

## Geopolitical Reflections of Sino-Indian Conflict and its Implication on Nepal's Survival Strategy

Gaurav Bhattarai

### Abstract

*Border disputes between China and India in June 2020 almost lead South Asian countries to take a side. But, Nepal, situated between India and China, has always expressed a stern belief in neutrality and non-alignment. Even though New Delhi doubted Nepal's neutrality and non-alignment citing China's growing footprints in Nepal, Kathmandu reckoned such suspicion as the result of a new map row between two countries connected by open borders. While Nepal's repeated calls to diplomatically resolve India-Nepal border problems remained unheeded by New Delhi, it provided room for the ruling communist party in Nepal to reap geopolitical benefits out of the Sino-Indian dispute. But, interestingly, such geopolitical benefits are usually targeted in tempering Indian influence in Nepal, by getting closer with China. Apprehending the same, this study aims to assess the geopolitical implication of Sino-Indian conflict on the survival strategy of Nepal. To fulfill the same objectives, the Chinese perception of Nepal-India relations, and Indian perception of Sino-Nepal ties have been critically assessed in this study. This study is methodologically based on the information collected from the secondary sources. In order to critically evaluate*

*the geopolitical expression of Sino-Indian conflict in Nepal, this study reviews India's perception of Nepal-China relations, and China's perception of Nepal-India relations. Also, the reports and the press releases of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, historical facts, treaties, government reports and decisions have been studied and analyzed. Media sources are also reviewed to understand the diverse narratives produced on the geopolitical reflection of Sino-Indian conflict. The themes that emerged from the reviews are thematically analyzed and interpreted, to discover that cultivating relations with one country at the expense of the other may be counterproductive to Nepal's survival strategies.*

**Keywords:** Geopolitical Reflection, Nepal, Sino-Indian Conflict, Survival Strategy

### Introduction

In June 2020, the border skirmishes between China and India almost generated an obligatory environment for the South Asian countries to take a side (Zheng, 2020). Although Nepal's foreign policy has been driven by unyielding belief in non-alignment and neutrality (Ghimire, 2020), India mistrusted Nepal's neutrality alluding China's growing interest in Nepal (Gupta,

2020). But, Kathmandu deemed such mistrust as the upshot of a new map row between two countries linked by the open borders (The Times of India, 2020). Also, Nepal's recurrent calls to diplomatically resolve India-Nepal border problems (Republica, 2020) are overlooked by New Delhi. Thus, the geopolitical reflections on Sino-India conflict in Nepal, today, concentrates on how India's reluctance has provided space for the ruling communist party in Nepal to reap geopolitical benefits out of the Sino-Indian dispute (Giri, 2020a). Remarkably, by getting closer with China, such geo-political benefits are mostly targeted in mitigating Indian influence in Nepal. Nepal's endeavors for trade diversification, along with the rail projects with China, were also the result of burgeoning discomfort with New Delhi (Sangraula, 2019). Such geopolitical reflections emanating from the Sino-India dispute is not a new phenomenon in Nepal, however. In 1962, when India and China went to war, there were comments in the press arguing that the war was to Nepal's advantage. Although Nepal remained uninvolved, Nepal's neutrality was disparaged in the Indian media as anti-Indian and pro-Chinese (Khanal, 2000, p. iii). Still, Nepal has always been balancing both the neighbors with its foreign policy of neutrality, non-alignment and equidistance, which are also understood as the survival strategies of the small states in dealing with the anarchic international system. But, with the Sino-Indian conflict, and its inescapable geopolitical implications, often such strategies have to undergo a severe trial. Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate how the geopolitical upshots of Sino-Indian Conflict have impacted Nepal's survival strategy.

The survival strategy of Nepal shouldn't be merely understood as a geo-political ambition directing the country's foreign policy, while the two neighbors are engaged in conflict. Lack of meticulous diplomacy from Nepal's side may also generate misperception in the psyche of neighbors. When a virtual meeting between the communist parties of Nepal and China was organized by Nepal Communist Party's (NCP) School Department on June 19, 2020, Indian media cynically interpreted Nepal's healthy bilateral ties with China as anti-Indian. Actually, two communist parties had the virtual meeting while the bilateral relations between India and China had worsened because of border skirmishes and scuffles leading to a violent clash along the disputed border in Ladakh. The virtual meeting coincided with re-ignition of Nepal-India border disputes, which not only made India cast doubt over Nepal's neutrality, but also provided an apt opportunity for Indian media to endorse the Indian army chief's remarks: "Nepal is acting on the behest of someone" (The Wire, 2020). Although the meeting was scheduled long before the clash between Indian and Chinese troops on June 15, 2020, the timing was not suitable. Such an avertible geopolitical ambitions drew widespread criticism, not only in New Delhi, but also in Kathmandu. Foreign policy experts and security analysts were heard posing the questions like: whether the Sino-Indian dispute merely boosts Nepal's geopolitical drive, or is it disastrous for countries like Nepal aspiring to bridge two economic giants. India's spectacular economic performance and China's unrivalled development has always given a hope of spillover effects to Nepal, whose search for economic prosperity is dependent on its transit diplomacy (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2018, pp. 75-96). But, quite often, the geopolitical dispute between India

and China prompts the spirit of geopolitical ambition in the leaderships of small states in South Asia, and as a result they take no less time to prioritize the interest of one nuclear-armed country against that of the other, mostly to protect their government back home, or at least to prolong their stay in power (Rose, 1971, pp. 177-207).

Because of the geographical proximity, and economic relations the two Asian giants have, the relationship between them is often labelled as one of the most ‘electrifying’ of this century. (Martin, 2015). But, there are certain similarities and unusual differences in the foreign policy behaviors of India and China, particularly in dealing with the small countries, like Nepal, whose position in international system is conditioned by either globalist, Indo-centric or isolationist approaches (Khatri, 1998, p. 12). Historically, Nepal has been balancing relations with its two immediate neighbors (Kissinger, 2014, p. 197), to maximize economic growth, and sustain balanced political stability with both the neighbors. Having adopted the Westphalian model, the two distinct civilizational entities have been reduced to geopolitical rivals, today. The communist system in China is depicted as a perpetual threat to India – the world’s largest democracy – and thus a rivalry is constituted. Sino-Indian rivalry has been a constant menace to the neighboring countries like Nepal, who have been aspiring to draw benefits from the spillover effects of the economic development in India and China, particularly by exercising transit diplomacy (KC & Bhattarai, 2018, pp. 75-96). Although India is perceived as a rising power, concomitantly, it has missed numerous opportunities to take its neighbors, including Nepal into confidence, and has failed to lead the South Asian region

(Ganguly, 2020). To Nepal, their competition for influence in South Asia remains a major source of insecurity. Thus, fueling any thoughts in quest of geopolitical ambitions may prove more hazardous. However, it doesn’t mean Nepal has to always continue with its conventional ‘survival’ strategy, which is driven either by the 18<sup>th</sup> century colonial narratives, or the cold-war narratives. But, most of the literature available to us, have either prioritized Nepal’s geostrategic location, or on the possibility for Nepal to derive economic benefits from the rise of India and China. Realizing the same research gap, this study aims to revisit the impact of the neighborhood policies of India and China on Nepal’s survival strategy and reflect on its relevance amidst the changing geopolitical dynamics in the region.

### Review of Literature

Available literatures prioritizing on Nepal’s geostrategic importance and Nepal’s survival strategy can be thematically assessed by classifying into two categories: A.) Geostrategic determinism (Dahal, 1998, pp. 25- 51); B.) Economic determinism (KC & Bhattarai, 2018, pp. 75-96). Geopolitically, Nepal’s destiny is linked to the destiny of its two immediate neighbors. Both the countries are equally important for Nepal to enhance its economic performance. As the geostrategic location between India and China is a principal concern for Nepal’s security and stability (Bhattarai, 2005, pp. 25-31), the most challenging job for Nepal is to maintain equidistance relations with both the immediate neighbors. Exercising the foreign policy of equidistance is beneficial economically and geopolitically, for Nepal’s survival strategy too (Schmidt & Thapa, 2012, p .11).

From the perspective of economic determinism, however, India's enormous economic performance and China's unsurpassable development has always given a hope of spillover effects to Nepal (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2018, pp. 75-96). Nepal's search for prosperity can be reinforced with transit diplomacy (ibid). But, there are instances of Sino-India conflict promoting the geopolitical ambition in the leaderships of small states in South Asia, whereby they take no less time to prioritize the interest of one country against that of the other, usually to defend their regime, or to protect their government back home (Sharan, 2017, pp. 157-166 & Nayak, 2014, p. 102). Also, small countries like Nepal are fearful of being trapped in the great power rivalry. In the early 70s, China was largely provoked when the Tibetan Khampa fighters in Nepal had received financial support from the United States (Adhikari, 2012). Recently, following the death of 20 Indian soldiers in the most recent skirmish (BBC, 2020a & Gettleman et.al), Nepal's security threat burgeoned (Giri, 2020b), which was clearly visible in the press statement issued by Nepal on 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2020 stating that the two neighboring countries need to resolve in their dispute through "peaceful means in favor of bilateral, regional and world peace and stability" (MoFA, 2020). It discerningly impacted Nepal's survival strategy. Although China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Indian national security adviser Ajit Doval expressed their commitments to disengage their troops along the Line of Actual Control (Hindustan Times, 2020b), a future escalation cannot be ruled out. Indeed, just before the Galwan crisis, China and India had decided to strengthen the spirit of 'positive consensus' through effective military and diplomatic communications (Aljazeera, 2020) – still the tragedy befell.

From the perspective of geo-strategic determinism, Gurkha recruitment in Indian army has further complicated Nepal's survival strategy. At present, over 30,000 Nepali Gurkha soldiers are serving in Indian army (Nepali Times, 2020), and most of them are deployed along the Sino-Indian borders. If India alludes to growing Chinese presence in Nepal, while doubting Nepal's neutrality, China surely finds Gurkha recruitment going against Nepal's refusal to take sides. While the Sino-Indian rivalry has the elements of conflict, cooperation and competition, exploiting Machiavellian benefits out of the rivalry might not favor Nepal's equidistant foreign policy. Upon this realization, Nepal has proposed a trilateral partnership (Giri, 2016). Thus, Nepal anticipates New Delhi and Beijing to renegotiate their perceptions about each other. Although the Xi-Modi Wuhan meeting of 2018 aimed to stabilize relations between India and China, their relations today are clearly stirred by border problems and competition for regional supremacy and global influence. Nepal itself views Sino-Indian ties in three different ways. Firstly, as geopolitical rivals. Secondly, as economic giants. Thirdly, as two distinct civilizational entities. Thus, the Sino-Indian dispute for Nepal shouldn't just mean an opportunity to boost its geopolitical ambitions as, owing to Nepal's geostrategic location, cultivating relations with one country at the expense of the other may be counterproductive to the *raison d'être* of Nepal's survival capability (Dahal, 1998, pp. 25-51).

But, most of the available literatures on the foreign policy of India and China towards Nepal have dealt on the issues of security, economics, trade and investment. The implication of their foreign policies on Nepal, have been studied from the perspective of

dependency theory in political economy, and geo-strategy in strategic studies. The study of the impact of their foreign policy on Nepal's survival strategy, however, will be a new attempt, as this study concurrently aims to unveil the relevancy and appropriateness of Nepal's survival strategy in today's world. Also, it has been realized that there is a dearth of literature on how survival strategy has aggravated Nepal's small state syndrome. Equally, there is a need to introduce a new discourse on how Nepal should go beyond the conventional cliché of survival strategy and reap the benefits out of the effective engagement in the international organizations, regional bodies and sub-regional entities. Upon the same realization, this study calls for further enriching the epistemological literature on Nepal's equidistance, neutrality and non-alignment, by assessing their importance while going beyond survival strategy.

### Methodology

This study follows qualitative research design. The philosophic ground of the study is pragmatic worldview trading on the interpretivist epistemological position. The research approach is deductive. The reports and the press releases of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal and China, and External Affairs Ministry of India, historical facts, treaties, government reports and decisions are studied and analyzed. Reports published by the prominent think tanks conducting their research on Sino-India relations are studied. Media sources are reviewed to understand the diverse narratives produced on the geopolitical reflection of Sino-Indian conflict. The themes that emerged from the reviews are thematically analyzed and interpreted.

### Discussion and Analysis

Nepal's foreign policy of neutrality and non-alignment in dealing with Sino-Indian disputes is understood by the foreign policy experts as Nepal's survival strategy. But, when China and India get closer, "will Nepal be uncomfortable for losing its strategic space"? (Muni, 2016, p. 8). While Sino-Indian rivalry is a constant threat to the neighborhood. Beyond the neighborhood, however, the Sino-Indian rivalry is strategically advantageous to the United States. It proliferates U.S assertiveness in the region as India and China may lose their image as responsible powers. Even though India is lured to the US-led Indo Pacific Strategy, New Delhi is not comfortable with U.S. assertiveness in its backyard (Hindustan Times, 2020a). China, too, has never been comfortable with the U.S engagement in the South Asian region. For China, which has left no stone unturned to lure the South Asian countries towards its Belt and Road Initiative projects, U.S. assertiveness in South Asia will be perilous. When U.S. President Trump tweeted, "United States is willing and able to mediate or arbitrate their raging border dispute," (Chiacu & Miglani, 2020), both the disputing parties rejected the offer. But, India and China claim that they can resolve the dispute on their own (Laskar & Patranobis, 2020), pointing to the Doklam crisis in 2017 which was resolved bilaterally. Zhao Lijian, the director of the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman responded that no third party 'intervention' is required (Krishnan, 2020). The Indian external affairs ministry also stated that India was directly communicating with China through established mechanisms (Laskar & Patranobis, 2020). But the 2+2 talks between US and India indicate India's interest to take help of the United States in

containing China (BBC 2020b; Nichols & Miglani, 2020). It may not only alter the balance of power in the South Asian region, but also has a significant impact on the survival strategies of the small countries like Nepal, as with 2+2 the U.S. aims to understand and assess the regional politics from the eyes of New Delhi. Although Nepal's strategy, at present, has been to await New Delhi and Beijing renegotiate their perceptions about each other, but India perception of Nepal-China ties has been more influenced by its Himalayan frontier theory that deems China as an existential threat (Bhattarai, 2020a). Consequently, Nepal's survival strategies of neutrality, non-alignment and equi-distance have been suspected by New Delhi.

### **India's Perception of Nepal-China Relations**

Until modern India was established in 1947, the bilateral relations between Nepal and China remained largely unharmed, notwithstanding the sporadic presence of British India and Tibet as the critical factors influencing China-Nepal relations during the period of colonialism (Bhattarai, 2020a). But, subsequent to the Indian independence and Tibet being an integral part of China, in the South Asian postcolonial setting, the bilateral relations between Nepal and China have passed through different geopolitical realities. Not only because Tibet was no longer between them, but chiefly because of the emergence of an independent India, which since its independence has perceived Communist China as an existential threat (ibid).

Today also, the Indian perception of China-Nepal relations sustains the same existential threat perception, and because of the same, New Delhi tries its best in preventing Nepal's

attempts to get closer to Beijing (ibid). Thus, every move Nepal makes towards China is prompted by New Delhi. Firstly, India attempts to limit Nepal's engagement with China to shape Nepal-China ties in its favor. Secondly, by exercising interventionist policies in the neighborhood, India herself has pushed Nepal closer to China, which has shaped Nepal-China ties, not in its favor however (Bhattarai, 2020a). When India announced the new route to Kailash Mansarovar in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, via the Lipulekh Pass, Kathmandu impatiently waited for Beijing's response (The Kathmandu Post, 2020). Actually, Nepal was aware of the fact how the two nuclear powers had agreed, without Kathmandu's consent in 2015 to use the Lipulekh pass, which territorially belongs to Nepal, for trade and pilgrimage (The Economic Times, 2015). Only two weeks after India's inauguration of the new route, Chinese foreign ministry remarked India's announcement of the new road in the trilateral junction, as the unilateral action (The Kathmandu Post, 2020). In those two weeks, Nepal unveiled a new map indicating Limpiyadhura, not Lipulekh as the trilateral junction (The Himalayan Times, 2020). But the Chinese foreign ministry didn't make it clear whether Beijing recognizes Lipulekh as the trilateral border point or accepts Nepal's claim of Limpiyadhura (Bhattarai, 2020a). Meanwhile, India's response was superficially hostile, reiterating its claim that Lipulekh is Indian territory, and drawing references from a new map that India published in November 2019 that included Nepali territory within India's borders (ibid). New Delhi thus not only expressed its reservations over Nepal's new map, but also erroneously hauled China into the Nepal-India border disputes: Indian news channels indiscriminately — yet in a

hilarious manner — held China responsible for Nepal’s issuance of its new map, which was actually not the case; China in fact has always wanted Nepal to maintain good relations with India. But the Nepali public was astonished to see that India, which shares many affinities with Nepal, hasn’t actually understood the Himalayan country. Most probably, this was due to India perceiving Nepal as a security threat emanating from Beijing (ibid).

India has shaped Nepal-China relations in different ways. India’s hegemonic ambitions, its asymmetrical relations with Nepal, and intermittent use of coercion has actually pushed Nepal closer to China. (Ganguly & Brandon, 2015) Principally, a regional power is anticipated to project a sense of accountability towards the region, but the post-colonial India has apparently chose hegemonic ambitions in dealing with its neighborhood (Bhasain, n.d.). As a result, most of the South Asian countries have been obliged to get closer to China. Use of coercive measures including blockades has compelled landlocked Nepal to creep towards China (Bhattarai, 2020a; Ganguly & Brandon, 2015). Whenever other countries or international organizations eye their considerable presence in the Himalayan country, it has always made India anxious. But, it’s not an approach introduced by democratic India itself. Rather, India’s foreign policy towards Nepal has a colonial legacy (Thakur, 2014, pp. 58-64). With the treaty of Sugauli in 1816, the British East India Company restricted Nepal’s strategic and economic relations with other European countries and the United States (Bhattarai, 2020a). But following the establishment of Communist China in 1949 and its incorporation of Tibet in 1951, New Delhi

rejuvenated the colonizers’ security doctrine for Nepal because it saw its neighbor in the northern Himalayas, bordering China, as part of its defense. The 1950 treaty of peace and friendship between Nepal and India was the upshot of India’s “Communist China scare” (ibid).

The treaty, for Nepal, is unequal and has demanded serious revisions (Thapliyal, 2012). New Delhi had signed the treaty with the authoritarian Rana regime in Nepal, against which the people had fought to introduce a democratic system in 1950. With the help of the same treaty, India even attempted to limit Nepal’s independent foreign policy, particularly its relations with China. Although the treaty did not specify a role for India in Nepal’s foreign affairs, New Delhi used the treaty to ensure that while maintaining relations with China, Nepal did not overlook India’s security concerns (Bhattarai, 2020a). For instance, Nepal was required to consult with New Delhi prior to purchasing arms from any country other than India (Subedi, 1994). As late as 1989, when King Birendra considered purchasing arms from Beijing, India imposed a blockade on Nepal (IFA, 2013, p. 8).

Today, India perceives that Nepal’s closer relation with China has aggravated the ‘special’ relations between Nepal and India (Singh & Behal, 2020). Indian Nepal experts are often heard touting Nepal-India relations as “special.” But, Nepalis often wonder what makes it so special: blockades and interference (Bhattarai, 2020a). In reality, the idea of “special relations” is a strategic approach that India undertook predominantly to limit Nepal’s relations with China (ibid). Entering into a special relationship routinely overrides other kinds of bilateral relations. Realizing this, King Mahendra in the 1960s

inaugurated relationships based on equality over special status, by going beyond the immediate neighborhood and introducing Nepal to the comity of nations (ibid). While a relationship based on equality relies on the process of treating all bilateral relations as equal, a special relationship favors one over the other. In the name of open borders, cultural affinity and people-to-people relations, India always wanted Nepal to favor it over China. But King Mahendra's increasing closeness with the United States not only caused the Chinese leadership to raise an eyebrow, it also obliged Beijing to share with New Delhi the evidence of Nepal's budding intimacy with the US (ibid). While King Mahendra received a warm welcome in the US from President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967, this was sure to incite the Cold War anxieties of Nepal's immediate neighbors (The New York Times, 1967). Still, the Chinese act of sharing information not only indicated that Beijing valued Indian interests in the region, but also reflected China's firm desire to contain the US in Asia. Upon learning that King Mahendra had a heart attack in 1968 while hunting in Terai, President Johnson sent a physician to assist the treatment of the king. Throughout his rule, King Mahendra, who died in 1972, successfully managed to thwart India's attempt to limit Nepal's relations with China by adroitly balancing Kathmandu's relations with New Delhi and Beijing (Bhattarai, 2020a).

The political socialization of Nepal's leaders in India (Thapaliya, 2019, pp. 142-161) is a predominant factor in the way India perceives Nepal's relations with China (Bhattarai, 2020a). Had the first generation of leaders been educated and socialized in the West, things might have been different. But leaders from Nepal not only actively supported the

Indian independence movement; they also drew support from New Delhi to topple the authoritarian Rana regime in 1950. Almost all the mainstream political parties that Nepal has today, from Communist to Congress, Maoist to Madhesh-based, had their political schooling in India (Bashyal, 2016, pp. 31-44 & Bhattarai, 2020a). But it is quite surprising to hear Indian TV channels imprudently stating that the ruling Communist Party in Nepal has always been closer to China, and is often scheming against New Delhi. Is this a new China scare? (Bhattarai, 2020a) It shouldn't have taken much time for Indian journalists to understand that India's actions are actually pushing Nepal closer to China. For instance, in 2016, Kathmandu signed a transit and transportation agreement with Beijing that provided Nepal with access to the port of Tianjin in China. Previously, Nepal had access only to the Calcutta and Visakhapatnam ports in India. The agreement was the consequence of India's unnecessary attempt to dilute Nepal's sovereign right to promulgate its new constitution, followed by the imposition of a harsh blockade on Nepal in 2015. This is how India has shaped China-Nepal relations: the China scare obliged India to take Nepal into its confidence, but colonial policy remnants eventually made Nepal seek refuge with China (ibid).

Although India perceives Nepal-China relations through the securitization of its foreign policy, the Gujral Doctrine, a set of principles guiding India's foreign relations with its neighbors (Murthy, 2008), offered a different approach toward Nepal (Bhattarai, 2020a). Espoused by former Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral in 1996, the doctrine believed India should not use its power to demand reciprocity from smaller neighbors (Murthy, 2008). Thus, Nepal

was free to pursue an independent foreign policy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "neighborhood first" policy initially echoed the spirit of the Gujral Doctrine. But with the subsequent adoption of the neo-Kautilayan approach by Modi, suspicion over Nepal's ties with China grew. Nepal's entry into the China-led Belt and Road and Initiative (BRI) is an apt example and is perceived by India as hostile. India continues to disparage China-Nepal ties openly (Bhattarai, 2020a). Surprisingly, even Nepal's sovereign acts are being seen by New Delhi as Chinese covert actions against India. In October 2019, China pledged to provide 150 million renminbi in military aid to the Nepal Army, predictably ringing alarm bells in New Delhi (ibid).

But no Nepali expected that the unveiling of a new map by Kathmandu would be described by Indian defense officials as an act to fulfil Chinese interests on the Nepal-India border. Most possibly, Indian Army Chief General M.M. Naravane's statement that Nepal "might have raised this problem" (referring to its new map that includes Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura) "at the behest of someone else" (The Wire, 2020) illustrates the new China scare in India. His remarks came at a time when China and India were experiencing border tensions in the mountainous areas of Ladhak and Naku-La. Still, it was hardly expected that the world's largest democracy would authorize its army chief to make unsuitable remarks about bilateral relations (Bhattarai, 2020a). General Naravane's hypothetical observations, once made, quickly stimulated India's commercial TV news channels to portray Nepal-China relations in an abusive manner. Even though they are private channels, Nepal and possibly China might reasonably wonder to what extent the Indian media reflects the perceptions of

the Indian establishment. Given that the news media, whether private or state-owned, can influence public perceptions, the airing of unsubstantiated details and cockeyed analysis can contribute to a negative public image about Nepal and China. It may be startling for the Indian news channels to know that while they were broadcasting misleading reports portraying Nepal's new map as a covert act directed by China against India, Kathmandu was waiting for Beijing's response over the Lipulekh Pass (ibid). It was because the Nepali public suspected that India's construction of a new road to Mansarovar was probably the upshot of a 2015 quid pro quo between New Delhi and Beijing over the Lipulekh pass.

### **China's Perception of Nepal-India Relations**

China has always advised Nepal to maintain a healthy relation with the latter's southern neighbor (Giri, 2017) India, despite the unhidden reality that New Delhi tries to prevent every move made by Kathmandu to creep closer to Beijing (Bhattarai, 2020a). However, it appears as a mystery for the Nepali folks why China provides counsel to Nepal in that line. Mainstream experts and newspaper reports have surmised that China doesn't want to endanger its relations with India over Nepal. Equally, it is a matter of perception that itself occupies an important place in international relations. How does China perceive Nepal-India relations then? Quite explicable that Beijing reckons Nepal-India relation as more cultural and civilizational one driven by people-to-people ties, in comparison to Nepal-China relations that is significantly driven by the interests of the two states (Bhattarai & Ali, 2020). For Nepalese folks, it's not difficult to infer India's covert intentions than to merely observe the latter's overt behaviors. But, historically,

Nepalese have got very few instances to get acquainted with the Chinese mind (Baral, 2020). Thus, hitherto, they have been able to observe only the overt behavior of Chinese. They have not been able to painstakingly understand how China actually thinks, when it comes to Nepal and Nepal-India relations, in particular (Bhattarai, 2020b).

India considers South Asia as its traditional sphere of influence. However, with the alarming Chinese presence in South Asia through investment and aids, India's claim over its traditional sphere of influence has definitely shrunk (Ghoshal, 2010 & Bhattarai, 2020b). But such aids and investments are the overt behaviors. What covert motives trigger such overt actions? The covert intent is, probably, not only limited to downsizing Indian influence in the region, because there are some rare occasions where both nuclear powers haven't contested over the claims, rather collaborated. India's recent announcement of the route to Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage via Lipulekh pass of Nepal is the result of the same kind of quid-pro-quo India-China relationship. In 2015, when Nepal was hectically engaged in post-earthquake relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction, India and China, without Nepal's consent, decided to use Lipulekh of Nepal as a trading point. The quid-pro-quo agreement between India and China not only stirred the controversy in Nepal, but also raised questions about the intention of its two immediate neighbors (The Economic Times, 2015). Besides anti-Indian sentiments, the public in Nepal wonders how Beijing agreed with New Delhi to use this route given that China's image has always been friendly and welcoming in Nepal (Bhattarai, 2020b). Actually, it's reported that Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Indian President

Narendra Modi have agreed on Lipulekh corridor without Nepal's consent. The 41-point agreement signed on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015 between China and India called for "enhancing border areas cooperation through border trade, pilgrimage...and expand border trade at Nathu La and Qiangla/Lipulekh Pass and Shipka La"( MEA, 2015). With India's announcement of the new route for Kailash Mansarovar, which lies in Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, most of the people in Nepal eagerly waited for China's response over the same. And, only after two weeks of the announcement of the new route, Chinese foreign ministry diplomatically stated that no unilateral action should be done at the trilateral junction. But, Lipulekh is not a trilateral junction. Actually, Limpiyadhura, the north-western corner of Nepal, is a trilateral junction, and Lipulekh territorially belongs to Nepal under an 1816 treaty with the British East India Company. Already, Nepal has published a new map including its territory up to Limpiyadhura, against which India has reservations. Unlike China's, deciphering India's motives and intention is not difficult for Nepal, however. Amidst the spread of pandemic, while Nepal has closed its land borders with India and China, it is startling to see that New Delhi has inaugurated a new route for Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage via Lipulekh pass that belongs to Nepal (Bhattarai, 2020b).

What made the route strategic is that its inauguration wasn't done by the Ministry of Road Transportation and Highways, but by the defense minister himself (The Print, 2020). Having stationed Indian troops in Nepali land since the 1960s, Indian strategic interest in Nepal exactly dates back to 1950, when Indian leadership revived the colonial posture, perceiving Himalayas as

the source of defense (Cowan, 2014). It was on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1950 Prime Minister Nehru stated in the Indian Parliament that “from time immemorial, the Himalayas have provided us with a magnificent frontier... we cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also the principal barrier to India”. Construction of the Indian road linking Uttarakhand’s Pithoragarh with Kailash Mansarovar via the Lipulekh echoes the same geographical determinism of India’s security interests in Nepal, though the route is ostensibly identified by India as a pilgrimage route, “*Kailash Mansarovar Yatra*”. And it is not a mere coincidence that India decided to announce the opening of the new route in the middle of the lockdown while no pilgrim will be able to travel to Kailash Mansarovar, at least in the foreseeable future( Bhattarai, 2020b ).

But, how does China perceive India’s frontier theory vis-à-vis Nepal? During the Cold War, China used to perceive the Himalayan frontier as the obsolete bourgeois pleas for imperialist control. When Araniko highway was being built linking the capital of Nepal with the Chinese borders, Chairman Mao had commented that “once these roads are opened, India may be a bit more respectable towards you” (Upadhyaya, 2012). However, today, accepting India’s new route to Kailash Mansarovar through Lipulekh not only adulterates Nepal’s claim over Lipulekh, but also severely exposes the limitation of small states like Nepal (Bhattarai, 2020b).

Now the trade volume between India and China has significantly increased, and they are eying for all-weather trading route to further expand their bilateral trade via land. Although the two countries share a 3,488km land border, the Nathula Pass is the only functioning trade route between them. Even

the Nathula Pass is not a year-round route. In fact, the pass was closed since the 1962 India-China war before it was reopened only in 2006 (Bhattarai, 2017). Hence, Lipulekh comes as the best alternative to the Nathula pass to increase their trade and connectivity via land. It’s also notable that the year of 2015 wasn’t the first time when the both Asian giants agreed upon the Lipulekh route, which territorially belongs to Nepal. Here, ‘historical amnesia’ of Nepal should be condemned. In 1954, India and China had agreed to permit Indian Mansarovar pilgrims to use the Lipulekh Pass for the first time. Even in 1999 during Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh’s visit to Beijing, in 2005 when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Delhi, and in 2014 when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited India, both countries discussed the issue of using Lipulekh route for trade and pilgrimage (Dixit, 2020). It clearly indicates that India and China do not have divergent views on Nepal’s claim to Lipulekh. But Nepalese folks shall wonder here why China is planning to extend the Qinghai-Tibet railway to Nepal’s border with India as New Delhi and Beijing have jointly decided to use Lipulekh pass as trade corridor (Bhattarai, 2020b).

While Nepal was waiting for China’s response on India’s construction of road in Nepal’s territory, it was reported that Indian and Chinese soldiers were injured in a cross-border clash during a face-off at a remote crossing point near Tibet. Once again, it made Nepalese folks wonder about Sino-Indian relation (ibid) which has the elements of conflict, cooperation and competition (Indurthy, 2016). Whenever Nepalese folks see China and India cooperate on the one side of Tibetan Autonomous Region, and confront on the other side of TAR, they are wondering

how China actually thinks (Bhattarai, 2020b).

Kathmandu has always looked up to Beijing, whenever Delhi attempts to dilute Nepal's sovereign right as a modern state (ibid). When Nepal promulgated its new constitution in 2015, China welcomed it unconditionally, whereas India greeted the statute with a blockade that eventually obliged Nepal to sign the Transit and Transportation agreement with Beijing in 2016 which provided Kathmandu access to Chinese port of Tianjin. Today, Nepal has access to seven Chinese seaports and dry ports, and Beijing has become a significant player in Nepali politics and economy. But despite being a close and friendly neighbor, Nepal isn't even sure whether China would respect its territorial integrity or not. Actually, Kathmandu's lack of surety is undeniably prompted by its recurrent failures in grasping how China actually thinks (ibid) In 2015, Nepal could have understood what China really thought when the latter paid no heed to the former's call over Lipulekh. Also, Nepal could have diplomatically lobbied after 2015, brushing aside the small state syndrome, and demanding Beijing not to ink further agreements over Lipulekh.

### Conclusion

By using a qualitative method, the article tried to illustrate the geopolitical impacts of Sino-Indian rivalry on Nepal's survival strategies. Geopolitical impacts have been discussed from the perspective of perception: how India perceives Nepal-China ties and how China views Nepal-India ties. Although Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi endeavored variously to stabilize the bilateral relations between India and China, their relations today are driven by border problems and

competition for regional supremacy and global influence that have also impacted Nepal's survival strategies impelled by Nepal's foreign policies of neutrality, non-alignment and equidistance. But, Nepal doesn't view Sino-Indian relations only as geopolitical rivals, but also as economic giants, and two distinct civilizational entities, and eventually apprehends Sino-Indian dispute not just as an opportunity to boost its geopolitical ambitions. Because, cultivating relations with one country at the expense of the other may be counterproductive to Nepal's survival strategies. The same realization has motivated Nepal to exercise a 'transit diplomacy,' so that the Himalaya country could benefit from the spectacular economic development achieved by the two neighbors.

Also this study has emphasized on rise with responsibilities. With the rise of India and China economically, their responsibilities towards the immediate neighbors have also increased. Thus, while a new world order is emerging, Nepal has new aspirations, and it seeks its neighbors' support to realize them effectively. Hence, to go beyond the conventional survival strategies, the new foreign policy has already directed the Nepali state in maintaining its relations with neighbors, regional powers and great powers on the basis of sovereign equality, mutual respect and mutual benefits. While maintaining such relations, Nepal aims to evade all the geopolitical implications, as friendship with all and enmity with none, has been the core principle of Nepal's foreign policy, and is relevant too, in going beyond the conventional survival strategies.

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