

Understanding the Primacy of Geography in the Conduct of Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Geopolitics has returned to reassert and manifest itself in various ways. The management of the geopolitics has emerged as the central challenge of the day. The rise of China and emergence of India as great economic powers containing 40 percent of the world's population, and a huge market is one of the most important geopolitical developments of contemporary human history. This has caused monumental shift with a few parallels in the world history. While exposing the vulnerabilities of the world, Covid19 and climate change have accelerated these trends.

The advent of globalization intensified the process of massive social awakening, radicalizing the politics. Market forces would determine the free flow of goods, services, capital, and technology. The latest developments indicate geopolitical considerations driving trade policy and economic integration to reflect geographic, cultural, and strategic direction. The hard lessons from emerging geopolitics include the ongoing rivalry between the US and China, newly assertive Russia and its invasion of Ukraine, Sino-Indian border clashes pushing for deeper US-India partnership. The elevation of the Indo-Pacific as the center piece of US regional strategy has raised the contours of competition and rivalry in the region. Nepal's geographical location between India and China has gained greater prominence and higher sensitivity in the changed context with the geopolitical challenges and economic dynamism of its neighbours at its doorsteps, Nepal's friendship with both of these neighbors' and United States remains of paramount importance in the conduct of its foreign policy. A stable, democratic, and prosperous Nepal stands as the anchor of regional stability and security. Upon the same realization, this qualitative study is an attempt to explain how the primacy of geopolitics has come back and how it is being played.

Key words: *Geopolitics, Geography, Globalization, Democracy, Indo-Pacific,*

Background

In November 1989, the Berlin Wall -the symbol of division of Europe came down. The Iron Curtain that was erected following the end of the World War II (WW II) was demolished. The fall of the Berlin Wall not only ended the 45-year-old Cold War and subordinated the primacy of geopolitics to geo-economics, it also unleashed forces of freedom, innovation and human energy. Nations started looking for markets for their products. More focus was on economic diplomacy than on the hard power. The end of the Cold War made America the most powerful country, with no peer competitor.

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Realizing that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 proved to be a “costly disaster,” Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev chose not to use force to support the communist governments in Eastern Europe. He launched the idea of ‘perestroika’ – or restructuring and glasnost- open discussion and democratization with an intention to reform communism, ‘not replace it.’ That did not work. There was a coup in August 1991 staged by hardliners against Gorbachev. Soviet Republics started declaring independence and suspending communist parties. On December 26, 1991, the Supreme Soviet voted to dissolve itself. Boris Yeltsin and his colleagues seized Gorbachev’s office in Kremlin. On December 31, Soviet flag on Kremlin was replaced by Russian tri-coloured flag, thus formalizing the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Russian President Vladimir Putin called the collapse of the Soviet empire as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century,” and a “genuine tragedy for Russian people.”

With these two earthshaking geopolitical changes, democracy stood unassailable. Prosperity was then with democracies and understood to have delivered dignity to individual. American political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his book *“The End of History and Last Man,”* in 1992 used the word dignity 118 times more than peace and prosperity combined and described the triumph of liberal democracy as a model of governance. Democracy emerged as the rising tide and held clear advantages over ideological rivals as the Cold War had just ended and the one pole of the bipolar power the Soviet Union had disappeared.

The ‘end of history’ pushed the geopolitics to a secondary position. The advent of globalization coincided with the dispersal of power. “Power, after the end of the Cold War, transferred to “entities with no borders, such as ethnic groups, non-government and international organizations or corporation, etc.” (Matthews,1997). The advent of globalization was expected to create wealth and be inclusive. The world focused on new world order and global governance through trade liberalization, nuclear nonproliferation, human rights, the rule of law, and environmental sustainability. Globalization represented as “sophisticated euthanasia of state and national identities and entities,” a negation of state territorial sovereignty” (Tunjic, 2000). Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, the most important objective of “US and EU foreign policy has been to shift international relations away from zero-sum issues toward win-win ones”... and the thinking prevailed that “the collapse of the Soviet Union did not just mean that humanity’s ideological struggle was over for good; they thought geopolitics itself had also come to a permanent end.” (Mead, 2014).

With the history of communism ‘over’, there was the end of geopolitics, paving way to shrink defense spending, lower appropriations on diplomacy, focus less on foreign hotspots in the belief that the world would just go on becoming free and more prosperous through the process of globalization. Countries would focus more on development economics, human rights and nuclear nonproliferation. US also saw it as international system becoming conducive to US interests, and the world on a stronger plane to accruing benefits from the open global economic system. The Clinton administration thought it proper to prioritize promoting liberal world order and “not playing classical geopolitics.” His administration articulated an extremely ambitious agenda in support of that order.

Thirty years after the publication of the book, *“The End of History and Last Man,”* there is “a definitive refutation of the thesis of liberal democracy and return of geopolitics.” (Mead, 2014). Since the beginning of “opening up and reforms process”, China registered remarkable success in raising the material conditions of its population. China has been able to reduce poverty and raise the life expectancy of its people. David Runciman writes in China’s challenge to democracy that “sweet spot” which Fukuyama identified as the end of history, “looks increasingly remote.” (Runciman, 2018).

When we look around today, we find the revolution of rising expectations of people expressed through democratic means remain unaddressed. Populism has risen both on the left and right, and middle space has shrunk considerably leading to the erosion of democratic norms, values, and practices. Leaders for momentary political benefits or gains have practiced immense amount of populist nationalism. The strongman theory is doing the rounds in several countries. Strongmen equate their own well-being with that of the nation and opposition with treason (Albright, 2022). This has pushed liberalism in crisis and democracy in retreat, causing a significant erosion of trust in public institutions. Democracy became weaker and the rise of populism at its cost slowed performance for the welfare of the people. Populist leaders use democratic means to come to power and assault the same process that brought them to office. Examples are plenty how populist leaders have encouraged the ethnicization of politics and politicization of ethnicity for vote banks, and also the criminalization of politics and politicization of criminal activities. Identity politics has poisoned the mainstream politics and generated a feelings of US vs THEM. These has resulted in the presence of large number of elected representatives with criminal backgrounds in parliament which represents the acme of people’s aspirations. Their direct target has been national democratic institutions and their performance.

Geography, Geopolitics and Balance of Power

Geography may conceptually appear distinct from economics, politics, and strategy, yet studies of geo-economics, geopolitics, and geostrategic are taken within it. Geopolitics refers to “the relations of international political power to the geographical setting” (Cohen, 1964). It is taken as “the maneuverings and counter maneuverings of the world’s big powers, the question of who does what to whom around the globe, and why. It is a subject you might think that you ignore at your peril.” (The Economist, 1998).

After the World War II, the center of geopolitical power has been the United States, whose influence, has “radiated to the Maritime edges of the large Eurasian supercontinent.” Political geography remains a critical consideration in the study of international relations. The conduct of foreign policy of any country must be sensitive to political geography of that country. Napoleon once said that to know a nation’s geography was to know its foreign policy. In a similar way, so do maps. “Maps help to understand geopolitical realities, which help understand states’ capabilities and their options. The right map can stimulate foresight by providing a spatial view of critical trends in world politics.” (Kaplan, 2009). If

“understanding the map of Europe was essential to understanding the twentieth century,” closely understanding the Asian map is essential to understanding the dynamics of the twenty first century.

Our understanding of the importance of political geography, the late US national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote, “however, must adapt to the new realities of power.” He wrote, “economic prowess, and its translation into technological innovation, can also be a key criterion of power. Japan provides the supreme example. Nonetheless, geographic location still tends to determine the immediate priorities of a state – and the greater its military, economic and political power, greater the radius beyond its immediate neighbours, of that state’s vital geopolitical interests, influence and involvement.” (Brzezinski,1997).

Based on their geographical locations, nations have pursued a wide variety of policies and adopted a wide range of strategies. World geopolitical analyst Robert Kaplan says geography plays a crucial role in world politics, in this century as in any earlier centuries. Geography determines policy, players, and strategy. Politics is still at the mercy of geography (Kaplan, 2009) that shapes the stakes the players contend. Contemporary global realities confirm the return of geopolitics as the most vital factor influencing the foreign policy. As Europe was at the center of the world history in the twentieth century, Cold War, and bipolar struggle between the two poles mostly remained focused on Europe than anywhere else.

British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder wrote “each century has its own geographical perspectives” (Mackinder, 1919). The geographical perspective of the 21st century is just now being formed and at its heart is a rivalry between China and the United States to succeed Europe’s 500-year centrality in the international system, which will be framed by a shift in global economic activity and trade, new energy resource competition, a weakening Europe and Russia and a technological battle to control information.

The American historian and strategic theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan argued in a 1902 essay that a state with a land as well as maritime frontier was at an enduring and usually fatal geostrategic disadvantage when in naval competition with a wholly insular opponent. He focused upon the growing Anglo-German rivalry, against the backdrop of the historical experiences of Britain in her past competitions with the Dutch and the French. Reasoning geopolitically, Mahan wrote that an insular state, if attentive to the conditions should be able to dictate its policy and maintain its superiority in that particular kind of force (sea power), the mobility of which enables it most readily to project its power to the more distant quarters of the earth. (Mahan,1902).

Technology and geography, communications, and culture, have entered the arena of geopolitics and geo-economics. New weapons technologies can offset distance, terrain, and even climate to an important degree, but their strategic value is limited by at least three major considerations. Communications technologies undoubtedly have produced some features key to the growth of a global community. In fact, scholars of geopolitics consider strategic culture to be shaped importantly by the geographical settings. (Jacobsen, 1990)

The role of technology has come to influence balancing behaviour of state and appears to have surpassed geography as a determinant of state's power, yet "geography continues to be relevant for balance of power politics in Asia in at least three respects: the relative size of potential adversaries, the difference between maritime and continental interstate rivalry, and the distinctive position of the region's most powerful state" (Goldstein, 2003, 179). Geography along with modern military technology continue to condition balance of power in Asia and across the world.

In Asia, geography matters more for balance of power. Due to its location, South Asia is becoming an epicenter of 21st century geopolitics. Indo-centric South Asia is the world's most complex and closely watched region. It has all essential elements that make up geopolitics. South Asians face widespread hunger and extreme poverty amid an abundance of natural endowments and 'unending possibilities.' The region is made up of only 3.27% of Earth's total land area but is home to one fifth of the world's population—a population possessing less than 2% of world income. As ethnic linkages travel across the border, South Asia remains a theater for ethnic, cultural, and religious tensions and rivalries. In the midst of rising ultranationalism and elected authoritarianism, the region has records of repeated interstate wars and myriad intrastate conflicts. Nuclear armed neighbors—India and Pakistan—are at loggerheads. The region is projected to be facing a series of internal and external shocks during the next 15-20 years in which low growth, rising food prices and energy shortages will pose stiff challenges to governance.

South Asia is beset with unsettled territorial disputes, and trans-border criminal and subversive activities. Cross-border terrorism has made the region, as former US President Bill Clinton once deemed it, "the world's most dangerous place." Even more dangerous is as has been noted by leading geopolitical writer Walter Russell Mead, Pakistan "the world's only nuclear state with deep ties to terror groups. And its national security elite believes it is locked in an existential competition with India, its much larger, richer, and more technologically advanced southern neighbor. Yet Pakistan simply does not have the economic capacity to keep up this security competition." In addition, Asia has the world's longest disputed China-India border. Japan has territorial disputes with China. Also, it was in Afghanistan that the United States fought "the longest war" and had to make a "chaotic withdrawal" in 2021 as geographic factors came to be determinative in the final outcome of the global war on terror (GWOT). With trends of democracy in decline and triumph for authoritarian regimes in recent years, each of these serve as fertile nurseries for fueling destabilizing trends, which have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that can be said to be seismic in scale and significance impacting every sphere of national life.

The unprecedented growth of China and its transformation from agrarian backwater as Graham Allison writes, has made it the "the biggest player in the history of the world." Within the space of a few decades, writes Ashley Tellis, China has transformed itself from a predominantly agricultural economy into a manufacturing powerhouse, whose southern provinces were once described by the Economist as "the contemporary equivalent of 19th century Manchester—a workshop of the world." (The Economist, 2002). China today feeds

22% of the world's population with merely 7% of the arable land (Carter, 2011). It has been able to lift living standards of the vast majority of the people 100 folds "within a single human life," and eliminated the absolute poverty.

Today, China is the largest trading nation, greatest source of global lending, military global center of innovation and has largest population. The rise has numerous ramifications for the global system. China wishes to showcase that its "pragmatic authoritarianism" has shown itself more capable of planning for the long term. Today, China has risen not only as a regional power but the global one. With the rise of China, the West thinks a new world is in the making, quite unsure of what it would be like. While China talks of collective dignity, the West stands for the dignity of individuals.

Former Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd says, "preserving peace will be critical not only for the three billion people who call Asia home but the future of global order. Much of the history of the twenty first century, for good or for ill, will be written in Asia, and this in turn will be shaped by whether China's rise can be managed peacefully and without any fundamental disruption to the order" (Rudd, 2013). Kishore Mahbubani writes as "China's weight in global affairs grows, it will have to take on greater responsibility...China's led order could turn out to be more "democratic" order. China does not want to export its model. It can live with a diverse multipolar world. The coming Asian century need not be uncomfortable for the West and the rest of the world" (Mahbubani, 2022).

In 2017 at the 19th Party Congress, President Xi Jinping announced that China has arrived at the center stage. Analysts see China becoming "more aggressively assertive abroad and more authoritarian at home." Under Donald Trump and now Joe Biden, "American policy towards China has shifted from hubristic faith that it could be integrated into the existing American led world order to something closer to paranoid containment, marked by suspicion of China's intentions and a fearful bipartisan consensus that America's global pre-eminence is at risk" (The Economist, 2021).

At the peak of unipolar power, terrorists attacked the United States on September 11, 2001 (9/11 terrorist attacks). It was a transformative moment to the post-Cold War. Terrorist attacks, US President George Bush said, "can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America." (Bush, 2001, 351). He believed that American "energy and freedom" is unparalleled" and announced a "forward strategy of freedom." Perceptions were that a bipartisan consensus in the United States that no political regimes other than liberal democracy provided enough freedom and dignity for a contemporary society to remain stable and democracy could be implanted to favour the United States. President Bush in his address to a Joint Session of Congress and American People on September 20, 2001, said, "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." He said, "Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom -the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time-now depends on us... We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail." (Bush, 2001).

Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, and two decades of the terrorist attacks, the dynamics of international politics has changed contrary to expectations. Contest has been renewed and spread to nook and corner of the world. The present attempts by China, Russia and Iran portray a scenario to overturn the Westerners' view of a world order and balance of power. Russia fears the rise of China in the long run, Tehran and Moscow are sources of oil and would like oil prices to go up, China as a net consumer wants them to be low. Political instability in Middle East may favor Russia and Iran but not to China. Russia seems intending to reassemble as much of the Soviet Union as it can as is reflected in the recognition of two separatist states of Ukraine and unprovoked attacks on it. Geopolitical settings are further complicated with the latest geopolitical developments surrounding Ukraine making the "task of promoting and maintaining world order" daunting. China has not hidden its intentions to be number one superpower. Iran has its own agenda of replacing the order led by Saudi Arabia in the region. A very complex geo-strategic scenario appears to be in the making.

The United States enjoys geographic advantages in full. As the only great power not surrounded by other great powers, "the country has appeared less threatening to other states and was able to rise dramatically over the course of the last century without triggering a war. After the Cold War, when the United States was the world's sole superpower, other global powers, oceans away, did not even attempt to balance against it" (Ikenberry, 2014). Russia's geography stretches from the Baltic Sea to the Sea of Japan with vast area having 11 time zones. Russia has immense natural resources and supplies natural gas. Though a formidable military power, with nuclear weapons, army, air force and navy Moscow's strength is in natural gas and oil and uses them as geopolitical resources to gain influence and enhance power.

China's geostrategic location has both geographic advantages and disadvantages as it pursues to become the 21st century superpower. It has the world's largest population. Its massive army-People's Liberation Army- is being modernized. China's land border extends to 14 countries. Major countries in China's periphery have reacted to the rise of China by modernizing their militaries and reinforcing their alliances. As India lives in a "tough" geopolitical neighbourhood, it showed its interests in Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in mid-2017 because of the gradual deterioration of the China-India relationship. Quad is a group consisting of Australia, India, Japan, the United States, as members that come together and work quadrilaterally in support of a resilient, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. This reflects the growing convergence of their interests across the spectrum, including on strategic and economic cooperation.

Several reports forecast that Asia will have surpassed North America and Europe combined in terms of global power by 2030 with China, India and Brazil becoming especially important to the global economy. South Asia has significant economic prospects, with India projected as one of the world's fastest growing major economy and key driver of continued global economic growth to become the world's third largest economy by 2030.

The Sino-Indian border clashes in 2020 in the Galwan valley, Tibet issue, and China's patronage of Pakistan remain as sources of friction. It is said that that the new source of

tension is the substantial growth of China's military strength, economic footprint, and political influence in both South Asia and the Indian Ocean- emerging as a contested space, which combines "the centrality of Islam with global energy politics and the rise of India and China to reveal a multilayered, multipolar world." (Kaplan, 2009) Indian Ocean remain at the center of global and international politics with China fast becoming the most critical and political power of our time. Countries in the region and the world's superpowers support the one China policy because "they want to avoid what they fear is a costly and unnecessary conflict... A humiliated, bitter, and xenophobic China will...poison relations in the whole region. We will have an ugly, nasty Asia-Pacific." (Yew, 2000)

There has been "a major change in the balance of international forces," as Chinese President Hu Jintao observed in a reference to the financial crisis 2008. The "prospects for multipolarity were now more obvious" (Jintao, 2016). With the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, growing Chinese assertiveness and aggressiveness, United States is upscaling its efforts to contain China, latest of them include hosting QUAD summit (2021) in Washington, and forming an Australia, United Kingdom and United States (AUKUS) among others reflect the Cold War mindsets of the last century. Indeed, a new Cold War in old-fashioned power plays appear to have staged a comeback.

President Putin took advantages of Western weakness and extended a "long overdue recognition" of the two separatist states of Donetsk and Lugansk (part of Ukraine) as independent countries. He sent troops to Ukraine what called them "peacekeepers." In an address just before launching attack on Ukraine, Putin addressed "Ukrainian brothers and sisters," and said, "this is not a war against Ukraine. We are at war with America, NATO, and proxies" (The Economist, 2022). Now the entire world attention remains focused on Russia. "Asia first" is missing. Ukrainian crisis sets the stage for a new superpower struggle. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has triggered a set of geopolitical shifts and challenges the world order at a precarious moment. This challenge has brought the West together. Germany has increased its defence spending. Switzerland has also joined the EU to enforce sanctions. Former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright argued that Russian President Vladimir Putin seeks to revive Russia's imperial or Soviet past, adding that Moscow does not "have a right to chop the globe into spheres of influence as colonial empires did centuries ago" (New York Times, 2022).

Moscow and Beijing forged a partnership with "no limits," on February 4, 2022. President Putin wants the West to rewrite the post-Cold War security arrangements for Europe and Moscow in partnership with Beijing. Afghan lessons are not old, Moscow had gone to Afghanistan in 1979 to quote former US President Jimmy Carter to reach the "warm waters" of the Persian Gulf. Peter the Great's advice to his descendants was "urging Russia to pursue an aggressive approach to access warm waters" (Marshall, 2015). Moscow found itself mired in a long, grinding struggle against a Washington backed insurgency that forced to retreat a decade later. Afghanistan weakened the USSR and contributed to its withdrawal leading to its dismemberment.

Geographical location for power projection matters the most. Powerful countries seek to control geostrategic locations such as transit gates, seaways, mountain passes, hill sides, plateaus, lakes, water resources and oil rich locations and cities. They establish military bases

on foreign land or important geopolitical theaters, or close to their locations. They expect to gain strategic benefits from such bases. During the Cold War, if the West had North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the so-called socialist block had Warsaw Pact. Warsaw Pact was dissolved after the end of the Cold War. America insists on importance of developing a vast network of bases to confront counterterrorism and other regional threats, and also gain leverage from these bases “to press them to liberalize and grant the US the use of network of air bases, naval stations, pipelines and communication facilities in return they get economic assistance” (Cooley, 2005, 79-92). China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017. The intensified high-profile engagements with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Nepal, are taken as challenging Indian influence in South Asia. The 73-day standoff along the Bhutan-China-India tri-border region in 2017 was taken as a part of the Chinese plan among others to strategically encircle India through increasing engagements with its neighbours. The trijunction lies close to the Siliguri Corridor near the Nepal-India border known as “Chicken Neck” and described as a “terrifyingly vulnerable artery in India’s geography” (Panda, 2013). This corridor links India’s northeast to the rest of the country.

As “geostrategic shift has been marked by the Asianization of world politics” (Dahal, 2022) and the center of economic gravity moving from the Europe and North America to Asia, countries in the region have been displaying all their capacities and potentials to shape the twenty first century- as Asian Century. This shift is based on the remarkable progress of China followed by India. Chinese premier Li Keqiang after taking office chose to make his first foreign visit to India in 2013. Writing in the Hindu of May 20, 2013, he said “we live in an age of change but there are always certain things that are enduring forever refreshing and attractive. India is such a nation, at once old and young” (The Hindu, 2013). Premier Li wrote, “the world looks to Asia to be the engine driving the global economy. This would be impossible without the two powerhouses of China and India. Our two countries need to work hand in hand if Asia is to become the anchor of world peace. An Asian century that people expect would not come if China and India, the two most populous countries in the world, failed to live in harmony and achieve common development. Asia’s future hinges on China and India. If China and India live in harmony and prosper together, and if our two markets converge, it will be a true blessing for Asia and the world at large. China’s development promises opportunities for India, and India’s development promises opportunities for China. Our common development will benefit people of the two countries and offer the world more and better opportunities” (The Hindu, 2013).

The euphoria created by the visit soon evaporated. There was a border clash in Galwan valley for the first time in 45 years in June 2020. Since then, India-China relations are not only slowing, but they also remain at a conflictual mode. India considers China as the greatest challenge to its security. China’s growing diplomatic, military, economic and political footprints are viewed with grave concerns in India. India fears that its congenital foe, Pakistan- nuclear power state, is in deep relationship with China, which is characterized as “all-weather friendship, higher than Himalayas, stronger than steel, deeper than oceans and sweeter than honey.” Relations are being widened and deepened between them with a \$60 flagship project known as China-Pakistan Economic Partnership (CPEC) as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative(BRI).

Unfolding crises in countries and regions that are geostrategically sensitive establish that geopolitics never gives its way. The rise of new geopolitics is so significant that it has produced profound geopolitical consequences for region's security, stability, development, achievements and also conflicts, and troubles.

The Nepal Context

Nepal's permanent home is between India and China, forming "the geopolitical heartland of Asia" (Dahal, 2022). The location of Nepal explains its contemporary challenges. Nepal has a landlocked geography and is exposed to myriads of vulnerabilities-geographical difficulties being among the prominent. Acutely aware of geography, the unifier of Nepal, king Prithvi Narayan Shah, laid down the basic tenets of Nepal's foreign policy in eighteenth century. He said, "This Kingdom (Nepal) is like a tarul (a root vegetable) between two stones. Great friendship should be maintained with the Chinese emperor. Friendship should also be maintained with the emperor of the southern seas (the British), but he is very clever. He has kept India suppressed. He is entrenching himself in the plains.... Do not engage in an offensive attack, fighting should be done on a defensive basis.... If it is found difficult to resist in the fight, then even means of persuasion, tact and deceit should be employed" (Yogi and Acharya, 1953). "Yam between two boulders" is the geostrategy Nepal has followed all through.

Understanding the geographical constraints of Nepal is helpful to understand and assess the nation's geographical strength and weaknesses. In the past, high Himalayas in the north stood as natural barrier from immemorial times, what Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru called "a magnificent frontier." Nehru told the Indian Parliament in 1950, "it is not quite so difficult as it used to be, still it is difficult... we cannot risk our own security by anything going wrong in Nepal which permits either that barrier to be crossed or otherwise weakens our frontier." During his visit to Nepal in June 1959, he said, "The Himalayas are a great force which none can affect. The Himalayas are the old friends of Nepal and India and guard us both" (Bhasin,1970).

Nepal shares borders (1880 kms) with India on the south, east, and west and with China (1415 kms) on the north. While border with India is open, mighty Himalayas constitute the frontier with China. Nepal is 23 and 68 times smaller than India and China respectively. Nepal's population of 29 million is almost 46 times smaller than India and 49 times smaller than China. Nepal is among the landlocked and least developed countries. The nearest seaport is 1,127 kilometers away in India. Kathmandu is 3,000 kilometers away from Beijing, 900 km away from New Delhi. This makes access to sea through China difficult, and exorbitantly expensive.

Nepal's foreign policy priority begins with neighbouring countries (Koirala, 2014). Relations with India and China are bound by religious, cultural, and ethnic linkages. Four of India's politically sensitive states and the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China which constitutes its "core concern" border Nepal. It is equally important to study mutually reinforcing ethnic linkages underlining critical geo-strategic location for peace, stability, and development in the entire region as ethnic linkages travel across the borders on both sides-north and south. Nepal's location is of extreme strategic and economic importance to both

of them. Once considered an obstacle, Nepal's location can be turned as opportunity. Nepal can serve as a gate way to South Asia for China and can work to widen prospect for improving the quality of lives of its people.

Nepal's land mass ranges from 62 meters in the south to 8,848.86 meters (The Kathmandu Post, 2020) elevations of Mount Everest in the north. Abundant water resources with a potential of producing 83,000 Megawatt, stand eternally waiting to be converted into hydropower. Rich deposits of minerals and precious plants in the diverse landscape are yet to be surveyed systemically. Nepal lives in scarcity amidst such an abundance. Scarcity of job opportunities has pushed over 6 million Nepali youth out of the country-majority of them being in the Gulf countries to look for work opportunities.

Nepal is uniquely rich in diversity with over 125 ethnic communities and equal number of languages. Nepal is a melting pot of multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multicultural, and multilingual groups. Cultural pluralism remains a unifying factor. Nepal's culture of tolerance, harmony, and respect for all remains firmly woven into the social fabric of its national life. But lately, under different pretexts in this strategically sensitive country, attempts are on for social engineering to weaken, break apart this social cohesion of lasting unity, draw divisions and create fault lines. The most and major challenging task is how such a diversity be firmly tied to unity in universal values of democracy, and rule of law.

In a pluralistic society like Nepal, democracy acts as glue to bind all these ethnic groups in one. It is absolutely essential that we make democracy meaningful to make it powerful. If democracy becomes disgraceful and goes the sectarian way, Nepal's geographical vulnerabilities will compound, and external forces will step in to exploit them to grind their axes. B.P. Koirala said in an interview, "If Nepal has to exist as a nation or develop as a nation, it must also develop democratic institutions." He argued, "unless we develop economically, unless the people are motivated, unless there are democratic institutions, our state cannot exist as an independent state sandwiched between two powers of Asia, both developing at a very fast rate. We cannot just stagnate, vegetate, tucked away on the slopes of the Himalayas" (Koirala,1977).

Following the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, unipolar moment was with the United States. Security became indivisible. Poor countries were considered sources of security problems. The emerging global order appears to be visibly and vastly different from the international order and global balance of power that preceded it. The ongoing rivalry and competition between the United States and China seen in other parts of the world appeared to have arrived at Nepal's doorsteps-thanks to Nepal's location between two emerging global powers China and India.

Nepal's geo-strategic location seems to be turning into a confluence of contest, competition, cooperation, and collaboration. In the ongoing geopolitical game and competition at various levels between China and the United States, China would try to push American power as far away from its borders as it could and reduce America's weight in international diplomacy. As China vigorously pursues peripheral diplomacy with 'security, diplomacy and economics' as its components, the U.S. would try to influence China's neighbors to contain and provide

counterweight to Chinese dominance. They would adopt whatever means they find it convenient in pursuit of their geopolitical goals. Geopolitics has no values and norms, it has only interests. The strong powers, as Greek historian Thucydides wrote, “do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

It was quite unusual for two global powers to do arms twisting over a development grant extended to a country that is nonaligned and trying to develop by mobilizing the goodwill, support and cooperation from its friends and well-wishers in the international community. The exchange of sharp words between the United States and China regarding the Millennium Challenge Corporation’s (MCC)- Nepal Compact that was granted to Nepal by the former reflects the growing sensitivity and fragility of Nepal’s geographic location and big powers’ ongoing rivalry and competition in Nepal.

Donald Lu, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs in a reported phone call on February 10 had urged to endorse the MCC pact by February 28, or Washington would “review its ties with Nepal.” February 28 was the timeframe proposed by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and coalition partner Maoist Chair Prachanda in their September 2021 letter to MCC to “fulfill their commitments to MCC.” US State Department Spokesperson expressed concerns that the propaganda against MCC in Nepal had been “actively fomented or funded or encouraged or facilitated, or all the above, by China.” (Lu, 2022), and also some imaginative conspiracy theories “to place American troops on Nepalese soil” were in circulation, and “aided by Chinese-orchestrated disinformation campaigns” (The Economist, 2022). Such imaginative theories were utterly preposterous. Sharply reacting to the American official’s saying, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said, China opposes “coercive diplomacy and actions that “pursue selfish agenda at the expense of Nepal’s sovereignty and interests.” China viewed that “such cooperation should be based on full respect for the will of the Nepalese people and come with no political strings attached.” (Wenbin, 2022) Beijing questioned “does a gift come with the package of an ultimatum? How can anyone accept such a “gift”? Is it a “gift” or Pandora’s box?” (Chunying, 2022). These expressions amply reflect the attempts of ‘geopolitical maneuverings and counter maneuverings” which can hardly be ignored.

Amidst this exchange of sharp words between its two traditional friends, Nepal’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, “Nepal has always been pursuing an independent, balanced and non-aligned foreign policy,” and as a sovereign country, it “accepts and utilizes development assistance... in terms of national interest, as per its national requirement and priority.” The Ministry clarified, “the sovereign parliament of Nepal alone decides what development assistance is needed in the best interest of Nepal and Nepali people ” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

It is time to accept the heightened sensitivity of Nepal’s geographic location, realize the gravity of these harsh realities, and ongoing geopolitical rivalry and competition between established superpower USA and emerging superpower China. The elevation of the Indo-Pacific as the center piece of US regional strategy, and Xi’s taking China to the center stage of global politics have seen an upsurge in US-China competition. The Sino-Indian border

clashes and their stable ties taking downward trend in almost half a century, have pushed toward deeper US-India partnership. This puts Nepal in a tight spot.

Nepal should develop a strategic culture and have a geostrategy for the skillful management of geostrategic sensitivity for the preservation of its sovereignty and protection of territorial integrity. An institutionalized global cooperation based on rule of law is what the world needs at the moment. We must not ignore the dynamic transformation that is generating a new set of strategic uncertainties and ambiguities in the neighbourhood and beyond.

The world has become more interdependent and interconnected. Nations' destinies have come to be intertwined. No nation, no matter how powerful, will be able to shape all the rules in its own image. It will need to be cooperative and confident. Important issues such as climate change, pandemic, nuclear proliferation, and other transnational issues that threatening the existence of the entire humanity need close cooperation and coordination of all-big or small nations alike. They should be fully conscious of shared responsibilities and shoulder responsibilities to address these pressing issues.

India and China along with the USA are key and dynamic geostrategic players. They are guided by their own interests. While Nepal stands ready to address their legitimate interests and concerns, it expects that its sensitivities and legitimate interests be respected by them also. Living for centuries with very big neighbours, both north and south, Nepal has been able to protect its sovereignty, and maintain a prestigious international profile. "In the past there have been the British, there have been the Mughals, there have been the Chinese and others. But basically, our neighbours have always been large. But we have always been able to live in this situation and this because we believe in having relations with our neighbours independent of one another" (Shah, 1974). Neighbours and friends in international community are expected in this strategically sensitive location to understand Nepal's geopolitical compulsions, and not to cross any redlines that destabilizes the country or deprive Nepal of its legitimate aspirations. Nepal pursues democratic pluralism at home and multipolarity in international relations. It wants the world to be governed by the rule of law and responsibility. Nepal pursues an independent foreign policy and judges every issue on its merits without fear or favour. There is no question of Nepal taking any sides. It has been an independent country throughout its history. This should be respected by our neighbours, friends and well-wishers in the international community.

Conclusion

Geography matters more than anything else. States are products of geography which shapes human actions, behaviour and discourses. The influence of the geographical setting upon international power relations is so pervasive that there is no escape from geography. The size, character of territory population, social habits, and location are important in the study of international relations. Recognition of the relevance and importance of geopolitical thinking, appreciation of the meaning of the geographical settings for international political power shapes thoughts and actions. This demonstrates the importance of geopolitical insight and understanding.

The strategic importance of location is back at the center of geopolitics. The emergence of India and China as great economic powers is one of the most important geopolitical developments of contemporary human history. With China and India as the engines of growth, emergence as leading global players through their perseverance and performance, containing 40 percent of the world's population with them, and a huge market, they are at the center of the global attention. Today, reports indicate that out of every three persons on earth is of Chinese or Indian descent and the countries of the Indo-Pacific already account for 60% of the world's population. Their rise as world-class economies represent a monumental shift with a few parallels in world history. Given their growing role, power and influence, no sustainable world order can be created unless India and China come together, work together, and rise together.

Nepal's location between them, which was once considered an obstacle for development, can prove to be a boon in the changed context. We must seize the opportunities to benefit from both of these rising economies. Nepal maintains friendly relations with both India and China than they have with each other. Our friendship with both of these neighbors' remains of the paramount importance in the conduct of our foreign policy. Nepal should, therefore, work towards sharing their prosperity and further spreading it.

The hard lessons from emerging geopolitics include the ongoing rivalry between the US and China, resurgence of Russia and its 'intend to reassemble' the Soviet Union, India leaning towards the US, and the outbreak of the covid 19 pandemic and variants exposing the strength of all nations. Added to this phenomenon are discontents in globalization, and issues that continue to plague the world including widening inequality, rampant corruption, erosion of public trust in public institutions, high unemployment prevalent among the young people who finding no jobs turn to extremism. Nepal with a host of geographic challenges, burgeoning social and economic problems will become stable, democratic, and prosperous only if people are made strong and foundation of national power is cemented. Strengthening the national cohesion while enhancing capacity of democratic institutions to confront the emerging challenges will make Nepal the anchor of regional stability and security.

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