

## Book review

**Sudheer Sharma. (2024). *Himalpariko Huri: Ganatantrapachhi Pherieko Nepal-Chin Sambandha*. Kitab Publishers.**

Nepal's relations with its immediate neighbors – India and China– as well as with the United States (US), known as its “third neighbor,” have always been central to Nepal's foreign policy priorities. For Nepal, a landlocked country, maintaining a balanced relationship with these neighbors is vital for its political stability, economic development and diplomatic relevance. Therefore, bolstering ties with them has remained a top priority in recent decades.

While a substantial body of literature exists focusing on Nepal-India relations, writings on Nepal's relationship with China remain limited. Seasoned journalist and author Sudheer Sharma has tried to fill the same gap through, *Himalpariko Huri: Ganatantrapachhi Pherieko Nepal-Chin Sambandha* (The Storm Beyond the Himalayas: Changing Nepal-China Relations After the Republic). The author highlights the Nepal-China relationship, especially the one that evolved in post-republican Nepal. The thrust of the book is that, for a long time, Nepal was heavily influenced by India. When Nepal transitioned to a republic in 2008, China steadily increased its presence. Moreover, Sharma discusses the competitive interests between India and the US in Nepal along with their collaboration to counter China's influence. This explains Nepal's geostrategic importance as well as geopolitical complications.

The author addresses these diplomatic challenges by posing a series of questions: How does Nepal manage the competing agendas of these powerful neighbors? What are the potential consequences if Nepal fails to balance diplomatic complexities smartly? And most importantly, what are Nepal's strategic interests in its relationships with these countries? Dealing with these questions, the author navigates complex and competitive geopolitical environments, spotlighting the potential to safeguard Nepal's national interests in the context of global and regional rivalries, while also promoting a more strategic approach to foreign policy.

Published in two distinct volumes, the first volume, titled *Bhiksu, Vyapar ra Vidroha* (Monk, Trade, and Revolt), delves into historical insights from the seventh century. This review exclusively centered on the second volume and is divided into six substantive Chapters. In the Introductory section entitled “2008,” the author attracts readers' attention by explaining why the year 2008 holds significance in the context of changing Nepal-China relations, during

which Nepal formally became a republic by abolishing the monarchy in that very year. Till then, the Chinese government valued Nepal's monarch as a trustworthy actor in preventing anti-China activities, disallowing Tibetan refugees from using Nepali territory for political dissent. With the abolishment of the monarchy, China engaged aggressively with stakeholders such as political parties, bureaucracy, security agencies, civil society organizations and media, abandoning the previously adopted silent diplomacy.

Similarly, the author raises several questions that serve as the foundation for further analysis: why is China important for Nepal? Why is Nepal important to China? How much do Nepalis understand about their northern neighbor? Poor understanding of Mandarin, limited engagement and lack of mutual understanding at the societal level are identified as key diplomatic challenges for Nepal. The Introductory section also offers a brief overview of Nepal's post-republic political trajectory, the end of the Maoist insurgency, the constitution-drafting process, and the broader peace process, thereby connecting these internal developments to Nepal's shifting foreign policy environment with major powers becoming more visible and contested. To counter Western influence, China lobbied against a \$500 million US grant, while India and the US united against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), making Nepal a geostrategic hotspot for power centers.

In the First Chapter, entitled "*Naya Sakriyata* (New Proactiveness)," the author argues that active engagement of Chinese diplomacy was driven by growing concerns over increasing Indian, American, and broader Western influence in Nepal's political and civil society spheres. By providing detailed post-republic anecdotes, the author explains the Chinese model of relations building among the political class, including regional forces with greater influence in Madhesh, businessmen, media and intellectuals. The intriguing contradiction highlighted is China's perception towards the Maoists. Even as Maoists in Nepal invoked Mao Zedong, Beijing remained critical of them. Reasons: Maoists began a war against the monarchy and they were supported by India, which made China wary; and that posed a serious threat to Tibetan security, a core Chinese concern. The involvement of the US Army in training the Nepal Army during the insurgency annoyed Beijing further. Beijing was worried about possible American strategic encroachment, especially in sensitive areas near the Chinese border (p. 30). The book has documented how China took its position on key political developments i.e., government formation, Constitution writing and the peace process. This marked a radical departure from China's historical non-interference policy.

The Chapter elucidates China's cautious approach by demonstrating a few cases of political leaders. For instance, the government of Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal served very briefly as Prime Minister, lasting just nine months, as he was embroiled in various controversies and the inability to manage the interests of neighboring countries. Both China and India prioritized their favored leaders

for the new Prime Minister. Their rivalry reached a climax when it took seven months to replace the ad-hoc government led by Madhav Kumar Nepal (p. 46). The author asserts that Beijing welcomed the appointments of Nepal and Jhala Nath Khanal, while India expressed satisfaction with the leadership of Baburam Bhattarai (p. 47). This reflects the clear rivalry between the two neighbors as both seek a government in Nepal that aligns with their interests.

A controversial yet central claim in this Chapter is that India and the US historically engaged in micro-management of Nepal's internal administration i.e., key appointments in the government and political transitions. The author terms that China also committed the same mistake made by the Indians by engaging in overt political maneuvering. This marked a turning point where Beijing adjusted its approach to become more cautious and cooperative, particularly aligning with India to resist Western influence. Furthermore, the author also alleges that China accused the presence of United Nations Mission in Nepal and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) of geopolitical manipulation in Nepal (p. 51).

Another geopolitical friction continued during the constitution-writing process. Against the Indian push for regional identity-based federalism, China advised Nepal to adopt federalism based on geography and economic sustainability (p. 60), reflecting Beijing's broader concerns over internal stability and spillover effects on its own multi-ethnic regions. India's interest lay in promoting a regional identity based in the Tarai Madhesh, advocating for a greater Madhesh province extending from east to west as part of Nepal's federal structure. Conflicting views from immediate neighbors on disputed issues complicated the task of Constitution writing. The presence of these multiple, and at times conflicting, domestic and international agendas prolonged the constitution-writing process. The First Chapter concludes with diverse international responses to Nepal's newly formulated Constitution in 2015. China welcomed the Constitution, the US offered congratulations and New Delhi expressed dissatisfaction. Shortly afterward, India imposed a blockade on Nepal (p. 69). This moment is presented as one of heightened regional tensions and competing geopolitical narratives, illustrating how constitutional politics in Nepal are entangled with the strategic interests of its powerful neighbors.

In Chapter Two, "*Samyavadi Sahakaryako Parikshan* (Testing of Communist Collaboration)," the author discusses the ideological alignment and historical connection between Nepal's left forces and China. It provides a detailed account of how Communist Parties in Nepal and India interacted with the Chinese political establishment. A particularly notable observation is China's advice to Nepali Communist leaders to develop self-reliant political structures, emphasizing that "every party must stand on its own feet" (p. 78). This sentiment influences China's encouragement of the Communist Party in Nepal to shift from violent conflict toward peaceful political engagement. The author notes that, roiled by political instability, frequent government change

and inconsistent policies, China increased its interest in domestic affairs. Such interests were expressed visibly after smaller left Parties merged to form a powerful Communist Party of Nepal.

China's expanding influence in Nepal became more visible through its involvement in infrastructure projects, railways, hydropower, and diplomatic cooperation. President Xi Jinping's 2019 visit to Nepal was a case of their assertive diplomacy. One particularly revealing incident involved the proposed signing of a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty between Nepal and China. As stated in the book, despite cabinet approval, the government backtracked from signing the treaty following objections from the US. The US Congress reportedly sent a letter to the then PM K. P. Oli requesting that Nepal not move forward with the treaty (p.119-120). This event illustrates how external powers exert pressure on smaller nations when they try to pursue an independent foreign policy.

Likewise, during the blockade in 2015, Nepal signed a Trade and Transit Agreement with China. But complications arose during a bilateral meeting in Beijing when China requested access to Nepal's three border points Birgunj, Biratnagar and Kakarbhitta connecting India (p. 99). Nepal declined the proposal, citing political sensitivities and poor infrastructure. During President Bidhya Devi Bhandari's visit to China in 2019, the Trade and Transit Protocol was officially signed. However, Chinese officials repeatedly questioned Nepal's commitment to implementation, referencing Nepal's inconsistent track record with previous agreements and expressing concerns about Nepal's multiple, sometimes contradictory, treaties with other countries (p. 100). This reflects a growing mistrust, as Nepal is often seen as lacking the institutional capacity and political will to follow diplomatic commitments.

The Third Chapter, "*Sainya Sajhedari ko Prayatna* (Attempt for Military Partnership)," provides a comparative analysis of how India, the US, and China compete to influence Nepal's security apparatus. The author explains that Nepal's military sector, which was traditionally under Indian and American influence, is being equally approached by the Chinese. Increased military aid, training programs for Nepali Army officers, collaboration in disaster response are some of the Chinese interventions (p. 144). The author claims that China attempted to influence the Nepal Army through Maoists-led government. Similarly, Chapter Four, "*Birsina Khojiekka Tibet* (The Forgotten Tibet)," is about China's core strategic interest in Nepal: Tibetan security. By providing an in-depth analysis of the Tibetan refugee issue, the author explains how Nepal balances the conflicting interests of power centers. This sensitive topic remains central to China's engagement with Nepal and exemplifies the complex diplomacy required to manage foreign relations without alienating key partners or violating international norms.

Chapter Five, "*Dui Dhungabichko Saghu* (A Bridge between Two Stones)," presents a broader historical and economic perspective, noting that China

and India were the world's two largest economies in the 1500s – a trend that appears to be reemerging (p. 176). The author suggests that Nepal stands to benefit significantly from enhanced connectivity with these two rising powers, particularly through North-South transit corridors, advocating for trilateral cooperation among Nepal, India, and China in trade, investment, and regional development. Geopolitical tensions and mistrust often hinder these opportunities. For instance, while India proposed Rasuwagadhi and Kodari for trade with Tibet, China (p. 207) sought access to cross Nepal-India border points, Birgunj, Biratnagar and Kakarbhitta (p. 99) for trade with India. Nepal is in a fix to do this owing to infrastructural constraints. Nepal's limited understanding of its northern neighbor, the author calls for a significant policy shift, offering several measures ranging from strengthening the foreign ministry's northern desk, developing Chinese language expertise, and encouraging China focused research within universities, think tanks and research institutions in Nepal. While critiquing China's micro-management approaches, the author concludes Nepal must understand the motivations and weaknesses of Chinese foreign policy and formulate a balanced, pragmatic strategy to safeguard Nepalese sovereignty.

The subject matter of *Himalpariko Huri* and its accessibility engage the reader. Still, the book does have some flaws and weaknesses. One notable weakness is its repetition of an unverified claim: that India assumed the 2015 blockade would last no more than 15 days. The author makes this point more than once (pp. 74, 96), but fails to provide a credible source, which slightly weakens the empirical rigor. A significant portion of information lack proper sourcing and citation. For instance, on page 18, the author mentions that the number of Chinese tourists increased to 169,543 in 2019 from 35,166 in 2008. Irrespective of valuable insights, the book lacks adequate sourcing. This may weaken its academic credibility and confine it to a narrative style rather than a rigorously researched work. *Himalpariko Huri* offers a better understanding of Nepal's foreign policy and major powers, emphasizing its diplomatic balancing acts, strategic engagements and internal limitations.

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