



Implications on Nepal's Foreign Affairs of the Sino-Indian Rapprochement over Lipulekh

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Abstract

When China and India get closer, will Nepal be uncomfortable with losing its strategic space? The available literature on Sino-Indian conflict and competition in the Himalayan region do not divulge the impacts of Sino-Indian cooperation on Nepal. By examining the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Nepal's Lipulekh, this study elaborates the implications of India's and China's neighborhood policies on Nepal's foreign policy. In 2015, while Nepal was concentrating on post-earthquake relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction, China and India—the two Asian geopolitical rivals, decided to use Nepal's Lipulekh as a trading corridor, without Nepal's consent. The Sino-Indian agreement over Nepal's Lipulekh not only stirred controversy in Nepal but also raised questions over the intention of Nepal's two immediate neighbors. Although 2015 was not the first time that Nepal's neighbors agreed upon the Lipulekh route, the case of the Sino-Indian rapprochement in Lipulekh is studied and methodologically analyzed under the framework of exploratory research design. By situating Nepal's case in the conceptual framework of small states, first, this study surveys Nepal's foreign policy behavior in the context of Nepal's Gulliverian neighborhood through deductive reasoning. Second, the impacts of the multi-faceted Sino-Indian interactions on Nepal's foreign policy are identified through inductive reasoning. Finally, the implications of the neighborhood policies of China and India toward Nepal are discussed against the backdrop of the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Nepal's Lipulekh.

Keywords: Sino-Indian Rapprochement, Lipulekh, foreign policy strategies, foreign policy

Introduction

“When two elephants fight, the grass suffers but when they make love, the grass still suffers”. This maxim is very popular among Kathmandu-based foreign policy experts and security analysts, indicative of popular attitudes regarding Nepal's geopolitical positioning between China and India. While the hostile Himalayan terrain in the north has constrained Sino-Nepal interactions, the country's open and porous borders in the east, west, and south have shaped

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ties between Nepal and India—both economic and cultural. India has historically considered Nepal's Himalayas as its defense frontier. Strategically informed about the same, Beijing, today intends to penetrate the Himalayan region with its Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) projects, which have already riled policymakers in New Delhi. As such, the Himalayas have occupied a central place in the foreign policy priorities of both China and India. Despite their routine contestation over the Himalayas, the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Nepal's Lipulekh in 2015 unusually divulged a point of convergence between them. After New Delhi and Beijing agreed to use Lipulekh as their trading route without Kathmandu's consent, it spawned a sense of distrust in the political and social spheres of the Himalayan country.

Hence, the insinuations of China and India's neighborhood policies toward Nepal, against the backdrop of Sino-Indian rapprochement, raised a few important questions: Why did China and India agree on Nepal's territory without the latter's consent? Why did China agree with India to use the Lipulekh corridor in light of the the Nepalis viewing China as a welcoming neighbor? Is Nepal losing its strategic space when Beijing and New Delhi get closer in Lipulekh? These questions unveil the presence of distrust in Nepali society's understanding of China and India's neighborhood policies toward Nepal. Although the self-help available to Nepal was to resolve the issue diplomatically by holding talks with both countries, they were absent in holding talks on the same.

Their reluctance in resolving the issue, diplomatically, further aggravated the sense of distrust and suspicion. Episodes like this often contribute to shaping Nepal's worldview in general and its neighborhood policy in particular. If we make a claim that Kathmandu's foreign policy strategy toward its immediate neighbors is fundamentally driven by feelings of distrust and suspicion, it should be also understood that not only its neighbors are responsible for the production and reproduction of the amount of distrust. The Nepali political spectrum also shares the blame. The synopsis of Nepal's foreign policy in the context of Nepal's Gulliverian neighborhood signals the lack of understanding about the formation of trust and mistrust in Nepal's foreign policies.

The existing literature on Nepal's neighborhood policies has identified numerous impacts of the different facets of Sino-Indian interactions on Nepal's foreign policy behavior. But, the incubation of trust and cynicism in its foreign policy would be a fresh and novel exploration. To fulfill the same gap, this study intends to analyze how episodes such as the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Nepal's Lipulekh spreads and escalates distrust and suspicion in bilateral relations, and offers power elites an opportunity to exploit such incidents as political rhetoric. In disseminating the amount of distrust from the political level to the social level, Nepali power elites have taken refuge in the foreign policies of China and India toward Nepal. Foreign policy decisions taken by them, predominantly in the context of Sino-Indian contestation, reveal the same. Also, while responding to the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Lipulekh, Nepal's strategic choice was limited to fostering a sense of distrust about its neighbors and exposing both of them as existential threats.

Literature Review

Existing literature heavily concentrates on the Sino-Indian competition in Nepal. There is a dearth of literature on the Sino-Indian rapprochement toward Nepal. Thus, this study presents the implications of China and India's neighborhood policies on Nepal's foreign policy by taking Lipulekh as a focus of attention in the paper.

Talking about the strategic dimension of Nepal-India-China relations, Indian foreign policy expert S.D. Muni believes that whenever China and Nepal come closer, India is perturbed, and whenever China and India become closer, Nepal may feel uncomfortable about "losing its strategic space" (Muni, 2016). Nepal's "uncomfortable geographical location" (Muni, 1977) between Asia's two big countries, its small geographical size and landlocked character, and its undersized economy have further aggravated its sense of insecurity and distrust. Thus, in such a context, will Sino-Indian rapprochement be advantageous or detrimental to Nepal? Referring to the case of Lipulekh, Nepali political scientist and foreign policy expert Lok Raj Baral underlines that while Nepal and India are yet to settle the disputed Kalapani territory, which is close to Lipulekh, the Sino-Indian agreement for using Lipulekh as a trading point has swelled Nepali anxiety (Baral, 2016). After China and India signed an agreement on 15 May 2015 over Lipulekh, Nepal's expressed its objection and also formed a committee to identify the actual position on the Lipulekh pass. The 41-point agreement between the two Asian giants mentions, *inter alia* :

These two sides recognized that enhancing border areas cooperation through border trade, pilgrimage by people of the two countries and other exchanges can effectively promote mutual trust; and agreed to further broaden this cooperation so as to transform their border into a bride of cooperation and exchanges. The two sides agreed to hold negotiations on augmenting the list of traded commodities and expand border trade at Nathu La, and Qiangla/Lipulekh Pass and Shipki La.

While Beijing assured Nepal that it would address the latter's legitimate concerns, New Delhi also emphasized resolving the issue through mutual understanding. As such, the self-help available to Nepal was to resolve the issue diplomatically. Still, there have been few episodes in history revealing how Nepal intentionally avoided settling disputes related to Kalapani. King Mahendra, as disclosed later, aimed to "pacify the Indians by allowing the Indian military to use Kalapani" in the context of the construction of Nepal's first road to China (Baral, 2016). It was then Foreign Minister Rishikesh Shaha, who first disclosed Mahendra's approach to Kalapani. When Shaha raised this matter to King Mahendra, the latter responded by saying that "he didn't want to upset India further" (Sharma, 1998) as New Delhi was already irritated by his overtures to China.

The Indian diplomat Ranjit Rae views it differently and argues that Nepal's claim to Lipulekh is quite recent. Because Kathmandu didn't object to the signing of the *Panchasheel* Agreement in 1954 between China and India that "contains several references to this Lipulekh pass that has been traditionally used for the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage and trade between Tibet and India" (Rae, 2021). Although Lipulekh pass was mentioned in various agreements between China and India, Nepal protested against it only in 2015 (Rae, 2021). In 1954, for

the first time, New Delhi and Beijing decided to allow Indian Mansarovar pilgrims to use the Lipulekh Pass. Again, Lipulekh found its place in the Sino-Indian consultation in 1991 during the China visit of the Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh. During the visit of the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in 2005 to India, both countries emphasized using the Lipulekh route for trade and pilgrimage. As such, the 2014 agreement was the continuity of the erstwhile deal. It clearly indicates that both countries do not have divergent interpretations of Nepal's claim to Lipulekh. One may ponder then: Why is China willing to extend the Qinghai-Tibet railway network to Nepal's border with India as the two nuclear powers have already decided to use Lipulekh pass as a trade corridor (Bhattarai, 2020)? As such, Nepal's standpoint over Lipulekh appears more ambiguous and uncertain.

Another Indian diplomat Manjeev Singh Puri endorses Rae by declaring that Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura are traditionally used as a route to the Kailash Mansarovar by the Indian pilgrims. "The areas are in Uttarakhand near the Chinese border and weren't even included in the map of Nepal till the recent claim" (Puri, 2021). After Nepal issued a new map including these territories in May 2020, new tension brewed between Kathmandu and New Delhi. To the Nepali diplomats and foreign policy experts, however, Kathmandu needs to take a new approach to resolve the outstanding boundary row. Nepali diplomat and foreign policy expert Dinesh Bhattarai believes that although the region belongs to Nepal, it is a trijunction too. Thus, the need to bring both China and India together for talks cannot be denied (Bhattarai, 2022). Inviting both countries for talks became more pronounced after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated on December 30, 2021, while addressing an election rally in Uttarakhand that his government has built a road to Lipulekh and further expansion is underway. Therefore, while Nepal keeps on modifying its position over Lipulekh, India is all equipped to materialize its pilgrimage route.

Available sources disclose that the Chinese position on Lipulekh is very unclear. While China has inked an agreement with India for using Lipulekh to "enhance border areas cooperation through border trade, pilgrimage by people of the two countries, and other exchanges," Beijing's response to Nepal's claim is ambiguous. Although China seeks constant commitment from the Nepali side on the Tibetan and Taiwan issue, arguably, Kathmandu has failed to draw China's commitment over Lipulekh. Still, China has signaled the strategic importance of the region. When the Dokhlam standoff was underway between China and India in 2017, Wang Wenli, the Deputy Director General of the Boundary and Ocean Affairs of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated to an Indian media delegation in Beijing, "what New Delhi would do if China enters Kalapani region?" Indian foreign policy expert Sangeeta Thapliyal however claims that the Indian army and People's Liberation Army identified Lipulekh as an additional border personnel meeting point in 2014 (Thapliyal, 2020), a year before Modi and Xi agreed to expand border trade through Lipulekh in 2015.

The scholarship produced by Nepali scholars and exports blame both: the rise of China and India with little responsibility towards its small neighbors, and the so-called "small state syndrome" of the small states in the vicinity of China and India (Bhattarai, 2022). Senior Nepali geographer Buddhi Narayan Shrestha considers India's claim to Lipulekh as an act of encroachment and Nepal's territory reaches to Limpiyadhura, not limited to Lipulekh. He states:

As a border analyst, I established the statistical data of the India-encroached territory of Lipulekh-Kalapani-Limpiyadhura 372 sq km, Susta 145 sq km, and 89 sq km in other 69 places, being a total of 606 sq km... I scoured through many libraries around the world, including the ones in London and New York. At the Library of Congress in New York, I discovered that the origin of the Mahakali River was Limpiyadhura, not Lipulekh.

Nepali hydrologist Jagat Bhusal blames both British India and independent India for the cartographic manipulation. He notes:

British-India after the Sugauli treaty and also India after the independence realized the importance of the Gunji-Kuti area, Lipulekh pass, and Kalapani and made the unilateral cartographic manipulation on the North-west border of Nepal.

Scanning the fundamental literature available on Lipulekh, it is understandable that India's and Nepal's claims to Lipulekh are incompatible while China's response has been unclear. For Indian experts, Nepal's claims are recent and "at the behest of else," an indirect reference to China (PTI, 2020). To Nepali scholars, however, it is an upshot of Indian encroachment since the 1950s. But, as soon as the Nepal-India border problem in Nepal's northwestern frontier is towed into the Sino-Indian contestations in the Himalayas, the idea of Sino-Indian rapprochement appears more perplexing and intricate. Thus, this study intends to highlight various factors leading to the rapprochement despite their geopolitical competition.

Methodology

This qualitative study examines the causes of the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Lipulekh and its impact on Nepal's foreign policy strategy. While the primary data were received through the informal conversation with the foreign policy experts, military strategists, and geographers of Nepal, India, and China in different periods of time from 2015 to 2022, the secondary data have been received from books, op-ed articles, newspaper reports, academic journals. Similarly, the Sino-India rapprochement is analyzed through India's Himalayan frontier theory and small-state theories. Speeches, press releases, joint communique have been used as the primary sources of information. As the data are non-numerical, with the help of interpretive analysis, the author interprets the bilateral agreements, statements, speeches, and interviews of policymakers and foreign policy experts to understand their meaning. After gauging the causes of the Sino-Indian rapprochement in Lipulekh based on both the primary and secondary sources of data, the paper employs both inductive and deductive methods, moving back and forth between concepts and data, interpretation, and description.

The entire research process is emergent as the research began to change the more the data was collected. Although the initial plan of the study was to identify the causes of the Sino-Indian rapprochement, the collection of data encouraged the author to assess its impact on Nepal's foreign policy strategy. Data analysis on the causes of the rapprochement progressed concurrently with the data collection in the same section. Still, the author has winnowed the data on geopolitical vulnerabilities focusing more on the foreign policy strategy of Nepal. Data on the causes of rapprochement and its implication have been coded by converting collected information into a set of meaningful and organized categories. Through coding, data

on Sino-Indian rivalry, Sino-Indian strategic convergence, and Nepal's small states syndrome, are linked with interrelated themes and concepts that eventually reinforce the key argument of the study. Coding was done by assigning codes to the causes and implications of Sino-Indian rapprochement and clustering them until they were turned into categories to conduct a preliminary analysis. Recoding of the causes and implications was done as new data emerged. Findings were validated by examining evidence and converging different sources of data. Key findings were shared verbally with colleagues and experts to authenticate the findings.

Discussion and Results

Strategic Convergence or Kathmandu's Dilemma

Generally, the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Lipulekh is understood as the upshot of the strategic convergence in the interest of both countries in Nepal's Himalayan region. But, this is not entirely true. After all, Sino-India contestation in the Himalayas signals strategic divergence. Then, what made them converge in Lipulekh? To understand this, one needs to understand the nature and extent of Sino-Indian interactions. While Sino-Indian rivalry has the components of "conflict, cooperation, and competition," (Bhattarai, 2020a) we need to understand Sino-Indian rapprochement in Lipulekh from all three perspectives. Before the COVID-19 global outbreak, China and India had intended to stabilize their relations through the Wuhan meeting and Chennai Connect between the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Chinese President Xi. Today, their relationship is aggravated by border problems and contestations in the Himalayas and the Indian ocean. Kathmandu perceives Sino-Indian interactions in three ways: firstly, as geopolitical foes, secondly as economic powers, and thirdly as two different civilizations. Hence, to Nepal, their rapprochement over Lipulekh appeared vaguer and unclear. Besides, merely complaining of not being consulted, Kathmandu has not been able to identify the true causes of rapprochement, which has ultimately spread suspicions and doubts regarding the intention of its neighbors.

After all, one cannot understand the causes of the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Lipulekh without locating them in the broader historical domain. On 29th April 1954, China and India signed an agreement granting travel permission to the traders and pilgrims of both countries through the following passes and routes: Shipki La Pass, Mana Pass, Niti Pass, Kungri Bingri Pass, Darma Pass, and Lipu Lekh Pass (MoFA, n.d.). In 1954, Nepal hadn't established diplomatic relations with China and in most of Nepal's foreign affairs decisions, India used to have a strong sway over it. In those days, New Delhi was so fascinated by the Himalayan frontier that it considered the Himalayas as its source of defense. It was on the 6th of December 1950, inside the Indian Parliament, Prime Minister Nehru stated:

"From time immemorial, the Himalayas have provided us with a magnificent frontier... we cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also the principal barrier to India. Therefore, much as we appreciate the independence of Nepal, we cannot allow anything to go wrong in Nepal or permit that barrier to be crossed or weakened, because that would be a risk to our own security. (Nehru, 1961).

Today also, India has securitized its foreign policy towards Nepal, especially when it comes to the Himalayan borderlands. Lipulekh is an apt example. Strategically, New Delhi is

always riled by a third party's influence in Nepal. As such, colonial heritage paves its way in India's foreign policy towards Nepal. A 1903 letter to the then Secretary of State, Viceroy Lord Curzon mentioned that "... Nepal should be regarded as falling under our exclusive political influence and control." Chinese leader Mao Zedong's approach to the Himalayas was also driven by the act of securitization. To him, Tibet was the palm of China, while Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal, Ladakh, and North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) are its five fingers (Rowland, 1967; Schram, 1963). Following the end of British colonialism in India and with the establishment of the PRC, both countries were looking for ways to make bilateral relations friendlier and harmonious despite the problems of the un-demarcated borders. In those days, both countries took refuge in the mantra of "Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai" (which in English means Indian and Chinese are brothers). Most importantly, the 1954 agreement on Lipulekh can also be seen as China's acknowledgment of the first non-Communist country like India to recognize Communist rule in China. But, after the 1962 war between China and India, it took 29 years for them to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on the resumption of border trade between India's Uttar Pradesh and Tibet by establishing border trade markets in the Lipulekh area. The agreement on 13 December 1991 states, in relevant parts:

With a view to facilitating the visits of persons engaged in border trade and the exchange of commodities and means of transportation, China and India have decided that Lipulekh (Qiangla) be the border pass for the entrance and exit of the said persons, commodities, and means of transportation from the two sides.

Again, on July 1, 1992, China and India signed a protocol on entry and exit Procedures for border trade, which states, in relevant parts:

Lipulekh (Qiang La) pass shall be the border pass for entry and exit of persons, commodities, and means of transport engaged in border trade, exchange of commodities, and means of transportation.

In both the decades of the 50s and 90s, Nepal was undergoing political uncertainty and instability. As such, power elites in Kathmandu were intensively engaged in managing the uncertainties emanating from domestic politics. After all, domestic needs shape foreign policy behavior. Also, following the political change of 1990, the Indian influence in Nepali politics increased, because of which political leaders in Kathmandu were allegedly not in a position to resist India's interest in Lipulekh. On April 11, 2005, during the visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to India, the two countries signed a protocol on "Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas". The agreement states, in relevant parts:

Both sides agree in principle to expand the mechanism of border meeting points to include Kibithu-Damai in the Eastern sector and Lipulekh Pass/Qiang la in the middle sector. The precise locations of these border meeting points will be decided through mutual consultations.

For the first time, Nepal objected to the Sino-Indian agreement on Lipulekh on 10 May 2005. But, once again, the time was not favorable for Nepal. Just two months before the agreement, King Gyanendra Shah had imposed a coup and wasn't in a position to antagonize India. Nepali

press, however, reacted to the agreement by expressing how Nepali society is hurt by China's move regarding the acceptance of Indian encroachment of Nepali soil. Nepali journalist Sudhir Sharma wrote a long article arguing how the new agreement had divulged China's support of the Indian occupation (Sharma, 2005). While Nepal has accommodated China's interest regarding Tibet and Taiwan, Nepal could argue that its concerns were not seriously addressed by China. On 18 September 2014, China and India inked several agreements during the State visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to India. On the same occasion, they also signed the Memorandum of Understanding "on opening a new route for Indian pilgrimage (Kailash Mansarovar Yatra) to the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China". The MoU provides for "conducting the annual Kailash Mansarovar Yatra through Nathula Pass in Sikkim in addition to the existing Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand." On May 15, 2015, when both the countries decided to "expand border trade at Nathu La, Qiangla/Lipu-Lekh Pass and Shipki La" during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to China, Nepal's objection appeared stronger. This time, the opposition was reported not only in the media but also in the political circles, public spheres, and also in the government, which took advantage of the Sino-Indian agreement for political rhetoric in Nepal. Despite the stern opposition from all quarters, Nepal has failed to resolve this issue diplomatically and to remove the Indian military mission from its soil, the causes of which are discussed in the next section.

In trying to identify the actors and factors leading to the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Lipulekh, it has been understood that firstly, Indian occupation of the area played an important role; secondly, Nepal's fragile political situation and the landlocked country's dependence on India, which has demonstrated a history of attempting to manage Nepal's political voyage after 1950. Thirdly, China's indifference to Nepal's territorial integrity so as to strengthen Sino-Indian ties.

When China and India agreed on Lipulekh, their bilateral relations were relatively harmonious, peaceful, and more driven by economic interests. Today, with India's entry into the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD), Sino-Indian interactions have transformed from economic engagement to geopolitical tensions. In such context, India's construction of the road to Lipulekh is routinely interpreted from military and strategic perspectives. Above all, the changing dynamics of Sino-Indian ties have become an impasse for the decision-makers in Kathmandu, because of which distrust finds its place in the relations between the three countries. While China and India agreed to use the Lipulekh pass, they had developed a certain level of trust toward each other in regard to their approach and engagement in the Himalayan region. But, the same agreement spawned a sense of distrust in Nepal towards both neighbors. Psychological and political research suggests that countries share more trust if they have similarities. Although Nepal and India share culture, religion, and people-to-people relations, the level of trust is suspect. The Strategic Choice theory assumes that trust is driven by the prior performance of the actors involved (Schelling, 1994). Kathmandu's trust in China, possibly, is propelled by the prior performance of China as a strategic balancer to the Indian influence in Nepal. But, the Sino-Indian rapprochement over Lipulekh has called Nepal's trust towards China into question. Social scientists Henry Farrell and Jack Knight define trust as "a set of expectations held by one party that other party of parties will behave in an appropriate manner with regard to a specific issue" (Farrell and

Knight, 1966). Following Nepal's protest against the agreement over Lipulekh in 2015, both countries pledged Nepal to resolve the issue through mutual consultation and understanding; however, this has not happened, yet. Trust is to be built by recurrent compliance with rules and expectations (Suchman, 1995) which should be instantiated in neighborhood policies of all concerned.

A socio-political analysis of the different actors, actions, and issues associated with the neighborhood policies of China and India toward Nepal shows a sharp departure in policies. Although New Delhi often reiterates the inevitability of a peaceful, and affluent neighborhood, New Delhi's policy is often criticized for its failure in fully appreciating the principle of sovereign equality and treasuring mutual respect in bilateral relations. While the principal foundation of India's foreign policy intends to achieve a strategically secure, politically stable, and economically vibrant neighborhood (Muni, 2003), India, since its independence, has concentrated on consolidating its power in the neighborhood (Malone, 2011). Owing to the divergence between its stated policy and practices, India's neighborhood policies have drawn criticism from several quarters.

In his 2019 Nepal visit, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged China's support in upgrading Nepal's landlocked status to a land-linked country by extending China's Qinghai-Tibet railway up to Nepal's border in Kerung. However, the excitement of getting easy access to the Chinese market, increasing the number of Chinese tourists via land, and the prospect of increasing trade between the two are challenged by hostile geography separating Nepal from China. The following section highlights the challenges of Nepal in persuading both neighbors towards course correction due to the so-called small state syndrome in its neighborhood policy.

Small States Syndrome

Nepal's foreign policy is characterized by small states syndrome while dealing with different facades of Sino-Indian interactions. Their rapprochement over Lipulekh further aggravated the small state syndrome-symptoms indicating Nepal's submissive and docile approach to its gigantic neighborhood. Such symptoms develop with the state's low level of participation in world affairs, comparatively less military capability, narrow functional and geographic coverage in its foreign policy agendas and priorities, and the recurrent use of legal, moral, and normative positions on international issues (East, 1973). Indian occupation of the Lipulekh area and China's endorsement of the same through agreements have heightened the small state syndrome in Nepal's foreign policy. Although Nepal is not a small state in terms of its population and size, its gigantic neighborhood has made the country appear small (Bhattarai, 2017) and the same impression of smallness is visible in its neighborhood policy targeted to the different facets of Sino-Indian interactions.

While branding countries as small and big smacks of a colonial project, there is no universal definition of a small state. The quantitative variable associated with any state may reveal the geographic or demographic factors whereas the qualitative variable stresses the status of the country in international politics and its relations at the bilateral, regional, and multilateral fronts (Kosary, 1987). Demographically speaking, countries with a population of less than 1.5 million are considered small. Countries with less than 500,000 people are

considered microstates, particularly the small island countries including the Maldives, Tuvalu, the Bahamas, and Seychelles. There is also a trend of perceiving landlocked, least-developed, and resource-scarce countries as small states. As such, there are various indicators for defining a country as small and the impact of that smallness on its foreign policy. The size of a country—measured either through population, economy, territory, or military—is at the core of traditional studies on small states. But our world today is different, where size alone cannot be considered the source of the small state syndrome.

To Thorhallsson, there are six types of size, which are: (a) the idea of fixed size (which denotes a certain population and state's territory); (b) sovereignty size (denotes the capability of a country to maintain sovereignty over its territory); (c) political size (the competence of country's administrative units, foreign policy institutions, and military capabilities); (d) economic size (it denotes state's GDP and development activities); (e) perceptual size (perception of decision-makers towards your own country and the external perception towards your ability); and (f) preference size (ideas and ambitions prioritized by the elites in the state) (Thorhallsson, 2006). The idea of fixed size and population suggests that Nepal is not a small state. But, other indicators, as listed by Thorhallsson, have aggravated Nepal's small state syndrome. Kathmandu's inability to conduct a census on its north-western frontiers owing to the Indian military occupation in the Kalapani-Lipulekh region reflects Nepal's "smallness" in terms of its size of sovereignty. New Delhi's lobby to amend Nepal's newly adopted constitution after its promulgation in 2015 was another chapter. Nepal's economic dependence on India for the latter's imports and exports chills governments in Nepal to raise its voice effectively to New Delhi. Despite its dependency on India, the power elites of the landlocked country have strategized Nepal's geography in relation to its immediate neighbors, which is also evident in their perceptions and preferences.

Ideologically, the principle of sovereign equality repudiates the colonial process of perceiving countries as big and small. Still, the state's interests, influence, ambitions, and security concerns produce the dichotomy of small and big. As Nepal's two neighbors are using their military and economic capabilities to secure a global power status, decision-makers in Kathmandu are left to pay close heed to their interests, at times, even at the expense of Nepal's own legitimate interest. As a result, it engenders the small state syndrome. The Sino-Indian rapprochement in Lipulekh is the upshot of the same. Following Nepal's objection to the 2015 joint communiqué between China and India, both neighbors assured Nepal that the matter would be resolved through mutual consultations. Until now, no diplomatic settlement has materialized. Although Kathmandu proposed dates for holding meeting of the foreign secretaries', it has not happened, yet. When the Modi government unveiled a new political map in 2019 including the Nepali territory of Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura within Indian borders, matters became more sensitive.

Despite having evidence and historical maps to support the Nepali claim, Kathmandu is in a difficult situation vis-à-vis India. China's endorsement of India's occupation has made decision-makers in Kathmandu more helpless. The Sugauli Treaty of 1816 shows Nepal's territory up to Limpiyadhura, the source of the Kali River. Article 5 of the Sugauli Treaty says "The Rajah of Nipaul renounces for himself, his heirs and successors all claims to or

connections with the countries lying to the west of the river Kali and engages never to have any concern with those countries of the inhabitants thereof". Also, the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed with Britain in 1923 validated the provisions of the Sugauli treaty.

Until 1963 Lipulekh- Limpiyadhura was not a disputed territory. Still available are the records of people from those territories who had cast votes in the 1963 Village Panchayat elections (Dhungel, et al. 2020). Also, the Nepal government had conducted a census in 1954 and 1961 in the villages including Gunji, Nabi, Kuti, Tinker and Charung (Risal, 2020). When India included these areas in its new map in 2019, records about the elections and census, and bureaucrats associated with and involved in collecting data were still alive, which is in itself valid evidence (Risal, 2020). Above all, the maps published from 1816-1856 by the British East Indian Company have cited River Kali, originating from Limpiyadhura, as the boundary river between Nepal and India (Bhusal, 2020). But, understanding the strategic significance of Limpiyadhura as a tri-junction, the source of the Kali River was feigned as Lipu Khola. In reality, Lipu Khola is a small stream originating from Lipu range. Although the maps published until the decade of 1850s used the details embraced by Sugauli treaty, the "District Almora" published by the Survey of India by taking survey details from 1865-69 and 1871-77 named the Kali River coming from Limpiyadhura as 'Kuti Yangti' for the first time. A letter dispatched by Acting Chief Secretary of the Government of British India, J Adams, on February 4, 1817, to the British Resident Edward Gardner in Kathmandu mentions that the territories east of the river Kali belong to Nepal.

While the Boundary Working Group (BWG)—the joint agency established by the governments of Nepal and India in 2014—aimed to undertake activities of border pillar construction, repair, and restoration, the BWG is not mandated to look into the issue of Kalapani-Lipulekh and Susta. Although only a high-level mechanism is entrusted with resolving the disputes in Susta and Kalapani-Lipulekh, boundary issues are rarely discussed during the high-level visits unless and until New Delhi is interested, which arguably has further ingrained a small state syndrome in Nepal.

Any attempts to seek refuge in international law may also have more negative repercussions in practical life. Small states around the world have been seen advocating the importance of international law and expressing their commitment to the international rule of law; however, power disparity between states is all too real. Adjudicative process is costly and may strain diplomatic ties between Nepal-India. It may be argued that the only self-help available to Kathmandu is a diplomatic channel, the success of which seems yet to be seen. When India unveiled its new map incorporating the Nepali territory, Nepal sent a diplomatic note asking for clarification. Without offering clarification, New Delhi inaugurated a road through Lipulekh. Later, the Oli-led Nepali government issued a new map claiming its territory up to Limpiyadhura. Today, the real challenge is the impasse in diplomacy in earnestly heeding concerns of the neighbors and acting towards it.

Conclusion

India's road to Lipulekh is being constructed today, and Nepal remains a mute spectator, which as this qualitative study identified, is because of three reasons: Firstly, Indian military mission

was stationed in Nepal's Kalapani-Lipulekh areas since 1952 and it was already arduous for Nepali leaders to make India withdraw from the north-western front, particularly after the Sino-Indian war of 1962. Secondly, China has endorsed India's occupation of Nepali soil through various agreements and MoUs that have limited the self-help options available to Kathmandu. Thirdly, Nepal's small state syndrome also is blameworthy. Being located between two big civilizations, big economies, big populations, and two incompatible political set-ups, Nepal's capacity to hold dialogue and negotiations on the same level have eroded substantially. In its place, distrust and suspicion have fashioned Nepal's relations with its gigantic neighborhood, which is quite often exploited by the power elites in Nepal to fulfill their vested political interest, whipping a frenzy through political rhetoric. Much remains to be done on the part of the Nepali leadership to seek all channels in holding talks with China and India over the issue that is of utmost importance to Nepal's national integrity.

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