals underlying the Gorkha kingdom's unification push was to merge Nepal's territory into a modern state so that it could protect its sovereignty and independence against prospective invasion by colonial powers" (p 7). Only India and China were important to King Prithvi Narayan Shah; he did not value Americans or Europeans. He also criticized the European missionaries and clergy who came to Nepal to proselytize and spread Christianity. Realizing the precarious situation of Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah described Nepal as being a yam between two boulders, where China was the defender of the status quo while British India was the challenger. "He also stressed economic and cultural nationalism - preventing the entry of both the foreign traders and Christian missionaries" (Dahal, 1998, p. 47).

Jung Bahadur Rana, who came to power in 1846, did not heed to maintain a balanced geopolitical relationship with the north and south, instead he steadfastly became too close to British India. According to Rose (1971), "Jung Bahadur was aware that British power had dominated the entire region at the time, and China's power was fading. As a result, he pursued a policy centered on Britain and India" (p. 106).

Khanal (1996) says,

Rana's foreign policy of isolationism tailored to the elemental need of survival of the country. Isolationism, which somewhat, uncharacteristic of the general course of Nepal's history was a product of the uneasy compromise between this traumatic experience and the harsh international reality of the nineteenth century. (p. 62)

In the early 1950s, a democratic movement overthrew the Rana aristocracy. King Tribhuvan was restored as the country's executive from a titular head soon after the Rana aristocracy was deposed. Since his surrender to India, King Tribhuvan was unable to comprehend Nepal's geopolitical sensitivity. During his tenure, democracy began to emerge, although it was the result of a compromise between Nepal and India. During King Tribhuvan's reign, Nepali geopolitics became unbalanced and overly reliant on the south. Some have called it Nepal's tragedy, while others have maintained that obtaining democracy was a watershed. Rose & Dayal (1969) say, "Nepal had no foreign policy during the period of 1951 to 1955, Delhi used to represent Nepal in international forum" (p. 60). King Tribhuvan/s reign was a period where Nepal and India had a special relationship, which Indian strategists have often narrated. Muni (2016) writes:

When Nepal and India signed the treaty of Peace and Friendship in April 1950, Indian Prime Minister Nehru presented this treaty as evidence of "Special Relationship" between Nepal and India. The two countries were described as having had a "special relation" with each other. (p.136).

But Nepal has always been critical of the special relationship. King Mahendra (1955-1972) recognized Nepal's geopolitical importance and diversified Nepal's contacts with its neighbors and overseas. "Nepal maintained diplomatic relations with many countries and got the membership of United Nations. Nepal became the member of Afro-Asian community and participated in Bandung conference" (Acharya, 2070 BS, p. 126). During King Mahendra's reign, China agreed to construct the Kodari Road, the first road linking Nepal to Tibet. Upon King Mahendra's accession to the throne, diplomatic relations with China quickly gained a new significance. "It was in that period that Nepal's historical role as a channel of communication between the civilizations of south and East Asia began to be emphasized by both the Nepali officials and intellectuals, often in extravagantly exaggerated terms" (Rose, 1971, p. 218). King Birendra deployed a policy of non-alignment considering the geopolitical susceptibility. (Rose 1971) says,

...the slogan of non-alignment which had been adopted in 1956 'equal friendship for all' was gradually reinterpreted to mean equal friendship with India and China. This led eventually to a declaration of non-alignment in the Sino-Indian dispute - that is, formal neutralization of Nepal. (p. 282).

Non-alignment was the right policy during the time of cold war. It was aptly suited to Nepal since the two neighbors shared both commonality and rivalry. King Birendra's proposal was geopolitically a very balanced and sensible approach. Khanal (1996) argues, '

Peace Zone proposal which came to be endorsed as a result of active diplomacy, individually; by a large and important section of international community including permanent members of the Security Council has projected Nepal firmly as nation concerned about peace including the United States of America during the time of President Ronald Reagan. (p. 67).

Geopolitics played a significant role in shaping domestic politics during the 1990 revolution that established the twin-pillar paradigm of constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy. Similarly, geopolitics also had a key role in the second people's movement (2006), which toppled the monarchy and installed a republican government in the country. According to Khanal (2019), "the second Delhi accord, also known as the 12-point deal, was reached in New Delhi between Nepal's Seven Party Alliances (SPA) and the warring Maoists." India played a critical role in the entire process. In an interview with Al-Jazeera Television, India's senior minister Pranab Mukharjee admitted that the deal was mediated by India," (p. 97-102). The period after the election of a government under the new 2015 Constitution has been a watershed in Nepal's foreign policy and relations. KP Sharma Oli was elected as the first Prime Minister under the new constitution by parliament in 2016, and was reelected to the office in the elections held in 2017/2018. The signing of a Trade and Transit Agreement with China was a historic departure in foreign policy. Nepal and China signed

the agreement on trade and transit in Beijing in 2016, (Joint Statement, Nepal-China, 2016). When President Xi visited Nepal in 2019, he made a committed to transforming Nepal into a land-linked country from a land-locked country. (Joint Statement, Nepal-China, 2019)

Nepal had previously relied on India for transportation and transit. Nepal's transport and transit with China were diversified by this agreement. Nepal should not rely solely on India to obtain goods, especially from third countries. Nepal, which was previously reliant on a single country for transit, has now become a land-linked country thanks to the transport and transit deal with China. Various other agreements were also signed during this time. The major ones related to opening new pathways to the northern border and building transmission lines, which could have a long-term influence on bilateral relations between Nepal and China. Beginning with the implementation of accords signed in 2016, the government has expanded its connections with China and several protocols have already been signed. Nepal and China have agreed to build railways and both sides have acknowledged their delight at the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Railway Connectivity Cooperation. They hailed it as the most significant move in bilateral cooperation history, predicting that it will usher in a new era of cross-border connected-ness.

Conclusion

Nepal's foreign policy has gone through numerous ups and downs since the days of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, but the core element has remained unchanged. As the world's power balance is shifting towards Asia, Nepal's geopolitical location has also begun to draw international attention. Nepal has been thrust into the spotlight because of the evolving global political order, which may present additional opportunities as well as challenges. King Prithvi Narayan Shah had maintained a healthy relationship with both immediate neighbors. Nepal's foreign policy was largely governed by rulers' interests rather than the interest of the nation and people. King Prithvi Narayan Shah was an exception. The Ranas were deeply inclined towards British India who ensured that the country was administered without interruption. In broadening Nepal's ties with China, King Mahendra took a risk. A non-aligned foreign policy was proposed by King Birendra, but it could not be executed in practice. Despite domestic and external problems, Nepal has made progress in keeping up with the times. Nepal has turned its focus to economic development following the completion of the establishment of a federal system of governance. The path to reaching the aim of a "Happy Nepali, Prosperous Nepal" is provided by the 2015 constitution. A neighborhood policy has been implemented. India and China are not only Nepal's neighbors but are also emerging global and regional powers. Unfortunately, the two countries, with the largest populations in the world, have also been both adversaries and allies at different times. Nepal has been prioritized by the US and other regional players to expand their influence or exert control over other forces. As a result, when dealing with geopolitical sensitivity, Nepal must approach with caution and balance. Nepal's foreign policy and ties are highly influenced by its geographical location. If Nepal's geopolitical situation is maneuvered wisely, it can be

leveraged to its benefit. Otherwise, the same geography could prove to be a curse. Nepal has maintained a balanced relationship with both China and India in terms of economic development and has invited them to invest in Nepal's development initiatives. Nepal has also responded to their legitimate concerns. China and India should reciprocate by offering economic and other assistance to help it fulfill its development aspirations.

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