



The Political and Historical Dynamics of Nepal-India Relations

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Abstract

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This study examines Nepal's political and historical relationship with India, focusing on key events that shaped their interactions. The purpose is to analyze how Nepal navigated its geopolitical challenges between India and China, particularly in the context of its foreign policies from the 18th century to the post-2006 revolution period. Using a historical-analytical methodology, the research draws on secondary sources to trace Nepal's diplomatic and political strategies, emphasizing pivotal moments such as the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty, the 1962 Indo-China War, and the 1989 economic blockade. The findings reveal Nepal's consistent struggle to maintain sovereignty while balancing Indian influence. The study highlights the implications of this relationship for Nepal's political and economic strategies in the broader regional context, emphasizing its importance for future diplomatic policies.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Geopolitics, Historical Relations, Regional Sovereignty.

Introduction

Nepal is a small country in Asia that borders two extremely large countries, China and India. From a longitudinal and latitudinal perspective, Nepal extends from the prime meridian and equator to 80° 4'E and 88° 12'E, 26° 22' and 30° 27' N respectively (Rokaya et al., 2013). It shares 1750 km open border with India (Singh, 2009). For this reason, there is a natural relationship between Nepal and India. Relations between India and Nepal date back a long way, possibly even before the beginning of human civilization.

Over the length of these bilateral interactions, there have been exchanges in language and literature, trade and commerce, culture and history, religion and mythology, and; (Dharamdasani, 2001). The relations between India and Nepal have been shaped by a variety of circumstances. The relationship between Nepal and India is deep, ancient, and inevitable, as evidenced by the pen border, socio-cultural attachment, linguistic intimacy, people-to-people relationships, and India's involvement in each political movement. These factors are all influenced by geography (Adhikari, 2018).

Since the majority of his reign was devoted to battles, conquests, and national integration, King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Gorkhali king, was crowned as the head of state of all of Nepal and was unable to devote much more time to other national matters. But his timeless teaching sometimes referred to as "DivyaUpadesh," serves as a crucial moral compass for both domestic and international affairs (Acharya & Naraharinath, 2013). Before Prithvi Narayan Shah's ascent, Nepal's political landscape was unstable and lacked a well-defined foreign and internal policy. King Prithvi Narayan Shah succinctly summarized the fundamental principles of Nepal's foreign policy in one of his most insightful explanations of the nation's precarious geopolitical status, which determines a policy.

Early late British India's attitude toward Nepal was a reflection of the business-minded approach of the English firm in the eighteenth century. An illusory economic lure served as its catalyst. Soon after capturing Bengal in 1764, the British developed an interest in the nearby northern regions (Nanda, 1997). Untested to date, and thinking about potential trading chances. The East India Company used Nepal as a hub for its trade with China and Tibet. They attempted to enter Nepal by any means necessary, but Nepal refused to allow their presence. However, during Warren Hastings' administration (1776-1795), the British adopted a policy of self-restraint and caution. Rash actions were strongly discouraged; provocations were tolerated, and efforts were made to bridge the gap between the British and the Gorkha kingdom to lay the groundwork for Anglo-Nepalese friendship (Dharamdasani, 1997). The driving force behind

these efforts was to restore, if not enhance, normal British trade with the Himalayan region.

Warren Hastings was the first to envision the concept of free trade between British India and Tibet through Nepal. He developed a strategy to establish a commercial treaty with Nepal. However, the Gorkhas were distrustful of British intentions and resisted any British attempts to initiate trade negotiations until 1792 (Singh, 1996). The Anglo-Nepalese War eventually fulfilled British interests in Nepal, leading to the rise of Rana rule in the country.

When Jung Bahadur Rana seized power, he implemented a policy of appeasement toward the British East India Company, effectively isolating Nepal from the rest of the world. This strategy involved fostering a close and cooperative relationship with the British while limiting interactions with other countries. His successors continued this policy, maintaining a strong alignment with British India in political, trade, and other matters (Rana, 1974). This approach ensured that Nepal remained closely tied to British interests, further entrenching the country's isolation on the global stage.

The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Nepal and India marked a significant turning point in the political relations between the two nations. This treaty, which acknowledged Nepal as a sovereign and independent state, was enacted a year before the People's Movement for Democracy that led to the end of the Rana regime (Dharmadasan, 2000).

The Nepal-India Peace and Friendship Treaty, signed on July 31, 1950, has recently become a subject of intense discussion and debate. This treaty gained significant attention following the rise of the CPN (Maoist) as the largest political force in the Constituent Assembly elections. Maoist Chairman Prachanda declared that the treaty should be annulled to reflect the changed circumstances. However, this stance later appeared to be driven more by electoral strategy and emotional politics rather than substantive policy changes.

Although it is said that there has been a good neighbourly relationship between Nepal and India for centuries, there have been disputes between Nepal and India on minor issues from time to time. Neighbors can never be changed but relations can be improved (Singh, 1996). The problem of this study is that the relationship between the two neighbouring countries cannot be evaluated from a historical political point of view. There is a gap in the study of the relationship between Nepal and India from a historical and political point of view. The relationship between Nepal and India is a must-know topic. The subject of the relationship between the two countries is a matter of concern to all citizens living in India and Nepal, so this study has great significance (Fahad, 2015). The objective of this study is to analyze the relationship between Nepal and India from a historical and political point of view.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on descriptive and analytical methods to explore the subject matter in depth. Data collection spanned over two months, utilizing a variety of sources including libraries, Google Scholar, and other relevant repositories. These sources were systematically organized and prepared using Microsoft Word for ease of analysis.

Given the qualitative nature of this research, visual data representations such as tables and charts were not incorporated. Instead, the study emphasizes the socio-cultural relations between Nepal and India, a longstanding historical connection (Khanal, 1998). The livery method was employed to gather and manage the sources, ensuring their relevance and accuracy. Descriptive and analytical approaches were applied to examine the collected data, providing a nuanced understanding of the topic.

Results and discussion

Nepal and India's diplomatic establishment in 1947, the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty significantly altered their relations. The treaty placed Nepal under India's security umbrella, leading to the deployment of an Indian Military Mission and checkpoints in Nepal. These were withdrawn in the late 1960s as Nepal's sovereignty was increasingly questioned, marking a pivotal shift in Nepal-India relations as Nepal sought to assert its independence.

Nepal-India Relation after Democratic Period

Although Nepal and India established diplomatic relations in 1947 during the Rana regime, significant changes in their relationship emerged following the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty. This treaty became a focal point for Nepal's leftist political parties. It placed Nepal under India's security umbrella, as evidenced by India's concerns over

border security, which led to the deployment of an Indian Military Mission in 1952 and the establishment of Indian checkpoints within Nepal. These checkpoints were later withdrawn in the late 1960s as Nepal's sovereign status began to be questioned (Dharmadasani, 1997). This period marked a transformation in Nepal-India relations, highlighting India's influence over Nepal's security and the subsequent pushback against this influence as Nepal asserted its sovereignty.

A surprisingly critical aspect of the 1950 India-Nepal Treaty controversy is the continuation of the open border regime, which the treaty does not explicitly address. Nowhere in the treaty, nor in the 'secret' letters exchanged with it, is the term 'border' or 'open border regime' mentioned (Kalim & Lama, 1995). The treaty has faced significant criticism for its perceived unequal provisions. Professor Mr Baral has described it as an extension of the "spirit" of the 1923 Treaty, attempting to encapsulate the essence of Nepal-India relations. The treaty encompasses three major aspects: special security relations, people-to-people connections including the free movement of people across the borders without passports, and economic relations (Baral, 2012). Nepali politicians who criticize the treaty as unequal link it to nationalism. They argue that the treaty reeks of colonialism, asserting that Nepal has been tied to the Indian security doctrine, keeping the Himalayan country within India's sphere of influence (Basin, 1970).

During the 1960s, Nepal's relations with both India and China were in a state of crisis due to the 1962 conflict between the two ancient civilizations (Adhikari, 2018). However, Nepal successfully adopted a neutral foreign policy during the Indo-China War, marking a significant achievement in its diplomatic strategy. The 1950s are often referred to as an era of special relations between Nepal and India. Leo E. Rose interpreted this period as one where Nepal acted as a midwife to India's strategic interests (Timalsina, 2002). However, the successors of King Tribhuvan and King Mahendra shifted to a policy of equidistance and equi-proximity toward both India and China. A prime example of this approach was Nepal's neutrality during the 1962 Indo-China War (Dahal, 2018). This policy was continued by the late King Birendra, who further proposed Nepal as a Zone of Peace, although this initiative did not receive support from India (Timalsina, 2002). This period highlighted Nepal's efforts to balance its relations with its powerful neighbours and maintain its sovereignty.

The Indo-Pak war of December 1971 and India's emergence as a potential regional power significantly influenced New Delhi-Kathmandu relations. The limited influence of China in South Asia, coupled with India's actions towards Sikkim, which the Nepalese press perceived as imperialist, heightened anti-Indian sentiments and demonstrations in Nepal. Nepal's stance on the Sikkim issue strained Indo-Nepal relations, leading New Delhi to adopt a firmer and more assertive attitude towards Kathmandu. However, the visit of Prime Minister Nagendra Prasad Rijal helped alleviate misunderstandings between the two countries (Singh, 2009). Following India's Pokhran nuclear test on May 9, 1974, Nepal neither officially welcomed nor condemned the event, maintaining its policy of equidistance towards its neighbours. This neutral stance was upheld by the late King Birendra. Additionally, the visit of Deng Xiaoping to Nepal marked a significant step towards strengthening Nepal's special relationship with China. This period underscored Nepal's efforts to balance its foreign relations amidst regional power dynamics.

Given the geopolitical context of Nepal, China likely recognizes the limitations of pursuing an aggressive strategy towards Nepal. The undeniable reality of India's cultural, geographical, and economic proximity to Nepal makes it challenging for China to supplant India's role in Nepal's economic development. Furthermore, as Nepal underwent political changes and embraced economic liberalization, China's influence and ambitions experienced a setback (Basin, 1970). During the 1980s, relations between India and China adopted a more balanced approach, reflecting nuanced diplomacy in their interactions with Nepal.

In 1978, India agreed to separate trade and transit treaties, addressing a longstanding demand from Nepal. However, when these treaties came up for renewal in 1988, Nepal's refusal to meet India's demands regarding the transit treaty led India to push for a single combined trade and transit treaty. This disagreement escalated into a crisis in India-Nepal relations as Nepal adopted a hard-line stance. Following two extensions, the treaties expired on March 23, 1989, leading to an effective economic blockade by India that persisted until late April 1990. While economic issues were a central factor in this confrontation, Indian dissatisfaction with Nepal's 1988 acquisition of Chinese weaponry also played a significant role (Dahal, 2018). These economic and trade disputes carried political undertones, aimed at exerting pressure on Nepalese politicians and leaders.

Nepal-India Relation after Democratic Restoration in 1990

From 1987 to 1989, Nepal-India relations were highly strained. The primary source of tension was India's

rejection of Nepal's proposal for a peace zone (Singh, 2009). Nepal sought international guarantees, akin to the Swiss model, to ensure its independence, sovereignty, and neutrality in the event of regional conflict. The situation was further complicated when the government of Girija Prasad Koirala, which took office following the 1991 general elections, faced criticism from the CPN (UML). They accused the Koirala government of prioritizing India's interests over Nepal's own (Singh, 1997). Additionally, the CPN (UML) criticized the Nepali Congress (NC) for failing to adhere to a policy of equidistance from both India and China, instead favouring closer ties with both New Delhi and Beijing.

Following the establishment of the United Front Government in 1995, India sought to pursue a policy of fostering good neighborly relations on a short-term basis. The Mahakali Treaty, negotiated between the two countries, was seen by the UML as a means for India to assert control over Nepal's water resources. However, the Gujral Doctrine, which emphasized a more liberal approach to neighborhood diplomacy, improved India's relations with South Asian countries (Upreti, 2009). This policy successfully facilitated the establishment of the Phulbari Bandargaha as a trade route to Nepal.

The royal takeover by King Gyanendra in February 2005 significantly displeased New Delhi, leading India to initially adopt a "wait and see" approach. Subsequently, India decided to boycott the SAARC Summit and suspended its military aid to Nepal. Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh met with King Gyanendra, urging the restoration of democracy in Nepal. India was also wary of King Gyanendra's attempts to leverage China's involvement. Meanwhile, the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) sought direct support from India in opposition to the king's takeover and the ongoing Maoist conflict (Upreti, 2009). Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, a prominent Maoist leader, initiated a pro-India stance within the Maoist party.

With India's direct mediation, the SPA and the CPN (Maoist) reached a 12-point agreement. By April 2006, anti-monarchist movements were gaining momentum in Nepal, with significant contributions from Indian political figures such as Karan Singh and Sita Ram Yechuri in facilitating political change (Pokharel, 2003). The 19-day revolution introduced Loktantra (democracy) in Nepal, with India's involvement proving crucial and effective (Upreti, 2009). This active role was partly driven by India's concerns over increasing Chinese influence in Nepal despite the king's actions.

Under the Maoist regime in Nepal, there was a deliberate move to counterbalance India's significant influence by inviting China to play a more prominent role. The first country that Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as Prachanda, visited after assuming office as Prime Minister was China (Upreti, 2009). This visit sparked discussions among both Nepalese and Indian media, as well as among intellectuals, about the evolving dynamics of Nepal-India relations. During Prachanda's tenure, issues like the appointment of priests at the Pashupatinath Temple also generated anti-Indian sentiments in Nepal. Prachanda later reversed his decision to replace the traditional priest, Bhatta Pujari. Additionally, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, in an interview with Anand Swoop Verma for Think India Quarterly (a popular Indian magazine), addressed questions about his ideological allies. Bhattarai emphasized that he would align with forces supporting revolutionary changes, women's empowerment, and the emancipation of Dalits and other marginalized groups (Timalisina, 2002). He criticized the Indian ruling class for interfering in Nepalese affairs and argued that strengthening Nepalese nationalism was crucial to counteract Indian intervention and unite the people against foreign interference.

After Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal resigned over the dismissal of Army Chief Rukmangat Katuwal, a new government led by CPN (UML) leader Madhav Kumar Nepal was formed. This government faced sharp criticism from the CPN (Maoist), which accused it of being pro-Indian (Kathaputali Sarkar). Subsequently, the government led by CPN (UML) President J.N. Khanal was largely ignored by India, which did not even extend an invitation for a state visit.

Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh expressed that Nepal and India have historically enjoyed close, cordial relations enriched by deep cultural, geographical, and historical bonds (Pokharel, 2003). He highlighted the mutual respect and understanding that have characterized their relationship. However, this statement did not reflect the reality of the situation, as India appeared to favour the Congress government in Nepal over the Communist leadership.

Meanwhile, King Gyanendra's proposal to include China in SAARC, following India's proposal of Afghanistan in November 2005, was met with disapproval. India's displeasure with King Gyanendra was evident, especially after his controversial decision to impose a state of emergency in Nepal on February 1, 2005. India was further irritated by the King's move to involve China in SAARC. Ultimately, the monarchy in Nepal was abolished through the People's Movement II, and the 12-point agreement that underpinned this movement allowed India to exert significant influence over Nepalese politics. Relationship Entered into the New Era 2007.

Following the April Revolution of 2006, Nepal-India relations entered a new phase. Before this, Nepal's interactions with both India and China from 1950 to 2006 were largely shaped by the Monarchical system. India takes pride in its role in facilitating the political changes in Nepal, aligning with the aspirations of the Nepalese people (Destradi, 2010). In the fiscal year 2010, the Nepalese government outlined policies aimed at further strengthening its friendly and cordial relations with neighboring countries, with a particular emphasis on enhancing ties with India and China.

India was uneasy with the Maoist government's approach, particularly its policy of balancing relations with Beijing, which Indian media and analysts interpreted as signalling the end of the 'special relationship' between India and Nepal. Indian observers were concerned that Prime Minister Prachanda's visit to China indicated a shift in the regional power balance in favour of China (Upadhyaya, 2012). Despite these concerns, the Indian government provided support to the Maoist administration when it was established in August 2008.

Similarly, the government led by CPN (UML) leader Madhav Kumar Nepal faced criticism from the Maoists, who labelled it as a pro-Indian administration, calling it the '*Kathputali Sarkar*'. Dr Baburam Bhattarai, a key leader in the CPN (Maoist), was also criticized for his perceived pro-Indian stance, especially regarding the BIPPA (Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement) and the security management at Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA), which was seen as aligning too closely with Indian interests.

Baburam Bhattarai's government, which lasted 18 months, faced significant criticism for being excessively pro-Indian, according to its opponents. During this period, Bhattarai's administration was frequently accused of aligning too closely with Indian interests. In a similar vein, the current government led by Khil Raj Regmi has also been criticized (Sharma, 2012) with some suggesting that it is part of a larger Indian strategy. India had a noticeable and direct role in Nepali politics during the second mass movement, but when its involvement was rebuffed, Nepal suffered an unofficial blockade under the BJP administration.

Findings

The findings of this study are as follows:

Impact of the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty: The treaty fundamentally altered Nepal-India relations by placing Nepal within India's security sphere. However, the withdrawal of the Indian Military Mission in the 1960s indicates a gradual assertion of Nepal's sovereignty, reflecting growing nationalist sentiments and the desire for autonomy.

Shift Toward Equidistance: Nepal's foreign policy evolved, especially under King Mahendra, moving towards equidistance between India and China. This shift, particularly during the 1962 Indo-China war and subsequent diplomatic developments, highlights Nepal's attempt to maintain balanced relations with its powerful neighbours.

Role of Geopolitical Conflicts: Events such as the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the Indo-Pak War of 1971 affected Nepal's relations with India. The 1989 economic blockade, caused by tensions over trade treaties and Nepal's acquisition of Chinese weaponry, underscores how geopolitical conflicts have often strained bilateral ties.

Influence of Anti-Indian Sentiment: India's actions, such as the annexation of Sikkim and the perceived imperialism during regional conflicts, fueled anti-Indian sentiment within Nepal. This nationalist pushback played a significant role in shaping Nepal's internal political discourse and its relationship with India.

Economic and Political Pressures: Trade and economic relations have been pivotal in India-Nepal diplomacy. Disputes over trade treaties, such as the 1988 transit treaty issue, demonstrate how economic pressure has been used by India to influence Nepal's political decisions.

Nepal's Neutral Stance: Throughout various regional conflicts and political upheavals, Nepal has often maintained a neutral stance, exemplified by its response to India's nuclear tests in 1974 and King Birendra's proposal of Nepal as a Zone of Peace, which reflected its desire to protect its sovereignty from external pressures.

India's Role in Political Change: India's mediation in the 2006 revolution and the 12-point agreement between the SPA and CPN (Maoist) showcases its strategic involvement in Nepal's political transitions. However, this involvement has often been viewed with suspicion, especially by political parties and factions advocating for Nepal's sovereignty.

Challenges of Balancing Relations: As Nepal moves forward, it faces the challenge of balancing its relations with both India and China. While India remains culturally and geographically closer, China's growing economic influence in

Nepal adds a complex dimension to this triangular diplomatic relationship.

Conclusion

Nepal-India relations have a long history marked by both cooperation and tension, shaped significantly by India's involvement in Nepalese political developments. India's "wait and see" approach during key political upheavals, such as the royal takeovers of 2059 and 2061 (Bikram Sambat), highlights its cautious stance, which contrasts with China's more reserved involvement in Nepal's internal affairs. Key events, including King Gyanendra's state visit and India's mediation in the 12-point agreement between the SPA and the CPN (Maoist), were pivotal in reshaping Nepal's political landscape, ultimately leading to the end of the monarchy and the integration of Maoists into mainstream politics.

The implications of these historical developments are far-reaching. India's concerns over China's growing influence in Nepal, particularly about Kathmandu's political trajectory, continue to shape its foreign policy towards the country. Additionally, India's support for the April Movement and its involvement in Nepal's constitutional process underscore its broader strategic interests in maintaining stability in Nepal while countering Chinese influence in South Asia. These geopolitical dynamics will likely remain central to Nepal-India relations in the future, as both nations navigate regional power shifts and internal political challenges. The evolving balance of power in Nepal and its implications for India-China relations make the study of this relationship not only historically important but also vital for understanding contemporary regional politics.

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