



GEOPOLITICS OF INDIA'S RESPONSES TO THE INTERFERENCE OF CHINA IN THE SOUTH ASIA: A CASE STUDY OF NEPAL

Dr. Ranbir Gulia¹ and Ms. Ritu²

¹Professor , Department of Political Science , M.D. University, Rohtak.

² Research Scholar , Department of Political Science , M.D. University, Rohtak.

ABSTRACT

India being the most dominant power in the Indian Subcontinent, it is very natural that India many a times have to fine-tune its relationship with the small neighboring countries, especially in the context of 'rising China' and simultaneously its ever growing encroachment in the India's immediate strategic neighborhood like Nepal. In the sense it becomes more pertinent to closely introspect our declining relationship with the Himalayan Kingdom-Nepal, a country with whom India shares a long and deep socio-economic and cultural relationship since time immemorial.

In recent times we have seen incidences, like heavy infrastructure investment by China in Nepal, regular political engagement of Chinese with Nepalese newly formed republican government. Apart from this India's own relationship seems to be in turmoil, the latest example can be seen in the long five month economic blockage along Indo-Nepal open border in 2015, which further deteriorated the Indo-Nepal relationship to a new low.

In this aspect it becomes necessary to inquire into those political as well as geopolitical factors which have been historically influencing the Indo-Nepal relationship since the post-Cold War period. And at the same time, to analyze the factors which have led to deteriorating Indo-Nepal relationship leading to China's influence into the Indian subcontinent.

KEYWORDS: Geopolitics, South Asia, Rise of China, Nepal, Sri Lanka.

BACKGROUND

The tectonic plates of power that have characterized the Indian subcontinent or the South Asian region for almost more than a century are shifting from traditional to new geopolitical pattern. To understand this pattern, the study is concerned about the study of the geopolitics of responses of India due to advancement of growing China's influence in Nepal. Primary among the catalysts of change in the region is the 'rise of China' and its influential economic wealth, emerging military power, and as a proactive power in multilateral institutions.

Relations between India and Nepal are age old and have been nursed by a rich and deeply pervading inheritance of historical evolution, geographical contiguity and socio-cultural identities. This inheritance continuously impinges upon political, economic and strategic variables, thus, yielding a complex dynamics of intimate interaction which has vast areas of rapport and understanding, co-existing with equally powerful expressions of conflicts and divergence between the two neighbours.¹ There has been a long tradition of free movement of people



¹ S.D. Muni (1992), *India and Nepal: A Changing Relationship*, Konark Publishers, Delhi, p. 4.

across the borders. Hence, the history of Nepal's relations with India has absorbed all the possible ups and downs that are characteristics of such a long period of relationship.

Since colonial days Nepal's geographical location has been strategically significant for India's external security. It is located in South Asia between the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China in the north and five Indian States - Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand - in the south, east and west. Nepal is a small Himalayan, landlocked country in South Asia, sandwiched between two giant neighbours – China and India.

No doubt Nepal's inevitable land border with India has been all time significant geostrategic location for India. As Dahal² argues that 'Nepal being sandwiched between the large countries, where both are hostile to each other becomes difficult for Nepal to balance. Nepal's location in the South Asia where it positioned between Central Asia and South Asia, makes it Heart land for both China and India. As both China and India based on their individual geopolitical and security stake in Nepal do not want to lose their hold in Nepal.

Historically too, Nepal has played China card against India in order to bargain political and economic benefits. Starting from King Mahendra, there has been tendency of Nepal's ruler and elite class to make India fear from Sino-Nepal closeness. And now when Nepal has become a democratic-republic country, the case is no more different and still China card is considered an important diplomatic tool to make its bilateral relation with India in Order. As with the establishment of Maoist hold in Kathmandu Parliament in 2008, the Prachanda government invited the Chinese leader to reduce Nepal's dependence over India. And also after coming to power the Maoist leader Prachanda started his first abroad trip to Beijing³.

It is also important to note that the China is having more frequent trips to Kathmandu. In comparison to this the Indian officials have least been in Nepal for their diplomatic activities. This shows India's seriousness in its Nepal affairs. During Prachanda's term, a large number of developmental agreements were signed between Nepal and China. India needs to understand the benefits of India-Nepal frequent diplomatic interactions. As per Gujral doctrine, India needs to send the positive move to Nepal without expecting anything in return⁴.

Initially with the coming of Modi government in power in India, the India-Nepal bilateral relationship seemed to be moving on a positive note, but it took a bad turn with the blockade in 2015. It seems that Modi government is more concerned improving its relations with the far flung countries rather than its nearest neighbors⁵. It seemed that as Modi pursues a trade-and-investment-led agenda, his method would bring regional development and simultaneously would also enhance India's development image in Nepal and other neighboring countries. But it seems after looking at more than three and half years of Modi government's foreign policy particularly regarding Nepal has fallen flat. Modi's undemanding pronouncement of a protracted blockade against Nepal in 2015 has not only worsened bilateral relations but also has pushed Nepal further towards China's grip⁶. According to BBC news⁷:

"The blockade is led by ethnic minorities who say they are discriminated against in the new constitution. The government also accuses India of deliberately worsening the embargo - something India denies".

While on the one hand India puts blame game of this blockade over Nepal's ill-conceived constitutional policy, but the Nepal government has termed the standoff an "unofficial blockade" by India as it thinks that its Madhesis of Terai has very close relationship with the people of Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. But contrary to this the Indian government has consistently denied it was imposing any kind

² Ibid, p-5

³ Cailmail, B. (2008), "The Fall of a Hindu Monarchy: Maoist in Power in Nepal".

⁴ Murthy, P. (2011), "The Gujral Doctrine and Beyond", Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis.

⁵ Atres, A. (2014), "The Modi Doctrine", *Outlook*, Washington.

⁶ Swain, A. (2017), "Me-First, The Core of Modi Doctrine of Foreign Policy Damaging For India?".

⁷ BBC News, (2015), "Nepal blockade: Six ways it affects the country", *Asia*.

of blockade on Nepal and says disruption to supplies is a result of internal unrest in Nepal. India believed that Indian truck drivers are scared to cross the Indo-Nepal open border and that a resolution will only be found through dialogue between the protesters and political parties in Nepal⁸.

About the blockade, the common perception in Nepalese major and regional political parties was that it was largely supported by the Indian government, as even after going through several rounds of negotiations both at national and regional level they could not reach to any conclusion.

Further sensing the regional geopolitics of the region, China started its intrusion into South Asia at the more increased pace. Recently, China announced that it will allow Nepal the use of its four ports⁹. After the blockade in 2015 and 2016 Nepal was left high and dry, and thus it had sought access from China. Through this facility China may allow Nepal to use its land (dry) based ports at Lanzhou, Lhasa and Xigatse. Though based on such China's move experts are claiming that China is making rapid encroachments into Nepal on the pretext of investments and aid, thus challenging India's long hegemony in the region.

Apart from this China is also trying to appease the Nepal to take part and let its country for its much famous Belt and Road (OBOR) initiative project. It has to be noted that India and Bhutan in South Asia have vehemently opposed the project. Nepal has held many meetings with China concerning OBOR. But China is not having win-win situation all the time. There was an investment bid going on in Nepal over a hydro power project, which under Indian pressure could not be finalised¹⁰. The Chinese and Nepal were at opposition over the West Seti power project over the past few years. Ultimately China under the pretext of unfeasibility decided to quit this project¹¹. India in the past made it clear that if any hydropower project comes in Nepal without the stake of Indian investment, it is not going to purchase the power from Later.

STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The regular planned economic and infrastructural development by China in India's northern Himalayan Kingdom- Nepal, leaves huge question mark on the intention of China. Does India need to be cautious?

Does it reflect India's declining influence over its immediate northern neighbor- Nepal?

Has the emergence of 'rise of China' and its functional influencing position in Nepal led to geopolitical shift in Indian sub-continental region?

How do small and landlocked states like Nepal balance their economic and political interest between two major powers-India and China?

What are the factors from India's perspective which led to such regional geopolitical crisis in its immediate reliable neighbor?

What are the India's responses to these alarming situations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The proposed research work has been broadly reviewed under following themes:

Theoretical framework:

Geopolitics is a word as well as a set of associated ideas. A much debated term among the scholars and in popular writings, geopolitics is etymologically, a combination of geography and politics. In this capacity it refers to "the relation of international political power to the geographical setting" (Cohen, 1964).

⁸ Pokharel, K. (2015), "The Two-Month Blockade of Nepal Explained", The Wall Street Journal, 26 November 2015.

⁹ Reuters, (2018), Nepal says to allow access to ports, ending Indian monopoly on transits.

¹⁰ Ghimere, Y. (2018), "China eyes exit, Nepal over West Seti hydro power project in Jeopardy".

¹¹ ANI, (2018), "China Mulls exit from Nepal's Seti hydro power project".

Rise of China, its interest and role in the South Asian region:

The emergence of rising China together with US presence in Asia-Pacific has led to the emergence of complex geopolitical pattern in Asia (Tow, 2004). According to Shambaugh, (2005) this has created a bipolar regional geopolitical pressure on regional states, thus putting them in dilemma how to react in the present geopolitical condition.

The literature on the reaction of regional states on emergent geopolitical shift to Asia provides starkly contrasting answers to these questions. On one hand, Pempel (2005) argued that notwithstanding a myriad of pessimistic predictions, China's rise over the past twenty years has been largely peaceful. Accordingly, it has been suggested that Asian states have little, if anything to fear from China's rise. A contrary view claims that there are strong theoretical and historical geopolitical reasons to doubt this prognosis, and rather, much to fear (Christensen, 1996).

Emerging Sino-Nepal relationship and its impact on the strategic interest of India in the region: Since the past few decades the Sino-Nepal relationship has seen many upwards trends, that also happening against the Indian imagination. As according to Sood (2008) the Nepal's irregular politics which time and again has been using its 'China card', against India. But the reality is that the India-China relationship is much broader in scope. Thus, like (Sood, 2008), even Bhattari, (2015), suggests Nepal needs to change its political mindset.

Response of India over the changing regional geopolitics in its northern border: It seems that sometimes Indian political leadership becomes quite insensitive regarding the needs and emotions of the Nepal, as pointed by Murthy, (2011) in his writings on 'Gujral Doctrine and Beyond'. According to Nayak, (2008), the involvement of major powers in Nepal since 1990s has created strategic problems for the India. In the Ministry of External Affairs, (2016-17), reports, it is pointed India-Nepal relation is very unique and significant for India, and needs to be preserved as it is in its pristine form.

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Ms. Ritu

Research Scholar , Department of Political Science , M.D. University, Rohtak.