



Charting a New Foreign Policy Direction: Will It Deliver Better?



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Highlights

- Foreign Policy determines the state of relationships between countries and guides the diplomatic negotiations.
- At the practical level, constitutionally envisioned national interests are side-lined, prioritising the ruling party's interests.
- Defining 'national interest' is much like defining '*Janata*' at a political level.
- We need to redefine national interests through political consensus for a projected time and update them periodically.
- The Oli administration seems to exercise double standards concerning its foreign policy, especially with India.
- Signing too many areas of collaboration at a time during high level visits and not executing even a few indicate a total failure of strategic priority setting and a feeble commitment for action.
- New foreign policy of Nepal needs to be made pro-people by adopting some grassroots approaches to public diplomacy.

Introduction

Foreign policy is a tool for protecting and promoting national interest and fostering mutual understanding between and among nation-states. It is essentially the attitude and actions of a state towards other states. For Beach (2012), foreign policies are the external behaviours of a state, specifically, policies that are “explicitly directed

towards other actors” (p. 2). Foreign policy is the “management of external relations and activities of nation-states, as distinguished from their domestic policies” (Jackson & Soresen, 2013, p. 252). Usually, foreign policy is perceived to be distinct from a nation's domestic policy. However, scholars believe that it is “ultimately the extension of a country's domestic condition: that is, the foreign extension of its domestic hopes and dreams and

fears” (Kaplan, 2019, p. xxi). As per Hill, “Foreign policy is the hinge of domestic and international politics” (as cited in AS, 2018, p. 2). Therefore, a clear foreign policy vision is inseparable from domestic issues consideration (Castiello, 2018). As such, the foreign policy of a state is influenced by both ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ factors.

Foreign Policy determines the relationships between countries and paves way for diplomatic negotiations. In the modern globalised world, no state can remain in seclusion in the international sphere, and thus every country has a foreign policy to protect its national interest. However, such international engagement is systematic and based on some well-defined principles of a state, which are reflected in its foreign policy (Outlook Afghanistan, 2016). A nation’s foreign policy is formulated based on its position vis-à-vis the states in the international system (Baral, 2018). A foreign policy protects the territorial integrity of the country and furthers its national interests, both within and outside the country (Outlook Afghanistan, 2016). In Malhotra’s (2014) insight, apt implementation of foreign policy upsurges the

government’s credibility. It further strengthens bilateral ties and advances cooperation in all possible areas for mutual benefits.

The core objective of Nepal’s foreign policy is to reinforce the dignity of the state by safeguarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and promoting economic wellbeing and prosperity of Nepal (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MoFA], 2020a). Article 51 of the Constitution of Nepal guides Nepal to pursue independent foreign policy and adhere to the principles of the UN Charter, non-alignment, Panchsheel, international law and the norms of world peace (Government of Nepal, 2015). As the current Minister for Foreign Affairs put it, “Maintaining foreign relations based on sovereign equality and enhancing the dignity of the nation is an important element of our foreign policy” (Gyawali, 2019, para. 7). As such, Nepal holds a firm commitment to respect each other’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and respect and accommodate each other’s concerns and interests. Article 5.1 of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 highlights the core elements of national interests as the safeguarding of the freedom, sovereignty, territorial integrity,

nationalism, independence and dignity of the country, border security, economic wellbeing and prosperity and the rights of the Nepali people (Government of Nepal, 2015). However, at the practical level, these interests are considered vague and/or side-lined, prioritising the ruling party's interests. Therefore, defining 'national interest' has been problematic.

Defining 'national interest' is much like defining 'Janata' at a political level. Whoever supports a particular leader or a party, only those people represent 'Janata' for them (in fact, own cadres are the pure 'Janata'), the rest of the people, including those who have no political interests, are their opponents. Similar has been the case with national interests. If a particular event, dialogue or something seems to do good to a leader or a particular political party, that becomes a thing or idea of 'national interest' to them. Therefore, we first need to redefine national interests through political consensus for a projected time and renew/update them periodically by conducting a thorough analysis of various facets of our foreign policy from our past experiences. In the changed context, Nepal has to reformulate its foreign policy to serve the growing aspirations of its people

(Dahal, 2018). In fact, with successful completion of the elections of the three tiers of the federal setup and the formation of governments at all three levels, Nepal experienced a historic and epoch-making political transformation. With this, it also set to begin a new era of political stability and economic development (Nepal Foreign Affairs, 2018). However, intra-party micropolitics was more obliging, which not only hampered its national image but also international. With recent political and economic developments of Nepal vis-à-vis its neighbours and India's neighbourhood first policy, it is time to review our bilateral relations with India from a new but realistic perspective (Shrestha, 2018). Therefore, Nepal's explicit foreign policy has become more important now in the changed socio-political context. How will Nepal respond to the rise of its immediate neighbours in the global economy and politics? What role will Nepal play in SAARC and similar institutions? How will it cooperate with the rest of the world (can it escape the India-China clutch)? How will it chart a more independent course for itself? Does Nepal have the capacity to live up to neighbours' expectations? Does it have the foreign policy capacity commensurate with its 'Prosperous

Nepal, Happy Nepali' ambition? Too many questions are in the pipeline.

Shrestha (2018) has rightly pointed out that distinct political priorities among the political parties have hindered in the consensus on national interests. Accepting this reality, the Minister for Foreign Affairs Pradeep Kumar Gyawali also stressed the need for national dialogues to build the nation's foreign policy based on mass consensus (Rastriya Samachar Samiti, 2019). As a corollary, the MoFA, in partnership with Institute of Foreign Affairs, the state-owned think tank, held a National Dialogue on Foreign Policy amidst cabinet ministers, senior leaders from various political parties, parliamentarians, diplomats, entrepreneurs, civil society members, academicians and media persons on 29 June 2019 intending to help the government fine-tune its foreign policy in the changed context, especially to realise the goal of 'Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali'. Likewise, the Ministry also established a Brain Gain Centre in 2019 to encourage Nepali diaspora to contribute to the development of the country through their knowledge, skills, resources and technology (MoFA, 2019a). As of 15 July 2020, more than 930 Nepali diaspora experts have been

reported to have registered themselves in the portal (MoFA, 2020b). However, it has neither offered any information regarding the expertise areas of the registered expatriate Nepali experts nor has it exposed how many have already started collaborating with experts at home.

Recent Transactions

Oli became Prime Minister first time in 2016 and second time in 2018. During his first premiership, Oli was applauded for opposing the infamous Indian economic blockade after the promulgation of the constitution in 2015 and for signing the transit transport accord with China which marked an end to the country's over-dependence on India. Since then, the Oli government has been blamed for tilting towards China. Moreover, since Nepal decided to join China's ambitious Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) formally and the domestic political changes in Nepal (left government), political pundits of the West and South have analysed that Nepal is inclining towards its North (Dahal, 2018). However, the agreement with China has seen hardly any progress on the ground, while relations with India are getting more complicated than ever (The Record, 2020). During Oli's

second innings as PM, H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, paid a state visit to Nepal from 12 to 13 October 2019, which is cited as diplomatic successes of the Oli administration. Likewise, holding the BIMSTEC summit in Kathmandu and making an agreement with India to build a railway connecting Kathmandu with Raxaul were also considered diplomatic success (The Record, 2020). Moreover, Oli's 'tit for tat' diplomacy, incorporating Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Lipulek in its map, could be termed a pragmatic action that would force India to come to the negotiating table (Khanal, 2020). However, Oli's order to halt the work on updating the new maps in school textbooks, using old maps in the official letterhead and remaining silent on matters concerning India (The Record, 2020) proves his exercise of double standards. That's why, for generations now, Nepal's foreign policy has been more about theatrics, less about substance (The Record, 2020).

Recent developments in Nepal's foreign relations, especially its plummeting relations with India, have led politicians from the opposition parties to describe the ruling Nepal Communist Party's foreign policy as disconcerted. SAARC has become 'crippled' with India's

ignorance and Nepal, having its headquarters here, has not dedicated its full efforts towards its revitalisation. It appears that the Oli government has pursued an imbalanced and irresponsible foreign policy, which is hampering Nepal's relations with its neighbours. Moreover, despite the supposed warm ties, China has refused to open major trade border points, and road links between the two countries have not been upgraded (Adhikari, 2020). China showed its 'lip service' towards reopening the Zhangmu/Khasa port at an early date. The proposed Chinese trans-Himalayan railway project connecting Kathmandu with the Tibetan region has not started. These hinted that the assumption of the Oli administration that China could be a substitute to India had proven wrong (The Record, 2020). In fact, India has also taken a 'holding but not delivering approach' on various projects like hydropower and transport (KC, 2018). Likewise, a \$500 million grant under the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compacts with the United States has been pending due to a conflict inside the ruling NCP (Bhattarai, 2020a). It not only shows the inability of the ruling party Chair cum Prime Minister to manage intra-party politics but also to handle international diplomacy. Another

example of our international diplomacy becoming weak is the gap between the committed and actual FDI inflows. Many blame this to be due to the political climate (factions in the ruling party) despite relative political stability (Shrestha, 2019). It shows there is a serious lack of follow up and planning. Analogically, Keohane's (1969) 'Lilliputians' dilemmas' aptly captures the dilemmas the small states have with respect to dealing with bigger powers (as cited in Adhikari, 2012, p. 83). A problem with Nepali's diplomacy is also the agreements made during the state head's visits. During such visits, it has become customary to sign too many areas of collaboration at a time and not to execute even a few. It shows a total failure of strategic priority setting and a feeble commitment for action.

Work Ahead

There is an increasing focus on Nepal's foreign decision-making institutions, policy drivers, as well as ideas and ideologies that shape Nepal's external affairs since the federal structure was in place. Nepal's foreign policies and international diplomacy have been overshadowed by its specific focus on India and China. As such, Nepal has been "engaged extensively with India

and China in various areas of cooperation" (MoFA, 2019b, p. 11). With the rise of China and India as the new economic powerhouses of the world, Nepal can tap the opportunity for greater economic cooperation with both the neighbours by formulating the strategies of small state economic diplomacy (Adhikari, 2018). Besides, Nepal needs to promote genial relations with its labour destination countries, especially Gulf Cooperation Council countries, since its economy is basically dependent upon remittance from these countries (KC, 2018). At this juncture, it is equally important for Nepal to reinforce the voice of the least developed countries in international forums and restore the importance of multilateralism.

At a time, we are talking about global diplomacy; the diplomacy with any of our immediate neighbours should not be put at risk. It is, therefore, time for Nepal to mend fences with India. Moreover, it should review the progress of externally funded projects in Nepal and make follow up for timely implementation accordingly so that all Janata will have faith in the competence of our political leadership. Moreover, it is important to scrutinise the process of foreign policymaking and shaping

international diplomacy. Neither the bureaucrats in the MoFA nor the ideologue of the ruling party, who have the top voice in foreign policymaking, are technically fit for making such policies. However, these with some sycophant experts make foreign policy, and that is why international diplomacy turns out to be ineffective. Now, the Nepal government should listen to independent experts' (not the experts wearing a particular political cap) advice on foreign affairs.

Moreover, adopting some grassroots approaches to public diplomacy (Payne, 2009) will help our international relations to be pro-people. By doing so, public trust in leadership may be fostered and "the lost morality in Nepali politics can be revived and rejuvenated" (Dhakal, 2020, p. 7). Veritably, this is an idea of sociological public diplomacy which calls for "direct interaction or people-to-people contact and necessitates governmental policy efforts to facilitate and protect freer and open interaction (e.g., visa or immigration regulation, monitoring and preventing xenophobia, nationalism, or ethnocentrism) among its citizens and individuals from foreign countries" (Vibber & Kim, 2015, p. 133). By revamping the traditional government-

oriented approaches to diplomacy, which are not as functional in today's world, we can make our foreign policy and international relations pro-people. It nonetheless is challenging given the context that "the contemporary public policymaking landscape in Nepal shows little citizens' participation" (Dhakal, 2019, p. 1). However, it is time for Nepal to set strategic priorities based on national interests and to do rigorous homework on identifying possible areas in which each nation with diplomatic relation can work closely with us. There are assortments of global diplomacy. What dimension is focused on each diplomatic relation needs to be considered: economy, health, environment, immigration, security, development. We might then have stronger cultural diplomacy with some countries, economic diplomacy with others and so on. As such, an integrated foreign policy document is the need of the hour.

Of late, the MoFA is said to have drafted a new foreign policy, and the government of Nepal has recently endorsed its new foreign policy (Onlinekhabar, 2020), but it has not yet been made public. However, the document seemed to have been "prepared in hush-hush, with little

public consultation” (Bhattarai, 2020b, para. 1). If it has addressed the issues raised in the National Policy Dialogue and integrated experts’ advice, hopefully, it may resolve Nepal’s foreign policy dilemmas. However, whether and how it will be implemented remains a big question.

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Editor Biosketch

Rebat Kumar Dhakal is an independent researcher, editor and writer. He is also the Managing Editor of the *Journal of Education and Research*, a biannual peer-reviewed publication of the School of Education, Kathmandu University. He has lectured and conducted workshops widely on aspects of academic writing, publishing, and communication. He has published several scholarly articles on teacher education, educational technology, school governance, and policymaking. He has written, edited or contributed to more than 30 books and reports, including school level textbooks, proceedings and reports of international seminars, and national level research consultancy reports. He researches, writes and speaks about educational leadership, transformative education, inclusive governance, and evidence-informed policymaking. He is a life member of International Forum of Researchers in Education (IFORE), and member of the International Society of Managing and Technical Editors (ISMTE).

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