

Realpolitik of Indo-Nepal Relations

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ABSTRACT: Substantial political and economic exchanges have marked the historical relationship between Nepal and India. They maintain their diplomatic relations through high-level visits, trade initiatives, and financial investments. Moreover, India has assisted Nepal in the domain of infrastructure development but is motivated by geopolitical considerations and preferences. The Treaty of Segouli, concluded in 1816 between the Kingdom of Nepal and British India, led to Nepal's relinquishment of a substantial territorial expansion. This began the emergence of realpolitik in Nepal, which facilitated foreign intervention in the country's political affairs. India has exerted a significant hegemonic influence on Nepal's internal and external affairs since its independence from British rule in 1947. This influence has been particularly evident since establishing the 'Peace and Friendship Treaty' between India and Nepal in 1950. India has played an active role in Nepal's political movements, introduced the concept of a common river, and imposed its desires and interests through river water agreements. Additionally, India has infringed upon Nepalese territories and utilized Nepalese political parties and their leaders to create a political-economic environment in Nepal that benefits India. Furthermore, India has a covert presence in selecting Prime Ministers in Nepal. Therefore, these factors collectively suggest that India's influence and domination infringe upon Nepal's sovereignty and independence.

KEYWORDS: relations, strategic interests, preferences, hegemonic, sovereignty

Introduction

The relationship between Nepal and India has a long history since centuries, from the Hindu epic Ramayana and Mahabharata (Embassy of Nepal 2017; Rose 1970, 19). Nepal was a trade transit to India with Tibet, the Caucasian region, Mongolia, and Russia, and dry ports in the Kathmandu valley for 2500 years before (Sarwar 2018). By understanding the commercial importance of Nepal during the British rule in India, they signed a treaty of commerce with Nepal in 1792 and further in 1801 with its strategic interests to expand their territory beyond the Himalayas via Nepal and Tibet and promote Trans-Himalayan trade (Aitchison 1936; Ramakant 1976). However, the *realpolitik* began in 1816 when the British-Nepal war took place and ended with a treaty of 'Segouli' that checked Nepal's territory expansion program, lost one-third of its territory, and employed one British officer in Nepal to control the decisions of the Nepalese Government (Pathak 2010). Hence, Nepal's foreign relations were limited as its dependency on the British Raj increased, and Nepal came under the influence of British India.

Once Nepal and India established bilateral relations through the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950, the political environment changed in both countries. The British Raj ended and established an independent India in 1947, while democracy was established in Nepal by abolishing the 104 years' Rana regime in 1951 (Rowland 1967). Since 1951, regular high-level visits have strengthened political relations between Nepal and India. The political visit was followed by the first-ever democratically elected Prime Minister B. P. Koirala in January 1960 for the intention to cooperate (Mishra and Mishra 1995). Exchange high-level visits have become a regular process to understand and strengthen the relationship. So, most of the visits were helpful, as a positive consequence, to improve the bilateral relationship with several agreements for development assistance to Nepal on establishing industries (cement, sugar, ancillary engineering), assisting in transportation (road links), supplying military hardware, developing hydropower (Khanna and Kumar 2018; Thapa

2010). However, as a negative consequence, anti-India sentiment is present in Nepal due to India's heavy hegemonic interferences.

Since 1950, India has been Nepal's largest trading partner, accounting for two-thirds of Nepal's foreign trade (MEA 2014). Moreover, India surrounds Nepal from three sides, making Nepal land-locked (India-locked) and leaving no other choices for international trade without transit excess through India. Similarly, Nepal is a significant market for India. According to the latest available data, bilateral trade exceeded USD 11005.10 million, with Indian exports to Nepal totalling USD 9634.06 million, but Nepalese exports to India totalling USD 1371.04 million, resulting in a USD 8263.02 million deficit during 2020/21 (MoF 2020). Furthermore, India has been Nepal's economic partner, providing grants and aid on an annual basis for infrastructure development, education, health, and agriculture (Bhattarai, 2005). During 2020/21, Nepal received USD 673 million in aid and support from India (MoF 2021).

Hegemonic India

After gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1947, India reinstated its democratic system. It pursued a foreign policy to expand its influence and dominate the South Asian region, consistent with its pre-colonial approach (Joseph 2015). Following India's strategic objectives to leverage and interfere in Nepal's domestic politics, it has actively participated in various political processes within Nepal. The Indian interest and its involvement in the political struggle against the Rana regime ended in 1950, marking the culmination of 104 years (Gautam 2005). India considered Nepal was under its political sphere, so it provided support by relying on monarchy and democratic forces rather than the Rana regime (Bhandari 2014). In return for India's participation, Nepal signed a Friendship treaty in 1950 that favored India but left Nepal's discomfort to this day (Thapa 2010). The treaty in question, which has generated significant controversy due to its perceived one-sided nature, has granted India a position of influence over various sectors in Nepal, including politics, economy, security, and technology. In 1969, Nepal formally requested to abrogate the pact established in 1950. However, India was unwilling to withdraw as the treaty made Nepal, under its influence and domination, a safer place for Indian traders, investors and citizens to reside, purchase property, and establish businesses (Whelpton 2005; Sharma 2000). In the early 1950s, Nepal saw a period of significant influence and domination by India, as the government of New Delhi pressed its decisions on the Nepalese government (Khanal n.d.). During the 1950s, New Delhi played a significant role as a representative platform for Nepal in several international forums. In the same way, the Indian government chose a personal secretary for the King of Nepal from its citizens, while the Indian ambassador actively engaged in cabinet meetings of the Nepalese government. India continues to play a significant role in Nepal's political affairs, as seen by its covert nominations for the position of Prime Minister (Levi 1957; Rose and Dayal, 1969; Brown 1971; Muni 2016).

Moreover, the political landscape in Nepal underwent significant transformations after the 1950s, resulting in consequential shifts in the political-economic dynamics between Nepal and India. Despite numerous treaties aimed at recognizing and upholding principles like full sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence, it is evident that Indian preferences had a significant role in guiding the actions of both countries. In the context of military relations and agreements, India successfully established 17 checkpoints along the northern border of Nepal with Tibet in 1954. However, Nepal later demanded the withdrawal of these checkpoints in 1969, asserting that they belonged to Nepal based on the 'Segouli treaty' of 1816 with British-India (Mulmi 2020; Xavier 2020; Nepali Times, 2019; Malik 2004; Kumar 1980; Pandey n.d.). Nevertheless, India still needs to remove its check post from Kalapani, which includes Limpiyadhura and Lipulekh.

Consequently, these areas continue to be regarded as a disputed region. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, India formally opened an 80-kilometer road in the territories on 8 May 2020 (Mulmi 2020; Xavier 2020). Moreover, it is worth noting that India recently released a political map that ignores the territorial claims of Nepal. Nepal has also published its political map incorporating these disputed areas in response. This development has had a detrimental impact on the bilateral relations between Nepal and India (Ethirajan 2020). The issue of territorial encroachment is a matter of great sensitivity, particularly in the context of Nepal. India has been observed to have encroachments in 26 locations, leading to the unfortunate loss of around 60,000 hectares of Nepalese territory. This situation has consequently created concerns regarding the sovereignty of Nepal (Zehra 2020; Paudyal 2014; Adhikari 2013; Das 2008).

India has been actively involved in numerous political movements and transformations within Nepal, exerting a substantial influence on the country's political landscape. The political movement *Jana Andolan* in 1990 transformed Nepal's absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy. This shift was facilitated by the encouragement and backing of the Indian government, which intervened due to a political confrontation and strained relations between the Nepalese King and the Indian Prime Minister. Likewise, Nepal saw a political uprising known as the Maoist insurgency, which spanned a decade from 1995 to 2005, during which it received support from India. It was revealed that the Maoists resided in India and offered training; nevertheless, India did not assist the King's imposition of direct rule on 1 February 2005 to manage the domestic political circumstances. India declined to assist the King, asserting it was not pertinent to India's interests (Shah and Pettigrew, 2009).

India strategically employed the Nepalese political parties to exert its influence and establish dominance, effectively ensuring its control over a significant portion of the political landscape. This control was achieved by forging alliances with major parties such as the Nepali Congress, Nepal Communist Party, Terai-based Party (representing the southern region of Nepal), and even incorporating the Maoist Party within its sphere of influence. During the Maoist insurgency, India's primary objective was to diminish the level of foreign involvement and military connections with Nepal by integrating the Maoist faction into the mainstream political landscape of Nepal (Thapa 2010). Furthermore, it is worth noting that many Nepalese political parties were founded in India during the exile of Nepalese politicians when the Rana regime existed in Nepal. Consequently, these parties were exposed to and influenced by India's political landscape (Joshi and Rose 1966). As a result, India has effectively established a favorable political climate in Nepal and controlled domestic politics since the 1950s treaty, which accepted Nepal's sovereignty while giving India increasingly considerable power over Nepal (Pathak n.d.; Vela 2009).

Most political-economic accords were executed based on India's desires and interests. Most river water sharing accords were established with a primary focus on India's fundamental security concerns, which are inclined towards favoring India (Jha 2010). The Koshi River deal, finalized in 1954, facilitated India's barrage construction, submerging a significant portion of Nepal's landmass. The Gandak River irrigation and power project, which concluded in 1959, was established to provide shared irrigation facilities to Nepal and India. However, in 1990, India introduced a new concept of common rivers for Nepal, which diminished Nepal's leverage in its negotiations with India on collaborative initiatives aimed at hydroelectric power generation and irrigation distribution (Subedi 2004). The Tanakpur River Agreement in 1991 and the Comprehensive Mahakali River Treaty in 1996 were established to provide irrigation to agricultural land in Nepal, particularly during periods of low rainfall. However, it has been observed that most of the irrigation facilities have been utilized by India rather than Nepal (Subedi 2005).

India has utilized economic blockades as a political weapon to interfere with Nepal's internal affairs and obstruct social, economic, and political progress (Subedi 2016). Additionally, India is always hegemonic in Nepalese politics (Patel 2017). India has

expressed apprehension regarding the efforts undertaken by China in Nepal and the potential influence that China may exert over Nepal. For example, when Nepal permitted China to construct the Arniko Highway linking Tibet of China with Kathmandu, which opened Nepalese territory Tatopani as a trade route in 1969, India protested the permission of the Nepalese government and employed an economic blockade. In 1989, Nepal encountered its second blockade imposed by India due to India's disinterest in procuring a shipment of Chinese weaponry. In 2015, Nepal saw a third instance of an economic embargo imposed by India due to Nepal's refusal to heed New Delhi's counsel over modifying the newly established constitution in alignment with Indian objectives (Subedi 2016; Nepali Times, 2018; Pant 2018). Their interest was to address the demand of people who live alongside the border between Nepal and India. As they have socio-cultural relations with India, in favor of them, India demanded Nepal grant Nepalese nationality. Such direct interference in the internal affairs of Nepal's independent and sovereign country is Indian hegemonic arrogance (Karki and KC 2020).

The Nepalese political parties and their leaders seek aid and guidance from New Delhi due to India's significant influence and dominance in the region (Patel 2017). The level of interference experienced in that particular situation resulted in the Nepalese government's stability being dependent upon the interests of India. Hence, on each occasion, when a new government is established in Nepal with the support of India, the Prime Minister undertakes an inaugural international tour to India. In the recent past, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' embarked on his inaugural international bilateral visit to India from 31 May to 3 June 2023 after assuming the position of Nepal's Prime Minister (Ghimire 2023; Indian Embassy 2023).

Conclusion

The relationship between Nepal and India began in historical times. As independent and sovereign nations, they engage in political-economic cooperation. Regular high-level political visits strengthened their relationship, supported by economic aid and grants for infrastructure development. Both nations are significant trade markets for one another, so the volume of bilateral trade increases yearly.

Although India respects Nepal's independence and sovereignty, it is theoretically interested in one way of ensuring its safety. It continues to implement the pre-independence policy of influencing and dominating by following India's strategic interests and preferences within its political-economic sphere to become a global powerhouse or, failing that, a regional powerhouse in the current multipolar era. India's hegemonic role in Nepal governs the relationship between Nepal and India. India's hegemonic role is interfering with Nepal's internal and external affairs, ultimately raising questions about Nepal's sovereignty and independence.

The Nepalese constitution mandates that international relations be directed towards enhancing the nation's standing in the international community by sustaining relations based on sovereign equality while protecting the country's freedom, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence. However, under the influence of India, Nepal's foreign policymaking has exhibited a long-standing pattern of shifting foreign policy orientation with each change in government. To pursue national interest, sovereignty, and international dignity, Nepal must prepare a comprehensive foreign policy capable of dealing with the hegemonic conduct and pressure of regional powers such as India so that one-sided bilateral agreements with India can be revised.

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