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# Nepal in a Triangular Geopolitical Rivalry

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## Abstract

The global power structure continues to change which is a general phenomenon of history. These changes are marked by some phenomenal shifts in the international order. Wars shaped the world order and marked the shift of political power from one country to another and from one region to another. Europe at one point was the master and pivot of world power and politics, while the Europe-centric international power shifted to America after World War II with the United States dictating and the rest of the world taking notes. The Soviet Union, too, emerged as one of the superpowers but it could not sustain its prowess for a long time and collapsed in the early 1990s giving rise to a unipolar world order led by the United States. However, this international order too is in the process of change but it is not yet certain what shape the new world order will exactly take. However, it is certain that the Atlantic-centric world order and power will not last long and the international power will shift to Asia to make the Asian century a reality in which China and India will be the key actors. This article examines how Nepal, situated in a crucial location between the two rival powers of Asia along with an increasing role of the US in the region, should use diplomatic acumen to face the challenges in maintaining a balance in its relations with great powers.

*Keywords:* wars, international order, global conflicts, triangular rivalry, Nepal's geopolitical challenge

## Rise and Fall of Empires

In the history of humanity, the world has witnessed the rise and fall of different empires and powers (Perkin, 2002). Assyrian, Roman, Persian, Greek, Mauryan, Mughal, Arab, Khmer, Chinese, Japanese, Mongol, Byzantine, Aztec, Ottoman, Portuguese, Turkish, Dutch, German, French, British, Russian and many other empires rose and fell in the annals of history. The world order changed with the fall of the old powers and the rise of new ones. This has been the general phenomenon of global politics. The world order has never been static but has been constantly changing ever since civilization began to sprout.

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Paul Kennedy, in his book *The Rise of Fall of The Great Powers*, says that the year 1500 is the date that marks the “divide between modern and pre-modern times.” Whether pre-modern or modern eras, wars and conflicts have been the permanent features of world history. Wars shaped the world. Thus, the world’s history has been splashed with human blood (Kennedy, 1987). Every era and century has seen devastating wars and conflicts. In a way, world history is the history of wars between different empires and powers. Peloponnesian War, Roman-Persian Wars, Hundred Years’ War, Thirty Years’ Wars, Napoleonic Wars, World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, Gulf War, War in Afghanistan, the present Russia-Ukraine War and Israel-Hamas War in Gaza of the Middle East are some major wars that have taken place in different parts of the world and at different period. Tensions and conflicts between powers and nations have been more pronounced now than ever before (Lamsal, 2022).

The Industrial Revolution powered Europe to rise into an engine of economic growth, which also placed Europe at the central place of international power. With economic growth, Europe’s military power also grew so phenomenally that various countries of Europe conquered the world and expanded their colonies across all continents. It was a time when there was a saying that the sun never set in the British Empire implying that the British Empire controlled and colonized all continents of the world. Such was the situation as the international power was focused in Europe. In other words, Europe was the pivot of global power (Eliassen, 2022). However, the situation did not last long as two world wars bled European economies so badly that European countries could no longer maintain their status of global power. World War II changed the shape and structure of global power and order dramatically.

World War I was purely a European war while World War II was its extension (Howard, 1993). Only Japan was part of World War II from other continents other than Europe in the beginning. However, Japan’s attack on America’s Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 changed the entire war scenario (WWII, n.d.). Until then, the United States had adopted isolationist policy and maintained neutrality in the war. However, Japan’s kamikaze attack dragged the US into a war that turned out to be a catalyst in ending the war. In retaliation to Japan’s attack, the US dropped two atomic bombs on Japan’s two cities - Hiroshima and Nagasaki - in 1945 which forced imperial Japan to surrender. Similarly, Adolf Hitler’s attack on Russia too dragged Moscow to join hands with the Allied Force led by Britain against the Axis powers of Germany and Japan. Earlier, the Soviet Union was in coordination with Hitler’s Germany and had invaded Poland (UHMM, 1939). Had Japan not attacked

Pearl Harbour and Germany the Soviet Union, the outcome of World War II might have been different. The foolish attack of Japan and Germany on the US and Soviet Union was like digging their own grave ultimately giving victory to Allied forces of Britain and France while it was a crushing and humiliating defeat for Germany, Japan and Italy.

### **Europe Centric Power**

The world order before World War II was Europe-centric, and it was a kind of multi-polar world order. The powers of the day were Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Russia, Japan and the US. Although the US had already emerged as a great power, it was inward-looking focussing purely on American continents. This was the period when the world saw most wars, which was the product of the multi-polar order. The victory of the Allied Forces against the Axis also brought about changes in the world order. The multi-polar world order changed into a bipolar order.

After World War II, the US and the Soviet Union emerged as the two dominant powers or superpowers while other powers of the pre-World War II period were rendered into satellite powers of the US. Washington and Moscow drew the map of the post-World War II world (WWII, 1989). They divided Europe into their spheres of influence. The world, too, appeared divided into two camps, although a cluster of weak countries that were not on the radar of the global landscape of power chose to remain non-aligned keeping themselves away from aligning with any of the two power blocs. The divide was given ideological color as capitalist liberal democratic bloc versus socialist/communist camp. The rivalry, however, was less ideological basis but more the quest for ensuring and enlarging their hegemony. The US, thus, led the Western liberal or democratic bloc while the Soviet Union protected and promoted the communist and socialist bloc. Both the camps tried to consolidate their sphere of influence in every part of the world for which they built security alliances of different kinds.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was created as a US-led security alliance of which 32 Atlantic and European countries are members (NATO, 2024). Finland and Sweden are the newest members of the NATO security alliance. The US also built several other security alliances in other parts of the world. The Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) was formed in 1955 with Turkey, Iraq, the United Kingdom, Pakistan and Iran as members. The US, France, Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 (U.S. Department of State, 2001). But the CENTO

and SEATO did not exist for a long time. A three-nation security alliance called ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and US) came into being in 1951. In response to these security initiatives and alliances built by the US and the Western European countries, the Soviet Union created a rival security alliance called the Warsaw Pact with some East European communist countries as members. Now most of these security alliances cease to exist. The Warsaw Pact was also dissolved after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 with an expectation of a similar move from the US and Western European countries on NATO (NATO, n.d.). However, NATO continues to exist even today as a relic of the Cold War era's ugly rivalry.

As a post-World War arrangement agreed upon by the US and Russia, Germany was partitioned like a birth-day cake into two countries - the Federal Republic of Germany or West Germany and the German Democratic Republic or East Germany as a post-World War II arrangement. The Berlin Wall marked the artificial division of Germany, which was torn down in 1989 and Germany was reunified in 1990 (Office of the Historian, n.d.). Russia had raised security concerns over the unification of Germany as it would bring NATO closer to its border in Poland. In the meeting with Soviet Union's President Mikhail Gorbachev in Malta in December 1989, US President George H.W. Bush assured Gorbachev that the US would not try to take any advantage at the cost of the Soviet Union's security interests. Other US officials including US Secretary of State James A. Baker, too, gave strong assurances to Soviet leaders and officials that NATO would not expand even one inch eastward. However, the West broke its promises and NATO not only remained intact but also continued to expand eastward in Europe at a faster speed. The present Russia-Ukraine war that has lasted for three years also has a connection with the issue of NATO expansion. As moves were afoot to bring Ukraine into NATO, Moscow took it as a serious security threat and invaded Ukraine.

The global system, to some degree, is still based on the Westphalia model, which was agreed upon in a conference held in the German region of Westphalia back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Westphalian arrangement was made by mainly European powers of that time seeking to end the 30 Years War that ravaged Europe from 1618 to 1648. The Westphalia system recognized the state sovereignty, non-interference, and equality of states, which is the foundation of the modern international system (Lumen, n.d.). However, it started faltering immediately after it was signed which gave rise to World War I. Many Germans of that time dubbed the Versailles Treaty which ended World War I as an unfair armistice and a national humiliation imposed upon Germany. The same Versailles Treaty served as the primary contributor to the World War II. Adolf Hitler of Germany rose to power promising to abrogate the Versailles Treaty that ultimately led to World War II. Despite efforts made to prevent wars and establish peace in the past, peace remained elusive as Europe continued to get involved in different wars that culminated in the two world wars.

After World War II, the United Nations was created with the expectation of peace in the world. There has, at least, not been another world great war or World War III, the credit of which mainly goes to the UN. However, dozens of wars of different sizes and nature have taken place in different parts of the world even after the creation of the UN. Direct wars between two states like the one between Russia and Ukraine, between state and non-state actors like the Israel-Hamas War and proxy wars between non-state actors at the behest of powers continue to inflict humanity. In a way, all wars are world wars in the present economically globalized and technologically interconnected world. Every war in one way or the other impacts the entire world. The Russia-Ukraine War impacted the two warring countries more than others but all countries in one way or the other have felt its heat. Similarly, the Israel-Hamas War too has impacted the entire Middle East, and if it further flares up it may impact other regions and countries as well (Arshad, 2024). The UN is often criticized for failing to completely prevent wars and conflicts in the world, but one needs to think how horrible the world would have been without the United Nations.

### **Changing World Order**

The world order that we see today is different from what we had in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Grinin 2016). We experienced a multi-polar world order before World War II, a bipolar world in the post-World War period or during the Cold War era until the 1990s. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, which Russian President Vladimir Putin described as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked the end of the Cold War and also the end of the bipolar world order heralding the unipolar order with the US being the sole superpower. It is said that the Cold War came to an end after the Soviet Union's collapse, which American scholar Francis Fukuyama described as the "end of history" and a new Cold War is in the offing. However, in reality, the Cold War had never come to an end nor was it the "end of history", instead the Cold War had remained latent for some decades since the 1990s and has begun to manifest again (Kagan 2008).

The unipolar world order, too, seems to be on the cusp of change. The phenomenal rise of China is being described as the greatest geopolitical event of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. China has risen as the world's second-largest economy and is poised to become the largest economy in the near future. In the technological, military and other fronts as well, China's rise is impressive which is being taken as the principal challenge to the US's sole superpower status. Similarly, other powers are also rising like Russia in Europe, India in South Asia, Indonesia in South East Asia, Brazil in South America, South Africa in Africa, Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East and Turkey which lies both in Asia and Europe. Given the rise of multiple powers in different regions, it can be assumed that a multi-polar world is in the offing (Lamsal, n.d.).

The sole superpower US may not be comfortable with the rise of different power centres in the world. However, its prime concern is China as Washington chastens China as an acute threat and has taken its rise very seriously. The US labels Russia as a temporary threat in European theatre only. Now the international architecture of power has changed and the principal rivalry is between the US and China. However, China rejects the US allegation and says its rise is for peaceful purposes and does not pose a threat to any country. Since the US has designated China as the principal threat, the new theatre of geopolitical rivalry and conflict has shifted to Asia. The US has, accordingly, come up with newer strategic constructs and is building different security alliances in Asia and the Indo-Pacific region to contain China's rise. The quadruple alliance or Quad of the US, Japan, India and Australia and the trilateral security partnership or AUKUS (Australia, UK and US) are the newest examples of a US-led security alliance in the Indo-Pacific region.

These security alliances in the Indo-Pacific region remind the alliance politics of the Cold War era of post-World War II time. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its other integral instruments like the Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Development Initiatives (GDI), and Global Civilizational Initiative (GCI) have been interpreted by the West as Beijing's strategic arm to enlarge influence across the world. Similarly, the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are also being interpreted as China's tools to alter the West-led international order. NATO's expansion eastward in Europe is purportedly to check Russia while several other US-led alliances are at work in the Indo-Pacific region to contain China. Western concerns and alarms in Europe are understandable after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but hyper-military activism and growing security and military alliances in the Indo-Pacific region are matters of serious concern for all countries in this region. The military and alliance race in the Indo-Pacific region may lead to further military conflict destabilizing peace in Asia, which is a matter of serious concern for weaker and smaller countries like Nepal (Lamsal, 2024).

### **Power Shifting to Asia**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the European century and the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned out to be the American century. Now the situation has changed and the power is slowly shifting to Asia. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is said to be the Asian Century. Asia has been a new theatre of regional and global power rivalry between great powers especially owing to China's rise. As the US and the West seek to contain China, India's role appears to be crucial in the present geopolitical scenario. While the US and China are the world's number one and number two powers in terms of economic, military and technological capability, India is the fifth-largest economy and is aiming to occupy

the third place in the near future. In military strength, India is one of the top five military powers (Silver, Devlin, & Huang, 2019). Technologically, too, India is rising fast. The strategic location in the Indian Ocean has further elevated India's geopolitical position and significance.

South Asia is, therefore, gaining geopolitical significance more than ever, and at the same time, the region faces the risk of possible conflicts. China and India fought a major border war in 1962 and other minor border skirmishes between the two countries have taken place occasionally. Like the US, India, too, is not comfortable with China's rise and their rivalry has been an old phenomenon for more than five decades. However, India alone is not capable of checking China as there has been a huge power asymmetry between China and India is huge. As a superpower, the US has a strong presence in the entire Indo-Pacific region including South Asia. India and the US are therefore collaborating on a strategic front. In other issues, India and the US may have conflicting interests. In South Asia, the rivalry is triangular between three powers - China, India and the US. Nepal's geopolitical significance is relatively high due to its unique strategic location between China and India and the triangular geopolitical contestation.

## **Conclusion**

Given this delicate geopolitical situation, Nepal faces multiple challenges in handling its foreign policy, diplomacy and strategic affairs. This situation may be an opportunity from which Nepal can extract geopolitical and strategic benefits, provided this landlocked country moves ahead maintaining a delicate balance between the two Asian giants - China and India and handles the situation prudently and wisely taking these three powers into confidence. However, slight miscalculation and mishandling could land Nepal in trouble. If conflict flares up in the region among these three geopolitical actors, Nepal may be caught in the crossfire. A similar situation occurred in 1962 when China and India fought a border war. But Nepal judiciously and wisely kept itself away from the conflict and handled the situation taking both the parties in conflict into confidence. Nepal's non-aligned foreign policy was well appreciated and the rulers of that time deserve commendation for the astute conduct of foreign policy. The present situation is different from the 1962 context. In the 1960s, two actors were involved in the conflict, while there will be three actors in the present geopolitical conflict. Thus, the situation may be more complicated now. This demands that Nepal strictly adhere to its non-aligned policy and conduct its foreign policy and diplomacy smartly to steer the country out of the complex geopolitical situation. "Amity with all and enmity with none" has been the motto of Nepal's foreign policy implying that Nepal wants friendship, cooperation

and collaboration with all countries - big or small, developed and developing and powerful or weak. This has been clearly stated in our foreign policy goals, objectives and priorities. Therefore, this is a testing time for Nepal's diplomatic acumen, and the situation demands more mature and sensible diplomatic handling. Let us hope our foreign policy interlocutors pass this crucial test.

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