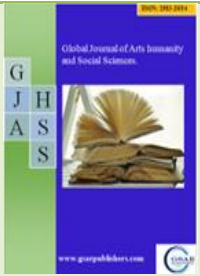
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The Geopolitics of Survival: Neorealism and Dependency in Nepalese Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The paper examines the external aspects of Nepalese politics within a nest of two powerful world neighbors, India and China, and one anti-neighbor, America. With multipolar rivalry growing, the party must explain that “buffer states” can protect themselves on their own. This study’s findings suggest the significance of probing into inner social inclusive processes, foreign interventions (MCC or BRI), and public stability with respect to governmental control over domestic governance. This study is grounded in a neorealist theoretical framework. This study is grounded in a neorealist theoretical framework. It uses qualitative methods and a process-tracing research design to analyze primary government documents and secondary geopolitical data systematically. Nepal is not cursed, but the fundamental limitation of its polity is that it still walks a tightrope around regulating external influence. It leads to institutional frailty and a “pendulum diplomacy. This paper argues that Nepal needs to focus on concessions externally, whilst consolidating unity from within and strengthening institutional resilience. Himalayan geopolitics is all about sovereign decision-making and sustainable democracy, the foundations of sovereignty in an age of dangerously kaleidoscopic global conflagrations.

Keywords: Himalayan geopolitics, infrastructure diplomacy, neorealism, pendulum diplomacy, strategic autonomy

Introduction

The politics of Nepal are a chronicle of enduring challenges faced by the small, landlocked state as it strives to secure its place in the rapidly reconfiguring international and regional balance of power. Nepal has longed for its independence and the ability to choose its own path, which is inextricably linked to its geography, which places it firmly between two Resurgent Asian powers, India to the south and China to the north. Globally, diverse relationships have made the country a theatre centered upon competing global interests, from rival aid to international alliances, which are also reflected in domestic dynamics, such as different power balances (Johny, 2024). The purpose of this article is to describe how these external influences have affected and, in many ways, determined the current Nepalese political landscape.

Literature Review: Small States and the Neorealist Buffer Logic

The analysis of Nepal’s external policymaking is primarily an exercise in survival as a buffer state. Kenneth Waltz, the progenitor of neorealist theory, implies that in a self-help anarchic international system, the structural distribution of power determines the behavior of smaller states (Goyal & Mam, 2024). At the Himalayan stage, this becomes a figure of speech as “yam stuck between two boulders,” in which India and the south by China hit the north. This has more recently been extended into a “triangular” pressure between the United States, particularly via the Indo-Pacific Strategy (Johny, 2024).

These economic limits of subsistence find a more specific application in dependency theory. Nepal is conceptualized as a subordinate or even an economic “periphery” inflected by regional “core” powers, into whose strategic interests the Nepalese reality often seems subordinated (Sonrexa, 2021). Previous research has



emphasized that, in the international arena, small states are frequently portrayed as reactive magnets for external forces. However, they can still exercise agency through what some call ‘institutional hedging’ or by using multilateralism to avoid relying solely on a single hegemon (Thapa, 2025). This research builds on this line of thinking by analyzing how infrastructure diplomacy now serves as a proxy for more traditional territorial competition through projects such as the BRI and MCC.

Background of the Study

The political situation in Nepal has been shaped by the transition from a Hindu monarchy to a federal democratic republic. It has not been an overnight change; the process of this internal transition, formalized through the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord and then the Constitution of Nepal in 2015, has not yet concluded. Rather, it was provoked and conditioned by global powers. Traditionally, India has had a “special relationship” with Nepal, based on the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which provides India with substantial influence over Nepal’s security and economic policies (Goyal & Mam, 2024, pp. 2342-2345).

However, the last two decades have utterly transformed that picture. As Nepal seeks to move away from its dependence on India as a dominant regional power, China’s expanding economic footprint through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has offered an alternative (Shahi, 2025, pp. 28-33). Moreover, Western powers have attempted to shape Nepal’s democratisation efforts through massive foreign assistance and the dissemination of human rights and inclusive governance (Sonrexa, 2021). Thus, the backdrop to this study is the “triangular” geopolitical pressure cooker in which New Delhi, Beijing, and Washington, D.C. compete for power. However, policy instability within the Nepalese government results from a lack of political stability.

Significance

The external impacts on Nepal are important to understand for various reasons. First, it underscores the difficulties “buffer states” face in preserving strategic autonomy. As Nepal seeks to navigate the competing demands of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact with the United States and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it also grapples with an intensified internal polarisation that risks tearing at its social fabric (Thapa, 2025). This study critically engages with the claim that foreign Aid is far from a development instrument, as much as it serves as “soft power” that hampers local agency (Pinckney & Chin, 2021).

Second, the study is timely given the shifting global partnerships and alliances. With the Indo-Pacific Strategy gaining momentum, Nepal’s own choices domestically now have consequences for regional security. This study, by examining these dynamics, contributes to the broader argument that smaller states can make a difference in international competition rather than be its victims. It also exposes Nepal’s intersectional injustices, in which marginalized women and ethnic voices are often absent from external development agendas (Ranta, 2024, pp. 881–902).

Methodology

This study uses qualitative methods and a systematic approach to analyze both primary and secondary sources. Primary data consist of official government documents, bilateral treaties among countries, press releases from Nepal’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and announcements from various foreign countries. Secondary data, derived through qualitative empirical analysis, mostly through desk exercises, are used alongside the primary data. These sources primarily include peer-reviewed journals and writings on Nepali politics and history.

This approach uses “process–tracing” to identify instances in which the government of Nepal implemented new domestic-level policies in response to foreign diplomatic or economic pressure. This compensates for the political fallout from the 2015 economic blockade and the turn toward China since late 2019 for fuel and connectivity. The study offers a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between domestic and external factors within Nepal’s political system, drawing on information from these various sources up through October 2023.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by a coherent analytical framework provided by neorealism and dependency theory. According to Kenneth Waltz, the behavior of smaller states, such as Nepal, is expected to be linked to structural fit, in which a state’s attitude toward great powers influences its conduct and role within the international system. Theoretically, this analysis implies that the balancing strategy was a survival mechanism for Nepal within the anarchic international system (Goyal & Mam, 2024, pp. 2342–2345).

This is the Dependency Theory, which adds an external economic context for intervention. It states that Nepal is highly dependent on external aid and trade routes, placing it in a “peripheral” position that favors core powers (read India and China) while keeping the Nepalese economy perpetually underdeveloped (Sonrexa, 2021). This study combines these theories and examines how various external actors exercise structural (security) and relational (aid) power to influence Nepal’s domestic political environment.

Findings and Discussions

This section provides an overview and analysis of the external dynamics impacting Nepal’s politics today. This discussion is intended to demonstrate that the geopolitical, economic, and social factors present in the source text collectively constitute a strategic cockpit of regional and global powers in Nepal.

1. The Geopolitical Tightrope: Balancing the India-China-US Triad

Nepal is already locked into the Great Game objectives of its overpowering neighbors, India and China, but it is increasingly becoming a Western chess piece (mostly American) (Mistry, 2023). That historical self-image of a “yam between two boulders” (King Prithvi Narayan Shah) has, over the ages, evolved into something both beautiful and yet tragically fragile in a balancing act.



There is, of course, historical and cultural congruence as well as context, given that India shares geographical territory. These are the sentiments upon which an open-borders policy and the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship are founded, and they remain institutional pillars of this relationship. As Goyal & Mam (2024) observe, this relationship, often referred to as a “big brother,” gives Nepali political elites the cold sweats. Whenever Nepal asks for a greater share of sovereignty and turns towards China, India responds with economic punishment, such as what was effectively a blockade in 2015.

China moved from active strategic partnering to a more hands-off non-interference policy. Shahi (2025) notes that China has significantly expanded its footprint in Nepal through infrastructure and connectivity since 2008, particularly following the 2015 earthquake. The conversation here centers on the “China Card,” a strategy Nepalese leaders use to squeeze concessions from India. However, the results suggest that it is no longer just a bilateral problem. The U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact has also made Nepal a battleground among three parties. Moreover, domestic debate on the MCC exposed deep-seated fears that Nepal might get sucked into a security alliance (the Indo-Pacific Strategy) against China, signaling that foreign interests now rule local legislation (Verma, 2025, pp. 1-11).

2. Infrastructure Diplomacy and the BRI-MCC Conundrum

The findings concern how infrastructure projects act as proxies for political clout. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the United States’ Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) are competing visions of Nepal’s development.

The data suggest that many in Nepal believe that China’s commitment to “Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity” will enable the country to free itself from total dependence on its southern neighbor for transit and trade (Aryal, 2022, pp. 285-303). Evidence of this shift can be seen at Pokhara International Airport and in other hydropower projects. However, as Shahi (2025) observes, the contrast between the speedy, perhaps controversial ratification of the MCC and the tentative, slow implementation of BRI projects in Nepal underscores the presence of political and administrative bottlenecks.

The debate over these projects tends to boil down to a simplified choice between “debt-trap” stories and “sovereignty” concerns. Whereas state-to-state loans and rapid construction characterize the Chinese model, the American model (MCC) emphasizes transparency, the rule of Law, and parliamentary oversight. The inferences obtained indicate that the Nepalese political parties are divided along these lines, not necessarily along economic preferences, but because of the foreign support they receive (Tiwari, 2024). This has decoupled the development landscape since 2015, and projects have needed to be validated based on their geopolitical provenance rather than technical feasibility and long-term economic viability for Nepalese.

3. The Politics of Dependency and Foreign Aid

Foreign aid has historically been a pillar of the Nepalese economy and the single largest conduit for foreign political power. The findings show that aid is rarely “neutral.” Moreover, those aids also come with “strings attached” that influence domestic policy, particularly in governance, human rights, and social reform.

These major changes needed towards the perception of humanitarian and development assistance constellations are because, as in the old model, flexibility depends not on destroying existing power but on continuing to promote it. (Sonrexa 2021). In Nepal, overreliance on International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and bilateral donations, vis-à-vis domestic organizations, has rendered it a ‘dependent’ state, too troubled by the ‘dependency syndrome’ (Thapa, 2025). This is particularly true whether it be in drafting constitutions or implementing federalism. It has been Western donors who have played the main role in putting domestic tensions, including secularism and ethnic representation, on the agenda (Burnell, 2017).

This discussion makes it clear that, alongside important health and education services, aid also directly facilitates outsiders’ circumvention of states or influence on states’ internal agendas. This “soft power” influence is not blatant but pervasive, setting the terms of social discourse in Kathmandu’s “corridors of power.” The lesson is that Nepal’s political stability is threatened when periods of external funding do not align with domestic needs, and externally funded programs are marginalized in favor of other priorities or abandoned entirely.

4. The Impact of the Prime Minister’s Office on External Relations

There are important variables in responding to augmented external influences, such as the individual leader and, above all, the Prime Minister. Thapa (2025) argues that the ideological inclinations of any Prime Minister, whether in New Delhi, Beijing, or Washington, have national consequences for the direction of Nepal’s national foreign policy.

The results demonstrate a pattern of “pendulum diplomacy.” During K.P. Sharma Oli’s term, for instance, Nepal had an overt tilt toward China that was manifest in the signing of the transit-trade treaty; a landmark move away from Indian dependence (Johny, 2024). In contrast, forthcoming administrations have sought to “fix” relations with India. This is not uniform and creates a trust vacuum. In this highly volatile context, external forces are now more often either lobbying in person or propping up select factions within the ruling party or opposition to protect their interests.

Secondly, this debate is marked by the increasingly centralized role of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), which tends to centralize and personalize foreign policy rather than institutionalize it (Blarel, 2025, pp. 48-60). This makes Nepal vulnerable to external relations due to local horse-trading. When a PM’s seat is in the balance, they will often beg for resources, extra votes, or both to ensure their

political survival, which means sacrificing sovereignty for the sake of interest. This finding highlights the fragility of Nepal's democratic institutions against external meddling (Chand, 2024).

5. Transnational Social Movements and Democratic Diffusion

The influence from outside is not just coming from state actors who flow through transnational networks and social movements (Pinckney & Chin, 2021). Similar to how TSMOs can contribute to the diffusion of democracy. In Nepal, such examples are evident in the struggles of marginalized groups such as Madhi, Janajati, and Dalit.

The findings also indicate that external support to such movements has been a double-edged sword. This has, on the one hand, been accelerated by an agenda of political inclusion and federalism, paving the way for a representative state. On the other hand, it has been accused of external "social engineering." It concerns the story that led to India being alleged to be complicit in the Madhesi movement during Nepal's 2015 blockade, constructing an external intervention narrative around Kathmandu's demographic and territorial conflicts (Rafique, 2021, pp. 349-360).

These reprieve missives characterize a clash of commitments to universal human rights and local statements of sovereignty. It illustrates, inter alia, how foreign actors finance or help advance specific social agendas to cause domestic polarisation. That "foreign hand" narrative is also used as a dismissal against actual social grievances in order to erode real national reconciliation, mostly by pro-monarchist or nationalist forces.

6. Gender, Inequality, and the International Agenda

The universal forms of gender equality and social inclusion originated in the international community, which played a significant role in Nepali political sociology (Cheong et al., 2023, pp. 599-613). Ranta (2024) addresses intersecting inequalities in political inclusion emerging from Nepal's unique federal republican transition. Suffering international pressure and receiving foreign assistance were significant in promoting the 33% female quota for parliamentarians, which was implemented at the grassroots level.

Nevertheless, the dialogue reveals a divide between "descriptive representation" (numbers) and "substantive representation" (power) (Tøraasen, 2019, pp. 459-481). Although external forces have been somewhat successful in creating legislative change, this research highlights the fact that entrenched patriarchal structures within Nepalese political parties remain. Furthermore, female figures in high office are sometimes considered "proxies" for fathers or party leaders.

Furthermore, there has also been international engagement with "gender" that should not ignore the intersection of "caste" and "class" (Ranta, 2024, pp. 881-902). This is a top-down inclusion, which means that only those elite, privileged women benefit from feminism as told 'from on high', leaving the grassroots out in the

cold. External influences have driven the inclusion process; it has not been culturally deepened to tackle structural inequalities ingrained in Nepalese society.

7. The Security Dilemma and the Future of Neutrality

The "Security Dilemma" facing Nepal. As the rivalry between the U.S. and China deepens (the "New Cold War"), Nepal is being compelled to pitch its tent (Imran, 2021, pp. 67-86). The implications show that Nepal's traditional policy of non-alignment (NAM) remains under tremendous stress.

India's security concerns, especially regarding its "open flank" in the Himalayas, contradict those of China, such as its security concern over the ongoing "Tibetan issue." The U.S. presence, via the MCC and other initiatives, exposes a third layer of security anxiety. It places particular emphasis on military-to-military cooperation (joint exercises, the best examples at this point, with India and the U.S., as well as, more recently, China) as an area where external influence may play a significant role.

The results show that Nepal is failing to sustain a "credible neutrality." The politicization of security matters means that every step towards one power is perceived as a threat by the others. For instance, Nepal's withdrawal from the State Partnership Program (SPP) with the U.S. resulted from internal pressure and Chinese anxiety (Baral, 2021, pp. 39-49). This means that Nepal's "strategic autonomy" is declining. The debate concludes that unless Nepal achieves a foreign policy consensus that transcends political parties, there will be ongoing struggle and recurrent instability in internal politics, as seen now amid external powers' intervention.

8. Analysis Summary

These seven findings synthesize to explain why Nepal cannot be considered merely a passive target unwillingly repelling external control, but rather an active yet limited player in this multi-dimensional geo-game. The following are a few of the key factors behind this influence:

- **Geopolitical Neighborhood:** The geographical proximity of India and China necessitates the management of bilateral relations. Now, this requires a careful hedging strategy, in which Kathmandu seeks to leverage economic and military cooperation with both the US and China to reduce its historic dependence on India. These include balancing regional security regimes against domestic political imperatives, which makes the tedious balancing act more perilous because the core security interests of these powers remain fundamentally incompatible. It raises the question for Nepal of whether it should treat sovereignty as a secondary priority amid changed power dynamics and ensure that nothing is done at a price that jeopardizes regional security or stability (Baral, 2021: pp. 39-49).

- **Economic vulnerability:** Poor infrastructure and heavy dependence on aid place external actors in a “god” position to determine the trajectory of development. This dependence often leads to an overly narrow conception of ownership, as donor-driven interventions favor elite-level discourse over needs-based incremental change in underdeveloped sectors. Thus, this concept of aid dependency further divides the national political class during periods of conflict between domestic and international interests, making one skeptical of any claim to long-term structural reforms. However, the fragmentation also hinders domestic coherence, necessitating external assistance that reinforces rather than contradicts national development objectives or power inequities (Grävingsholt et al., 2013).
- **Diplomatic Agency:** Nepal is actively engaged with a variety of multilateral institutions and global initiatives reflecting its institutional hedging strategy to avoid being completely beholden to any power. This gambit allows the government to maneuver its asymmetrical dependence on regional counterparts, without establishing overtly security-collusive relations which would provoke antagonistic reactions from competing global powers (Thapa, 2025). At the same time, this multi-directional approach highlights the necessity of nurturing regional support to insulate national strategy from the unpredictable trajectory of foreign-funder partnerships. A comprehensive framework cannot be overemphasized to fight the so-called “tyranny of terrain” and structural economic challenges that have made the state susceptible to foreign entrapment (Johny, 2024).
- **Institutional Weakness:** Personalization and a weak foreign policy structure allow state institutions to be more open to external lobbying. Consequently, the absence of a coordinated foreign policy creates wide discrepancies in policymaking, allowing external actors to use different dialogue platforms to pursue their regional objectives. Nepal’s failure to establish a bipartisan consensus on external engagement leaves it vulnerable to the very “geopolitical interference” that Kathmandu seeks to avoid, thereby hardening the “tyranny of terrain” and punching greater holes in Nepal’s sovereignty (Imran 2021, pp. Therefore, sound, non-partisan national-interest doctrines must be developed so that diplomacy can move from crisis management to a steady-as-it-goes upward history.
- **Social Transformation:** the rise of local, global, and transnational collective movements creating internal reform agendas counter to the old power structure. These homegrown movements are beginning to challenge

hierarchical models of development. They are calling for external assistance to support locally defined social justice agendas rather than donor- or agency-blind ones. This changing context suggests that modeling new international relations around elites will become progressively untenable and, in its place, the case for bottom-up engagement strategies that reflect Nepal’s plural socio-political fabric and its demands on external actors strengthens. In the end, it would mean relying on domestic institutional capacity-building and a policy environment that allows (and/or encourages) the primacy of security imperatives vis-à-vis wider economic development goals (Upreti, 2019, pp. 1–13).

In the Nepali context, extra-territorial pressures are multi-layered within the internal political landscape. While these technological advancements and social reforms benefit only those who can access the gadgets, they seriously undermine both national sovereignty and political stability. The yam does not have to survive merely amidst the boulders; it has to thrive, swirling around them and outliving a downturn or upheaval of a multipolar world order.

9. Results

9.1 Foreign Aid: Political Instrument and Economic Reliability

It focuses on the limits of the options available to outside actors working with Nepali foreign aid and development assistance. Foreign actors most often exercise this through policy frameworks organized in the interests of foreign powers, usually hiding behind a humanitarian or infrastructure-development facade. It should therefore not bend to a logic of dependency considered an ulterior restriction on the collective political sovereignty of these nations, thereby constituting itself as a radical transformation in such fundamental aid with objectives of national development (Sonrexa, 2021). The data provides clarity that, for great powers, finance is much more than a development appendage. Instead, it is a strategic lever for generating political payoffs. As a result, the Nepali internal policy framework is constantly reshaped to suit the interests and wishes of foreign donor agencies in an economically sensitive field where everything ultimately comes down to politics.

9.2 The India-China Strategic Rivalry and Domestic Policy

The underlying reason for Nepal’s internal politics is the competing interests of its neighbors, India and China. Especially since 2008, there is evidence that China has progressively broadened its footprint in South Asia through soft power and infrastructure loans, which we can safely assume have contested India’s influence, making Nepalese leadership a balancing act where a lean towards each neighbor gives the other some leverage to return reactive responses (Goyal & Mam, 2024, pp. 2342-2345). The data indicate that domestic changes, such as a leadership transition, are usually accompanied by alignment with regional powers. Thus, this geopolitical seesawing has engineered a trans-Himalayan moulin in the Nepalese establishment, lamenting the

spoils of developmental unilateralism on either side, free from divorce.

9.3 The Influence of Global Power Triads and Democratic Diffusion

The global context, especially the trajectory of developments in the US, has also driven these changes. Thus, political rhetoric in Nepal increasingly reflects trends among foreign diplomats and embassies. In particular, the US-China dilemma (e.g., MCC) led to domestic political polarization. Through transnational networks, cooperation is also effective in promoting both desirable and undesirable forms of activism (i.e., democratic diffusion and good or bad civil society), depending on the organizers' strategic intent (Pinckney & Chin, 2021). In addition, the results demonstrate that international mechanisms of political inclusion, as tools to address inequality gaps in disadvantaged societies, can be refracted by geopolitical rivalry dynamics, a tendency labeled a quirk that affects variation in the extent to which marginalized groups are incorporated into national political systems (Ranta, 2024, pp. 881–902).

10. Conclusion

The political reality of Nepal has long been deeply shaped by the vested interests of foreign powers, namely India and China. This requires a close examination of the political economy underpinning state-capitalist relationships. However, foreign aid and infrastructure investment can be both important supports for development and tools of geopolitical leverage, often tied to domestic policy placement or governance, which further complicates these frameworks. The findings suggest that Nepal's geopolitical realities necessitate a thin-margin policy of "equidistance." Nevertheless, a volatile regional security calculus and economic interdependence periodically disrupt this pattern. In addition, international non-governmental organizations and global democratic norms have been effective in establishing social integration and constitutional change, but have subsequently competed with traditional political institutions. The study finds the need to shield Nepal's stability, sovereignty, and institutional resilience from external reverberations and their consequences. However, willpower, unlike a nod of the head to an alien piper in our ear, will not give birth to skills in Himalayan geopolitics. Hence arises the catch-22 for each of Nepal's democratic hem and (upside down) gonad, or in other words, the extent to which Nepal holds any bargaining power with these extraneous powers.

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