

Historical Analysis of Nepal's International Relations from a Defence Perspective

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Abstract

Nepal has a track record of being one of the oldest ever sovereign and independent nations of the world. Today, Nepal's international relations is going through a critical and vulnerable phase. One of the main reasons for this may be that Nepal abruptly abandoned and stopped learning from the deeds of the founding heroes and has not been able to chart and steer an effective national policy strategy in its international relations. In the past, many of the rulers used to be kings and military generals and they had adopted hard power as their main instruments. Today, Nepal cannot think of hard power but rather soft power and smart power. At this point, it would be pertinent to reflect on Nepal's past international relations policy strategy so it may help to understand the value and role of national security policy strategy as an integral part of successful international relations in the future. This paper has tried to examine the international relations of contemporary Nepal from a defence perspective based on historical references.

Keywords: International relations, war and treaty, defence, small states, geopolitics

Introduction

International relations is a collection of national policy strategies on a wide range of issue mainly focused on diplomacy, defense, and development which are interrelated and interdependent (Center for Global Prosperity, 2010). The fundamental objective of international relations is not to cultivate enemies and hostile forces but to build strong external partnerships around the world and create a network of friends and allies. In this interdependent world, positive and constructive international ties are essential for the pursuit of a nation's interest like national security (safety and survival of a country) along with its political, economic, cultural, environmental and other related concerns (Kishan, 2002).

In the 21st century, Nepal has become a center of gravity because of China inching towards becoming a super-power and rival of the United States and the Western

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powers. Similarly, India has emerged as another great power and partner of the US and the West. A country like Nepal has a very limited alternative and choice as it is a landlocked country situated between two big and powerful neighbors India and China and the US sees its strategic interest as a solid and secure base to deal with China.

Importance of Size and Power

In international relations, the size and power of a nation is connected to its capability and influence. While being big is correlated with power, being small has been viewed as a handicap to state action, and even survival (Purlis, 2010). This bitter truth was articulated in the fifth century BC by Athenian scholar Thucydides who wrote, “The strong do what they have power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (Clive, 2016). Some states are left to obey the rules of the game because they are too weak to be taken seriously when the rules are negotiated.

Kenneth Waltz notes that a) power provides the means of maintaining one’s autonomy in the face of force that others wield, b) the more powerful enjoy wider margins of safety in dealing with the less powerful and have more to say about which games will be played and how. (Waltz, 1979). Jared Diamond postulates remarkable examples of Finland and its struggle for survival against its big powerful neighbor Russia and the Meiji Government of Japan on its development and prosperity by adopting advanced technology from the US and the West and, at the same time, preserving its old traditional identity, culture, tradition and civilization (Jared, 2019). All these factors lead to a question - can there be any optimism for small countries to survive against their big powerful neighbors?

Foundation Laid by Prithvi Narayan Shah

After King Prithvi Narayan Shah’s rise as the king of Gorkha in 1743, the principality began to grow as a military and political power which ultimately led to the unification of Nepal in 1769 (Sam, 2019). He showed great acumen in running the domestic and foreign policy. Former Minister for Foreign Affairs Ramesh Nath Pandey claims that contemporary Nepal has come under the radar of the compulsive nature of geopolitics and sharp contestation of world power between India, China and the US (Pandey, 2015).

In international relations, small states have a weaker part in an asymmetric relationship as they are unable to change the nature and functioning of the relationship (Steinmetz, 2010). Today, Nepal’s international relations is in a delicate and sensitive situation. Nepal is shrinking towards a narrow range of choices, actions and alternatives due to social, political and economic imbroglio. Nepal’s

credibility has eroded in the world of diplomacy and development. Nepal is under intense pressure to be used as the mouthpiece and diplomatic tool of big powers under the facade of developmental partnership.

International relations is determined by geopolitics. Besides geopolitical location, there are people, leaders and national policy strategies that are equally vital for an improved international relation. Among these, geographical location and immediate neighbors cannot change. Nevertheless, a country can bring about changes in other factors that are dynamic like political stability, law and order and external threats.

According to Nepali historian and diplomat, late Rishikesh Shaha, “The geostrategic location of Nepal in the trans-Himalayan area has enabled it to serve as a bridge between the two vast land areas of Asian civilization - India and China - which represent two distinct worlds of thought and culture (Kumar, 2017). This is the crux of the matter of Nepal’s international relations at present too. He reiterates, “Comparatively, China and India are each more than twenty times bigger in size and more than forty times larger in population. Like Mongolia, Botswana, Lesotho, and Malawi, Nepal is heavily dependent on one country alone for trade and transit facilities. Nepal is a completely landlocked country. The history of Nepal’s international relations begins with the military conquest and unification of Nepal (Stiller, 1973).

Since King Prithivi Narayan Shah consolidated Nepal in 1769, he retained and adapted all old systems and values; improved and modified to make Nepal fit and capable to face the growing power of the East India Company. But his successors could not catch up with his dynamism and lost trade relationship with Tibet in the north aggravating its neighbors in the south with military campaigns undermining diplomatic maneuvers.

The result was the Nepal-Tibet trade dispute and Regent Bahadur Shah’s invasion of Tibet in 1788 which dragged China militarily to support the Tibetan forces (Basnyat, 2023).

Turning Point

The war between Nepal and the East India Company in 1814-16 and the Treaty of Sugauli (1816) were the major turning points of Nepal’s international relations. Nepal has struggled to adjust and search for new goals after that deprivation, devastation and humiliating defeat. Historian Ludwig F. Stiller interpreted it as the beginning rather than an end to Nepal’s time of trouble (Ludwig, 2018). Despite, that, Stiller opines, the Gorkha troops gave an excellent account of themselves before being forced to the negotiation table. Nepal lost one-third of its territory; however, it enhanced its prestige as fighting men and preserved its heritage of independence thereby promoting the growing sense of Nepali nationalism (Whelpton, 1987). The

actual cause of the war was not the Nepali ambition to go to war but the failure of the Joint Border Commission of 1813 to work out the terms of settlement which both warring parties had agreed for a peaceful settlement that would have provided an ideal solution for both governments. In 1814, when the Governor General of the East India Company issued a letter challenging the Nepali government, *Mukhtiyar* (the equivalent of a prime minister) Bhimsen Thapa boldly accepted it which initiated the war (Whelpton, 1987).

These borderlands were valuable for Nepal because they were the real reward of their conquests. Many parts of the Terai land were given as rewards to the rulers, nobles and military commanders during the unification campaigns. It was also essential and critical for Nepali commanders to possess control over the Terai for the continuation of the unity of Nepal. Without it, Nepal would have become fragmented into mini-states

Neither the amputation of the western provinces of greater Nepal nor the psychic shock of defeat had seriously weakened the unity of Nepal proper. However, it was a blow to the prestige of Nepal, and it therefore had a significance all its own (Stiller, 2018).

Paradigm Shift During the Rana Rule

Thirty years after the war, the Nepali court (government) was divided into pro-and-anti British East India Company. During that period, the British resident representative, especially Brian Hodgson, played the most crucial role in intervening and subverting domestic politics. Ultimately, numerous experienced courtiers and commanders were massacred by the new would-be ruler Jung Bahadur Rana during a bloody coup known as the ‘Kot Massacre’ in September 1846. That changed the entire course of Nepali history for the next 104 years.

The new Prime Minister, Commander-in-Chief and later *Sri Teen Maharaj* General Junga Bahadur Rana, was an autocrat, but a realist military commander and a statesman. He realized that the best course of action for him and his country would be to remain on friendly terms with the British. He visited England and France in 1850 to gain confidence and deepen his relationship as the king’s ambassador. He was intelligent and smart enough to cultivate trust and friendship with the British rulers and also acquired first-hand knowledge of the ways, policies, strengths and resources of European powers. Militarily, he took advantage of Chinese preoccupation with the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and the British engagement in the Crimean War (1854); attacked Tibet to acquire territorial and commercial concession and succeeded in signing a treaty on March 24, 1856. According to the Treaty the Tibetan Government was obliged to: 1. Pay an annual tribute of 1000 rupees to Nepal; 2. the children born out of marriages between Nepalis and Tibetans - sons would belong to Nepal and daughters to Tibet; 3. More importantly, any legal

disputes in which Nepali were involved were to be decided only in the presence of a Nepali representative at Lhasa (Stiller, 2018).

When the Sepoy mutiny broke out in Meerut, India, Jung Bahadur volunteered and led nine thousand Nepali troops on December 10, 1857. In return, he successfully acquired back some of the lost territories during the 1814-16 war that comprised four districts of present Nepal – Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur called the *Naya Muluk*. Despite their oligarchic and autocratic military rule, the Rana rulers were successful in retaining Nepal's sovereignty and independence while most of the Indian states were under British colonial rule. Later Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher visited India during which the British Viceroy requested him support Colonel Francis Younghusband's expedition to Lasha overriding Nepal's 1856 security pact with China. British troops prevented Russian dominance over Tibet and maintained Nepal's 'buffer state' position. He invited King George V of the United Kingdom to Nepal in 1911 and also hosted Edward, Prince of Wales, in 1921 to lay the groundwork for his ultimate aim of gaining Nepal a sovereign status in 2023 (SJB, 2017).

During the First World War, Nepal sent six regiments of Nepali army contingents and an additional 8000 in 1917. Apart from this, there were around 26,000 Nepali already serving in the Indian Gorkha Regiments. Hence, the total number of men who left Nepal for military purposes exceeded 2,00,000 from a total population of five million. The greatest achievement during the rule of Chandra Shumsher was the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Nepal and Britain (SJB, 2017). During World War II (1939-1945), Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher sent thousands of Nepali troops in aid of Britain (Shaha, 2001).

Nepal's crucial geopolitical location has always been well-known. Helen Sexton, the Vice Consul at the Consulate General in Calcutta at that time noted, "The Nepalese leaders may fear that Russian influence will be extended in this area after the war and possibly reach Nepal". She further opined, "Nepal must be watching the current turn of events and evaluating her position. When this withdrawal takes place, the British will have little interest in Nepal in relationship to India. However, (the British Government) and the U.S. Government will have a very definite interest in establishing diplomatic representations in Kathmandu because of Nepal's strategic position in relation to Russia and China" (Shaha, 2001).

Restoration of Democracy to Present

Before the British left India after its independence, they divided the Gurkha Soldiers between Great Britain and India. Nepal and India also signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950. While the British left, the US showed interest in Nepal and

both the countries established diplomatic relations. A new Independent India under the dynamic leadership of its Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru started to play a key role in the making of the new democratic government of Nepal. During the premiership of Matrika Prasad Koirala, the Indian Military Mission was invited, and 18 northern border posts of Nepal were manned jointly by the Indian and Nepali armies (Cowan, 2015).

Direct engagement of the Nepali Army came to the fore during the Khampa Movement in the 1960s in the Mustang region of Nepal. It was pacified by the Nepali Army through its disarming mission in July 1974 (Basnet, 2020). Similarly, the Nepali Army was mobilized to pacify the armed revolt by the banned Nepali Congress in 1962 (Hoftun, 1999). When Nepal bought a few anti-aircraft guns from China in 1989, India imposed a blockade on Nepal. The imbroglio came to an end when the Partyless Panchayat system was abolished and the old two-pillar system of governance with King in the Parliament was restored in 1990 (Peace, 1990).

In 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched, what became a decade-long insurgency, against the Nepali government and the monarchy. The government and CPN (Maoist) signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in November 2006, and a special political mission United Nations Mission to Nepal (2007-2011) arrived in Nepal for the management of arms and armies (UNMIN, 2010). The Peoples Movement of 2006 led to the end of the centuries-old monarchy when the country was declared a republic in 2008 (Giri, 2021).

Conclusion

Historically, Nepal's army and other security agencies have played a major role in safeguarding the country's independence and sovereignty. The political change of 1990 brought the then Royal Nepalese Army and Nepal Police under scrutiny to bring them under civilian control. The Comprehensive Peace Treaty of 2006 prioritized this to be one of the prime agendas. The Constitution of Nepal has envisaged to divide the Nepal Police into three tiers. Various such experiments related to the country's defence forces have been made, but the government seems to be without any long-term strategic planning, coordination and direction. These have ultimately given foreign interest groups to play more in Nepal's defence and diplomacy realms which are going to be more complex and critical in the coming days.

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