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Small States in the Shadow of Great Power Politics

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Abstract

This article examines how small states navigate an international system increasingly marked by a shifting geopolitical landscape and shaped by intensifying great power rivalry, strategic competition, and a move toward multipolarity. Moving beyond consideration of small states as passive actors or mere objects in international affairs, the study argues that they can exercise their influence through diplomatic agility, normative positioning, consensus-building, and strategic multilateralism as purposeful partners. Drawing on cases from regions such as the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Global South, the article demonstrates how small states employ strategies of hedging, healthy balancing, niche diplomacy, and international law to safeguard sovereignty and expand policy options and space amid pressures from larger powers. It attempts to discuss the condition of small states in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape and the rise of the middle power. It examines how small states, drawing on their internal capacity and strong domestic foundations, balance relations with emerging middle powers and sustain engagements in the UN peacekeeping operations. Engaging with realism and liberal institutionalism, the article explains how vulnerability can be transformed into leverage. It highlights how small states use international organizations, economic interdependence, and normative commitments—such as peaceful coexistence, nonalignment and neutrality, and rule-based order—to resist coercion and maintain strategic autonomy. The article discusses the possible perspectives for a weak and vulnerable country like Nepal, perennially trapped in political transition and located between two huge neighbors, India and China, in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. It briefly touches on how Nepal conducts its foreign policy with its large neighbors and remains constructively engaged with great powers and the broader international community. It argues that in an era of renewed great power competition, the survival and relevance of small powers depend less on material capabilities and more on their capacity to institutionalize external relationships, diversify partnerships,

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and build domestic capacity to influence international norms and standards to their advantage.

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Background

The domain of International Relations (IR) has always been challenging for small states. Despite apparent equality of opportunity in the global arena, small states are rarely treated as equal participants due to their limited foreign policy options, security resources, and market size and leverage to influence. “The world has never been structured to facilitate the survival of small states,” and “treating them as disposable has been the norm through most of recent history” (Sarkissian, 2023). Power disparities have been a part of international politics from the very beginning. Realists emphasized that power disparities left little space for the weak to pursue their own positions. The ingrained assumption in IR is that lack of autonomy is such a recurring feature of small states that it essentially defines them (Goetschel, 1998).

They are often overlooked by the international community until security threats begin to affect major powers. In an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world, where connectivity has become a lifeline of nations, and great power rivalry is being intensified, problems in one corner of the world quickly travel to other parts. A distinctive line between domestic and international issues is getting blurred. To quote late United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, “problems without passports” require greater attention to the foreign policy planning and strategic roles of smaller states.

Though small in size and population, small countries have all the features of a modern state, their own language, currency, central bank, an airline, ambassadors, and a fine body of literature (The Economist, 1998). They have their own independent foreign policy. According to *The Economist*, “For not only are there many more countries today than there were at the start of the 20th century; the forces of fragmentation are growing.” It further argues, “Small states are nothing new, of course. The city-states of ancient Greece had a population smaller than Iceland’s (population 270,000) today. Athens, at its peak in the age of Pericles, had perhaps 200,000 people, slaves included. Renaissance Italy was also a world of tiny city-states: Florence, that cradle of so much art, had some 70,000 citizens in its heyday; Venice, the Hong Kong of the medieval world, had 115,000 (The Economist, 1998). History is a witness that the city-states of ancient Greece have been the cradle of civilization and art, like Florence, Venice, and Hong Kong of the medieval world.

At times, small states went out of fashion in the 19th century as they were considered too small to be economically viable. Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the founding fathers of a unified Italy, thought that a dozen states were quite enough for Europe. He dismissed the nationalism of the Scots, Welsh, and Irish on the ground that their economies were too small to go it alone (The Economist, January 3, 1998). 15 countries in the European Union (EU) have a population under 10 million, jointly making up just 14% of the bloc's 448 million (The Economist, 2023).

Small states may possess deposits of rare earth minerals and precious natural resources that great powers want. They even have comparative advantages in some sectors, giving them a profitable niche business sector. This attracts the attention of rich and powerful countries. Big powers prey on their resources, making small states vulnerable. This makes small states “choose to be unaligned or neutral (The Economist, 1998). Iceland is in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), but outside the EU (European Union). It has no army; it never built one. It is to hold a referendum by 2027 on joining the EU (The Economist, 1998). Norway is also in NATO and outside the EU. Until a few years ago, all these small states thought they had the best of all worlds. In the course of time, large states have turned into predatory global powers with imperialistic ambitions, and little ones become their prey. As a NATO member, Iceland relies heavily on the US for its security. But with US President Donald Trump backtracking on NATO commitment and threatening to even withdraw from this “paper tiger,” the EU and Iceland recently had talks about more defense cooperation (The Economist, 1998).

The UN has 41 microstate members with a population of less than a million. At the end of World War II, there were only two such states, Iceland and Luxembourg. The number of small countries in the world has grown over the years. The UN had 51 sovereign member states at the time of its formation in 1945, whereas it is now composed of 193 sovereign member-states. A quick look at world history reveals that states came into existence, grew, broke, and disappeared. Similarly, great powers have emerged, risen, and declined.

State System in International Affairs

The modern state system is generally traced back to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Although political entities existed long before 1648, they operated on different foundations. The ancient world witnessed expansive dynastic empires, small city-states, and the vast Roman Empire, which included much of the Western world (Ault, 1946). The Treaty of Westphalia is assumed to have formalized the nation-state system by acknowledging that imperial authority no longer commanded the allegiance of its constituent territories and the papal authority could not be enforced everywhere, even

in spiritual matters. Historian Warren O. Ault summed up the results of the Peace of Westphalia as follows: “By 1648 the state system was fully established in Europe. The Empire was an empty shell. The claim of the pope to temporal sovereignty in Europe was, as an effective force, a thing of the past” (Ault, 1946).

Small powers, in the words of Martin Wright, “are powers with the means of defending only limited interests, and of most of them it is true that they possess only limited interests” (Wright, 1946). Increasingly, small powers have demonstrated a universality of interests and a breadth of vision that often go beyond those of great powers. Power is an amorphous concept that is neither measurable nor quantifiable, but has to be judged on the ability of individual actors to influence the actions and behavior of others. Being weak, smaller powers have less of a chance in conditioning the responses of other nations, particularly since international systems are shaped by great powers who have sought to ensure the systems’ survival as they reflect the stronger powers’ values and capabilities (Khatri, 2001).

The concept of small states has evolved over time. The small state refers to physical attributes, and small power is defined by behavior and the capability to play a bigger role. A state can be small without being passive, isolationist, or inward-looking. Generally, a combination of factors has been used to define the term “small state”: first, population size and geographical location, second, the ranking scale of a state in terms of its capability; third, the relative influence exercised by these states; and fourth, identifying characteristics through hypotheses on what differentiates small states from other classes of states (Barston, 1973). The UN is composed of many small nations. The number of UN member states with populations fewer than 500,000 is about 20-25. The list of microstates with fewer than 500,000 people includes Vatican City, Nauru, Tuvalu, Palau, San Marino, Monaco, Liechtenstein, Seychelles, etc. (The Economist, 1998).

In the latter part of the 20th century, there was a growth of independent countries after the end of the Cold War in 1990. Small states are nothing new today. According to The Economist, the proliferation has been due to the end of colonial rule. 48 independent states came into existence in Sub-Saharan Africa. This number was more than any other continent. Between 1960 and 1964, 25 new African countries came into being. The collapse of the Soviet Union alone gave rise to 15 independent states known as the Commonwealth of Independent States. This also witnessed the split of Eastern European countries, once under the influence of communist Moscow. Slovaks seceded from the Czechs. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Iron Curtain, East and West Germany reunited, but Europe as a whole went from a continent of 32

countries to one of 48. With populism both at the left and right at its peak, the rise of identity politics has proliferated the number of small states (The Economist, 1998).

US Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan made a prophetic statement in 1993 that ethnic conflicts promised to be savage. He said, “The defining mode of conflict in the era ahead is ethnic conflict. It promises to be savage. Get ready for 50 new countries in the world in the next 50 years. Most of them will be born in bloodshed” (Moynihan, 1993). Fault lines based on ethnic divides are deepening. Forces of fragmentation in multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious states have grown. Prominent among them being Yugoslavia disintegrating into Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. The termination of the Soviet Union gave birth to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine (Kazakhstan and Ukraine are no smaller states). They have one thing in common- their journey from bipolar to unipolarity and then to multipolarity, along with a new set of challenges. Because of their inbuilt vulnerabilities, with a few exceptions, they have been the worst victims of their big neighbors’ design. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is one such example.

Changing Landscape of Geopolitics

The current geopolitical atmosphere is defined by profound instability, fluidity, uncertainty, and deeper structural shifts. This changing *zeitgeist* (mood of the moment) demands a strategy that precisely aligns with national interests and navigates a rapidly transforming international system. The Cold War lasted from 1945 to 1990. At the end of the Cold War, political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed the “end of history,” meaning the onset of a liberal era with no alternative (Fukuyama, 1992). More and more countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America have opened up and become more democratic. The center of gravity of world politics started to shift towards Asia, once described as the “killing fields,” has emerged as the world’s brightest spot. Asian economies are growing. Today’s major news headlines come from Asia.

With the end of the Cold War came the primacy of geo-economics over geo-politics. Countries began to look for markets for their products. Unipolarity confirmed the unquestioned supremacy of the US. The acceleration of globalization transformed the landscape in which institutions, states, and the international community interacted, and introduced the new context, dimensions, and dynamics in the conduct of foreign policy (Abbasi, 2024). Some countries immensely benefited from globalization, became rich, while others became impoverished. Globalization disproportionately widened political, economic, and social inequality, generating a sense of “us versus them,” creating several flashpoints.

The progression of the rules-based liberal international order has experienced significant challenges. The UN seat of multilateralism is often bypassed, and the UN Security Council has been paralyzed due to the frequent use of veto power by the P5 nations. The multilateral system that was once practiced at the UN has become shaky and fragile. With the rise of non-traditional security threats such as climate change and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a proliferation of challenges described as “problems without passports” (Annan, 1999).

With the preoccupation of the US with the global war on terror in Afghanistan and the “disastrous” US invasion of Iraq in 2003, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US in 2001, combined with the globalization in retreat, the 2008 global financial crisis, and the reemergence of China as a great power, led to the decline in the supremacy of unipolarity. Then began the inward-looking tendency of nations taking shelter under protectionism, parroting the rhetoric of patriotism, populism, and *atmanirbharta* (self-reliance), raising questions on the superiority of Western economic and political models. This “led to a world of three great powers: not only the US but also China and, to a lesser extent, Russia” (Shidore, 2023).

The US under President Barack Obama proclaimed its “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia primarily in terms of geopolitics and foreign policy (Clinton, 2011). Asia-Pacific, later rechristened as Indo-Pacific, became the centerpiece of the regional security strategy of the US. It was basically what was called to cope with challenges with a rising and more assertive China. Based on the impressive growth of China, followed by India, the center of geopolitical gravity is rapidly shifting to Asia. They have shown their preference for the middle way and are actively exploring the “third space,” or “the middle ground,” and are developing their own counter-narratives, such as the Asian Century, Chinese Century, the African Century, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

The US continued its turn to attention eastward. In 2021, President Joe Biden declared, “I’m now the fourth United States President to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan: two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth” (Rondeaux, 2021). A senior administration official was quoted as briefing reporters that one of the reasons for the drawdown in Afghanistan was to “free up the time and attention and resources from our senior leadership and our military to focus on what we believe are the fundamental challenges of the 21st century. And they lie, fundamentally, in the Indo-Pacific” (Waldman, 2021). This has led to devoting more military and diplomatic resources to the Indo-Pacific region. Reports are in circulation that Washington is considering allying with the Asia-Pacific à la NATO (Fong, 2026). The US grand strategy has consistently been to prevent the emergence of rivals and regional hegemons.

President Trump's instinctive preference appears to be a spheres-of-influence arrangement with Russia and China (Shidore, 2023). He spoke of G-2 arrangements with Beijing in Busan, South Korea, last year. This was seen as an acceptance of reality. China and Russia share their hostility towards the US. They entered into a "friendship without limits" agreement on February 4, 2022, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine followed on February 24 (Julienne, 2025). Taken together with the October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, they have almost erased the concept of the rules-based liberal international order (RLIO), which is composed of three main components: international rules and norms, economic liberalism, and the universality of liberal democracy and human rights among sovereign nation-states (Ikenberry, 2011). The RLIO enables some of the world's smallest and most resource-poor countries to attract the attention of global elites and provides them with a cushion for survival.

At a time when big and powerful members in the international community are mocking the UN Charter's ban on seizing another state's territory by force, Russia, by brazenly doing it on Ukraine, and America's talk of "annexing Greenland and absorbing Canada as its 51st state," there is a scary situation for small and weak countries. The absence of the rule of law can be compared to an intersection or crossroads without traffic lights, where reckless driving leads to frequent accidents becoming the order of the day. In a world without rules, small, weak, and developing countries have no chance of defending their national honor and space, let alone bettering the lives of their people. This was manifested on January 3, when the United States Special Forces carried out an operation and picked up Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife from their residence in Caracas. This was, in the words of the UN Secretary General, "in contravention of the international rules" (The Economist, 2026).

In the ongoing US-Israel war on Iran since February 28, Tehran has shown a remarkable resilience amidst major blows, firing missiles and drone salvos on Israel, US regional bases in the region, and Gulf Arab states. The ongoing Gulf crisis and tensions in the critical waterways of the Strait of Hormuz have disrupted energy and food security globally. Countries far and wide are adversely impacted socially, economically, and geopolitically. Singapore's foreign minister has termed it as an "Asian crisis" as around 80% of the oil and 90% of the gas that usually pass through the Strait of Hormuz are bound for Asian countries (The Economist, 2026).

Tehran's chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz is a stark demonstration that control of a critical waterway, technology, or even a company can give a government enormous sway in an interconnected global economy (Douglas, 2026). It reminds us of the importance of physical geography in this era of hyperconnectivity. China's use of

rare-earth minerals in its trade relations with the US is a case in point. Beijing used its control of roughly 90% of the world's supplies of rare-earth magnets to checkmate the US in trade negotiations. By cutting off access to metals used in cars, weapons, and electronics, Beijing forced US factories to idle and Washington to soften its demands (Kantchev & Emont, 2026).

South Asia is an important region of the world. With three landlocked states- Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal- the Himalayan region is increasingly becoming contested. The region is Indo-centric, with India being the largest country in the region. Any discussion of the region begins and ends with India. The region's geopolitics and geo-economics appear to be greatly diverted from the path of peace and prosperity. The largest regional cooperation organization, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), has been sidelined by the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan. As Time Marshall observes, both sides can agree on one point: "neither wants the other around" (Marshall, 2015). While the region is labeled as unstable and in turmoil, India stands as an exception. According to *The Economist* (November 6, 2025), "India has not always been as stable as it is today." Taken together, this makes Asia's economic fundamentals stronger, projecting it as a bright spot. Amidst such positivity, there are also potential political, economic, and social flash points and the longest boundary disputes in the region that could unravel in Asia, making the Indian subcontinent a potential center of conflict for the foreseeable future. A historian and geopolitical expert, Michael Auslin has titled his book "The End of Asian Century", even before it begins. His discussion revolves around war, stagnation, and the risks to Asia (Auslin, 2017). There are rival power blocs in the making, indicating the potential return of spheres of influence, what Thucydides said some 2500 years ago, "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must" (Graham, 2018).

The Global South, once neglected and marginalized, is becoming increasingly visible. Of the 193 countries in the UN, around two dozen qualify as middle powers. The majority of them are in the global south, and some are in the global north. If the global north is tied to military alliances, whereas countries in the global south are nonaligned and pursue strategic autonomy/hedging. The middle powers in the south have become stronger and richer than they were before, when the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) formally came into being in September 1961. That was the height of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. Following the end of the Cold War and the onset of globalization, the global south embraced the US global leadership overtly. Global North became the rule setter, and Global South became the rule taker. The Global South also faced some intrusive demands from the North on democracy, human rights, and good governance.

There is a growing tendency for rich and powerful countries to have developed a blatant disregard for the rule of international law. Their foreign policy choices are seen to be increasingly driven by internal compulsions, and less and less relevant to others' concerns and to the principles and purposes of the UN Charter. Foreign policy is becoming more transactional. There is an inward-looking tendency in international relations. This was manifested in 2016 in Brexit in England, and is further reflected in popular domestic slogans such as 'Make America Great Again', 'Build Back Better', 'China's Rejuvenation', and 'Taking Centre Stage', which help to mobilize people and rouse their nationalist sentiments.

The pace of change creates a variety of new challenges, particularly for small states. In the whirlpool of the rapidly changing geopolitics, challenges also create opportunities. It is up to the concerned state to work carefully, critically, consistently, and comprehensively on strategies that overwhelm challenges while seizing emerging opportunities. After all, the success remains grounded in a realistic and practical understanding of the international and regional environment and a visionary leader's single-minded pursuit of policy goals. Small states are important actors in international relations. They are neither irrelevant nor impotent. Yet they have been relegated to a second tier of international relations scholarships, which deprives them of recognition for the strategic autonomy that has been a recurring feature of their behavior. A quick look at the conduct of small states shows that small states pursue a wide range of foreign policy goals shaped independently of external pressures (Trends Research & Advisory, 2025).

Today, it seems that for the rich and powerful, no rules apply, and diplomacy, debate, and dialogue remain sidelined in the conduct of foreign policy. It is natural for any power to insist on its own interest. We must understand that our neighbors are not alone in behaving the way they have been behaving to advance their national interests, often at the expense of their neighbors. This reality demands strengthening our domestic foundations and core capacities to better withstand emerging challenges.

Realities and Challenges of Small States in the Global System

Questions are raised on whether small countries can grow faster than big ones. Kenichi Ohmae, the author of *The Borderless World*, discussed it in an increasingly interlinked and interdependent world economy. Talking about Singapore, he says, "Three million people, without their own sources of food or water, have grown from a per capita GDP of \$1,000 at independence to \$24,000 today, and are host to 500 multinationals. What matters is leadership and vision" (Trading Economics, 2026).

The world is run by the strength of ideas, not by size. Prosperity does not come from the size of a country. Having a large market alone does not ensure prosperity. In this age of advanced technology, the drawbacks of being small are shrinking, and smallness should not automatically equate to helplessness. What counts today is how much research the country is engaged in and how creative and innovative it is to understand the complexities of the evolving international situation, and the scale of its institutional strength. What marks have they been able to make in international politics? Countries like Singapore, Qatar, Estonia, and Luxembourg, with rather small populations, have effective governments and skillful diplomatic establishments as the most valuable resource to confront significant geopolitical and environmental challenges, transnational challenges such as climate change, transnational crime, and rising geopolitical tensions between China and the West.

Former Armenian President Armen Sarkissian argues that small states' survival can scarcely be taken for granted in an increasingly multipolar world whose order, institutions, and norms are being torpedoed by the velocity of political, geopolitical, social, and technological transformations. He insists that small states can prosper and offer their citizens peace and stability even in an era of great-power competition and widening geopolitical fault lines. Israel and Singapore are cited to have ensured a harmonious relationship between leadership and populace and won the trust and confidence of their people. He also claims that large states desire dominance and small states seek stability" (Sarkissian, 2023).

The international system is dominated by big and powerful states. Multilateral forums like the UN allow small states to present their diverse worldviews, though big powers set the rules. Globalization, increased mobility, and rapid technological advances have enabled countries once considered peripheral to voice their concerns and claim a meaningful and stronger place in the global economy. Sarkissian argues that power no longer resides solely in the large states but with small ones as well (Sarkissian, 2023). Investment in health, education, and technology helps create safeguards to confront an adversarial environment, as has been seen in the survival of Israel and its progress and prosperity.

Sarkissian lists three ingredients as fundamental to defining the character and determining the fate of small states. They include: 1) a strong foundation of identity and purpose premised on history, traditions, and culture, a sense of belonging and unity among citizens, 2) national mission and strong leadership playing a pivotal role in guiding citizens towards a shared purpose, and 3) articulated vision and strategic planning to strategically navigate the complex web of international diplomacy,

leveraging relationships to their advantage. He adds to these principal ingredients a coherent state structure, maintaining a balance of power with strong institutions such as an independent judiciary and a capable legislature to prevent the abuse of authority” (Sarkissian, 2023).

In the UN General Assembly, all members have an equal voice and vote. Sarkissian suggests “small states to unite in a Small States Club that can protect their interests, serve the common good of humanity, and act as an inspiring model for others” (Sarkissian, 2023). Then only they can protect their national space and protect their citizens even in an era of intensifying great power competition, unsettling global order, and fast eroding rules-based international order by bypassing the seat of multilateralism, aided and abetted by geopolitical machinations, conflict, and war. Taken together, these are the very factors that pose risks for smaller states.

Several small countries—such as Singapore, Botswana, Switzerland, Ireland, Estonia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Israel—have achieved remarkable success despite limited size by relying on strong identity, strategic vision, prudent governance, smart foreign policy, investments, and investment for the future to pursue clear national missions. Sarkissian argues, “big states suffer problems of cohesion, small states suffer the consequences of weakness” (Sarkissian, 2023). Recent records show smaller states losing territory to big and powerful neighbors. Big and powerful states have failed to impose their will on weak and smaller states, as reflected in Russian experiences in Ukraine and American experiences in Afghanistan. Singapore became Singapore thanks to the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew. Botswana is “a diamond in the rough”, as Sarkissian puts it, “a model of economic prudence and efficient governance in Africa”. A trio of European countries makes it into his collection: Switzerland, which has made a virtue out of neutrality; Ireland, formidably well-connected as well as “compassionate, open and global”; and impressively pragmatic Estonia, which has changed beyond recognition since its Soviet days to become a pioneer of simplified taxation and e-government (Sarkissian, 2023).

In a political landscape that is full of uncertainties, contradictions, and challenges, the message is to govern well, develop a set of strong institutions such as an independent judiciary and a capable legislature, let national institutions operate as per the rule of law to prevent abuse of power, develop a strong foundation of national identity and purpose with a national mission and vision. It is equally necessary to have a leader whom people trust. By actively demonstrating a commitment to ensuring good governance and combating corruption, small states earn the trust and confidence of their citizens. Tom Long concludes that small states’ interests, actions, and ideas must be given greater

weight for their part in constituting great powers' international positions, shaping the web of international relationships, and making up much of the content of international politics (Long, 2022).

How Small States Keep the UN Peacekeeping Going

Article 33 of Chapter VI of the UN Charter encourages member states to seek solutions by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, and arbitration to settle their disputes by peaceful means of their own choice (United Nations, 1945). When parties to the dispute seek to settle their disputes by such means as mediation, monitoring, and disarmament under the aegis of the UN, such efforts have found acceptability across the world.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is entrusted with the most important function of primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. It was never intended to have its own fighting force and realize this goal militarily. Instead, it vows to promote social progress and better standards of life in greater freedom. Peacekeeping has evolved into one of the main instruments used by the UN to ensure the maintenance of international peace and security. In the post-Cold War era, UN peacekeeping operations have become more complex. As the complexities grew in peacekeeping operations, the traditional form of peacekeeping arrangements proved to be insufficient in dealing with the realities on the ground.

The beauty of working under the UN is that there is burden-sharing, and all troops contributing countries send their missions under the aegis of the world body. Countries become ready to shoulder the responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security around the world under the principles of sovereign equality.

The UN functions as the “protector of the weak and voice of the small.” In his State of the Union address on January 30, 1961, US President John F. Kennedy made a plea to the smaller nations of the world, “to join with us in strengthening” the United Nations, “which is far more essential to their security than it is to ours-the only body in the world where no nation need be powerful to be secure, where every nation has an equal voice, where any nation can exert influence not according to the strength of its armies, but according to the strength of its ideas. It deserves the support of all (Kennedy, 1963).

Small states have a great role to play in the UN. Addressing the Irish Parliament in Dublin on June 28, 1963, President Kennedy spoke to remind “the small nations that they, too, can and must help build a world peace. They, too, as we all are, are dependent on the United Nations for security, for an equal chance to be heard, for progress toward a world made safe for diversity.” He appreciated the commitment and dedication to

world order and said, “The peacekeeping machinery of the United Nations cannot work without the help of the smaller nations, nations whose forces threaten no one and whose forces can thus help create a world in which no nation is threatened” (Kennedy, 1963).

The then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said of small states that they “are more than capable of holding their own,” and that “their contributions are the very glue of progressive international cooperation for the common good.” He referred to “Nepal among the stalwart nations” consistently ready to contribute troops, police, and observers, and to take other steps to improve the UN’s overall readiness (Annan, 1998).

Rise of Middle Powers

In recent years, the landscape in geopolitics and geo-economics has structurally altered. India, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey, and South Africa are members of the G-20 (with the addition of the African Union, it has become G-21). Middle powers object to the watering down of the “common but differentiated responsibilities” principle on climate change. During the heydays of G-77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Global South demanded redistributive justice under the rubric of ‘new international economic order at the UN in 1974. The G-4 coalition (India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan) is at work to further consolidate the role of middle powers.

At a time when the world is confronting a disorienting reality, and the architect of the rules-based international relations is discarding the old rule book and bypassing all accepted norms and standards, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney came out boldly at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2026, and said the world “is at a rupture, not in transition.” He said that intermediate powers like Canada are not powerless, as they have the capacity to build a new order that honors values such as respect for human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, sovereignty, and the territorial integrity of various states. He emphasized that, “The power of the less power starts with honesty” (Carney, 2026). He added, “We live in an era of great-power rivalry, where the rules-based order is fading, and the strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must. And this aphorism of Thucydides is presented as inevitable, as the natural logic of international relations reasserting itself” (World Economic Forum, 2026).

States pursued value-based foreign policies and prospered under the rules-based international order, acting within the limits set by institutional rules and principles. They benefited from the order and its predictability. But lately, the “might is right” has returned, and great powers are using their strength as coercion against the weak, with tariffs as leverage, financial infrastructure as coercion, and the exploitation of vulnerabilities. Connectivity has become a source of subordination to the powerful.

Of the ten countries with populations of over 100 million, only the US and Japan are prosperous (The Economist, 1998). Several small countries have also achieved their highest Gross Domestic Product. A set of rising nations in the Global South is working together and posing a challenge to the supremacy of Washington's supremacy. Several economic groupings of middle powers indicate the collective strength of the Global South as manifested in groups of G-77 and China within the UN. G-20, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), initially of five large countries, is now expanding, and MINT (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey) is yet another economic grouping in the making.

Alasdair Roberts, in his book *Superstates: Empires of the Twenty-First Century*, describes the growing dominance of the world's largest political entities-China, India, and the US (Roberts, 2023). He argues that by 2050, about 40 percent of the global population will live in these countries. "The international order that is emerging in the twenty-first century," Roberts writes, "is distinguished by dramatic differences in the scale of states." "Superstates," he says, are "hybrid polities, governing vast territories and diverse populations, and having important features of both empires and states, and they are vulnerable to a host of threats: external attack, rebellion, climate change, disease, growing internal disparities, shifts in economic competitiveness, and uneven technological development" (Menon, 2024).

Middle powers are acquiring self-confidence and a sense of entitlement, and do not want to be patronized by the West. Indeed, middle powers are the new architects of the world order (Djalal, 2024). They are "having a moment" (Shidore, 2023). Their common interests lie in defending multilateralism, which they think is an essential part of statecraft. Multilateralism is considered the most ideal forum for solving systemic problems like climate change and pandemics. It is multilateralism that provides space for middle powers and the global south to step in and contribute to stabilizing the world order. At a time when the seat of the rule-based international relations like the UN, World Trade Organization (WTO) and related architectures of the collective problem solving and respecting sovereignty; territorial integrity, the prohibition of the use of force, is under threats, Carney insists that middle powers "must develop greater strategic autonomy, in energy, food, critical minerals, in finance, and supply chains. A country that can't feed itself, fuel itself, or defend itself has few options. When the rules no longer protect you, you must protect yourself." We need to be both principled and pragmatic. He says, "the middle powers must act together, because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu" (Careny, 2026).

A Yam between Two Boulders: Nepal as Anchor of Peace

Judged by conventional measures of size, power, influence, and compared to its immediate neighbors, India and China, Nepal has been described as “small, weak, and one of the least developed states” (Dahal, 2001). Nepal is 23 and 68 times smaller than India and China, respectively. Nepal’s population of about 30 million is almost 46 times smaller than India’s and 47 times smaller than China’s (Panday, 2026). Nepal is considered small when viewed through the lens of its neighbors. By present-day global standards, however, Nepal is not a small country in terms of population or landmass.

When World War I broke out in 1914, there were only a small number of recognized sovereign countries in the world, and Nepal was one of them. With a sound foreign policy in place and relations with the British on an excellent footing, Nepal’s Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher Rana paid an official visit to England in 1908. He was the first to do so since Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana visited in 1850 (Sever, 1993). In August 1914, Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher wrote a letter to be transmitted to the Viceroy in London, in which he stated, “In the event of a continental war, the whole military resources of Nepal are at His Majesty’s disposal. We shall be proud if we can be of any service, however little that may be. We have spoken of our friendship on many occasions. Should time allow, we hope to speak in deeds” (Sever, 1993).

Remarkably, Nepal has never lost its independence throughout its long history. The Treaty of Sugauli of 1816, though it cost Nepal some territory, established defined borders and laid the foundation for its continued independence in the present-day Nepal. Nepal remains a rare example of an Asian nation that maintained its freedom and identity amid the great geopolitical upheavals of the 19th and 20th centuries. While much of Asia yielded to European colonial domination, Nepal skillfully preserved its sovereignty through a combination of diplomatic prudence, military strength, and strategic engagement with both British India and China. Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher Rana offered to provide a Gurkha contingent to the Allied cause at the time of the Munich crisis of September 1938. He underscored the independence of Nepal and reinforced the distinction between Nepal and the Indian princely states by making his offer of help directly to the British government in London (Sever, 1993).

Nepal prides itself on maintaining an independent foreign policy and sovereignty. Addressing the 15th UN General Assembly in September 1960, Nepal’s Prime Minister B. P. Koirala said, “Nepal is a small country in terms of economic and military resources and strength, but it is fully conscious of its responsibility and the role it has to play in the deliberations of the United Nations as one of its members. We believe in the independent exercise of our judgment in considering international issues.” He added,

“My country is fiercely proud of its independence, which we have never wholly lost” (Koirala, 1960). Nepal pursues an active, independent, and balanced foreign policy based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (*Panchsheel*), nonalignment, and international law, and has been making immense contributions to the maintenance of international peace and security under the aegis of UN peacekeeping missions. Nepal’s constructive and positive role in the maintenance of world peace and security has been widely acclaimed by the international community. Nepal currently stands as the largest troop contributing country to UN peacekeeping missions. It has also been sending the largest number of female peacekeepers to these missions. Our contributions to peacekeeping are a source of national pride. Nepali peacekeepers are widely regarded as both desirable and reliable in UN missions. So far, 74 peacekeepers have made their ultimate sacrifice for the cause of peace, and 77 have been disabled (Nepali Army, 2026).

One of the most influential diplomats of the modern era, Henry Kissinger, offers a compelling insight in his book “World Order.” He writes, “For centuries, Nepal skillfully balanced its diplomatic posture between the ruling dynasties in China and those in India- offering letters and gifts that were interpreted as tribute in China but recorded as evidence of equal exchanges in Nepal, then holding out a special tie with China as a guarantee of Nepal’s independence vis-à-vis India” (Kissinger, 2014).

The world is witnessing an intense rivalry between the US and China. China’s unprecedented economic progress since its “economic reforms and opening up” in 1979 has witnessed dramatic and transformative forces that have propelled the emergence of Asia as the global center of gravity. This has been the economic and geopolitical reality. China’s rise is reflected in the launching of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-described as the “project of the century”- as a centerpiece of its rise in Asia and beyond (Callebs, 2017). India is already the world’s fourth-largest economy. Based on the impressive growth of China followed by India, the center of geopolitical gravity has thus arrived at Nepal’s doorstep. In the changing geopolitical landscape, Nepal confronts balancing relations with rapidly rising power China, its traditional neighbor India, and the only superpower, the US. Nepal thus finds itself at the heart of a triangular contest unfolding on its own soil.

With immediate neighbors India and China having reached the global top table and gained prominence, Nepal risks being on the menu, though not at the main table. Its geography places it in a delicate position. As the only superpower, the US looks to every corner of the world for friends and carves a space to deny its possible adversaries any chance. In the present context, China is the only country that can challenge the US.

Nepal and China share a common border. The US considers Nepal “as a neighbor on the other side of the globe” (Reagan, 1983). Nepal faces a difficult and delicate task in managing its foreign policy, security, and national interests without being pressured, dominated, or drawn into rivalry between its neighbors and the US.

How Nepal calibrates its foreign policy with this in mind is essential to Nepal’s historic independence, sovereignty, and prosperity. Nepal will have to integrate strategic foresight into its foreign policy to manage its relations with New Delhi, Beijing, and Washington. While seeking to balance its desires to maintain strategic autonomy with the need to secure material benefits, without upsetting development partnerships with any of them.

Nepal pursues an independent foreign policy with non-alignment at its core. The principles of rules-based international order premised on the foundations of the *Panchsheel*- five principles of peaceful co-existence, are of prime importance for all nations like Nepal for their existence. Kathmandu has remained truly nonaligned on security issues. Nepal’s nonalignment is not a passive neutrality, but a dynamic one, where each issue is judged on its own merits and positions are taken to protect its national interests. This approach is manifested in Nepal’s engagements in its neighborhood, the wider region, and beyond. It remains economically engaged with all its traditional friends and donors seeking their goodwill, support, and cooperation to improve the living standards of its people.

An effective foreign policy demands a strong domestic foundation. Strength abroad comes from strength at home. Nepal’s society suffers from eroded moral norms, poor governance, and weak accountability, as manifested in the violent Gen Z revolt of September 8 and 9, 2025. This was an explosion of public grievances rooted in persistent political instability, short-term politicking, and patronage at the cost of meritocracy. The country needs transparent, ethical leadership, trust in public institutions, and a stronger democratic bond between leaders and citizens. Moral integrity must guide not only the public but, above all, those in government.

Seated between two large and rising global powers, China and India, Nepal finds itself at a strategic crossroads. At this critical point and time, Nepal must mind the century-old aphorism in terms of governance and parliamentary politics, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” It is equally true of geopolitics. King Prithvi Narayan Shah’s notion, “Nepal is a yam between two stones,” derives from this geographical analogy (Shaha, 1973). Nepal’s geography, history, and culture are tied with that of its neighbors and the region as a whole. Nepal has relied on its neighbors for its international trade and economic development. It is time to accept reality, be pragmatic, and stop pretending that everything is hunky-dory. The pressing need is to fix the domestic front and build strength at home to gain strength abroad.

Though geographically far apart, Nepal remains vulnerable to the ongoing Gulf crisis. As Nepal imports all its petroleum products, there has been an immediate impact at home with oil prices going up and impacting transport, agriculture, and manufacturing, and increasing overall consumer prices. With the Gulf region in tension, a significant portion of Nepali workers are threatened with their employment and remittances. A prolonged crisis will impact its trade and supply chains. If the crisis persists, Nepal will have to evacuate its citizens, possibly in coordination with multilateral organizations, and engage them at home. This appears to be the most significant challenge facing the new government.

Conclusion

Nepal should always act in what is in Nepal's interests and align itself with time-tested principles. Nepal's interests must come first, and never hesitate to uphold the long-standing principles and positions consistently, and objectively so as not to allow any powers, no matter how close or big or small, how friendly, to dictate to us. Foreign policy should be respect-centric and trust-based. That is possible only if we conduct ourselves in a principled and credible manner. The founding prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, opined that the survival of small states "depends upon world conditions. It doesn't depend on [small states] alone. It depends on whether there is an international environment that says that borders are sacrosanct and there is the rule of law" (Yew, 2013).

Great powers are increasingly seen as unpredictable. The US is retreating from its long-standing role as the leader of an international rules-based order. It is using its economic and military power to coerce other nations into toeing its line. The rule of law is at its weakest point. Small powers/states are fragile actors and suffer from multidimensional vulnerabilities and remain exposed to outside influences. They need to be pragmatic, balanced, and dynamic, not driven by ideological considerations. Thorough homework and sound preparation will only produce resilience in these turbulent times to weather the storm. The leadership backed by skilled, dedicated, and patriotic professionals with knowledge of foreign languages can steer their nations skillfully, even amidst their lack of material resources and hard-power capabilities.

Small powers should go vocal to project their positions, and be incredibly persuasive, who "could sell ice to Eskimos," to survive in the anarchical international system and avoid being maneuvered in international relations dominated by great powers. There is a popular Nepali saying - "*Bolne ko pitho bikchha, nabolne ko chamal pani bikdaina,*" which roughly translates as "the one who eloquently speaks can sell flour while the one who cannot talk cannot even sell rice." It matters more how you say or present something than what you say. The wisdom of this traditional Nepali saying applies as powerfully to diplomacy and statecraft, where the ability to communicate or articulate persuasively often determines success.

Nepal has been unable to leverage its rich natural resource base, strategic location, and its immense contributions to the maintenance of international peace and security under the aegis of the UN peacekeeping mission to project its position. Lee Kuan Yew said, “A nation is not great by its size alone. It is the will, the cohesion, the stamina, the discipline of its people and the quality of their leaders which ensure it an honorable place in history” (Yew, 2013). What matters most is visionary leadership for the nation.

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