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Geopolitics and National Security of Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal's strategic position between two aspiring world powers, China and India, has made her a fulcrum of geopolitical competition, often shaping the national security landscape. Additionally, landlocked status and closeness to these aspiring world powers add layers of complexity, as we must navigate the juxtaposing ideologies, power dynamics, and security interests. Notwithstanding, Nepal endeavors for non-alignment; recent developments in Nepal's political, economic, and security apparatus with the increased competition among the global powers are significant enough to create both challenges as well as opportunities. In this article, there is a review of work and develop a sound pathway to improve our understanding and foreign policy approach while examining patterns of geopolitical competition, security threats, and potential benefits, utilizing an interpretivist approach that includes case studies. This research contributes insights into the unique security challenges Nepal faces and offers strategic recommendations that may support more comprehensive policymaking. Rather than comparing Nepal with others with similar geopolitical apparatus, The focus is on the geopolitics and national security issues of Nepal. This study implements an interpretivist lens to delve into the multifaceted relationship between national security and geopolitics. By analyzing diverse secondary sources, including scholarly articles and online newspapers, through qualitative content analysis, this research aims to uncover the subjective interpretations and contextual nuances that underpin this dynamic field.

Keywords: Power dynamics, geography, geopolitics, strategy, global, national security

Introduction

As neighboring countries realize greater relative power capabilities, their desire for influence becomes inevitable, often altering the power dynamics of the specific region. This rivalry, especially when driven by ambitions for dominance, can have consequences for the nation in proximity. The political, economic, and social cohesion of the small state can be significantly impacted. Plausibly, the geopolitical landscape of the globalized world is akin to a continually

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changing river, with shifting power dynamics affecting the surrounding nations, in much the same way as a river's flow can erode or deposit sediment. In this context, recent rising activities of neighboring countries and other global powers with their own strategic interests have been influencing the geopolitical landscape of small states in significant ways.

Nepal's geostrategic challenges are rather unique in the world, as it is located between two of the largest and rising powers (Subedi, 2010). Moreover, as it occupies a critical square on the Asian geopolitical chessboard, bordered to the north and south by nuclear-armed China and India, it often struggles with the weight of their juxtaposing ideologies and power structures. Furthermore, landlocked status adds another layer of complication to its security anxieties. If we can understand how states, residing in proximity to rising powers, have been impacted by the policies of other nations, we may have a better understanding of why small state nations have been in a dire situation to effectively address the problem of geopolitics and national security issues.

The findings of this article contribute to a central understanding of Nepal's distinctive national security challenges and provide insights into plausible strategies for navigating the complexities of its geopolitical security environment. Moreover, this article uses interpretivist methods to explore the prominence of geopolitics and its consequences on national security.

Conceptual Framework

This article deals with a multi-faceted approach, embracing Neorealist theories; structure-centric, balance of power, and geopolitical analyses of setting and proximity with the aspiring global powers. By investigating how these factors interact within Nepal's typical geopolitical setting, characterized by landlocked status, proximity to nuclear-armed neighbors, and the constantly evolving global power dynamics. With this in mind, this article attempts to highlight the impact of geopolitics in the realm of International Relations.

Research Methodology

While preparing this paper, an interpretivist approach was incorporated to discover the interplay between national security and geopolitics, converging on the contextual and subjective meanings within this multifaceted domain. The research employs qualitative content analysis as the primary method, analyzing data from a range of secondary sources, including scholarly articles and online newspapers. By critically examining these texts, the study seeks to identify patterns, narratives, and perspectives that illuminate how geopolitical factors influence national security dynamics while enabling nuanced understanding of the topic, highlighting the importance of contextual interpretation in uncovering the intricate affiliation between geopolitics and security.

Data Analysis Method

For this article, content analysis was used to examine the content of interviews, opinions, research papers, journal articles, and narrative analysis was applied to narratives and stories around the research topic. Political leaders' statements, newspaper articles/reports, relevant articles and journals from the JSTOR website, published books, reliable online videos, and government's official websites were examined and analyzed.

National Security: Concept and Perspective

Realist scholars like Hans J. Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and John J. Mearsheimer consider the states as the principal actors in international relations. Realist theory assumes that states, as independent actors, fundamentally possess their own exclusive national interests and goals. But here's the catch: those goals come from the people living in the country, and everyone has different ideas. It's like trying to discuss the same topic with a bunch of people who all have different opinions - it can get messy! That's why it's significant to clearly outline what a country's national interest truly means. Otherwise, it's like everyone is screaming their own favorite flavor of ice cream and calling it the "national flavor." Therefore, a well-defined national security strategy is crucial for every state.

The concept of national security is one of the most confusing and value-laden terms in social science (Baldwin & Milner, 2019). According to Wagle (2010), a nation's approach to national security is guided by a complex interplay of historical experiences, enduring traditions, and the ever-changing concept of nationhood. As discussed in *National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol* (Wolfers, 1952), national security might be better understood by considering two aspects: the objective absence of threats to a nation's core values (like territory or political systems) and the subjective absence of fear regarding such threats. In this article, Wolfers, rather than proposing a rigid definition, emphasizes the complication of "national security" as a concept. He contends that its uncertainty can be a foremost drawback.

Meanwhile, there is no universally established definition of national security of any nation (Subedi, 2010). In this milieu, the study will adopt the definition of Nepal's National Security Policy (NSP) published in the year 2016. As defined in Nepal's National Security Policy-2016, "National security means complete safeguarding of a country in geographical, social, economic, and political perspectives." But in retrospect, our national security problem is that we haven't chosen the national security issues explicitly. The geographic explanation of world politics starts with Europe, and all geopolitical theories are founded on Europe's desire to expand its empire throughout the world. But Nepal was never colonized; thus, European expansion does not apply to Nepal (Khanal, 2022). What are our main referents: people, the state, or the other realm covering the broad spectrum like environmental security? Our source of knowledge on national security has been, by and large, influenced by the western approach and their understanding, mainly enshrined in the experiences of the Great War periods. In hindsight, the oversimplification of national security on various dimensions often diversified the national efforts in various sectors.

Geopolitics: Contemporary Realities

Daily, countless lives are tragically lost due to war, disasters, accidents, and preventable tragedies. This immense human cost raises a critical question: why do nations continue to dedicate huge resources to security, often at the expense of addressing these other pressing issues? The world's military expenditure rose for the ninth consecutive year to an all-time high of \$2443 billion (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024), which is almost 60 times larger than Nepal's GDP of 2023. This stark contrast demands our collective attention. War is more often the inevitable destiny of states. The geopolitical complexities and difficulties of a state always guide the relations between states.

The strategic competition of major powers can exacerbate internal conflicts within vulnerable states, hindering their chances of achieving stability. The current war in Yemen is a result of the failure of the political transition after the Arab Uprising in 2011 (Okbandrias, 2017). The case of Yemen exemplifies the destabilizing role of external intervention in a fragile state. Africa remains a geopolitical competition arena of China and the USA. Such dynamics, illustrating the interplay of power politics and geography, are evident in the case of Nepal, which finds itself between two major powers: China, a rising power, and India, another regional heavyweight, and the USA, a significant 'Third Neighbor.' As in the case of the continued development of the Third Neighbor policy, it is imperative for Mongolia's ability to hedge against a potential Russian threat (Rinna, 2015), which is crucial for their survival as well. The current geopolitical competition amongst major powers plays out differently in Nepal's strategic environment compared to other regions.

As always, geopolitics plays a crucial role in shaping a nation's strategic choices. In this context, the most important factor constraining a war between Iran and Israel is distance. The two countries do not share a border. At their closest points, they are 750 miles apart. Central Israel is almost 1,000 miles away from Tehran (Pollack, 2024); geographical distance matters in international relations. Apparently, in Nepal's case, other global players have also had their own strong say in her politics, namely the United States, European Union, and Russia, and these may be in conflict with Delhi's or Beijing's intentions and strategies (Klodkowski, 2016). These actors engage in tactics using economic, military, and cultural tools to influence Nepal and align it with their interests. Nepal's strategic location makes it particularly vulnerable to the consequences of these shifting power dynamics, subsequently affecting its national security posture.

Furthermore, the Arthashastra has served as a manual of statecraft that influenced generations of Indian thinkers and politicians and constituted the political philosophy of the Mauryan Empire (Michael, 2013). Hence, the Arthashastra's emphasis on statecraft and the inherent threats posed by neighboring states has fostered a historical tendency to perceive immediate neighbors as potential adversaries. Such a thought process is likely to upset the traditional Nepal-India relations, as India is an emerging power. The ambitious aspirations and objectives of emerging powers tend to impact the mutual relations between nations. In this context, author Allison G. (2017), in his book "Thucydides Trap: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?" argues that fear and apprehension drive wars between established powers and rising ones. The historical analogy of the Peloponnesian War serves as a glaring reminder of the potential consequences that can arise from an unbalanced distribution of power within the international system. This underscores the importance of maintaining a semblance of equilibrium to stop the upsurge of major conflict. Hence, to accurately measure how great power rivalry impacts Nepal's national security, an analysis must consider Nepal's unique geopolitical settings and avoid generalizations.

Geopolitical Anxieties of Nepal

Each region of the globe possesses distinctive characteristics, shaped by its unique geographical features. Within this context, elements such as natural resources, demographic patterns, and climatic circumstances display particular qualities. These geographical and resource-specific

factors considerably impact a nation's potential and capabilities. Kaur (2010) discusses the Saptanga Theory of State in the context of Kautilya's political philosophy that a definite territory is a necessary element of the state. Subsequently, the varying capacities of nations give rise to typical international relations dynamics. Understanding these dynamics is critical in the framework of geopolitics, as the interplay between geography and resources underpins global power structures and diplomatic interactions.

As Mao Zedong (1937) said, external causes are the condition of change, and internal causes are the bases of change. External causes become operative through internal causes, just like that; Nepal's security threat is primarily internal. The country's geography is fragmented, with large rivers dividing it into distinct regions. Despite geographical proximity, the partition created by these rivers has naturally limited social integration for a long time. This kind of social and cultural divergence can be felt while traveling from east to west, especially across the Saptakoshi River. The constitution has made efforts to unite such a diverse society. However, the fundamental question remains whether Nepal can withstand the power struggles of these global powers. This, inevitably, led to a state of heightened geopolitical anxieties, characterized by contending interests and complex power dynamics. India and China, along with the USA, are key and dynamic geostrategic players. They are guided by their own interests (Bhattarai, 2022). To navigate this perplexing environment, a cohesive and resolute society is crucial. What saves us from all the external factors that restrain us from influencing our very societal fabrics will be our pragmatic foreign policy departure; certainly, the first step of doing this is stopping from shifting towards national egoism as a guiding principle of our foreign policy. As the future government of Nepal should understand that relations with neighboring countries should not be guided by ideology or emotion but should instead be based on pragmatic considerations (Khadka, 1992), still relevant and should be taken into consideration by political actors and policymakers.

Geopolitical Context and National Security

The concept of Westphalian sovereignty, with its emphasis on states retaining defined territories and exclusive authority within their borders, is a foundation of modern international relations. Within these borders lie a country's distinctive landscape and its geopolitical makeup. These landscapes—mountains, deserts, or plains—shape the needs of the people living there. Mountain communities might need help growing food (food security), while plains dwellers might need help with irrigation (water security). These different needs lead to distinct cultures and histories. Because of these varying needs, countries develop different forms of political systems to function effectively. In a nutshell, a country's location (geography) significantly influences how it's governed (politics), directly or indirectly. This concept is called human geography. Geopolitics is a component of human geography (Flint, 2022).

King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the 18th-century ruler of Gorkha, is said to have offered advice (Dibyaupadesh) emphasizing the strategic importance of Nepal's geographical location. He advised maintaining strong friendships with both China, the "emperor of the land," and the British, the "emperor of the sea," positioning Nepal like "a yam between two stones." This underpins Nepal's geopolitical vulnerability and applies universally to all nations. Between 2020 and 2023, Africa suffered an acute drought never seen before. Such environmental mishaps, aggravated by the conflict and hunger push nearly 30 million people at the risk of

starvation, a misery beyond menace. Additionally, a nation's geopolitical environment can exert a significant influence on its domestic political landscape, societal structures, and economic development. For four years, geopolitical competition between China, Russia, and the United States has thwarted any serious UN Security Council action on the wars in Sudan and Ethiopia (Carson et al., 2024).

Since, the world has never been structured to facilitate the survival of small states, and treating them as disposable has been the norm throughout most of recent history. It is hard to find an international boundary today that has not shifted in the last two centuries. States are born and disappear; great powers swell, shrink, and vanish (Menon, 2024). Puri, M.S. (2021) gives an idea by describing the map issued by Nepal in May 2020, by including the Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiydhura as the darkest red lines between two neighboring and friendly countries. Survival, therefore, has largely depended on the will and skill of small states themselves (Sarkissian, 2023). In a recent article titled "The End of South Asia: A Region in Name Only, Happymon Jacob (2024) argues that regional cohesion has been in limbo with the competition between major global powers. Hence, evidence from the past suggests that a nation rises through war and possibly falls through war as well. As noted in *People, States, and Fear* (Buzan, 1983), the national security problem lies at the root of war, and addressing it is a matter of acknowledged importance. Historical analysis validates that wars are not inevitable but rather triggered by specific circumstances and motivations.

Conclusion

Nepal, a nation cushioned between two rising global powers, China and India, faces a complex geopolitical landscape. As claimed by Halford Mackinder, the Heartland theory says that Eurasia is the center of gravity of the world, with which, remarkably, Nepal shares the border with those Eurasian nations or is in proximity at least. Such a plausible strategic location exposes Nepal to the influence, competition, and potential security threats emanating from its powerful neighbors and nations beyond the sea. The nation's landlocked status and diverse internal characteristics further complicate its security equation. Understanding how geopolitics shapes Nepal's national security is crucial for formulating effective policies to safeguard her innate interests.

More significantly, with the nuanced understanding of the geopolitics and national security dimension holistically, it can influence Nepal's internal security dynamics and foreign policy choices. Additionally, Nepal's internal social and geographic fragmentation poses potential security challenges in the days to come, certainly demanding a more rigorous and balanced foreign policy approach, obviously not based on emotions and egos. As a small state, Nepal has to deal with a plethora of issues that hamper the security of nations and her existence as a sovereign state. Notwithstanding the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, the return of rightist party leadership, artificial intelligence, and the rise of giant tech industrialists like Elon Musk as major players in the political sphere, during the research, I do not understand which elements of the geopolitics will be pervasive in the coming days and so on. Perhaps the time has come that we may need a new international theory to predict the outcome of the complexities of global systemic phenomena and their outcomes.

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