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Revitalizing Nepal's National Security Council and its Secretariat in a Changing Geo-Political Context

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Abstract

Security has evolved to become multidimensional and comprehensive in a competitive geopolitical scenario, demanding an effective institutional setup. Nepal's National Security Council is mandated to recommend the Government of Nepal for formulating policy on overall national interest. Since its inception there has been much debate on the work of the Council and its Secretariat. However, a prominent gap exists in Nepali literature regarding the effectiveness of the work of the council and secretariat. This article advocates for a strong NSC architecture as an oversight agency for policy implementation in the defense and security sector in Nepal. Thus, the research topic is worth examining in a rapidly changing global and regional security milieu. This paper aims to explore the current setup of the Council and Secretariat by analyzing its importance for Nepal, which has many security sensitivities. The paper employs a qualitative research approach, and analytical methods are used. Identifying different geo strategic challenges Nepal has faced in recent times, this article also argues that there is a need for urgent revitalization of this body through legislative reforms and a determined will to fulfill the constitutional mandate. This important body needs to be reinvigorated because of geopolitical challenges that are rapidly increasing in a complex and volatile world whose impacts can be seen in Nepal.

Keywords: *National security council, security architecture, geopolitics, security policy, institutional reform*

Introduction

The modern concept of security is comprehensive and ever-changing, not limited to the traditional notion of state-centric security. National security is all about protection and promotion of core national interests through the wellbeing, happiness, and prosperity of its citizens. The Constitution of Nepal has guaranteed human security as a major principle of our national security policy. The state must ensure the wellbeing of its citizens wherever they are. The latest concept of security encompasses issues such as human rights, economics, environmental concerns, epidemics, crime, drug trafficking, and social injustice, in addition to

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the traditional focus on preventing external military threats. The decrease in vulnerability is security (Ullman, 1983, pp. 137-139). The emerging world order and fast-changing geopolitical dynamics and polarization of world politics are serious challenges to Nepal. For this strong and resourceful national security mechanisms help to navigate the changing global security environment. Nepal's geostrategic location and various challenges brought by domestic and external volatility need a robust national security architecture. The geostrategic dimensions and the relations with India and China are the crucial factors of national security of Nepal (Bhattarai, 2005, pp. 6-7).

Revitalizing means institutionalization of the National Security Council (NSC) and National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) in state machinery through a legislative framework, competent manpower, and resources to make it fit as per the constitutional mandate. There lacks sufficient harmony between the council envisioned by the Constitution and our daily practice. There is an absence of effective representation of provincial governments in NSC and NSCS. The government constituted the Covid-19 Crisis Management Center (CCMC) when there was already an NSCS. All security-related documents should take their origin in NSCS, but the reality is quite different. There is a coordination nightmare among agencies that are involved in security affairs.

National Security policy is an umbrella policy under whose jurisdiction all other policies should be framed. The National Security Policy, 2016 identifies our national security interests and the challenges, like Nepal's unique geographical location, open border, regional and global security environment, conflicting and competing interests of neighboring and other countries, and their strategic implications. As per the National Security Policy, 2016, it is the main policy of the state on security of the state; it directs defense policy and internal security policy (Security Policy, 2016, p.2). This security policy was revised and updated in 2018 identifying thirteen key challenges to national security and suggesting several policy measures to address them. Nepal lacks quality think tanks and research institutions on security issues. After the establishment of the National Defense University (NDU), this strategic vacuum could be fulfilled. The Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) could not function well as envisaged by the government. Neither historical institution, like the Nepal Council of World Affairs, was properly utilized. The government can redesign IFA into a National Institute of Foreign and Strategic Affairs by keeping it under the Office of Prime Minister and Council of Ministers (OPMCM). Effective and robust security and defense institutions are vital in advancing the national interest of Nepal.

Based on the above background, the paper seeks to answer the following research questions: What is the status of the National Security Council and its Secretariat in Nepal? Similarly, why does Nepal's National Security Council and its Secretariat need revitalization in a changing geopolitical context? Accordingly, how can a revitalized National Security Council and its Secretariat contribute better to the overall national security of Nepal?

Review of Literature

International politics today is a web of networks rather than a chessboard with overlaps and interconnected nodes, and Nepal is no exception to it. Geopolitics can, therefore, be defined as

“the relation of international political power to the geographical setting” (Cohen, 1973, p. 24). If the 20th century was about the Atlantic Upheaval, then the 21st century is about the Pacific Upheaval (Kishore Mahbubani). The "strength of the treasury," therefore, is nothing more than what the Chinese like to call "comprehensive national power" (Baru, 2013). If states' dependence on one another is not evenly balanced, asymmetric interdependence can be used as a source of power, thereby eroding the peaceful outcomes of interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Nepal is in similar conditions. Nepal's independence and sovereignty have been challenged by the economic realities and political conditions (Acharya, 2008, p. 15). Our geostrategic position demands that Nepal cannot be a part of any strategic alliance/bloc which ultimately destabilizes equi-proximity relations with immediate neighbors (Giri, 2019). Similarly, Robert D. Kaplan (2012), has highlighted the heightening strategic and geopolitical gravity of Asia and its implications in Nepal, as Nepal is the epicenter of the emerging geopolitical rivalry of global power (pp. 252-53). Waltz (2010) proposes that under the anarchic structure, small states' security and foreign policy will rest on structural constraints like the level of competition between the great powers (pp. 184-185). Today the strategic rivalry between the US MCC and China's BRI going on and India's belief in BRI as a "string of pearls" strategy brings them strategically together (Gokhale, 2021).

Multiple dimensions and perspectives can be found in Nepali literature. A book by Chandra Dev Bhatta and co-editor from FES Nepal entitled *Gaida's Dance with Tiger and Dragon* deals with some of the pressing issues, such as prospects for development, national security, and geopolitics in the neighborhood. However, institutional aspects of NSC are not discussed at length and only advocates for reform. The notion of the threat of non-traditional security looms large in South Asia (Baral, 2006). There are three elements that dictate our security and foreign policy: (i) internal political dynamics, (ii) our neighborhood policy and (iii) policy with other countries. (MoFA, 2018). Under National Unity and National Security Policy of Article 51a (3) of the Constitution of Nepal highlights maintaining law and order by developing a national security system; all institutions and stakeholders on national security should act accordingly. Singh (2014) describes the position of Nepal in China's foreign policy and comments Nepal as a new 'strategic partner' of China. Similarly, an article entitled in defense of military diplomacy argues that military diplomacy needs to be incorporated in policy processes as it is increasingly becoming an essential part of a national effort for countries big and small. (The Kathmandu Post, 2021). In the years following the restoration of democracy, Nepal's civil-military relations were generally positive, with the military working to support the country's democratic transition (Barakoti, 2020). There is lack of coherence in foreign and security policy in Nepal. These two important policy documents should go hand in hand. The foreign and security policy of Nepal lacks the institutional dimensions of national security. The available literature covers policy aspects, but institutional reform is missing.

However, there is a paucity of documents and sufficient research on this topic in the Nepali context. Today's world is full of misinformation and disinformation. Quality information is critical to avoiding crisis miscalculation, and this part is lacking in our security architecture. Nepal's policies and plans lack documentation on security. There is a gap in foreign, security and defense policies. MCC and SPP are clear examples of it. Long outstanding debates and partisan politics at home on BRI show a lack of coherence and strategic guidance. Vital

institutions like NSC and NSCS are neglected in these crucial debates. It is also found that there is lack of political ownership in foreign and security policy which demands a high degree of national consensus. After reviewing different literature, it can be said that there is a significant gap in assessing the issue of NSC in Nepal and revitalizing its secretariat. After the thorough review of the above literature, it can be said that despite NSC and NSCS being key security institutions and National Security Policy being overarching policy framework, they are the least understood policy framework and institutions often neglected by government machinery. There is a tendency to believe that national security is the sole responsibility of security agencies, especially the Nepali Army. Further, it is found that there lacks interagency cooperation and coordination in the functioning of the Secretariat.

Conceptual Framework

National Security is a multi-dimensional, complex, integrated, cross-cutting, interdependent, and overlapping subject involving multi-stakeholders' governmental organization, non-governmental actors, political parties, media, business, academia, and the public at large. Considering the theoretical and empirical literatures, various aspects like diplomatic, military, and strategic issues have been used as the threshold to analyse Nepal's National Security Council and its secretariat. So, a holistic approach is used and a comprehensive review of the key security institutions is conducted. Geopolitical complexity and institutional reform being an independent variable and reforms in the national security council and its secretariat are taken as a dependent variable. In addition, governments like that of Nepal are affected by the international political system, a particular country's dominance, participation with, and relationships with, international players, all of which can be analyzed under the system levels of analysis (Rourke, 2008). The word 'geopolitics' refers to the interplay of politics, geography, demography, and economics, with particular emphasis to a country's foreign policy (Bhattarai, U., 2016, p.63). While envisioning strategy for security of a nation, the policy maker should consider all the positioned and intersecting aspects of security like economic, political, military, geographical, historical, and socio-cultural (Rothery, 2018). The research examines how a weak institutional mechanism can have adverse impacts in national security. To renovate this architecture, Nepal should work in such a way that reflects NSC as a cross-ministerial strategic body which is mandated to advise the Council of Ministers on all of security and defense issues. Nepal should not align with any global power on the security front. Ideological differences and partisan politics should not interfere with foreign and security policies. National consensus and unanimity guided within the constitutional framework are the backbone of security and foreign policy.

Research Methodology

This research is based on a descriptive and analytical study, mainly focusing on empirical data, facts, and historical anecdotes. This research is also grounded on qualitative research tools, such as content analysis and historical research. The study reflects both the primary and secondary data for analysis. Secondary sources include academic journals, books, magazines, theses, digital publications, websites, news reports, newspaper articles, and bulletins among others. Qualitative content analysis of historical and theoretical references, contemporary publications from both domestic and international sources, and web-based scholarly articles has

been used. The research designs are descriptive and exploratory. Additionally, secondary data are also collected from published journal articles, books, survey reports, and authentic publications of government and internationally reputed organizations. Further, qualitative data obtained from secondary sources have been interpreted and analyzed. Further, discourse analysis has been employed to gain deeper insights into the dynamics. Comparative analysis is used to understand similar institutions in different countries. Above all, through unstructured conversations with senior bureaucrats, security experts, academicians, and researchers' personal experience of working in Nepal's MOFA and missions, MOD and NSCS, and MOHA have added value to it.

Comparative Models: Lessons for Nepal

The State has taken its own approaches and has different understandings of national security organizations, influenced by historical experiences, homegrown practices, perceptions, and ways of dealing with threats. Learning the wider experiences is useful in devising one's own security architecture. The researcher reviews the Singaporean model because Singapore is also a small state like Nepal. Further, the US model of NSC is thought to be the oldest and a role model so it is reviewed. India, our close neighbor with whom we share many security sensitivities, is also included in this study through its National Security Council (NSC). The UK has lately initiated the provision of NSC. The provision of the National Security Council exists in many African and South Asian countries as well.

The Singaporean and UK Model of NSC

The National Security Coordination Secretariat (NSCS, 2024) of Singapore states that the National Security Coordination Secretariat (NSCS) is a unit under the Prime Minister's Office responsible for national security planning and coordination. The provision of NSC was established only in 2010 in the UK. The National Security Council (NSC, 2024) states that, in the UK, the NSC serves as the primary forum for collective discussion on the government's national security objectives and strategies for achieving them within the current financial climate. NSA in the UK functions as the secretary of the NSC. The NSA in the UK is the principal official advisor to the PM on all range of security issues who is also mandated to lead the security team within PM's office.

The US and Indian Model of NSC

The NSC in the USA was established by the National Security Act, 1947, and it was further modified by the Reorganization Plan of 1949. During Truman's presidency, to assist him in policies relating to national security and foreign policy, this institution was set up. It consists of a small structure with just four members: the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense. Hassan (2008) states that NSA in the US is supported by the NSC staff. The structure is unique as it is immune from the department's scrutiny and hires the staff when required, mostly supported by many professionals. The Indian NSC came into existence through an executive order on November 19, 1998. Activities of NSC include intelligence assessment, generation of intellectual input, and watching over the implementation process. In the Indian context, the security management system includes the Strategic Policy Group (SPG), the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) with a secretariat from all intelligence units

or the current NSC, and a third-tier National Security Advisory Committee (NSAC). Nepal should also think about the provision of the SPG that should include the chief secretary, chief of security forces, chief security adviser, governor of Nepal Rastra Bank, vice chair of the National Planning Commission, and the secretaries of all the ministries.

Constitutional Setup of NSC and its Secretariat

At the height of the conflict, the government constituted the NSC in 2002. The National Defense Council under the Constitution of 1990 A.D. was more like a Defense Recommendation Committee or Cabinet Defense Committee than the National Security Council. Its role was "recommending to the Council of Ministers for the mobilization, operation, and use of the Nepali Army" (Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1990). Similarly, the PM was chief of defense and COAS as members. Under the Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007, the National Security Council was headed by the PM, defense minister, home minister, and three other ministers chosen by the PM as members of the council. Surprisingly, the COAS was not included in the NSC.

The Constitution of Nepal, Article 5, Article 51, Article 266, Article 48, Article 50 and Article 267 include provisions related to national security (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Article 5 of the Constitution mentions National Interest: (1) Safeguarding Nepal's freedom, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence, while upholding the nation's dignity, protecting the rights of its people, ensuring border security, and fostering economic well-being and prosperity. Similarly, Article 51 of the Constitution states Policies of the State: The state shall pursue the following policies: - (a) Policies relating to National Unity and National Security: (4) To guarantee the overall human security system. Articles 267 and 268 mention the provision of security agencies. (2) Each province shall have a Provincial Police Organization. Schedule 5 of the Constitution states national security under the federal domain.

The provision regarding NSC is mentioned in part 28 of the Constitution of Nepal. As per article 266(1) of the Constitution, there shall be a National Security Council for making recommendations to the Government of Nepal, the Council of Ministers for the formulation of a policy on overall national interest, security, and defense of Nepal, and for the mobilization or control of the Nepal Army. It is a seven-member council. Although the responsibilities of the NSC are broad, practical application is very low. The Secretariat of the National Security Council (NSCS, 2024) states the responsibilities as mentioned below.

- (a) To make recommendations to the Government of Nepal regarding the mobilization or control of the Nepali Army in accordance with the Constitution and prevailing federal laws.
- (b) To prepare the necessary action plan for the strengthening and modernization of the Nepali Army and recommend it to the Government of Nepal for approval.
- (c) To formulate a policy regarding the required arms, equipment, and their standards for the security agencies and recommend them to the Government of Nepal for approval.
- (d) To formulate policies related to the overall national interest, security, and defense of the country and present them to the Government of Nepal for approval.
- (e) To provide the Government of Nepal with expert recommendations on matters related to the country's overall national interests, security, and defense.

- (f) Regular monitoring of the implementation of National Security Policy 2018; according to the decision of the Council of Ministers dated 7th July 2020.

Structural Challenges in Nepal's NSC and Its Secretariat

The Secretariat of the National Security Council was formally established on the 11th of March, 2002, by an executive order when the Maoist conflict was at its peak. Its main function is to manage the daily administrative tasks of the NSC and to facilitate the Council's work, duties, and responsibilities more effectively. After that, this secretariat has been continuously active and has been carrying out its responsibilities with high professional competence by making its role more systematic and refined. The Secretariat has been facilitating the work of the NSC, providing necessary opinions, and preparing security analysis reports. NSCS in Nepal is staffed by five government agencies. Mostly, the Nepali Army, Nepal Police, the Armed Police Force, the National Investigation Department, and bureaucracy are assigned in NSCS. The Nepali Army is led by a Major General with two Brigadier Generals; the APF is led by a DIG; the Nepal Police is led by an SSP; and the NID is led by two SSPs; the civil service is led by a single post of undersecretary. Basnet (2016) states that NSC should comprise four structures—the council, Strategic Policy Committee (SPC), National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) and NSC Secretariat (NSCS).

There is an urgent need for an Organizational and Management (O&M) Survey of the NSCS as the human resources from all security agencies and civil service were not well balanced, which should be synchronized with ranks and functions. Full-fledged communication and linkage with the parent organization of the deputed security officials at NSCS is important. Staff should be incentivized based on training and other opportunities with a proper working environment. There should be vetting procedures and proper criteria for the staff before they are placed in the secretariat. In the formative years of the NSCS, there used to be an oath-taking mechanism for all staff before they were placed in the secretariat.

The Integrated Action Plan, 2077, and National Security Guidelines, 2078, mention *modus operandi*, code of conduct, and provision of handover and takeover of focal person in NSCS. There lacks any specific division of responsibility in the secretariat. Clear roles and jurisdictions of all security agencies in the secretariat should be formulated. Only a nominal role of undersecretary is imagined with no permanent post of Joint Secretary in the Secretariat. A complete set of bureaucracy ranging from joint secretary to officer is needed in the secretariat, which helps in better coordination with the civilian apparatus. Similarly, the secretariat lacks any concrete tools for a reporting mechanism and information collection system.

The provision of NSC and NSCS should be brought under the separate heading in the Allocation of Business Rules, 2074, with distinct work division. Currently, NSCS is placed under the MoD, but in many countries, it is under the PM's office. This organization can function well if it is under OPMCM, as it has staff from various agencies. The cabinet should formulate a mandatory legal framework to seek the opinion of the secretariat on national security laws and provisions and any decision related to security affairs. Government periodic plans and policies should be made in line with security policy. It should play a critical role in coordinating and synergizing between security and national development.

Separate charters of duties of all agencies should be demarcated in the Secretariat so that overlapping of functions can be avoided. The role of the NSCS should be redesigned to make it fit for the purpose. Adequate legal and other mechanisms should be constituted to make its role effective. The advisory role should be made mandatory and on a frequent basis. Nepal should develop the culture of hearing the advisory role and formulating policies based on it. The secretariat cannot deal with all domestic security issues, and focus should be on critical internal security threats only. The secretariat should establish a mechanism for periodic briefings to the PM, chiefs of security agencies, government secretaries, focal persons, and so on. There should be regular and periodic meetings of the Council to decide on pressing issues. SoPS and an annual calendar of the meeting should be devised for better functioning of the council. It should function flexibly and bring together people from diverse backgrounds onto a common platform for strategic communication and government-wide synchronization.

NSC should be strongly backed by NSCS, which is a multitasking body functioning in a holistic fashion both within the government and outside. NSCS should have a strong legal foundation backed by professionally committed and dynamic manpower. Section six of the Army Act, 2006 on NSCs should be revised as it contradicts the constitutional provision. Article 266 (4) of the Constitution mentions that other matters relating to the National Security Council shall be as provided in the federal law. The draft bill on NSC and its secretariat is pending in the parliament for a long time and needs to be expedited. Several drafts have been prepared, but there is no finalization on it. This law should be formulated with wider stakeholders' participation and consultation to have wider acceptance and ownership. New provisions in the upcoming federal law can be devised, like every member of the Council should lead a separate committee related to security issues. National consensus and national ownership from all stakeholders and among all political parties is the most for common understanding on security issues.

National Security Advisor

The National Security Advisor (NSA) is a linchpin for advising the PM on both external and internal security issues. Nepal's first NSA was former Chief Secretary Shanker Das Bairagi, who was appointed on 15th June 2023. The appointment was a ministerial portfolio with terms of reference and working procedures passed by the cabinet. The scope of the NSA was broad, ranging from internal security to foreign policy matters. This role was mandated to coordinate with all security agencies and had a secretariat in NSCS. NSA was appointed at a time when there was a lack of functioning apparatus and an urgent need for coordination in the security sector. After serving for nearly a year, the NSA resigned from the post. Immediately after his resignation, the cabinet decided to revoke the guidelines for the appointment of the NSA and eventually the post of NSA was revoked. This was a very surprising move, which reflects a lack of policy stability in sensitive sectors.

Political consensus at the highest level and strong legal backup are required to appoint the NSA in the future. Owing to our geostrategic situation and the need for coordination among all security forces, Nepal needs the post of NSA, which joins the civil-military elites. The NSA should act as a knowledge manager, and there should be a mechanism for knowledge management at their secretariat. Further, the NSA could also conduct security diplomacy and the NSA- level dialogues with other countries. At times, the NSA has the role of briefing the

defense committee of the Cabinet. The NSA could advise on structures, plans, and projects of various security agencies and government departments dealing with peace and security.

Integrated National Intelligence Mechanism

As passed by the NSC, there is an Integrated National Intelligence Mechanism (INIM) mechanism at the Secretariat of the NSC. This mechanism is headed by the co-coordinator of the secretariat of the NSCS and includes members from the heads of the intelligence departments of four security agencies. It meets regularly once a week and on a frequent basis as needed. This mechanism provides an important platform for critical information sharing. Intelligence gathered from all security agencies is discussed, and serious matters are forwarded to higher-ups for necessary action. However, it is also incomplete as it lacks representative from the civil service. At least a senior joint secretary should be a member in this mechanism. This mechanism should be made robust so that it can provide authentic and coordinated information to policymakers. Confidentiality, integrity, and vetting are paramount among the members of the mechanism. Also, there is a need for a systemic information collection system. Real-time threat intelligence, trade intelligence, and artificial intelligence have become ever more important.

Geopolitical Sensitivities and Their Impact on Security

Geopolitics is important to Nepal's national security and international relations as it remains in the triangular strategic rivalry between the United States, China, and India, with ever-rising competition on defense, security, economy, and technology. Geography is the mother of strategy (Gray & Sloan, 1999, p. 3). Nepal has been balancing relations with its two immediate neighbors (Kissinger, 2014, p. 197). Historically, it has opted for a policy of isolation. Over time, these isolationist measures changed to equal distance from both countries (Atique, 1983). Since the geopolitical radar has shifted to contain the rising China, Nepal has been in a geopolitical hotpot with a chance of getting boiled anytime (Khanal 2022). New geopolitical fault lines are seen in South Asia with the rapid rise in new realities and increased complexities. Nepal's geographic location has made it the land of geostrategic importance (Poudyal, 2022). It is nothing new for Nepali officials to disagree on major national issues, and for Kathmandu although potential external meddling is different in forms but it's not entirely new (Rose, 1971). The changing tides of geo-politics and the dawn of the Asian century have created new fields of contestation. Geopolitics and development have been Nepal's chronic dilemma.

Nepal-India relations are unique with civilizational and historical linkages. However, the Nepal-India Peace and Friendship Treaty, 1950, establishes the complex nature of these relations. It is necessary for Nepal to understand the sensitivity of India and China in terms of their security-related issues and adopt policies wisely, following a middle path that respects the interests of both neighbors without endangering its own sovereign and independent position (Thapa, 2012, p. 11). With the emergence of the struggle for global dominance, American and Chinese security strategies, economic strategies, and counter-strategies have unfolded (Silwal, 2023). For instance, the conflict between China and India in 2020 almost led to the allying of minor South Asian nations (Bhattarai, 2021).

Nepal needs better neighborhood policy so as not to be entangled in the emerging geopolitical competition and rivalry between our neighbors. It is mired in the big power rivalry

instead of taking advantage of the triangular competition (Bhatta & Menge, 2021, p.131). Using the same old strategy of making opportunistic tilts will not work (Baral, 2022). Nepal has signed multiple initiatives launched by China, like the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017 and the implementation framework in 2024, and joined the Global Development Initiative and has elevated her relationship to strategic partnership level. China understands any instability in Nepal might strengthen anti-China elements and seeks support in controlling Tibetan exiles in Nepal (Rajagopalan, 2019). Similarly, with India, Nepal also has many outstanding issues, including an open border. Nepal has not yet developed its intelligence mechanism, anything comparable to the capability of neighboring countries (Shah, 2011, p.239). If Nepal wants to become the link between them, it might be more prudent to adopt a credible strategy characterized by openness, geopolitical objectivity, and mutual understanding of each other's sensitivities (Gokhale, 2021). Nepal, therefore, must analyze the emerging global power dynamics and strategies more carefully and objectively than ever before (Wagle, 2020). Nepal has conventionally adopted a non-alignment, neutrality, and equidistance policy toward the great power, as it cannot afford to enter any kind of power blocs or strategic alliances, owing to its geostrategic location (K.C. & Bhattarai, 2021).

Public discourse on critical issues relating to India, China, and the US clearly shows that political parties based on their ideology construct their perception and policy towards each of these countries (Silwal, 2022). Securing our borders, reducing the adverse impacts of climate change, effective utilization of development cooperation, and dealing with mega-disasters and pandemics are some of our major challenges. Security forces are an important determinant of the foreign policy of Nepal. Nepal has remained active in multilateralism through various forums like the UN and keeps on doing so. Currently, ongoing wars, conflicts in various regions, disruption in supply chains, and a fragmented landscape worldwide have created a huge change in the security atmosphere. Similarly, Nepal should continue to remain active in regional organizations like SAARC, BIMSTEC, and SCO.

The geopolitical and geostrategic rivalry between China and the US, as well as between India and China, has trapped Nepal (Dixit, 2023). Rather than being completely swayed by the policies of these major powers, Nepal should protect its own identity and historical pride, which they can use to maneuver in other areas as well (Bhatta, 2022). Another challenge for Nepal has been the way 'developmental models' are designed and presented by development partners, which may not fit with the diverse local contexts (Bhatta, 2017). The MCC was very difficult to handle for Nepal. Similarly, we should be careful on Indo-pacific strategy launched by the United States and joined by other countries. Serious attention must be paid to balancing a range of actors and interests, for which we must opt for strategic neutrality to survive as a matured nation-state. NSC and its secretariat should effectively deal with the ever-increasing geopolitical complexities of Nepal through periodic reporting, high-level communication, and information exchange.

Conclusion and Way Forward

NSCS was constituted at the height of conflict in the early 2000's, and a sea change has taken place in the security apparatus. A huge gap exists between NSC and NSCS. This organization should function with new vigor and vitality. A functional and workable institution with a clear

mandate and legal backup is necessary. So, there is a need for revision in the existing structure of NSCS. Adequate resources should be allocated to make it a functional think tank institution. NSCS should be empowered so that it can decide on critical security matters. Nepal needs a separate subcommittee in the State Affairs Committee dealing with security issues. At first, there is a need for orientation for secretaries and joint secretaries at the policy planning division of the various ministries on national security issues. A healthy and functional secretariat should be created. NSCS should have the capacity to analyze the intelligence report. Mandate, intelligence-gathering mechanism, role of secretariat, and structure should be revisited. Institutional collaboration, capacity, modality of operation, and network of knowledge-haring mechanisms should be clear. Senior policymakers working at OPMCM, MOD, MOHA, and MOFA need regular security briefings from NSCS. In the long run, civil service should devise a security cadre for manning in the above institution.

Revitalization of NSC and its secretariat in a changing geopolitical context has become ever more important. Nepal's security threats are both internal and external. We must consider the geopolitical factors as the most important variable in its national interest, national security, strategic affairs, foreign policy, and diplomacy. Competition on development projects of major powers has been dragged into the security and foreign policy wing of Nepal, which should be handled well. Above all, sensitization and awareness among all stakeholders dealing with the security issues are most likely to meet the emerging geostrategic challenges. NSC should serve as a strategic engine in Nepal's national security policy decision-making. Due to the diverse nature of our security threats, we need the whole of the government and the whole of the security agencies approach in dealing with it. Nepal should continue to defend national interest by using all instruments of national power. There is a need for integrating intelligence on foreign, defense, and internal security matters by bringing together the principal civilian and military intelligence outfits. It is evident that there is a lack of consensus on national security and intelligence strategy in Nepal. Today AI has revolutionized the way wars are fought and the use of AI algorithms in decision-making and autonomous weapons system has brought great ethical and legal questions. Moreover, disasters, climate justice, cyber warfare, migration, and refugees are other pressing issues in the geopolitical landscape. Nepal should excel in strategic thought as directed by security policy. Nepal's strategic policies related to foreign affairs, security, and defense should be non-aligned like our historical precedent and be neutral and independent on all occasions.

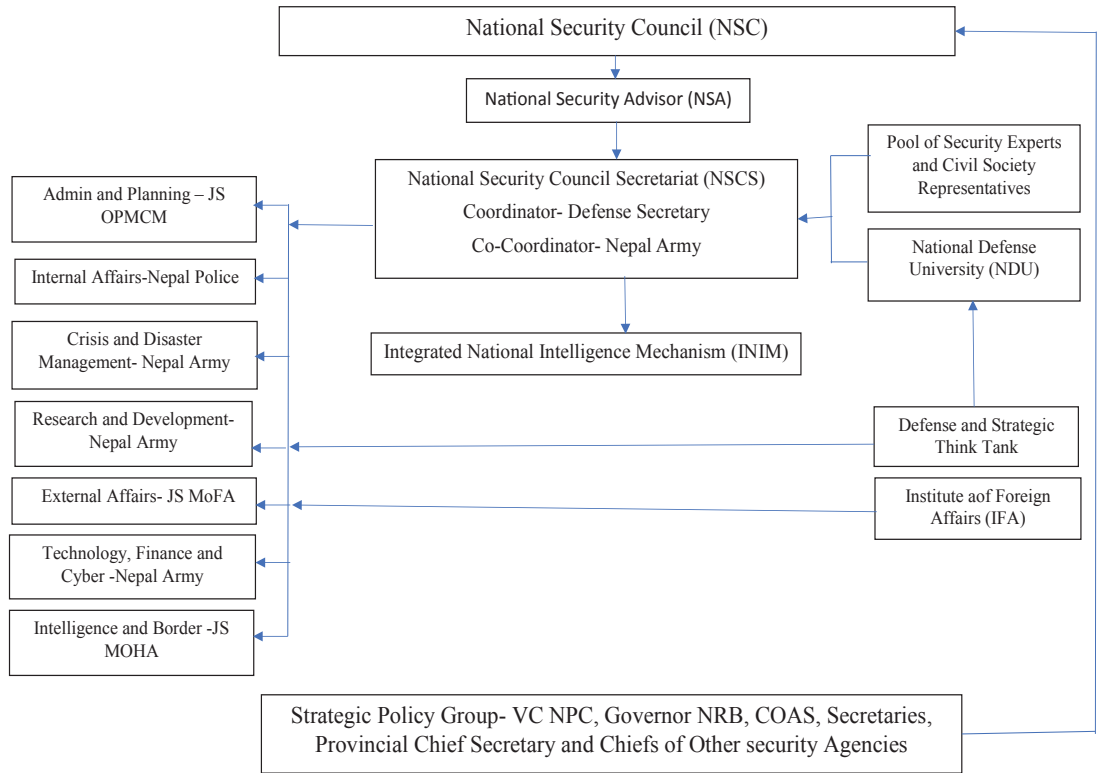
The revitalized NSC Secretariat can contribute better to the overall national security of Nepal in multiple ways. It creates citizen confidence in security matters. In the same way, it doesn't let power vacuum by keeping state machinery intact and alert. The PM, who is the main focal point for security issues, is burdened with many political assignments so that he/she needs to be backed by an effective NSC and well-functioning NSC. Systematic reforms in the intelligence wing of Nepal are an urgent need. We cannot rely endlessly on the goodwill of others. Amendments to the unpublished 2018 security policy are required in such a way that the major strategies remain unpublished. Nepal needs a comprehensive umbrella security policy that encompasses foreign, security, defense, and economic matters, similar to the *Rastriya Mul Niti 2042*, which could serve as a guiding national policy. There is a need for coherence in foreign and security policy. The root cause of this is a weakness in understanding. Therefore,

it has become necessary to raise awareness among stakeholders. For this, it is necessary to test the laws, policies, and strategies made by the state from the point of view of national security. We need a pool/cadre of strategic and security experts under NSCS that can be placed under different government ministries. Mechanisms for hiring experts from retired security forces are vital to utilize their knowledge and expertise. Above all, a determined will from all stakeholders is required. Finally, to better articulate government responses in major crises and manage future strategic interests and needs of the nation, we require revitalized, robust, and effective institutions like the NSC and NSCS.

In a nutshell, this research addresses a critical issue in Nepal's geopolitical and institutional landscape, which is highly relevant for policymakers and academics. There is a need for further research to address the complex policy dilemma. A suggestive model to revitalize NSC has been prescribed in Appendix One.

Appendix- One

A Suggestive Model for Revitalizing National Security Council and its Secretariat in Nepal



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