

Foreign Policy and National Interest

Shreedhar Gautam¹

Abstract

Nepal's foreign policy is guided by the collective desire of the people to preserve national independence and promote socio-economic interest. Our foreign policy is almost affected by geographical and cultural relations with the neighboring countries-India and China. Nepal must maintain very well-balanced relations with them in order to be a prosperous nation, and should not forget the Divya Upadesh of Prithivi Narayan Shah, late Kings Mahendra and Birendra (zone of peace). However, the post 1990 democratic Nepal is found lacking on many fronts in its foreign policy. Nepal should try to be self-reliant for basic needs of the people, based on common interest and mutual respect. Our political leadership must focus on economic development of the nation with a common voice and effort. But Nepal is being always a loser with India in various treaties. The issue of Kalapani, Lipulekha, Limpiyadhura is being a matter of dispute with India. Similarly, MCC, SPP, BRI are also disempowering us. Therefore, we have to maintain good relations with all by identifying our areas of mutual co-operation and collaboration keeping in mind our Panchasheela principles. Always we have to believe in people's power and eliminate fear of foreign interference so as to make Nepal self-reliant and economically prosperous and peaceful.

Keywords: strategies, directives, approaches circumstances, Divya Upadesh, Panchasheela, socio-economic transformation, challenges, treaty, MCC, SPR, BRI, prosperous

Concept of Foreign Policy

Foreign policy involves goals, strategies, measures, methods, guidelines, directives, understandings, agreements, and so on, by which national governments conduct international relations with each other and with international organizations and non-governmental actors (Carlsnaes, p. 335). Likewise, views of Ali Alatas regarding the foreign policy are equally important:

The foreign policy of a country is inevitably shaped by a confluence of inter-related factors, both objective and subjective, e.g. the country's national interest as perceived within a given time frame, its geo-political environment, its national history, and especially relevant to an independent nation, its particular process of growth into sovereign statehood. (p. 55)

¹ Dr. Gautam is Professor of English at Tribhuvan University.

From the above citations, we understand that foreign policies consist of aims and measures that are intended to guide government decisions and actions with regard to external affairs, particularly relations with foreign countries. Also, policy making involve a means - end way of thinking about goals as actions of government. It is an instrumental concept, thinking of the best available decision or course of action. Various approaches to foreign policy are practiced, and among them the traditional approach is still found effective. It focuses on comprehending the interests and concerns that drive the policies, and thinking through the various ways of addressing and defending those interests and concerns. It involves also the exercise of judgement and common sense in assessing the best practical means and course of action available for carrying out foreign policies.

Like for other countries, Nepal's foreign policy is also guided by the collective desire of the people to preserve national independence and promote economic interest. These ideas are vital to resist all possible interference and manipulation by other countries. Whatever the approach to foreign policy, national independence and strengthening economic interests are indispensable yardsticks.

Factors in Foreign Policy

Different factors affect the conduction of foreign policy of every country, and they have to be taken into consideration. In Nepal's case, our geography is most vital factor as we are in between the two most populous countries, China and India. Like the geography, history is an equally important factor for foreign policy. In an interview former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein says:

To abandon the past is expressive of a formal adherence and superficial affiliation to contemporaneity, whilst to relinquish the forward moving present with its requirements and laws is to formally adhere to the past in a manner which is neither human nor revolutionary. (p. 358)

Independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru too has underscored the importance of history. His historical and philosophical deliberations were a kind of search for the answer to the most important problems troubling his country and the world. He turned to the past in order to understand the present and foresee the future. History was for him a school of life, experience and struggle. He approaches it as an active politician:

My fascination for history was not in reading about old events that happened in the past but rather in its relation to the things that led up to the present. Only then did it become alive to me, otherwise it would have been an old thing unconnected with life or the world. (p. 383)

Saddam's and Nehru's views suggest that knowing the outcomes and the consequences of the past decisions and actions help us to recognize the circumstance under which a government must operate in carrying out its foreign policy. While taking into consideration of the geo-political location of Nepal, the first thing for Nepal is the reality of the two big neighbors in the North and the South with different political systems as well as the history of having difficult relations left behind by the past colonial legacy that led them to war in 1962.

China has become more conscious of its global role due to its economic prowess that has been perceived by the US led western countries as a looming threat to their domination of the world affairs and economic benefit after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was a kind of counter weight to the western powers till the end of the cold war. On the other, India has become a serious regional power in South Asia, and it has attracted the world attention by trying to be an ally of the US in the context of the ongoing efforts by the former to galvanize the countries around China with a view to containing the influence of China in the world politics. So, Nepal has become more important nation for the western powers because of Nepal's geographical proximity with China. If China has defined the western countries' perspective as the new cold war mind set, the western countries have retorted by holding China responsible for creating instability, particularly in the South East Asia. In such a ongoing political bickering between the US led western countries and China, it is for Nepal to adopt a sound foreign policy that puts the national interest above all.

Nepal cannot and should not allow to be a part of any military or non-military alliance of any block. Nepal has to walk cautiously without compromising its core principles of foreign policy at a time when war in Ukraine and the growing mistrust between China and US over the question of Taiwan, considered by China as its own territory, has become more sensitive issue with far reaching impact.

Considering our long term goals, our basic ideals of foreign policy should not be affected either by the periodical elections or change of guard at the highest political level. However, changing scenario of the world as well as regional politics demands some tactical changes whenever such a situation arises. Basically, Nepal should treat two big neighbors, China and India, with the same yardstick without any 'tilt or special status' as both are our friends and we cannot play any card against each other.

We should be guided by what is rightly said, "You can choose your friends and enemies, but you cannot change your neighbors." We should appreciate the support gained in our economic development by both the neighborly countries, but we should be firm enough not to allow our land to use for activity against them, and at the same time we

should resist all attempts to interfere in our internal affairs either in the macro or micro management form. Certainly, in terms of language, religion and culture, we have many similarities with India, but the foreign policy is not determined only by these factors as seen in many European countries having language and cultural affinity. Our ultimate stance for forwarding foreign relation should be the protection of national sovereignty and interest. Emotionalism does not work in political realism. Our relation with other Asian countries and the countries in Europe, Africa and America should be determined basing on mutual interest and respect to each other's national sovereignty.

Relevance of Prithivi Narayan Shah

Prithivi Narayan Shah, the unifier of modern Nepal, and his work Divya Upadesh is equally relevant in today's context. We can benefit from positive aspects of other past rulers, whether Jung Bahadur Rana, king Mahendra and king Birendra. Despite being an absolute monarch, king Mahendra expanded Nepal's relations to many countries, and maintained a balanced policy while dealing with the two big neighbors at a difficult time of the history. Through his proposal of 'zone of peace' King Birendra drew a widespread support across the world, as a testimony of Nepal's success to assert itself as an independent country.

The post 1990 democratic Nepal is found lacking on many fronts in its foreign policy. Instead of focusing on more investment either domestic or foreign for introducing many industries and factories to generate jobs, the already existing factories and industries were either sold or allowed to die slowly because of the state's apathy to socio-economic transformation of the country. To eradicate the present condition of economic backwardness, the following measures may be made the essential parts of our foreign policy.

First, we should try to gain an economic independence in this age of inter dependence. We need to be self reliant at least for the basic needs of the people. It is below dignity for an independent country to allow the migration of its citizens in thousands every day in search of job. Unless this problem is solved, Nepal's image will not be high among other countries. Another problem that needs to be solved with profound responsibility is the open border issue. Nepal being a rather small country in relation to our two immediate neighbors, it is essential to seek a permanent solution to solve the problem born out of open border with India. We need to take lesson from the example of other countries too. For instance, in 1950s a voice was raised in Indian parliament to have an open border with the then Burma, now Myanmar. Giving reply to the demand from the parliamentarians, then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said:

We on our part are perfectly willing, but cannot say anything more in this matter, because we are a country with a large population which tends to expand. Burma is a country with a relatively limited population. For obvious reasons, they do not like to have a large population coming into their country. (p. 313)

Nehru's comment on Burmese question is applicable to Nepal too. Nepal should develop new mind-set about how Nepal will safeguard its independence and expand prosperity as we are in a new era of engagement based on common interest and mutual respect. Related to this issue is the 1950 treaty of friendship with India which has remained controversial ever since its inception. So either a new treaty or a drastic revision of it is needed to make it equal and beneficial basing on the win-win concept for both countries. In this regard, some efforts were made in the past, but no tangible result has been achieved as evidenced by India's reluctance to acknowledge even the report of Eminent Persons' Group. We need to forge a consensus on such matter to advance our interest and expand genuine partnership. We have to rise above the simple intellectual exercise while shaping our policies. In approaching our foreign policy priorities, we have to deal with the urgent, the important, and long term all at once.

Some of the priorities include expanding trade, combating climate change, promotion of democracy, justice, and opportunity. No nation can meet the world's challenge alone, so we should combat climate change and proliferation of nuclear arms through partnership with our friendly countries. Today, we are in an age of multi partner world, and we should be clear eyed about our purpose. For this, political leadership should have ability as well as the credibility to be the vehicles for cooperation with our partners. It is for the leadership to create a stronger mechanism as well as pragmatic and principled way. The political leadership should be aware of the responsibility of elevating and integrating economic development as the core pillar of Nepal's power. Unless we restore our economy at home, we cannot enhance our strength and capacity abroad. It is rightly said that domestic policies shape a nation's foreign policy. By being passive observer, we cannot solve our problem. The MFA should be free from politicization, and it should be ensured that men and women of our foreign service should have the resources they need to implement our priorities effectively.

Nepali leaders' failure to create consensus on core national interest is exposed once more over the Citizenship Act recently passed by the parliament. In no other countries in the world, leaders are so divided over such vital issues. It is because of the vulnerability of Nepali political leaders that Nepal proved to be a loser in the past treaties with India, including the Mahakali Treaty, which was passed with a clarion call by our leaders claiming that it will bring a radical change in the economic transformation of Nepal. The reality is just reverse to see for everyone. It is again the lack of Nepali political leader's credibility and accountability that the issue of Kalapani, Lipulekh Limpiyadhura has not been treated seriously by the Nepali government even after issuing a new map in response to India's unjustified claim over our land and construction of road in Nepali territory in contravention to all international rules. In the case of MCC and SPP our political leaders could not rise above the petty party interest and acted in an arrogant way ignoring the fear

and sentiments of the people generated by the provisions of the MCC. However, the SPP did not meet the same fate of the MCC after the widespread outcry of the people.

We should maintain cordial relationship, with USA and European countries, but not at the cost of our national interest and geo-political realities. Nepal cannot afford to be a partner of any military alliance either directly or indirectly. In our case, the principles of non-aligned movement are still relevant, though we should not take neutrality in an absolute sense. It should be decided basing on the merit of the issue. We need to identify areas of corporation with China under the BRI project again on the basis of win-win principles. The Panchasheela principles are relevant for a country like ours, and we should adhere to them. No concrete goal in foreign policy can be achieved unless our political leaders become committed omitted to the nation and consider the people as the agent of change. If the political leaders have to have any fear, it should be the fear of the people, not any foreign power. If we believe in people's power, we can make our policies that will eliminate fears of foreign interference and manipulation. Let us learn lesson from the history and make Nepal relatively self reliant, economically, prosperous and peaceful too.

References:

- Carlsnaees, W. (2002). 'Foreign Policy', in W. Carlsnees, T. Risse, and B. Simmons (eds.). *Handbook of International Relations*. Sage.
- Government of India. (1958). *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*. 1953-1957. Vol. 2.
- Iskander, Amir. (1980). *Saddam Hussein - The Fighter, the Thinker and the Man*. Hachette Realities.
- Jackson, Robert and Georg Sorensen. (2020). *Introduction to International Relations*. Oxford University Press.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. (1982). *An Autobiography*. Oxford University Press.
- (1999). *The Discovery of India*. Oxford University Press.
- Pyadyshev, Boris. (1990). *International Affairs*. Progress Publishers.
- Ulyanovsky, Rostislav. (1980). *Present Day Problems in Asia and Africa*. Progress Publisher.
- Weber, Cynthia. (2014). *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge.