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## Revisiting Nepal's Zone of Peace Proposal: Survival Strategy for a Multipolar World

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### Abstract

*This paper revisits Nepal's Zone of Peace (ZoP) proposal, introduced in the 1970s, as a foundational framework for Nepal's foreign policy. While originally conceived during a bipolar global order, the ZoP remains pragmatically relevant in the current multipolar geopolitical landscape. Situated between two regional powers, India and China, Nepal faces persistent challenges to its sovereignty, stability, and diplomatic identity. By analyzing the historical context and contemporary relevance of the ZoP, this study highlights its potential to reinforce Nepal's neutrality and the pursuit of multi-alignment strategies amidst intensifying global and regional competition. Employing qualitative methodologies—including historical analysis, reviews of secondary sources, and theoretical frameworks like liberal internationalism, balance of power, and small-state diplomacy—the study finds that the ZoP's principles of neutrality and peaceful coexistence remain vital. Key findings suggest that revitalizing the ZoP through a multi-dimensional approach, encompassing strategic economic diplomacy, fostering alliances with middle and small powers, and deepening engagement in multilateral platforms like the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement, can reinforce Nepal's position as an independent and proactive diplomatic actor. Additionally, leveraging cultural diplomacy rooted in Nepal's Buddhist and Hindu heritage emerges as a critical tool to garner global support for the initiative. Acknowledging challenges such as resistance from neighboring powers, internal political instability, and limited international recognition, the findings imply that adaptive diplomacy, enhanced regional cooperation, and proactive global advocacy are essential to transforming the ZoP into a robust geopolitical strategy. This paper concludes that by stimulating the ZoP with a forward-looking, multi-faceted strategy, Nepal can safeguard its sovereignty, strengthen its global presence, and contribute to a more stable and peaceful world order.*

**Keywords:** *Zone of peace, multi-alignment, sovereignty, small-state diplomacy, foreign policy*

### Introduction

In 1975, King Birendra of Nepal proposed a vision in his coronation address that would shape the country's foreign policy for decades:

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As it's one of the most ancient civilizations in Asia, our natural concern is to preserve our independence, a legacy handed down by history. We need peace for our security, independence, and for development. And if today, peace is an overriding concern for us, it is only because our people genuinely desire peace in the country, in our region, and elsewhere in the world. It is with this earnest desire to institutionalize peace that I stand to make a proposition—a proposition that my country, Nepal, be declared a Zone of Peace. As heirs to a country that has always lived in independence, we wish to see that our freedom and independence shall not be thwarted by the changing flux of time, when understanding is replaced by misunderstanding, when conciliation is replaced by belligerency and war. (Birendra, 1975)

This pragmatic declaration marked the beginning of Nepal's Zone of Peace (ZoP) proposal, a strategic initiative aimed at safeguarding Nepal's sovereignty and ensuring its neutrality amid geopolitical influences exerted by its powerful neighbors, India and China. Grounded in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (FPPC - Panchsheel), first codified in 1954 through an agreement between India and China, and resonating with the ideals of liberal internationalism—such as mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality, and peaceful coexistence (Ghosh, 2010)—the ZoP sought to institutionalize Nepal's nonalignment by securing international guarantees against external interference. King Birendra recognized that Nepal's security depends not only on its bilateral ties with its neighbors but also on the dynamics of interactions between these regional powers (Duquesne, 2012).

Nepal's participation in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) further reinforced the ZoP's objectives, enabling it to position itself within a coalition advocating independence from superpower influence. The volatile geopolitical landscape of the 1970s—including India's assertive foreign policy under Indira Gandhi, Sino-U.S. rapprochement, the Indo-Soviet Treaty, and Soviet-China tensions—underscored the urgency of adopting a neutral strategy for Nepal (Bhattarai, 2023; Adhikari, 2020; Rose, 1971). Despite gaining international support, India's opposition constrained the ZoP's progress, reflecting the complexities and challenges of regional politics (Dahal, 2008, p. 45; Shah, 2013a, p. 78).

Today, Nepal's ZoP proposal is gaining renewed attention as the country encounters the challenges of a multipolar world. With increasing pressures to balance its strategic partnerships with India, China, and other stakeholders, the ZoP offers a diplomatic framework to assert Nepal's autonomy as well as addressing the demands of shifting geopolitical and geo-economic realities (ISAS, 2022; Lüthi, 2016a, Muni, 2016; Thapa, 2011). By adapting the ZoP to contemporary contexts, Nepal can ensure its sovereignty and stability while contributing to regional peace.

This study traces the historical evolution of Nepal's ZoP proposal, and then delves into the global responses to it, analyzing how various international stakeholders received the proposal and assessing its strategic relevance. Following this, it examines the ZoP's potential as a pragmatic survival strategy in today's multipolar world, drawing on historical lessons and identifying challenges Nepal may face in its implementation. The analysis concludes with strategic recommendations for the successful adaptation and implementation of the ZoP, taking into account contemporary geopolitical dynamics.

### **Historical Context**

Nepal's ZoP proposal emerged during a critical historical and geopolitical period, shaped by its geographical position between India and China. At the NAM Summit, King Birendra (1973) articulated Nepal's aspiration for neutrality, stating, "Situated between the two most populous

countries of the world, Nepal wishes her frontiers to be enveloped in a Zone of Peace.” Historically, Nepal’s foreign policy was significantly constrained by its reliance on India for trade, transit, and security, formalized through the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. While the treaty was intended to ensure mutual security, it has been criticized for granting India substantial influence over Nepal’s political and security affairs (Shah, 2013). Additionally, Nepal’s landlocked status entrenched its dependency on India for access to international trade, further limiting its strategic autonomy.

The geopolitical landscape in South Asia shifted significantly post-1947, with India gaining independence and China establishing the People’s Republic in 1949. Nepal’s cultural, religious, and economic ties with India became more pronounced, but India’s intervention in the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) and annexation of Sikkim (1975) raised concerns in Nepal regarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity. These events motivated Nepal to seek greater independence, culminating in the ZoP proposal (Muni, 2016; Rose, 1971).

Complicating matters further, Nepal had to address the Tibetan Khampa resistance, supported by the CIA after the 1959 Tibetan uprising (Lüthi, 2016, p. 158). The Khampa presence in Nepal’s Mustang region alarmed China, which viewed it as a threat to its territorial security (Bhattarai, 2023, p. 112). To maintain neutrality and assuage Chinese concerns, Nepal launched a military operation in 1974 to dismantle Khampa camps, ending U.S.-backed insurgent activity on its soil (Shah, 2013a, p. 99). This operation demonstrated Nepal’s ability to counter external influences and uphold its sovereignty in a competitive geopolitical environment.

Amid growing concerns over its sovereignty and the competing influences of India and China, Nepal, under King Birendra’s leadership, proposed the ZoP initiative at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1975. Drawing inspiration from the FPPC, the proposal aimed to declare Nepal a neutral buffer state, free from foreign military presence and political interference, consistent with the principles of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence (Lüthi, 2016b; Garver, 2001).

Nepal’s geographical location necessitated careful balancing between its neighbors. Its economic and transit reliance on India, formalized through the 1950 treaty, constrained its foreign policy autonomy while amplifying Indian influence (Shah, 2013). Conversely, Nepal’s 1960 Peace and Friendship Treaty with China complicated its position, as India viewed it as strengthening Chinese influence in South Asia (Muni, 2016; Rose, 1971). For Nepal, fostering closer ties with China served as a counterbalance to Indian dominance.

The ZoP proposal embodied Nepal’s strategy to secure its neutrality and sovereignty amidst regional rivalries (Shah, 2013b). However, India’s opposition led to its failure, underscoring the challenges small states face in balancing aspirations with the strategic interests of dominant regional powers, consistent with small-state behavior in international relations (IR) (Lüthi, 2016c).

### **ZoP Proposal in Retrospect**

The ZoP proposal was a strategic foreign policy initiative shaped by the geopolitical complexities of South Asia during the Cold War (Adhikari, 1995). This proposal embodied Nepal’s unique approach, blending liberal ideals with a neorealist strategy to assert sovereignty and address security concerns amidst the competitive regional environment of South Asia.

From a constructivist perspective, the ZoP was deeply rooted in Nepal’s identity as a peace-oriented, non-aligned nation. Constructivism in IR highlights the influence of ideas,

norms, and identity on state behavior rather than solely focusing on material power or security (Wendt, 1999). Nepal's historical commitment to neutrality and peaceful coexistence, evident in its longstanding non-alignment policy, defined its international identity. The ZoP reflected this self-perception, balancing geopolitical concerns with Nepal's aspirations to assert itself as a sovereign and independent actor in global politics. Nepal's appeal to the FPPC and its alignment with the NAM further demonstrated its normative stance, projecting values of neutrality and non-aggression globally while seeking solidarity with other non-aligned nations (Rana, 2010; Singh, 1997a). Through the ZoP, Nepal sought to shield itself from exploitation by major powers and avoid becoming a proxy battleground in Cold War rivalries (Bhattarai, 2023).

Liberal internationalism, by contrast, frames the ZoP as a cooperative effort emphasizing multilateralism, diplomacy, and adherence to international law. Liberal internationalism advocates collaboration among states to address shared challenges and promote stability through international institutions and legal mechanisms (Ikenberry, 2001). Nepal's advocacy for neutrality sought to safeguard its sovereignty while promoting regional peace. The ZoP aimed to prevent foreign military presence in Nepal and reduce tensions between competing powers (Sharma, 2002). Nepal's engagement with smaller and non-aligned states further demonstrated its reliance on multilateral platforms to assert its autonomy amidst regional rivalries (Adhikari, 1995; Shah, 2013).

From a neorealist perspective, the ZoP represented a pragmatic strategy to navigate a competitive regional environment. Neorealism views the international system as anarchic, compelling states to prioritize survival by balancing power and managing threats (Waltz, 1979). Nepal's attempt to position itself as a neutral buffer zone between India and China reflected this strategy, leveraging neutrality to mitigate threats and maintain strategic independence (Bhatta, 2005; Singh, 1997a).

Integrating these theoretical frameworks reveals the ZoP as both a normative vision and a strategic endeavor. Its mixed responses underscore the challenges faced by small states in asserting autonomy amidst great-power competition (Khanal, 1993).

### ***Reception and Reactions***

Nepal's ZoP proposal elicited mixed reactions internationally. Among NAM member states, it found strong resonance as it aligned with their goals of safeguarding sovereignty and promoting peaceful coexistence amidst superpower rivalries (Sharma, 2005). The proposal mirrored NAM's stance against hegemonic influences and its focus on stability in the Global South (Khanal, 1993a). At the UNGA, Nepal's neutrality was lauded as a pragmatic response to South Asia's strategic vulnerabilities, drawing comparisons to Switzerland's enduring neutrality model (Rana, 1995). However, these endorsements lacked the geopolitical weight needed to counter opposition from regional powers, particularly India.

India's opposition was the most pronounced and pivotal. Indian policymakers, from a neorealist perspective, perceived Nepal's neutrality as a potential avenue for Chinese influence, jeopardizing India's strategic interests (Bhatta, 2010). Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dismissed the proposal as "incompatible with the geopolitical realities of the subcontinent," reflecting concerns over external interference in South Asia (Rana, 1995, p.45). Indian diplomatic communications warned that the ZoP could disrupt the regional balance of power, escalate Sino-Indian rivalries, and undermine India's dominance in the subcontinent (Rana, 1995; Sharma,

2005; Muni, 2016). Scholars attribute India's resistance to its security paradigm prioritizing strategic dominance over smaller neighbors, compounded by heightened Sino-Indian tensions during the proposal's introduction (Sharma, 2005; Muni, 2016).

While appealing to smaller states, the ZoP's lack of institutional traction highlighted its practical limitations. Alternative strategies, such as phased implementation or bilateral negotiations with India, remain underexplored. The proposal's potential relevance in today's multipolar order warrants further reassessment to understand its strategic significance.

### ***Strategic Implications***

The strategic implications of Nepal's ZoP proposal during the Cold War were substantial, providing Nepal with an opportunity to assert its autonomy amidst intense regional and global rivalries. The ZoP was designed to position Nepal as a neutral mediator, fostering dialogue and cooperation between India and China. If accepted by both powers, it could have contributed to a more stable and less conflict-prone geopolitical environment in South Asia (Bhatta, 2010).

From a liberal internationalist perspective, the ZoP could have enhanced regional stability by emphasizing non-alignment and peaceful coexistence. By committing to neutrality, Nepal could have played a key role in mediating disputes among South Asian countries, particularly within the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), while limiting the influence of external powers (Rana, 1995). This neutrality would have safeguarded Nepal's sovereignty, avoiding military entanglements with its powerful neighbors and reducing the risk of becoming a proxy battleground for their strategic rivalries (Muni, 2016; Bhatta, 2005).

Maintaining strategic autonomy would have allowed Nepal to concentrate on internal development, fostering political stability, economic growth, and social progress without being encumbered by alignment with any superpower or involvement in regional conflicts (Sharma, 2002; Singh, 1997). Additionally, the ZoP could have elevated Nepal's standing in international diplomacy, positioning it as a hub for dialogue and cooperation in South Asia. This enhanced role could have attracted international investments, contributing to political stability, economic prosperity, and an improved global diplomatic profile (Singh, 1997b).

However, the reality was more complex. While the ZoP proposal held promise for enhancing Nepal's sovereignty and promoting regional stability, it faced significant geopolitical hurdles. Despite international support, the initiative was undermined by India's opposition, driven by concerns over regional strategic dominance and the possibility of increased Chinese influence in Nepal (Bhatta, 2010; Rana, 1995). India's resistance, rooted in neorealist calculations, reflected the broader complexities of navigating regional relations in a multipolar world.

Smaller states often lack the capacity to influence international relations (Hassan, 2015; Ikenberry, 2018). The failure of the ZoP underscores the broader challenges small states face in asserting sovereignty and pursuing neutral diplomatic strategies under the pressure of larger powers. The Cold War rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, coupled with regional power dynamics dominated by India and China, made Nepal's neutrality a formidable challenge (Muni, 2016c; Ranjan, 2017). Revisiting the ZoP in today's geopolitics, with the rise of China and shifting U.S. foreign policy, presents both opportunities and challenges for small states like Nepal in asserting sovereignty amid great power rivalries (Bhatta, 2010; Ikenberry, 2018).

## The Multipolar World and Current Relevance of ZoP

### *Shifting Global Dynamics*

The contemporary global order is characterized by multipolarity, with power distributed among influential nations like China and India rather than concentrated in one or two superpowers. This shift presents significant challenges for smaller states like Nepal, which must navigate complex alliances and rivalries to preserve sovereignty and stability (Bhatta, 2010; Singh, 2022; Ikenberry, 2018). While parallels exist to the 1975 environment when Nepal proposed the ZoP, key differences emerge. At that time, Nepal sought neutrality amid Cold War tensions, steering clear of U.S.-Soviet rivalries and regional pressures from India and China (Hassan, 2015).

Today, the rise of China and India as global powers, along with the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), has redefined regional dynamics. The QUAD—comprising the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia—aims to counterbalance China’s growing influence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific (Singh, 2022). The U.S.’s 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy seeks to contain China, targeting initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022); Ikenberry, 2018).

This evolving balance of power brings opportunities and challenges for Nepal. Multipolarity allows Nepal to diversify partnerships beyond Cold War frameworks, fostering economic and strategic collaboration (Rana, 1995). However, heightened Sino-Indian tensions and U.S. ambitions in the Indo-Pacific heighten Nepal’s precarious position (Singh, 2022). Nepal must carefully balance ties with key geostrategic players while avoiding entanglement in their rivalries. Compared to 1975, its diplomatic tightrope walk is more complex, requiring vigilance and strategic leveraging of its position to safeguard sovereignty, neutrality, and autonomy in an increasingly competitive environment (Bhatta, 2010; Singh, 2022).

### *Nepal’s Current Geopolitical Realities*

Nepal’s geopolitical challenges stem from its strategic location between two major powers, India and China, with competing regional and global interests (Rana, 2021). This positioning necessitates careful diplomatic maneuvering to preserve its sovereignty and stability. As a small state, Nepal is particularly vulnerable to external pressures. Scholars such as Katzenstein (2003) and Ikenberry (2018a) highlight that small states must adopt strategies like neutralism or multi-alignment to safeguard their independence while avoiding alienation from larger powers. Nepal’s engagement with China, particularly through initiatives like the BRI, exemplifies its efforts to balance relations with its neighbors, although this approach also intensifies its challenges (Bhatta, 2010; Singh, 2022b).

In the current multipolar global order, diversifying alliances while maintaining non-alignment is vital for Nepal. Its geographical position makes it strategically vulnerable as larger powers like India, China, and the United States compete for influence. Waltz’s (1979) balance of power theory suggests that small states often become tools for larger powers’ strategic objectives. Nepal’s participation in the BRI has been perceived as expanding Chinese influence in South Asia, raising concerns in India and the U.S. (Sharma, 2020; Bhatta, 2010). Conversely, India’s imposition of economic blockades and disputes over territorial claims reflect its own efforts to maintain regional dominance. Such actions underscore Nepal’s struggle to uphold its sovereignty amid these competing pressures (Sharma, 2021a).

To address these challenges, Nepal must adopt effective small-state diplomacy. Hancock (2013) and Baldacchino (2015) argue that small states can engage with larger powers to cultivate partnerships without becoming entangled in one camp. For Nepal, this means carefully balancing relations with India and China. Its participation in the BRI and cautious engagement with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) should be managed to protect neutrality and autonomy. Baldacchino (2015) suggests that small states can leverage their geopolitical importance to secure favorable terms. Nepal must apply this principle by using its strategic location to maintain autonomy while fostering balanced relations with major powers (Singh, 2022c; Sharma, 2021b).

In this evolving geopolitical environment, an idea of reviving Nepal's ZoP proposal holds renewed significance for national security. Introduced during the Cold War, the ZoP was designed to protect Nepal's neutrality amidst U.S.-Soviet rivalry (U.S. Department of State, 2022b). Today, with the U.S. pursuing deeper involvement in Nepal through initiatives like the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), Nepal must assess the benefits of such aid while safeguarding its neutrality (Bhatta, 2020a). Simultaneously, Nepal's measured approach to China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI) demonstrates its intent to avoid aligning too closely with any single power (Sharma, 2021b).

Nepal's diplomatic challenge lies in balancing relationships with India, China, and the U.S. while safeguarding its sovereignty. By adopting flexible, multi-aligned strategies, as suggested by Hancock (2013) and Baldacchino (2015), Nepal can promote regional peace, mitigate disputes, and leverage its position to advance national interests. Reviving the ZoP proposal could reaffirm Nepal's neutrality in a competitive multipolar world, enabling it to safeguard its sovereignty while pragmatically engaging with major powers.

### ***The ZoP Proposal in Contemporary Geopolitics and Historical Lessons***

The core principles of Nepal's ZoP—neutrality, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence—are highly relevant in today's multipolar world. Initially conceived during the Cold War, the ZoP aimed to shield Nepal from external pressures and assert its sovereignty amidst geopolitical competition (Adhikari, 2020; Singh, 2019b). In the 21st century, characterized by economic interdependence and regional power rivalries, reviving the ZoP could help Nepal maintain stability and reinforce its identity as a sovereign, non-aligned nation (Khanal, 2021; Shrestha & Thapa, 2022).

Nepal's contemporary geopolitical realities demand a strategy that blends neutrality with multi-alignment, allowing it to preserve sovereignty while engaging diplomatically with major powers. Scholars argue that small states can leverage neutrality to build economic and diplomatic ties without becoming overly reliant on any one nation (Katzenstein, 2003; Baldacchino, 2015). For Nepal, this involves strengthening its role in regional organizations like SAARC and BIMSTEC, which provide platforms for multilateral dialogue to promote stability and peace—principles central to the ZoP (Acharya & Shrestha, 2022; Lama, 2019). Active participation in such forums would reinforce Nepal's image as a regional stabilizer and promoter of collective security (Koirala, 2023).

Economically, neutrality can serve as a strategic asset. Neutral small states like Switzerland and Finland demonstrate that neutrality and political stability attract foreign investment and foster economic resilience (Maissen, 2018; Jakobson, 2020). By adopting similar principles, Nepal

could create an environment conducive to foreign investment, diversify its economy, and reduce dependence on any single nation. This strategy would strengthen Nepal's economic autonomy, enabling it to navigate the pressures of competing powers (Khan, 2022; Bhatta, 2021).

Geographically, Nepal's strategic position between India and China allows it to play a "bridge-building" role in fostering regional cooperation. Drawing lessons from Switzerland's neutrality policy, which has enabled it to act as a hub for diplomacy and host international organizations, Nepal could position itself as a mediator in regional disputes (Spoerri, 2019; Maissen, 2018). Similarly, Finland's Cold War strategy, exemplified by its 'Paasikivi-Kekkonen line,' successfully balanced relations between the Soviet Union and the West, maintaining its autonomy while avoiding provocation (Forsberg & Vaahtoranta, 2001; Jakobson, 2020). Nepal could adopt a comparable approach, fostering partnerships with both India and China while upholding its sovereignty and promoting regional peace in line with the ZoP's principles (Acharya, 2020; Khadka, 2021).

Reviving the ZoP proposal faces challenges, particularly from India, which has historically opposed the concept due to concerns over its regional influence (Smith, 2022a; Ranjit, 2019). To address this, Nepal must strengthen multilateral partnerships and seek global diplomatic support to mitigate friction with its neighbors (Wang, 2020; Khan, 2022). The ZoP's revival should not be seen as a return to past policy but as a strategy tailored to today's geopolitical realities. By adopting strategic neutrality and fostering balanced engagements, Nepal can assert its diplomatic agency and contribute to regional peace and stability (Dempsey, 2022). Lessons from Switzerland and Finland underscore that embracing neutrality while leveraging strategic geography can bolster Nepal's sovereignty and regional role (Jones & Taylor, 2021; Khadka, 2021a).

### **Potential Challenges**

Nepal faces numerous challenges in re-establishing the ZoP proposal within the complex geopolitical dynamics between India and China. These challenges span critical dimensions of survival, security, and prosperity.

#### ***Survival amid Regional Tensions***

Reviving the ZoP will encounter resistance from Nepal's powerful neighbors, India and China, both of which have strategic stakes in the region. India has historically opposed the ZoP, perceiving it as a threat to its regional influence (Bhattarai, 2018; Smith, 2022a). Meanwhile, China's growing presence through initiatives like the BRI may test Nepal's commitment to neutrality. Nepal must address these concerns by aligning ZoP objectives with regional platforms like SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BRICS, emphasizing collaboration rather than exclusion (Shakya, 2021; Acharya & Shrestha, 2022).

#### ***Security Challenges and Strategic Neutrality***

Nepal's ability to safeguard its sovereignty while maintaining balanced relations with India and China is central to ZoP's success. In a multipolar environment, small states like Nepal face challenges in crafting a viable security strategy. Smart diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and trilateral dialogues can promote transparency and stability (Singh & Li, 2020). Historical precedents, such as Finland's balanced diplomacy during the Cold War, demonstrate how small states can navigate great-power dynamics without compromising their independence (Forsberg & Vaahtoranta, 2001; Jakobson, 2020).

### ***Economic Vulnerabilities and Prosperity***

Economic stability underpins the viability of the ZoP, yet Nepal's dependency on India for trade and China for investments creates vulnerabilities. Drawing lessons from Switzerland's neutral stance, Nepal can attract foreign investments by projecting political and economic stability (Maissen, 2018). By ensuring economic diversification and positioning itself as a stable investment destination, Nepal can align ZoP principles with development goals to mitigate these vulnerabilities (Bhatta, 2021; Khan, 2022).

### ***Internal Political Cohesion and Foreign Policy Strategy***

Nepal's fragmented political landscape poses another significant challenge to the ZoP's revival. Divergent foreign policy priorities among political factions weaken its credibility (Adhikari, 2020a). Achieving a unified domestic front requires a national dialogue involving political leaders, civil society, and experts to build consensus on the ZoP as a strategic initiative for Nepal's long-term interests (Ghimire, 2021).

### ***Developing a Comprehensive and Adaptive Framework***

To enhance its relevance, the ZoP framework must address global challenges such as climate change and economic competition. Integrating ZoP principles with regional climate initiatives or trade agreements could attract international support while reinforcing Nepal's stabilizing role (Shrestha, 2020a; Acharya, 2021; Khanal & Dahal, 2022). Flexibility in implementation is crucial to ensuring ZoP remains resilient amid shifting dynamics.

### ***Securing Sustained International Support***

Historically, Nepal struggled to secure consistent international backing for the ZoP (Shah & Basnet, 2021). Strengthening alliances with neutral and middle-power nations can create a support network that legitimizes the ZoP in a multipolar world (Acharya, 2019). Precisely, reviving the ZoP requires Nepal to balance its sovereignty aspirations with regional and global sensitivities. A unified domestic front, an adaptive strategy, and sustained diplomacy are keys to ensuring ZoP's relevance and success.

### **Strategic Recommendations**

At this critical juncture in revising its foreign policy imperatives, Nepal can adapt the ZoP to align with the evolving geopolitical realities of the 21st century. This revitalization should position the ZoP as a forward-looking strategy that seeks international recognition while reinforcing Nepal's commitment to neutrality, sovereignty, and regional stability. Scholars suggest strategies such as bandwagoning, hedging, equidistance, counterbalancing, and positioning as a strategic bridge between India and China. Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001) advocate for neutrality and multi-alignment as viable approaches for small states in complex power structures, while Schafer (1999) and Rynning (2006) highlight the importance of flexibility in adapting to shifting power dynamics.

By leveraging pragmatic diplomacy and forging strategic partnerships with international actors, Nepal can broaden its engagement and address regional challenges (Ikenberry, 2018b; Nye, 2004). Furthermore, to successfully re-establish the ZoP, Nepal should draw upon IR theories such as constructivism, liberal internationalism, neorealism, and small-state diplomacy to preserve its peaceful identity while navigating the complexities of a multipolar world.

### ***Shaping National Identity and Perception through ZoP***

Nepal should position the ZoP as a cornerstone of its national identity, promoting a shared perception of the country as a peaceful, neutral state committed to regional stability. This aligns with constructivist theory, which emphasizes collective identity in shaping foreign policy (Wendt, 1999). Nepal's leadership must work with academic institutions, the media, and civil society to promote ZoP as a symbol of sovereignty and non-alignment. Public dialogues, seminars, and educational campaigns can embed ZoP into the national consciousness, reducing domestic political contention and uniting factions under a cohesive foreign policy. This strategy strengthens Nepal's international image as a peace advocate, similar to Switzerland's neutral identity since the 1815 Congress of Vienna (Maissen, 2018). Likewise, a well-ingrained ZoP identity can unify Nepal domestically while boosting its global standing.

### ***Enhancing Multilateral and Bilateral Cooperation***

Expanding Nepal's engagement in regional and international forums such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, SCO, BRICS, and the UN is crucial to bolstering ZoP. Participation in these organizations promotes ZoP as a peace component, enhancing legitimacy (Ikenberry, 2018). Collaboration with NAM countries and bilateral dialogues with global powers will strengthen Nepal's diplomatic profile and economic resilience. Prioritizing engagement with India, vital for regional security, ensures alignment with realpolitik and addresses India's strategic interests directly or indirectly.

### ***Balancing Power Dynamics between India and China***

As suggested by neorealist theory (Waltz, 1979), Nepal must balance its relations with both India and China while engaging with the broader international community. The ZoP proposal should assure both nations that Nepal's neutrality promotes regional stability. To achieve this, Nepal can implement confidence-building measures, such as trilateral dialogues with India and China, to address concerns about the ZoP. Additionally, Nepal should avoid policies that favor one side over the other. Strengthening economic and security interdependence with both nations will reduce over-reliance on either, maintaining Nepal's autonomy. This strategy aligns with neorealist principles, safeguarding Nepal's security and diplomatic independence (Bhattarai, 2018; Singh, 2022).

### ***Strategic Economic Diplomacy***

Nepal can adopt a multi-alignment approach in the economic sector, positioning itself as a trade hub between India and China to reduce dependency on either side. By promoting cross-border infrastructure projects, Nepal can enhance economic ties and regional connectivity. Additionally, developing partnerships with smaller economies in Asia, Europe, and neutral states will diversify its engagements. This strategy will reduce vulnerabilities and strengthen Nepal's role as a neutral player in global economic dynamics (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Shrestha, 2020).

### ***Expanding Relations with Middle and Small Powers***

The Balance of Power theory suggests that smaller states like Nepal can counterbalance larger powers by aligning with middle and small states that share values of neutrality and non-alignment (Morgenthau, 1948). Finland, Switzerland, and Singapore provide successful examples of maintaining independent foreign policies while fostering regional peace. Switzerland's long-

standing neutrality has bolstered its diplomatic influence (Kaufmann, 2019), while Singapore navigates relations with both China and the U.S., promoting regional cooperation (Chong, 2016). To support the ZoP initiative, Nepal can forge alliances with neutral or non-aligned countries in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America, amplifying its diplomatic influence in forums like the UN and NAM, reinforcing Nepal's neutral, peace-focused identity on the international stage (Jackson, 2021; Pacheco & Duarte, 2022).

### ***Leveraging Soft Power through Cultural Diplomacy***

Nepal can harness its cultural heritage to bolster support for the ZoP initiative and enhance its global influence through soft power, emphasizing cultural values like Buddhism and Hinduism. Initiatives such as cultural exchanges, tourism campaigns, and educational partnerships with countries in Asia and Europe can build goodwill and position Nepal as a leader in cultural diplomacy. This aligns with Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, highlighting culture's role in global influence. As Miller (2021) notes, cultural diplomacy elevates Nepal's peaceful image, while Smith and Lee (2019) argue that these strategies enhance Nepal's national identity and diplomatic goals, advancing regional peace.

### ***Specific Measures***

To overcome resistance from neighboring powers and garner broader international support for the ZoP proposal, Nepal can adopt several measures.

First, structured trilateral dialogues with India and China should be initiated, focusing on shared interests such as economic cooperation, environmental sustainability, and transnational challenges like climate change. These dialogues can build trust and highlight the mutual benefits of Nepal's neutrality. Nepal can also reintroduce the ZoP through non-controversial initiatives like regional environmental protection agreements or disaster management cooperation, adopting an incremental approach to minimize opposition. Additionally, an international advocacy campaign should be launched, involving conferences, collaboration with think tanks, and publishing research papers to promote the ZoP as a practical framework for a multipolar world. Leveraging Nepal's history of neutrality and unique geostrategic position, along with utilizing international media, can amplify its message and enhance the proposal's global appeal, particularly for small states.

### ***Conclusion***

The historical importance of Nepal's ZoP proposal provides valuable insights into the country's potential to synthesize contemporary geopolitical challenges by revitalizing its diplomatic strategy. Drawing lessons from the past, Nepal can seize strategic opportunities to strengthen its position as a neutral and peaceful state in today's increasingly multipolar world. The strategic recommendations, including enhancing multilateral engagement, fostering economic diplomacy, building international alliances, and leveraging soft power, offer a comprehensive framework for Nepal to assert its diplomatic influence on the global stage. These approaches, grounded in theories like liberal internationalism, balance of power, and small-state diplomacy, underscore the importance of strategic partnerships and cultural influence in advancing Nepal's foreign policy objectives.

However, Nepal must remain cognizant of facing the potential challenges that appear in the process. Resistance from neighboring powers, particularly India, coupled with internal

political instability, limited international support, and increasing geopolitical challenges, means that Nepal must foresee the threats that challenge its sovereignty and navigate its path carefully to avoid policies aligning with one side over the other. By adhering to its core principles of neutrality and strong sovereignty, Nepal can overcome these barriers and advance the ZoP proposal as a pathway to ensure that its national interests are met, peace is established, and stability is achieved. Through proactive and well-calibrated efforts in multilateral diplomacy, economic partnerships, and cultural outreach, Nepal can position itself as a steadfast advocate of the ZoP framework. By championing the ZoP, Nepal not only safeguards its own sovereignty and stability but also contributes meaningfully to a global order rooted in peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

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