

China-Nepal Think Tank Cooperation: Significance, Status and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Think tanks play an important role in the friendly relationship between China and Nepal. China-Nepal think tank exchanges and cooperation is the proper meaning of building a China-Nepal destiny community, fits the inherent objectives of China-Nepal think tank construction, and can provide effective intellectual support for the construction of the “Belt and Road” together with China and Nepal. At present, China-Nepal think tank cooperation has made remarkable progress: the two countries have set up specialized China study and Nepal study institutes, published a large number of reports, theses, monographs and media commentaries, intensively organized forums and conferences to improve exchange and cooperation mechanisms, promoted public diplomacy of think tanks to reinforce the people-to-people bonds between China and Nepal, and at the same time, they have also joined hands to build an international and interdisciplinary think tank platform with mountain characteristics. In the face of some shortcomings in the existing cooperation, both sides should strengthen the comprehensive capacity building of the two countries' think tanks, explore emerging topics such as digital and green transformation, promptly bridge the cognitive differences in China-Nepal cooperation, and ensure the objectivity and truthfulness of the information sources and knowledge outputs. Only in this way can China-Nepal think tank cooperation create new paths, expand its influence and enhance its effectiveness, and play a stronger role as an intellectual engine for deepening the development of the China-Nepal relationship.

Keywords: China-Nepal relationship, China-Nepal destiny community, “Belt and Road”, Think tank cooperation, Public diplomacy

1. Introduction

After the 10 to 15 years since the restoration of democracy in Nepal, the Nepalese government and society have gradually strengthened their dependence on the views and suggestions of think tanks, which has injected vitality into Nepal's bright future (Birendra, 2014, p. 20). Nepal now has a large number of think tanks of various types. Taking the example of Nepali think tanks focusing on foreign strategy and public policy, these think tanks can be divided into four main groups, namely, official think tanks affiliated with the government (such as Policy Research Institute [PRI] & In-stitute of Foreign Affairs [IFA]), independent and autonomous non-partisan private think tanks (such as Nepal Policy Institute [NPI], Nepal Institute for Policy Research [NIPoRe], Nepal Insti-tute for International Cooperation and Engagement [NIICE], Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy [CESIF], Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs [AIDIA], & The Global Dialogue Forum in Nepal [GDFN], etc), foreign think tank branches in Nepal (such as Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Nepal [FeS-Nepal], etc), and international think tanks built together by many countries (such as International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development [ICIMOD], etc). A large number of think tanks with diverse forms, organizations and emphases have played a key role in Nepal's external relations and in the formulation of major socio-economic policies that cannot be ignored. Fully aware of the rapid development of think tanks in Nepal and their profound impact on Nepal's internal and external affairs, the Chinese political and academic circles have made great efforts to strengthen the interaction between think tanks in China and Nepal. In recent years, China-Nepal think tank cooperation has achieved remarkable results, and has become an important bridge for communication between the Chinese and Nepali governments and civil so-ciety, enhancing their understanding of each other's politics, economy and culture, laying a solid cognitive foundation and providing ideological guidance for building a closer China-Nepal destiny community in the new era and deepening the China-Nepal “Belt and Road” all-round Cooperation. However, compared with the actual needs arising from the in-depth development of the Chi-na-Nepal relationship, there is still much room for expanding the scale and quality of cooperation between the two countries' think tanks. How to further enhance the level of China-Nepal think tank cooperation so that it can better play the role of spiritual drive and intellectual support for the Chi-na-Nepal relationship is an urgent issue to be solved now. Therefore, it is undoubtedly of great theoretical and applied value to explore the significance of China-Nepal think tank cooperation, its current situation and its improvement path.

2. The Significance of China-Nepal think tank cooperation

The significance of China-Nepal think tank cooperation is mainly reflected in the

following three points:

2.1. The proper meaning of building China-Nepal destiny community

From October 12 to 13, 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid an official state visit to Nepal. During this visit, the leaders of the two countries issued the “China-Nepal Joint Statement”, upgrading the China-Nepal Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation Featuring Ever-lasting Friendship to Strategic Partnership of Cooperation Featuring Ever-lasting Friendship for Development and Prosperity, marking the China-Nepal relationship have entered a new era, and the important connotation of the new era is to build a China-Nepal destiny community (Lou, 2019). Among them, people-to-people bonds are defined as the lasting driving force of the China-Nepal destiny community with a shared future. The “China-Nepal Joint Statement” clearly states: Both sides agree to strengthen exchanges and cooperation at different levels in the fields of education, culture, tourism, traditional medicine, media, think tanks, youth and other fields (State Council, 2019). Think tank cooperation is regarded as one of the important ways to enhance the level of cultural and exchange between China and Nepal. It is a wisdom guarantee for the shared dreams and shared destinies of the Chinese and Nepalese peoples, and a powerful support for the pursuit of common interests and well-being between the two countries.

The Nepal think tank community generally agrees on the China-Nepal destiny community as the long-term goal for the development of China-Nepal relations, and has noted the compatibility and commonality between its own mission and vision and the connotation of the China-Nepal destiny community: For example, The Global Dialogue Forum in Nepal (GDFN, Sagarmatha Sambaad) provides a philosophical interpretation of the essence of the mankind destiny contained in the cooperation between China and Nepal think tanks, which is rich in Nepalese ethnic characteristics: Mountain Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest) is the highest natural landmark on Earth and the highest witness to ongoing global events. The majestic and towering Mount Everest inspires us to think comprehensively beyond national borders. As an ancient Sanskrit says, “**वादे जायते तत्त्वबोध**” (Knowledge is generated through discourses). The practical challenges faced by humanity worldwide can be addressed through dialogue and reflection. In today's complex world, think tanks need to engage in more open and collaborative dialogue to exchange ideas and share experiences on prominent issues of global, regional, and national significance, in order to contribute to promoting the common interests and collective well-being of all humanity (GDFN, 2024). This shows that the grand mission and vision of Nepal think tanks represented by GDFN coincides with the core value of the China-Nepal destiny community advocated by the leaders of China and Nepal; strengthening China-Nepal think tank dialogue and cooperation is exactly the right path and proper meaning to create the China-Nepal destiny community and promote the common interests of the Chinese and Nepali people.

2.2. Fit the inherent objectives of China-Nepal think tank construction

On January 20, 2015, the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council stated: In order to strengthen the external communication capabilities and discourse system construction of new think tanks with Chinese characteristics, and enhance the international competition of Chinese think tanks It is urgent to deepen the reform of the international exchange and cooperation mechanism, establish an exchange and cooperation mechanism with internationally renowned think tanks, and carry out research on international cooperation projects (State Council, 2015). On April 29, 2019, the “Belt and Road” International Think Tank Cooperation Committee was announced. This is an important measure in response to President Xi Jinping’s suggestion to “play the role of think tanks and build a think tank alliance and cooperation network.” It is also an important step for Chinese and foreign experts to build a cooperation platform and a positive response to the willingness to promote the normalization of the “Belt and Road” academic exchange mechanism (State Council, 2019). On February 14, 2020, the 12th meeting of the Comprehensive Deepening Reform Committee of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China reviewed and approved the “Opinions on Further Promoting the Pilot Work on the Construction of National High-end Think Tanks”, once again specified the international cooperation charter of Chinese think tanks and provided guidance on promoting the development of national high-end think tanks (Chen, 2021).

The above-mentioned official documents on the construction of Chinese think tanks emphasize the international cooperation of think tanks, which fully proves that the introduction and globalization of Chinese think tanks is an important component of the implementation of the Party Central Committee’s think tank plan. China’s strengthening of think tank cooperation with Nepal is consistent with China’s own intrinsic goal of think tank construction and strengthening of think tank international exchanges and cooperation is also the goal of major think tanks in Nepal: Nepal Institute for International Cooperation and Engagement (NIICE) claims that it is committed to building strong interdisciplinary programs and building productive partnerships with different research and academic institutions around the world (NIICE, 2016); Nepal Institute for Policy Research (NIPoRe) said that since the COVID-19 epidemic dissipated, its members have been discussing relevant policy issues with partners and researchers in Nepal and other Asian economies (NIPoRe, 2019); Nepal’s official think tank Policy Research Institute (PRI) and the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) also discussed preliminary ideas for joint research with mainstream think tanks in South Asia and China (PRI, 2020). The importance attached to international cooperation by the above mentioned official and private think tanks in Nepal is yet another strong evidence of the deep congruence between China-Nepal think tank cooperation and the

goals of think tank construction in both countries.

2.3. Intellectual support for China-Nepal jointly building the “Belt and Road”

Since Nepal officially joined the “Belt and Road” initiative on May 12, 2017, think tank cooperation has played a very important role in ideological support and intellectual guidance in China-Nepal “Belt and Road” construction.

On one hand, Chinese and Nepalese think tanks have formed a consensus conceptual discourse on the importance and positive significance of the joint construction of the “Belt and Road”, and have spoken out enthusiastically for the construction of the “Belt and Road” between China and Nepal, playing a good role in leading public opinion and popularising the idea. Di Fangyao and Liu Xingjun from the Institute of South Asian Studies, Xizang Minzu University (ISAS, XZMU) wrote that the “Belt and Road” initiative of the Chinese government provides a rare historical opportunity for Nepal to get out of the dilemma of socio-economic development, improve people's well-being, and constantly enhance its ability to resist external interference (2019, p. 54). The above acknowledgement and evaluation of Chinese think tank scholars on the great significance of China-Nepal joint construction of the “Belt and Road” has been recognized and endorsed by many Nepalese think tank scholars: Sumitra Karki, a researcher at NIICE, believes that the “Belt and Road” initiative can help Nepal transform from a land-locked country to a land-linked country, thereby reducing its dependence on India, promoting the diversification of cross-border trade, and gradually achieving economic stability and prosperity (2019); Dr Kalyan Raj Sharma, Chairman of the Trans-Himalaya Development Center, also firmly believes: “The Trans-Himalaya Connectivity Network agreed upon by the top leaders of China and Nepal will be the best choice to eliminate infrastructure gaps and development bottlenecks in the region”(2019). Positive propaganda by Chinese and Nepalese think tanks on the joint construction of the ‘Belt and Road’ will undoubtedly win the hearts and minds of the people and gain popularity for the promotion of the ‘Belt and Road’ in Nepal.

On the other hand, Nepalese think tanks' analyses and assessments of the risks and challenges faced by the “Belt and Road” will help Chinese think tanks and policy circles to identify the gaps and make up for the shortcomings of Chi-na-Nepal “Belt and Road” construction in a targeted manner. A number of scholars at the Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA) in Nepal have keenly identified the constraints of the “Belt and Road” Initiative in Nepal: from the point of view of Nepal's internal situation, political instability, structural scarcity of institutions and policies, poor infrastructure, and scarcity of resources (Sajina, 2018) are the main internal causes of Nepal's inability to grasp the historical opportunities of the “Belt and Road” initiative; In terms of Nepal's external environment, India's misgivings and concerns about the “Belt and Road”, as well as Nepal's “blindly following India's footprint and making similar opinion while dealing with China” (Trilok, 2017), are the main external obstacles to the construction of the “Belt and Road” by China and Nepal; At the same

time, the China-Nepal 'Belt and Road' itself has some shortcomings: some large-scale projects are too large and time-consuming for Nepal's frequently changing government to sustain in the long term; China needs to be more realistic and prepare more small and medium-sized projects (Zhou, 2021). The above analyses by Nepalese think tanks hit the nail on the head, contributing professional analyses of the causes and solutions to the weaknesses of China-Nepal "Belt and Road" construction, and providing a multi-dimensional direction for China's think tanks and even the government's next step to improve the planning of China-Nepal "Belt and Road" construction.

3. The Status of China-Nepal think tank cooperation

At present, China-Nepal think tank cooperation has made gratifying achievements in institutional setup, publication of results, mechanism improvement, public diplomacy, and interdisciplinary platform construction. The specific situation is as follows:

3.1. Set up specialized China study and Nepal Study institutes

Study institutes are the essential carriers for the survival and development of think tanks. The establishment of specialized China study and Nepal study institutes marks the maturity of each other's research forces and plays a foundational and driving role in the relevant research and subsequent think tank cooperation between the two sides.

Nepal has now established a number of think tanks directly engaged in China studies. Among them, the China Study Centre (CSC) is the first to be mentioned. Established in 2000, CSC is the most influential civil society organization in Nepal engaged in friendly exchanges with China, with members including retired diplomats and academics. Its aim is to carry out exchanges and academic research on China, introduce and promote China, and actively advocate Nepal-China friendship (NDRC, 2016). By 2005, CSC had established 12 branch centers in major cities in Nepal such as Butwal, Biratnagar, Dhulikel, Lumbini, Chitwan, etc., with more than 1,000 members (China Net, 2005). By 2020, the number of CSC in Nepal has increased to about 30 plus. In addition, Nepal-China Mutual Cooperation Society (NCMCS), which was established in 2005 with the financial support of the Chinese Embassy in Nepal, and Nepal China Friendship Forum (NCFE), which was founded by Fudan University alumnus Dr Kalyan Raj Sharma in 2013, are also active in the field of exchange and co-operation with China.

China is also making rapid progress in the establishment of Nepali research institutions: on 16 July 2014, Hebei University of Economics & Business pioneered the establishment of China's first academic institution specializing in Nepali country studies—the Nepal Study Center at Hebei University of Economics & Business (NSC, HUEB), under the leadership of Professor Zhang Shubin (NSC, HUEB, 2014). Since then, Nepal Study Center at Beijing Foreign Studies University (2017), Nepal Study

Center at Yunnan Minzu University (2017), Nepal Study Center at Northwest University (2018), Nepal Center at Zhejiang Gongshang University (2018), Nepal Study Center at Yunnan University (2020) and Nepal Study Center at Tibet University (2021) have also been established. At the same time, Institute of South Asian Studies, Sichuan University (ISAS, SCU), Institute of South Asian Studies, Xizang Minzu University, South Asia Research Center of East China Normal University in South Asia regional research bases have also cultivated researchers specializing in Nepal study, strengthening the position of Nepal study in China's South Asia research. In addition to research institutions in universities, mainstream think tanks in China, such as China Academy of Social Sciences, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations and Shanghai Institute of International Studies, have also begun to list Nepal as one of the key directions of their South Asian studies, and trained many talents engaged in Nepal affairs analysis. The establishment of the above-mentioned Nepal study institutions and teams marks the gradual formation of a Nepal research team with great potential in China, which has laid a talent foundation for Nepal research in China, and is of course conducive to the promotion and deepening of China-Nepal think tank cooperation.

3.2. Publish many reports, theses, monographs and media comments

The publication of research results is one of the main ways for think tanks to enhance their popularity and expand their social and policy influence. China-Nepal think tanks have adopted diversified forms of cooperation in publishing results, including policy reports, theses, monographs and media comments.

The first is to launch a research report on the development of bilateral relations. On December 7, 2018, the Nepal Research Group of Shanghai Institute of International Studies officially released the policy report "Development Cooperation Between China and Nepal Under the 'Belt and Road' Initiative". The report was written on the basis of on-the-spot investigation and interviews in Nepal, which comprehensively combed China's aid, trade and investment in Nepal. Its practical value has been highly recognized by domestic and foreign experts, that is, it can not only serve the development of Sino-Nepalese diplomatic relations, but also provide a constructive reference for China enterprises to invest in Nepal (SIIS, 2018). Nepal think tanks are equally keen to write research reports on China-Nepal relations: Nepal Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy (CESIF) published a series of work reports in official website from 2022 to 2024, such as "China's Engagement in Nepal" (Ajaya & Vijay, 2022) and "Foreign Engagements in Nepal and Nepal-China Cross Border Relations" (Vijay & Arpan, 2022), which made a panoramic analysis of China-Nepal relations from multiple perspectives and had high application guiding significance.

The second is to translate and introduce theses and monographs from each other's think tank scholars. March 2, 2019, Center for Trans-Himalaya Studies, Leshan Normal University (CTHS, LNU) and Lieutenant General Vivek Kumar Shah, Chairman

of Nepal Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS), and Professor Yubaraj Sangroula, Dean of Kathmandu Law School, who came to meet, signed a power of attorney authorizing the center to translate and publish their works (CTHS, LNU, 2019), and prepared to translate two monographs, *Witnessing Palace, Power and Politics: Memoirs of a Military Secretary of the King of Nepal* (Vivek, 2020) and *South Asia China Geo-economics* (Yubaraj, 2018), into China respectively. In addition to translating monographs, academic theses of Nepalese scholars are also very popular in China academic circles: Rupak Sapkota, who is currently the foreign affairs adviser to the Prime Minister of Nepal, once published a high-level paper entitled "China-India-Nepal Trilateralism: An Initiative Beyond Geopolitics" in Chinese CSSCI Journal *Journal of International Security Studies* (Rupak, Zhao & Wang, 2016). Correspondingly, experts in Nepal studies in China, represented by Professor Zhang Shubin, director of NSC, HUEB, have also begun to publish their achievements in Nepal journals such as *Vision & Horizon* (NSC, HUEB, 2024), sharing the academic views of China think tank scholars with Nepalese people.

The third is to speak on each other's important news media. On the China side, Gao Liang, assistant researcher at the ISAS, SCU, is a representative scholar among Chinese think tanks, who has formed good interactions with Nepalese news media. Up to now, Gao Liang has published 13 commentary articles in important Nepalese media, such as *Kathmandu Post* and *My Republica* (Liu Xiaolong, 2021). With the help of mass media, he has sent the voice of a Chinese scholar to Nepalese people on topics such as Nepal's geopolitical dilemma and China-Nepal relationship. As for Nepal, many experts and scholars have also published articles in authoritative Chinese media to convey to the Chinese people the views and voices of Nepalese think tanks on China-Nepal "Belt and Road" construction, China-Nepal economic and trade cooperation and other issues. For example, the well-known Nepalese scholars Yubaraj (NCNA, 2019) and Rubo (NCNA, 2019) mentioned above have been interviewed or made relevant political commentaries in *New China News Agency* (NCNA), China's top official media.

3.3. Organize forums and conferences to improve cooperation mechanisms

Holding academic forums and conferences is a common cooperation mechanism of think tanks, which can build a communication bridge and a communication platform for knowledge sharing among different think tanks. Forums and conferences held by China-Nepal think tanks can be roughly divided into two types:

One type is the "government affairs training" actively undertaken by China think tanks for Nepalese cadres. From April 17th to 26th, 2016, National Cadre Education and Training Base, Sichuan University (NCETB, SCU) held the first Nepal Senior Government Affairs Seminar, which explained the story of China to young cadres of major political parties in Nepal and witnessed the friendship between China and Ne-

pal through special lectures, thematic discussions, on-site visits and student forums (NCETB, SCU, 2016). Since 2016, the Nepal Senior Government Affairs Seminar has been held as scheduled every year, forming a stable regular training mechanism.

Another type is the purely academic exchange meetings and discussion forums between Chinese and Nepalese think tanks. On January 17, 2017, the two-day 2017 “China-Nepal Think Tank Dialogue” was held in Kathmandu, Nepal. Nearly 200 representatives from about 20 think tanks and academic institutions in China and Nepal attended the meeting. Think tank scholars from the two countries conducted full and enthusiastic academic discussions on the specific measures of China-Nepal interconnection (NCNA, 2017). On January 21, 2017, the team of Di Fangyao of Xizang Minzu University held many discussions with the heads of think tanks such as Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) at Tribhuvan University, and reached a number of consensuses, which further implemented the “Memorandum on Inter-school Co-operation between China Xizang Minzu University and Tribhuvan University of Nepal” signed in 2016, opening up many new fields of scientific research and teaching cooperation between the two universities (ISAS, XZMU, 2017). It is not difficult to see that China-Nepal think tank cooperation has developed from verbal conception to document agreement, and the cooperation mechanism has become more mature and standardized. Since 2017, the conferences and forums jointly organized by the major think tanks in China and Nepal are very frequent, and there are a lot of close academic interactions every year. The related reports are too numerous to mention, and the academic consciousness of mutual help and exchange of needed goods has emerged. A China-Nepal think tank academic community seems ready to come out.

3.4. Promote public diplomacy of think tanks to reinforce people-to-people bonds

Think tanks, as an important force in the “Belt and Road” public diplomacy, play an important role that cannot be replaced by intergovernmental “track one” diplomacy (Li & Yu, 2020, p. 75). In order to truly achieve the people-to-people bond between China and Nepal, the help of think tank public diplomacy is essential. At present, China-Nepal think tanks have achieved phased cooperation results in establishing reading projects, promoting cultural mutual learning, and holding youth dialogues.

The first is to establish reading projects. The NCFE led by Dr Kalyan Raj Sharma has made a representative contribution to this. On December 6, 2018, the think tank officially launched a reading project called “Panda Book Corner”, which aims to promote the language, history and culture of China to Nepalese students and share the specific knowledge and experience of China (NCFE, 2022), providing an excellent learning channel for Nepalese students to understand China.

The second is to promote cultural mutual learning. On November 22nd, 2023, Contemporary China and World Studies at China International Communications Group, and think tanks such as CSC of Nepal jointly hosted “the seminar on shared

development and knowledge exchange between China and South Asia” and the “2023 South Asia International Book Fair”, which discussed the deep historical and cultural ties between China and Nepal and sought more ways to broaden cultural exchanges, so as to promote cultural exchanges and mutual learning between China and Nepal (Guo, 2023). As one of the important forms of think tank public diplomacy, such cultural sharing activities are undoubtedly the link to maintain cultural understanding and unity between China and Nepal.

The third is to hold youth dialogues. On October 9, 2023, the author was fortunate to participate in the China-Nepal youth exchange seminar with the theme of “carrying dreams and lighting up the future” sponsored by the ISAS, SCU. At this meeting, the author made many Nepalese friends, exchanged real ideas and established an academic contact network, which gained a lot. It can be said that the author, through personal experience, realized that the exchange, studying and mutual learning between the youths of the two countries organized by the China-Nepal think tank is very important for further enhancing China-Nepal friendship, deepening mutual understanding and rallying development consensus.

3.5. Build an interdisciplinary think tank platform with mountain characteristics

If the above cooperation measures are common paths for international cooperation of think tanks, then the Inter-national Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), an interdisciplinary think tank platform with mountain characteristics, is the highlight and novelty of China-Nepal think tank cooperation.

ICIMOD is a unique intergovernmental organization dedicated to improving people's livelihood in eight countries along the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Mountains and protecting mountain environment and culture. Currently China is also an important member of ICIMOD. It not only supports Sichuan University and Yunnan University to join the Himalayan University Alliance (HUC), collaborating with the University of Nepal to conduct natural science research on cryosphere analysis, disaster prevention and reduction, water resource management (ICIMOD, 2024); but also actively collaborates with Nepal to establish a cross Himalayan environmental humanities working group, introducing humanities and social sciences into Himalayan mountain research (ICIMOD, 2019).

At present, China and Nepal have made good progress in cooperation under the ICIMOD framework: Since 2016, ICIMOD has accepted researchers from China think tanks for resident research every year. In June 2019, Gao Liang from the ISAS, SCU was selected as a visiting scholar in ICIMOD for 8 months. During this period, Gao Liang participated in various activities organized by HUC, conducted field research in the Chitwan area, and used the collected data to complete the writing of the book *Study on the Governance of Terai Area in Nepal* (Gao, 2023). In addition, China think tank co-authored and published research results with ICIMOD. On June 9, 2021, the

Southwest Frontier Minority Research Center of Yunnan University published a new book entitled *Environmental Humanities in the New Himalayas Symbiotic Indigeneity, Commoning, Sustainability* (Dan & Erik, 2021) in cooperation with ICIMOD, which marked the emerging of the interdisciplinary research field of Himalayan environmental humanities.

From the above-mentioned cooperation activities between China and Nepal on ICIMOD, it can be seen that Chi-na-Nepal think tank cooperation is emphasizing and highlighting the mountain elements, labeling the cooperation between the two sides with the characteristics of Himalayan mountains, standing out the cultural value confidence of China and Nepal. This will attract the attention of the world's think tanks to the China-Nepal mountain think tanks, and thus it is expected to seize a place in international academic positions such as poverty alleviation in mountain economy, disaster protection and cross-Himalayan ethnic governance, and lead the discussion trend in the field of global mountain research.

4. The Prospects of China-Nepal think tank cooperation

In recent years, China-Nepal think tank cooperation has made significant progress and achieved fruitful results, but there are also some shortcomings. This requires both China and Nepal to take corresponding improvement measures to optimize, and the following suggestions may have a certain reference value for this:

4.1. Strengthen the comprehensive capacity building of two countries' think tanks

The first is to enhance academic research capabilities, emphasizing both basic research and applied research. In re-cent years, China-Nepal think tanks have mostly focused on the construction of the “Belt and Road”, cross Himalayan connectivity and other hot topics. This style of study, which excessively pursues hot spots, leads to the defects of homo-geneity or repetitive research in China-Nepal think tanks. Scholars of China-Nepal think tanks should be willing to sit on the “cold bench”, appropriately strengthen the basic historical research and consolidate the foundation of applied research, so as to come up with more enduring views and conclusions with both historical depth and practical significance.

The second is to strengthen the ability of results transformation and form a multi-channel and multi-body participation mode. At present, the ability and mechanism of Chinese think tanks to transform their results are obviously lacking. Most of China's Nepal study think tanks are research centers at universities, their researchers are still oriented towards theses and monographs, and their policy recommendations often lack operability and channels for upward reporting. China's think tanks should improve the procedures and methods of consulting and assisting in politics by combining the power of the government, universities, and private capital to form a set of ‘official + private’ organic integration of multi-subjects participation mode, which will strongly promote the generation and transformation of think tanks' results.

The third is to promote international communication capacity and shape an autonomous discourse on global thought governance. Although China-Nepal think tanks have done a lot of work in public opinion dissemination, their overall international influence is not yet satisfactory, and they have yet to form a mature international dissemination system. Most of the think tanks that are familiar to the international community and are able to grasp the discourse power of the international intellectual community are still European and American think tanks. In view of the above situation, China-Nepal think tanks should build an all-round cooperation platform and mechanism of “think tank + me-dia”, implement “menu-style” media cooperation with clear objectives, and expand the global voice of China-Nepal think tanks; while actively learning from the international communication experience of western advanced think tanks, we should maintain the China-Nepal characteristics, create the China-Nepal style, and safeguard the independent “thought development right”.

4.2. Explore emerging topics such as digital and green transformation

Helping Nepal to lift itself out of poverty at an early date is one of the core objectives of the “Belt and Road”. China-Nepal think tanks should contribute practical think tank programmes for Nepal's sustainable economic development. To this end, China-Nepal think tanks may wish to dig deeper into the two emerging topics of digital and green transformation:

The first is to design a new path of digital transformation in Nepal. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Nepal (FES-Nepal) has issued an appeal: It is time to discuss Nepal's future development model, and Nepal should look for opportunities in the digital service sector that does not rely much on physical infrastructure (FES-Nepal, 2020). This think tank's view is right on the mark, and in the future, it would be logical for the China-Nepal think tanks to closely align itself with the strategic vision of the 2019 Digital Nepal Framework (DNF), set a clear vision for Nepal's digital transformation, and cultivate experts in digital connectivity, digital technology, and digital governance to accelerate the realization of Nepal's digital transformation.

The second is to explore a new model for green development in Nepal. Indeed, Nepal has every potential to occupy a key position in the South Asian subcontinent in the field of green energy. Its rivers originate in the world's highest mountain ranges, with huge potential for hydropower generation; and the high Himalayan mountains are characterised by intense solar radiation, which opens up possibilities for solar power generation. Therefore, China-Nepal think tanks should consider green transformation as a key direction of endeavour in the future, and strengthen cooperation in hydropower and solar energy development, clean energy technology iteration, and green transformation master planning, so as to help Nepal enhance its climate resilience, expand green jobs, and strive to become an exporter of green energy, thus contributing to the solution of its long-term poverty problem.

4.3. Bridge the cognitive differences in China-Nepal cooperation promptly

With the gradual deepening of the “Belt and Road” project between China and Nepal, some negative comments and arguments on the “Belt and Road” have also become popular in Nepal’s think tanks and public opinion circles, and it is urgent to get timely and powerful clarification from professionals. This is embodied in the following three points:

The first is to misunderstand the “Belt and Road” initiative as China’s debt trap diplomacy towards Nepal. For example, Nepal AIDIA has commented that Nepal’s misgivings about China’s debt trap policy has always been one of the important concerns in all Nepal’s diplomatic decisions. The rumours surrounding China’s debt trap policy have led to growing unease among the Nepalese people about the sovereignty of the country and uncertainty about the fate of Nepal’s “Belt and Road” project (Aleena, 2024).

The second is to generate controversy over whether the “Belt and Road” initiative should provide loans or grants. China has decided to provide low-interest loans to Nepal for the Belt and Road, but Prashanti Poudyal, a researcher at Nepal’s CSIFP, said in an interview with the Voice of America that “Nepal cannot accept loans for the ‘Belt and Road’ project with an average interest rate of 4.2 per cent, a grace period of less than two years and a repayment period of less than ten years” (Sanjay Jha, 2023). The Nepalese side prefers to receive free grants from China rather than loans.

The third is to hesitate about the essence of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and whether to join it. After China formally put forward the concept of GSI in 2022, Nepal think tanks did not respond positively and were sceptical about GSI, and some think tank scholars even regarded GSI as China’s response to QUAD’s blockade of China as ‘China’s ver-sion of NATO’, believing that China was putting pressure on Nepal to pull it into China’s new security architecture. Nepal should refuse to join China’s GSI on the grounds that it will not join any security or military alliance (Pardafas, 2023).

The above-mentioned cognitive differences in China-Nepal friendly cooperation have constituted a huge obstacle to the further development of China-Nepal relationship. China think tanks should play a good role in consulting on security issues, give full play to the wisdom value of “Track II Diplomacy”, and correct the information bias in the dissemination of concepts; pay full attention to Nepal’s social realities, and choose the way of interpreting the concepts and the techniques of discourse with care, so as to resolve the doubts and misunderstandings of all sectors of the Nepalese society about the “Belt and Road” and the rise of China, so as to contribute wisdom and strength to the early realization of the China-Nepal destiny community.

4.4. Ensure the objectivity and truthfulness of the information sources and knowledge outputs

Due to the existence of the framework of the special relationship between India and Nepal and the limitations of geography, transport and other realities, the sources of information and knowledge output related to China of Nepal think tanks are to a large extent influenced by the Indian side, and their viewpoints and stances are unavoidably misled by the Indian think tanks and media. The specific manifestations are as follows:

First, many Indian scholars have expressed anti-China views in Nepal think tanks. Take the NIICE as an example: since 2019, of the 13 articles directly related to China-Nepal “Belt and Road” in the think tank, six were written by Indian scholars (NIICE, 2024). These articles by Indian scholars have misinterpreted and obscured the nature of the objectives of China-Nepal ‘Belt and Road’, deliberately emphasised the risks and challenges it faces, and downplayed the value of its enormous benefits, holding unfair arguments. Although the think tank has stated that these articles represent the authors' personal views, the publication of a large number of articles containing unfavourable arguments against China on the think tank's website will inevitably have a negative impact on China's image in Nepal and the construction of the “Belt and Road”.

Second, on hotspot issues between China and Nepal, Nepal think tanks have converged with India's viewpoints. 2020, after the outbreak of the Nepal-India Kalapani dispute, the Indian media, in order to divert attention from the issue, invented the so-called China-Nepal border “problem” out of thin air and publicized it vigorously, in an attempt to make use of Nepal's accusation that “China invaded its territory”, creating the illusion that “it was not India that invaded Nepal's territory, but China” and creating the international public opinion that China “bullied neighboring countries and encroached on the territory of neighboring countries” (Yang, 2023). Some Nepal think tanks actually listened to the Indian public opinion propaganda, and also began to clamor for the “problem” of the China-Nepal border, claiming that China was in Huinh District, Kaniyal Province had violated Nepal's territory, which led to a deadlock in Nepal-China relationship (Shuvangi, 2022).

Third, the Indian media discredited the normal China-Nepal think tank cooperation. As mentioned above, China has set up many CSC in Nepal. This is a representative achievement of China-Nepal think tank cooperation and a friendly symbol of the in-depth development of China-Nepal relationship, but it has been suspected and criticized by Indian media. India's Daily Guardian has publicly issued a document saying: “CSC has changed Nepal's social and cultural structure by training young people; China is using these centers to create anti-Indian sentiment in the hearts of Nepalese people and expand its control and influence over Nepal” (Rakesh, 2020).

As a result of the above three constraints, Nepal think tanks have inherent deficiencies in China-related information access and knowledge production. In this regard,

China think tanks should establish a system of information sharing, and provide more informative and reliable China research materials and policy messages to Nepal think tanks; at the same time, they should encourage more Chinese scholars to express their views in Nepal think tanks, and give full play to the role of famous experts as opinion leaders, so as to ensure that Nepal think tanks' sources of information on China and their knowledge outputs are objective and authentic, and to enhance the credibility and influence of think tank products, thus making China-Nepal think tank cooperation truly become the “ideological ballast” and “intellectual propellant” of the relationship between the two countries.

5. Conclusions

Under the background of the continuous improvement of China-Nepal relationship, China-Nepal think tank cooperation can be described as timely. The cooperation between the two sides will not only help to build and realize the China-Nepal destiny community, but also be in line with the inherent goal requirements of the construction of Chinese and Nepalese think tanks, and can effectively improve the efficiency of the construction of the “Belt and Road” between China and Nepal from the level of intellectual support. As an organic component of a new type of peripheral diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, the exchange and cooperation with Nepal think tanks is one of the important links for China to realize its diplomatic layout of “major powers are the key, surrounding areas are the priority”. Thanks to this grand diplomatic strategic plan, China-Nepal think tank cooperation has successfully moved towards three-dimensional, compound, multi-dimensional and wide-ranging fields, and has made commendable progress in institutional setup, publication of achievements, mechanism improvement, public diplomacy, and international interdisciplinary platform construction. In the future, China and Nepal should continue to pursue greater breakthroughs in the field of think tank cooperation. Think tank scholars of the two countries should seize the opportunity, follow the trend, further optimize the path of China-Nepal think tank cooperation, innovate the cooperation forms of think tanks between the two countries, and clear the obstacles of think tank cooperation between the two sides, so as to contribute more to the building of China-Nepal destiny community and provide stronger intellectual protection for the development of friendly relationship between China and Nepal.

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