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Army Command and Staff College, Nepali Army

Shivapuri, Kathmandu, Nepal

Relevance of Nepal's 1975 Zone of Peace Proposal in Contemporary Geopolitics

- *Brig Gen Madhav Thapa*

Abstract

Seventy years after the inception of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (FPPC)-mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence-this article revisits Nepal's 1975 Zone of Peace (ZoP) proposal in the context of contemporary geopolitical dynamics. Rooted in FPPC and Nepal's commitment to non-alignment, the ZoP initiative sought to safeguard Nepal's sovereignty amid Cold War tensions, rising neo-colonialism, and the strategic pressures posed by neighboring powers India and China. Despite garnering widespread international support, the ZoP faced resistance from India due to historical treaties, security concerns, and strategic interests, ultimately hindering its implementation.

This article examines the historical imperatives, international responses, and subsequent developments surrounding Nepal's ZoP proposal. It highlights how the initiative underscored Nepal's aspiration for neutrality and stability in an increasingly polarized world. Drawing parallels with evolving geopolitical realities-such as the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and India's regional ambitions-the article evaluates the continued relevance of FPPC and the ZoP in Nepal's foreign policy framework.

Addressing the challenges posed by India's strategic apprehensions, the article proposes a way forward rooted in transparent diplomacy, economic collaboration, and public engagement. It emphasizes the importance of Nepal positioning itself as a stabilizing force in South Asia, leveraging neutrality to foster regional security and economic opportunities.

The article concludes by affirming the enduring significance of FPPC and the ZoP as guiding principles for Nepal's sovereignty and diplomatic strategy. It calls for further research into the adaptability of such frameworks in conflict-prone regions, providing insights into their role in fostering peace, stability, and cooperation in an increasingly complex global order. This analysis underscores the need for small states like Nepal to prioritize peaceful coexistence to navigate shifting global power dynamics effectively.

Keywords

Nepal, Zone of Peace, Non-alignment, Geopolitics, Neutrality, Nepal's Foreign Policy

Introduction

Seventy years ago, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (FPPC) emerged during the early Cold War era, embodying mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence among nations. These principles, initially articulated by India, China, and Myanmar, have served as a foundational framework for fostering diplomatic relations globally (Manandhar, 2024).

Nepal, as a founding member of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), has demonstrated its adherence to these principles, maintaining sovereignty and independence despite its sensitive geopolitical positioning. After the Anglo-Nepal War (1814–1816), Nepal safeguarded its sovereignty through a combination of treaties with Britain and tribute missions to China, which reinforced its autonomy for over two

centuries (GlobalSecurity.org, 2024; Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2024). In the 20th century, Nepal joined the United Nations (UN), NAM, and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), underscoring its commitment to non-alignment and FPPC in international diplomacy.

A pivotal moment in Nepal’s diplomatic history occurred in 1975, when King Birendra proposed the “Zone of Peace” (ZoP) initiative. Rooted in FPPC and non-alignment, the proposal sought to shield Nepal’s sovereignty amid Cold War tensions. Although the ZoP received widespread international support, India’s opposition—citing historical treaties and strategic interests—prevented its implementation (Duquesne, 2022).

The ZoP was conceived as a response to Cold War challenges and the emerging threat of neo-colonialism. By asserting neutrality between regional powers India and China, Nepal aimed to secure its sovereignty and prioritize development free from external interference. However, the geopolitical complexities of the region underscored Nepal’s precarious position, illustrating the challenges small states face in maintaining autonomy amidst competing global powers.

As the world marks 70 years of FPPC and reflects on nearly half a century since the ZoP proposal, the dynamics of Nepal’s geopolitical environment have evolved. The rise of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, China’s multiple global initiatives including Belt and Road Initiative, and India’s regional ambitions demand a reassessment of Nepal’s strategic positioning and its adherence to FPPC.

This article revisits Nepal’s 1975 ZoP proposal in light of these developments. By analyzing historical precedents, international responses, and current geopolitical challenges, it aims to evaluate the enduring relevance of FPPC in Nepal’s quest for peace, stability, and sovereignty in a complex global order.

Basic Premise of FPPC

The FPPC, initially articulated in the 1950s by China and India, and China and Myanmar, represent a pivotal framework in international diplomacy. Developed to reduce tensions between India and China regarding Tibet, these principles have since been globally adopted, shaping diplomatic norms and forming the foundation of the NAM (Han & Meng, 2019). Emerging during the Cold War and decolonization era, these principles aimed to facilitate relations between countries with diverse political systems and ideologies.

The FPPC emphasize respecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity to maintain peaceful relations. They further advocate equality among nations regardless of size or power, promoting fair and balanced interactions in international affairs (Han & Meng, 2019). In contemporary international relations, these principles remain relevant and play a crucial role in global diplomacy. For instance, China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) incorporates these enduring principles to address security deficits (Xinhua, 2023). They also serve as guiding tenets in global governance frameworks, fostering conflict resolution, cooperation, and mutual prosperity. Although not explicitly included in the United Nations Charter, their impact is evident in numerous international agreements and movements aimed at advancing global peace and stability.

Nepal's ZoP Proposal and Its Essence

On February 25, 1975, during his coronation ceremony in Kathmandu, King Birendra officially proposed Nepal as a "ZoP", adding a new dimension to Nepal's non-alignment policy. In his speech, King Birendra stated:

"We adhere to the policy of non-alignment because we believe that it brightens the prospects of peace. We need peace for our security, we need peace for development and we need peace for our independence. As a matter of fact, Nepal in the past has signed formal peace and friendship treaties with both our friendly

neighbors. And if today, peace is an overriding concern with us, it is only because our people genuinely desire peace in our country, in our region and everywhere in the world. It is with this earnest desire to institutionalize peace that I stand to make a proposition that my country, Nepal be declared a zone of peace” (Birat, 2020).

The ZoP proposal, founded on the FPPC, emerged during a critical geopolitical period marked by Cold War rivalries and regional transformations. Its objective was to safeguard Nepal’s sovereignty and promote peace amidst neighboring power dynamics. The proposal envisioned Nepal as a neutral territory committed to non-alignment, non-aggression, and peaceful resolution of disputes (Birat, 2021). It reflected Nepal’s historical policy of strategic neutrality, rooted in King Prithvi Narayan Shah’s vision of maintaining independence amidst larger regional powers.

King Birendra’s international engagements further emphasized Nepal’s desire to institutionalize peace within its borders and beyond. Over time, the ZoP proposal evolved into a seven-point framework¹⁷ outlined in 1982 by Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa. This framework emphasized peaceful coexistence, non-alignment, and the prohibition of foreign military presence on Nepali soil (Birat, 2020).

¹⁷The seven-point framework comprised the following provisions:

1. Nepal commits to maintaining peace, non-alignment, and peaceful coexistence, striving to cultivate friendly relations with all nations irrespective of their social and political systems, particularly with its neighbors, based on equality and mutual respect for sovereignty and independence.
2. Nepal aims to peacefully resolve all disputes with any other state or states.
3. Nepal pledges not to use or threaten to use force in any manner that could jeopardize the peace and security of other countries.
4. Nepal agrees not to interfere in the internal affairs of other states.
5. Nepal pledges not to allow its territory to be used for activities hostile to other supporting states of this proposal, and reciprocally expects the same commitment from those supporting states.
6. Nepal will uphold the obligations of all existing treaties it has concluded with other countries for as long as they remain valid.
7. Consistent with its policy of peace and non-alignment, Nepal will refrain from entering into military alliances or allowing foreign military bases on its soil. Likewise, other countries supporting this proposal will also refrain from entering into military alliances or hosting military bases directed against Nepal on their soil.

Although the ZoP proposal has largely become dormant in official discourse, its historical significance continues to resonate in Nepal's foreign policy. It underscores Nepal's enduring commitment to non-alignment and the FPPC principles, emphasizing continuity, consistency, and the pursuit of international peace and security in evolving geopolitical realities.

Historical Context and Imperatives

Nepal's ZoP proposal in 1975 emerged from strategic imperatives to navigate the turbulent geopolitical currents of the Cold War era and address the vulnerable regional geopolitics crucial for its security and survival as an independent nation.

Historical Context

The ZoP proposal in 1975 was deeply rooted in Nepal's strategic concerns and vulnerabilities. It was formally introduced during the 4th Summit Conference of the NAM in Algiers in 1973, underscoring Nepal's commitment to FPPC as the foundation of its diplomatic overture (Birat, 2021).

King Birendra sought to redefine Nepal's non-alignment policy amidst existential threats to its sovereignty. The 1962 Sino-Indian border war highlighted Nepal's discomfort with being perceived as a buffer state between two powerful neighbors (Lidarev, 2022). Nepal's apprehensions grew with the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty and the subsequent Indo-Pakistani War, which led to the creation of Bangladesh (Jain, 2020; Zakaria, 2019). During the early 1970s, the strengthening of Sino-Pakistani relations following the U.S.-China rapprochement in 1971 further complicated regional dynamics (Ahmar, 2020).

Nepal's concerns intensified with India's annexation of Sikkim in 1975 and its support for internal political movements within Nepal (The New York Times, 1975; Birat, 2021). Additionally, India's 1974 nuclear test at Pokhran underscored the regional security challenges faced by smaller nations like Nepal (Explained Desk, 2023). Against

this backdrop, King Birendra's ZoP proposal aimed to formalize Nepal as a neutral, non-militarized buffer state shielded from external military influences and alliances.

The ZoP proposal rejected the strategy of leveraging one neighbor against another and sought international recognition to safeguard Nepal's autonomy amidst escalating geopolitical rivalries and regional dynamics (Birat, 2020). It was a visionary effort to institutionalize Nepal's independence and peace in a volatile regional context, emphasizing its strategic neutrality as a core tenet of its foreign policy.

Motivations for Nepal's ZoP Proposal

Nepal's ZoP proposal was influenced by complex international and regional geopolitical contexts, reflecting strategic motivations and global concerns.

Internationally, the emergence of the NAM provided a platform for Nepal to articulate its proposal. NAM's principles of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence aligned closely with Nepal's vision for national security and diplomacy (Davis, 2011). Regionally, South Asia was undergoing significant transformations, including the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, which reshaped the geopolitical landscape, with India playing a central role (Jain, 2020; Zakaria, 2019). India's annexation of Sikkim in 1975 under a legal pretext, coupled with China's annexation of Tibet in 1951 (Lama, 2021), underscored the vulnerabilities of smaller states like Nepal in the face of regional power dynamics (The New York Times, 1975; Duquesne, 2020).

Nepal observed these developments and felt compelled to safeguard its independence and security through proactive diplomacy. The ZoP proposal was a strategic response aimed at establishing Nepal as a neutral zone, free from external interference and military alliances (Birat, 2021).

Domestically, Nepal faced the challenge of asserting its sovereignty while positioned between India and China. This was further compounded by the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, which impacted Nepal's foreign

policy and emphasized non-alignment as a strategic necessity (Lidarev, 2022). The ZoP proposal sought to mitigate Nepal's vulnerability as a small state caught between major powers, advocating for peace, neutrality, and limited military presence through international endorsement and diplomatic initiatives (Birat, 2020).

Global Response

King Birendra's proposition to declare Nepal a ZoP in 1975 attracted significant international attention and support, despite formidable challenges, particularly from neighboring India.

Initial Global Response and Expressions of Support

Nepal's ZoP proposal was initially endorsed by 116 countries, with some literature suggesting support from as many as 130 nations, out of the 144 recognized by the United Nations at the time (Birat, 2021). Major powers, including China, France, the United Kingdom and the United States, along with members of the NAM, acknowledged the strategic value of Nepal's neutrality. They supported the initiative as a means to promote regional stability and global security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Nepal's cultural heritage as the birthplace of Lord Buddha and its consistent adherence to principles of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence further bolstered its image as a proponent of peace. The proposal resonated globally, being seen as a potential model for fostering conflict resolution, diplomatic cooperation, and peace in South Asia and beyond (Duquesne, 2020).

Responses from India and the Soviet Union

Despite international enthusiasm, Nepal faced opposition from India and the Soviet Union. India, as a signatory to the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, viewed the ZoP proposal as incompatible with mutual defense obligations stipulated in the treaty (Mohanty, 2019). India's strategic concerns, reflecting its emphasis on border security and regional stability heightened its resistance to Nepal's initiative (Duquesne, 2020).

This perspective was articulated by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during his 1950 speech in the Indian Parliament, where he remarked, “*From time immemorial, the Himalayas have provided us with magnificent frontiers. We cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated, because it is also the principal barrier to India.*” (Nehru, 1950). Furthermore, India’s alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War added another layer of complexity to Nepal’s diplomatic efforts (Birat, 2021).

Initially supportive of the ZoP proposal, the Soviet Union withdrew its backing, influenced by India’s reservations and its own strategic calculations in South Asia. This dual opposition from India and the Soviet Union revealed the geopolitical challenges Nepal faced and exposed its strategic vulnerabilities relative to India. The lack of regional consensus limited Nepal’s ability to secure formal endorsement for the proposal at international platforms like the United Nations (Duquesne, 2020).

Subsequent Developments

Nepal’s ZoP proposal aimed to address its security challenges arising from regional tensions between India and China. While the proposal garnered support from over 110 nations, including major global powers, it faced diplomatic opposition, particularly from India and the Soviet Union, resulting in significant setbacks (Birat, 2020). Despite these challenges, the proposal elevated Nepal’s aspirations on the global stage and underscored its strategic efforts to safeguard its sovereignty and independence.

Although the ZoP proposal did not secure formal endorsement at international forums such as the United Nations, it highlighted Nepal’s diplomatic agility and foresight in promoting peace and cooperation. Introduced during the ideological divisions of the Cold War, the proposal demonstrated King Birendra’s visionary leadership in positioning Nepal as a neutral and independent nation amidst a polarized global environment (ibid). By advocating for peaceful coexistence among major powers and smaller nations, the ZoP proposal showcased Nepal’s capacity to assert influence on

the global stage. Its enduring legacy continues to shape Nepal's foreign policy identity, despite the absence of formal international recognition.

Analysis of Failure and Future Scope

Nepal's ZoP proposal, while rooted in noble aspirations for sovereignty and independence, faced significant challenges that ultimately led to its failure. The primary hurdle was India's opposition. As Nepal's dominant neighbor and strategic ally under the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, India viewed the ZoP as incompatible with their mutual defense obligations (Mohanty, 2019). The treaty, perceived by many in Nepal as unequal, remains a point of contention, with India resisting any changes that could weaken its strategic influence in Nepal (Manhas & Sharma, 2014).

The Cold War-era geopolitical landscape further complicated Nepal's efforts. The Soviet Union, initially supportive of Nepal's ZoP proposal, later withdrew its endorsement, reportedly influenced by India's opposition and its alignment with South Asian power dynamics (Birat, 2020). A statement by the Soviet Ambassador to Nepal, K.B. Udumyan, in 1975 indicated initial enthusiasm for Nepal's neutrality, but subsequent shifts highlighted the constraints of Cold War geopolitics.¹⁸

Domestically, Nepal's transition from the party-less Panchayat system to multiparty democracy in 1990 shifted foreign policy priorities. The focus on democratization and recalibration of international relations diminished the momentum behind the ZoP proposal (Birat, 2020).

Despite its failure to materialize, the ZoP proposal remains a testament to Nepal's commitment to neutrality and non-alignment. In the current era of multipolar

¹⁸ According to an article, on July 20, 1975, the Soviet Ambassador to Nepal K.B. Udumyan stated: "The Soviet people enthusiastically endorse Nepal's policy of positive neutrality. They firmly support Nepal's commitment to peace and its stance against imperialism and neo-colonialism." Nepali diplomatic analysts speculate that India may have influenced the Soviet Union's change in stance regarding its earlier support for Nepal's "Zone of Peace" proposal. Birat Anupam, 2020. *ibid.*

geopolitics, Nepal faces similar strategic challenges, balancing between major powers such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), and India's regional aspirations transitioning from SAARC to BIMSTEC (Gupta, 2023). To navigate these complexities, Nepal must chart a strategic course that aligns with its national interests while managing the influence of external powers.

Increasing Relevance of Nepal's ZoP

The world is undergoing a major transition marked by the complexities of Cold War 2.0 dynamics (Tetrault, 2024) and a shift towards multi-polarity. In this turbulent geopolitical environment, nations face challenges such as pandemics, climate change, natural disasters, and persistent traditional conflicts that highlight the urgency of fostering peaceful coexistence. Nepal, situated at the crossroads of two major powers, China and India, emphasizes adherence to the principles of foreign policy based on peaceful coexistence (FPPC) as enshrined in its constitution.

Amid growing pressures to align with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), Nepal seeks to maintain neutrality and sovereignty. The geopolitical sensitivity of Nepal's location requires delicate diplomacy to address border disputes with India while leveraging opportunities for economic and diplomatic cooperation (Chand, 2021). Recommendations from the Eminent Persons Group (EPG)¹⁹ report could serve as a foundation for resolving historical differences with India and initiating a renewed phase of bilateral relations.

The revival of Nepal's ZoP proposal could significantly redirect the nation's trajectory towards peace and prosperity. Rooted in Nepal's quest for sovereignty and non-alignment, the ZoP framework positions Nepal as a neutral buffer state,

¹⁹ The Eminent Persons Group (EPG), established jointly by India and Nepal in 2016, comprises distinguished representatives from both countries. Its primary task is to reassess and update the historical agreements and treaties, such as the 1950 Friendship Treaty, that govern bilateral relations between India and Nepal. This initiative aims to align these agreements with the current dynamics and realities of both nations.

safeguarding its strategic interests while promoting stability in South Asia. This approach aligns with FPPC principles of mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence, which continue to guide Nepal's foreign policy (Subedi, 2022).

As geopolitical dynamics evolve, Nepal navigates its strategic position between India and China with the aim of maintaining autonomy and preventing external interference or proxy conflicts. The ZoP proposal complements recent EPG recommendations, advocating for diplomatic solutions over military confrontations and reinforcing Nepal's role as a stabilizing force in South Asia. Through adherence to FPPC principles and the ZoP framework, Nepal can secure its interests and assert its influence on the international stage amidst a rapidly changing global order.

Way Forward

India's concerns over Nepal revolve around fears of losing strategic influence, apprehensions regarding alignment with global powers, worries over security implications from Nepal's initiatives, and potential impacts on bilateral relations. Nepal's diplomatic strategy must carefully address India's concerns while upholding its constitutional commitment to peaceful coexistence. A combination of transparent communication, mutual benefit frameworks, and collaborative diplomacy is critical strategic adaptation to India's sensitivities. Therefore, Nepal should demonstrate its elegance on the following:

Diplomatic Engagement

- **Transparent Dialogue:** Nepal should initiate open communication with India to address misconceptions about the ZoP proposal, emphasizing its non-aligned and neutral stance.
- **Consultative Processes:** Nepal must seek India's input in re-proposing the ZoP initiative to build trust and mutual ownership of outcomes.

Mutual Benefits and Economic Collaboration

- Highlight the regional benefits of Nepal's neutrality, emphasizing that a stable Nepal can prevent power rivalries and enhance economic opportunities for both nations.
- Propose joint economic initiatives that capitalize on a peaceful environment, showcasing how the ZoP framework aligns with shared development goals.

Public and Track II Diplomacy

- Launch public campaigns to foster support for the ZoP proposal in both nations, leveraging media to dispel misconceptions and promote regional stability.
- Engage academics, think tanks, and civil society to facilitate informal discussions that complement official diplomacy.

Regional Security Cooperation

- Advocate for collaborative regional security measures aligned with the ZoP principles, demonstrating how Nepal's neutrality can contribute to peace in South Asia.

By adopting these measures, Nepal can position itself as a neutral and stabilizing force in the region. This approach aligns with Nepal's aspirations for peace and prosperity while fostering stronger bilateral relations with India.

Conclusion

This analysis concludes that the principles embedded in Nepal's FPPC and the ZoP remain crucial in contemporary international relations. The ZoP initiative, grounded in Nepal's strategic quest for sovereignty and non-alignment, underscores the enduring relevance of the FPPC in guiding diplomatic strategies. Despite challenges, including

opposition from neighboring India and the complexities of Cold War geopolitics, Nepal's experience highlights the importance of transparent diplomacy and mutual dialogue in fostering trust and confidence-building among nations.

Looking ahead, Nepal's foreign policy should continue to prioritize these principles to effectively navigate an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. As global power dynamics shift, particularly in the context of emerging regional rivalries and multi-polarity, the ZoP can serve as a stabilizing framework for smaller states, emphasizing neutrality and peace.

Further research could examine the adaptability of the ZoP concept in other regions, such as the South China Sea or the Korean Peninsula or the Middle East, where neutral or non-aligned stances may contribute to regional security. Additionally, investigating the implications of major power rivalries and evolving international norms on the feasibility and implementation of such proposals could provide deeper insights into their relevance in today's increasingly interconnected world.

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