



## CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN NEPAL POST -2006: CHALLENGES FOR INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*Nepal has endured a radical political transformation since 2006 when a decade-long Maoist insurgency officially came to an end. The Hindu monarchy was abolished by the interim parliament. With the drafting and eventual promulgation of the Constitution in 2015, the country moved forward into transitioning from a unitary state to a federation of provinces. The advent of democracy has made policymaking in Nepal more diverse. Nepal's political pole has shifted with the arrival of the Maoists onto the electoral stage, at the same time, South Asian power dynamics are changing and it has made space for China which undermines India's regional role.*

*The primary objective of this study is to assess China's rising influence in Nepal post-monarchy. First, a related theoretical framework is provided to examine the impact of the political transition on Nepal's foreign policy. This is followed by the analysis of China's strategic rise in post-monarchy Nepal. It then elaborates on the Challenges it poses for Nepal's relations with India.*

### **Introduction**

Nepal has gone through radical political development since the year 2006 when the Maoist insurgency officially ended. The Hindu monarchy which ruled for 240 years in Nepal was abolished when all parties agreed and a resolution was passed by the interim parliament. This event was seen by many as the most significant break from the past, symbolically and politically. Nepalese polity has seen major changes ever since, Maoists are now incorporated into the mainstream democratic process, the multi-party system is reintroduced, right to vote and political freedom without discrimination is given to the people. Different regime types carry different kinds of constraints for policymakers. The post-2008 emergence of democratic institutions has significantly involved and evolved public opinion and has made policy-making more diverse. It becomes important to analyse how that would affect Nepalese politics and also to understand rising China's role in Nepalese policymaking.

Nepal's geostrategic location has shaped foreign policy and also has been a ground for competition between the two Asian giants India and China. Foreign policy's main perception of promoting national interest changes merely with the surfacing of new factors of national interest and changes in the ruler, depending upon the polity of a nation. The traditional grounds of international relations in South Asia have changed profoundly and the rise of China is one of the major reasons for that. China is boosting its expanding political persuasion, its economic might, as well as its military power is huge and at the same time, its increasing involvement in the various regional multilateral institutions is among the key developments in Asian affairs. The far-seeing regional stance of China mirrors nearly all policy spheres.

It seems that in the contemporary political environment, Nepal does not want to have to choose between India and China; but rather to pursue both vectors. Nepal-India relations have been shaped by two factors-domestic political changes in these two countries and the regional dynamics. The internal changes in one country have effects on the other.



## Research Methodology

The study covers the contemporary Nepalese politics and foreign relations with India and China starting from the post-Jan Andolan II period in 2006, and it also then explores Nepal's regime change from monarchy to democracy and rising China's impact on Nepal's relations with India. This study also serves as a comprehensive introduction to the recent developments in Nepal. This study is limited to the analysis of factors to the extent that they intrude upon and affect the political decision-making.

This study employs a descriptive and analytical research design, which will help in defining the research problem. It will focus on creating a detailed picture by describing and analysing available data acquired from primary sources and from secondary sources. Specific theoretical perspectives will help to analyse and explain observed behaviours. In light of the recent political developments in Nepal, the study critically assesses if Nepal should incline towards India, go towards China, or rather choose to follow a middle path between them. The approach used to answer such questions would be the analysis of current and potential key issues in Nepal's relationships with India and China from historical perspectives and in the wake of recent political developments.

## Theoretical Premises

A relationship has been identified by many in international relations that certain types of political systems easily facilitate policy change. If two states are having different political systems then there are chances of less foreign policy change between them. States having the same type of political system would engage in more cooperation (Leeds and David, 1999). This helps in understanding how the transition from monarchy to democracy in Nepal affects its relationship with India and China. The constructivist theory emphasises how the agency and the structure influence each other and are interrelated to each other (Wendt, 1992). So, this theory explains here how different regimes in Nepal change foreign policymaking. Nepal's geostrategic location has shaped foreign policy and also has been a ground for competition between the two Asian giants India and China. This is better understood from geopolitical theory. To understand the growing Chinese influence in post-2006 Nepal, realism is employed with keeping in mind the dominance of power perspective (Raimjhanova 2015). Nepal's India and China relations cannot be analysed from a liberal standpoint. This can be done to avoid a single uncritical discourse (Karki and KC 2020). It also observes that the formal and government communications between Nepal and India have ever been realized to be guided in the path of realism (Pandey 2011, 13-14).

## A Historical Perspective on Political Development in Nepal

Pre-Rana Period (1769-1846) included the Kirat, Lichhavi, Malla and Shah dynasties in general. The orientations towards the political institutions-monarchy, the divine character of kingship, relationship between king and people, public opinion and participation and bureaucracy in general gives the clue of political culture (Malla, 2013). Rana Political Culture (1846-1951) could be styled as 'ultra-Machiavellianism'. This period was characterized by a culture of closed system, patrimonial order, rigid caste system, hierarchy, a traditional form of legitimacy, selective justice, a culture of *Chakari* (sycophancy) and the limitation of economic, political and administrative power monopoly within their own families. During Post Democracy Period (1951-1961), Nepal had a modern political system defined by the Interim Constitution of Nepal Act 1951 and the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1959. In Panchayat Era (1961-1990), king Mahendra Bikram Shah assumed emergency powers, dismissed the Nepali Congress government, abrogated the parliamentary system and banned all political parties. A monocratic Panchayat system was innovated under the constitution of 1962,



sovereignty was vested in the king (Lawoti,2005). People's Movement (Jan Andolan 1, 1990), the multiparty politics. was introduced.

### **Nepal's Transition from Monarchy to Democracy**

A comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) signed on November 21, 2006, between Nepal's seven party alliance (SPA) and the Maoists, ended the decade-long Maoists insurgency. This was a significant step which brought the Maoists into the mainstream of democratic politics. India is considered to be instrumental in abolishing the monarchy in Nepal by discontinuing the twin pillar policy. Monarchy was considered to be the foremost institution to safeguard China's security interests. Jan Andolan 2(2006) ended an era of monarchy. The death of entire family of king Birendra in 2001 shootout mark the tragic end of an era of direct succession of kingship established by the founder of Modern Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah. The movement unprecedentedly shook the roots of the 240 years old Shah monarchy thus compelling the king to renounce his power by a declaration on 24 April 2006. All the political parties extended support, though at a later stage, to the Maoists, to realize the goal of the democratic republic of Nepal. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal embraced the principles of republicanism, federalism, secularism, and inclusiveness.

### **Nepal-China interactions**

The beginning of Nepal-China Relations could not start in a normal manner after the Communist victory in China. Although Buddhism in the middle of the seventh century A.D became a channel to have social, cultural and historical associations. (Kant, 1976). Nepal upholds the 'One China' Policy and committed not to allow Nepalese territory against China (Kumar, 2011). The era of Mahendra and the Panchayat from 1955-1968 shows Nepal diversifying its relationship and strengthening its engagement with China. Pro India Rana Dynasty was overthrown by the revolution of 1950 in Nepal, and a diplomatic relationship with China was established on 1 August 1955 (Nayak, 2014). The crisis in relations between Nepal and India from 1960-1962 led to unprecedentedly robust engagement with the PRC. There were, in fact, worries in Nepal and India about the implications of the new Chinese presence in Tibet (Levi, 1957). India's growingly expressed disapproval and non-recognition of the Nepali monarchy's consolidation of power from 1955-1960 came at the same time when there was the perceivably rising threat of communism within Nepal, and more significantly, the rising popularity of the centrist and pro-democratic Nepali Congress (Riaz and Basu, 2016). Birendra's zone of peace, 1972-1990: Prime Minister Kirti Nidhi Bista in 1972 and King Birendra in 1979 visited China which endorsed the Nepal-China relationship to a higher level. Multiparty politics was back again in 1990 and the king's rule ended beneath constitutional monarchy. China was relieved to see the announcement by the newly elected Nepalese government that it adhered to the Panchsheel and non-alignment tenets in its foreign policy. Nepal's first ever-elected communist Prime Minister Manmohan Adhikari visited China in April 1995. Democratic Transition and Civil Conflict, 1990-2006: The 1990 introduction of constitutional monarchy in Nepal along with the interim government set forth a new period in Nepal's politics and ties with India improved. However, China was not neglected entirely during the rapprochement, with Bhattarai reassuring Beijing that, despite the change in government in Kathmandu, Nepal's stance toward China, particularly on the Tibet issue, would remain constant.

### **China's Growing Influence in Post-Monarchy Nepal**

It is difficult to comprehend the impact of rising China's influence on Nepal and consequently Nepal-India relations without first examining if and how its expanding power resources are converted into a genuine influence on policy-making in Nepal (Goh 2016,2). China's role in Nepal is multifaceted, it is



a very important aid-giver, it is a regional power, and an older brother, China is changing the dynamics at the regional and global levels. So, it has many reasons to grow its influence in Nepal. The South Asian power equation is changing and it has made space for China. China is also trying to validate its strategic role and for that, it is focusing on the solidification of economic strength in the region. Nepal gets special attention because it lies on its periphery. We have seen a huge increase in Chinese presence in the Nepalese socio, cultural, economic, and political spheres.

**Chinese objective for considering Nepal as its important state can be categorised into three parts:**

First, to minimize the dependence of Nepal on India and also to diminish the United States' capacity to threaten China's security in Tibet, China is deepening its political and economic integration with Nepal. **Second**, China wants to turn Nepal into a transit for trade in the South Asian region, at the same time China expects that Nepal can be a buffer between India and China if needed, which depends on how relations between the two Asian giants evolve in the times ahead. **Third**, China is very keen to make its monopoly in the South Asian region and is aware that to harbour ambitions of becoming the regional hegemon, controlling the periphery is very important (Gokhale 2021,16-17).

**Contemporary Era of Democratic Politics:** Reportedly Nepal-China relations changed their course when Maoists surprisingly won the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections. There is a similarity between the ideologies of Maoist in Nepal and China and also both of them are enthusiastic to neutralize India's influence. Consequently, this calls for an obvious choice for partnership between the two. China's south Asian policy in general and its foreign policy towards Nepal have undergone a major paradigm shift (Samaranayake 2012). In order to gain a robust tactical grip, China is providing multifaceted reliefs including huge economic packages, diplomatic and security offers, and infrastructure projects just to influence decision-making in Nepal. After the 2015 Indian blockade, tapping into this swelling of anti-Indian sentiments, PM Oli almost immediately pursued the China vector (Jain 2016). While Nepal is limited in autonomy by India's interests, India's leverage has its own limits due to Nepali domestic politics. India's assumption that a return to the office for K.P. Oli in 2018 would spell another tilt toward Beijing's interests led it to pursue an approach of keeping Deuba happy with New Delhi, reducing its demandingness on constitutional issues, especially as it relates to the Madhes issue (Jha 2017). China gives Nepal monetary aid in exchange for supporting and echoing the "One China policy" and also suppressing any anti-China events on Nepalese soil. Unlike the previous Nepalese Prime Ministers, Prachanda chose China as his first trip abroad. Many observers thought that China chose Maoists with the belief that they can most effectively advance its political interests (Sehgal 2014).

China has traditionally portrayed itself as a neighbour of Nepal that refrains from interfering in domestic affairs, at least publicly. Its traditional stance is changing especially since the abolition of the monarchy. What proved to be the watershed moment was the Madhesi issue as well as the unofficial India blockade of 2015. After the coming of Maoists into mainstream politics, Nepal's political balance moved much to the liking of Beijing and the regime in Nepal seemed to be more sensitive to China's interests. It has been believed by many in Nepal that China played a very important role in the consolidation of the "Communist Unity" in Nepal in 2018, the ideological nexus between the parties has been seen as the promotion of China's cultural, political, and economic relations in Nepal (Muni 2019, 6). If we look at China's Nepal policy within the context of its South Asia policy, Nepal plays an important role as it serves as an entry point for China to enter South Asia. China is attracted to the prospects that are evolving on its Northern front and is also extending its influence in South Asia in keeping with its official doctrine and preordained "National Dream" (Adhikari 2014,88). China's more





proactive foreign policy with post-monarchy Nepal can also be attributed to its domestic security considerations during the Tibetans uprising in 2008 (Lama 2013). When protests broke out in China's Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) before Beijing Olympics 2008, then Nepal's PM Prachanda made his maiden visit to China instead of India and signed agreements to strengthen bilateral cooperation. He expressed Nepal's intent to join the BRI (Pal 2021). They established Confucius Institute in Nepal in 2007 with the aim to strengthen bilateral relations in the realm of education, culture and tourism. A network of China Study Centres (CSCs) is set up (Ranade 2010). China became a SAARC observer in 2006 following a proposal brought forth by Nepal. In 2012, China appointed its ambassador in Nepal as its resident representative to SAARC (Adhikari 2014, 86).

In 2008, an agreement was reached for the construction of a 770 Km long rail line linking Lhasa and Khasa on the Tibet-Nepal border construction of highways connecting Nepal and Tibet as well as an energy pipeline to Kathmandu. These moderates India's pull over Nepal and the geographical advantage it has conventionally relished (Garver 2012). Nepal's hydroelectric potential has also been supported by China. (Kumar 2011).

China stood among the first nations to extend a helping hand to Nepal during post devastating earthquake in 2015 with relief materials. A comprehensive transit and transportation agreement came into effect in February 2020 (Pal 2021). China emerged as the largest aid donor and source of foreign direct investment (FDI) to Nepal in 2016. Reportedly, arrivals of Chinese tourists to Nepal overtook those from India during the first quarter of 2018 for the first time. China and Nepal signed an MoU on BRI cooperation on May 12, 2017, which marks Nepal's official entry into the China-led major international project (Sharma 2018). Not only this, both China and Nepal conducted their first joint military exercise in April 2017 and also Nepal began to use internet service through the route of China. In addition to this, the Covid-19 Pandemic has also allowed China to advance its vision of a Health Silk Road in Nepal (Pal 2021).

### **Challenges for India**

The post-monarchy politics in Nepal and the growing Chinese influence on its political and economic strength in order to consequently increase its influence on Nepalese politics have raised new challenges for India which has historically dominated Nepalese politics. There is a risk of strategic Chinese encirclement of India as China's economic, political, diplomatic and security influence in South Asia is increasing alongside its investments and this proves to be challenging to India's traditional place as the regional hegemon. With the goal of becoming a regional hegemon and also for security considerations, it has been bolstering relations with other South Asian countries, particularly Nepal, to improve its negotiating influence with India. India has valid reasons to be concerned about Chinese encirclement, and also the People's Liberation Army's growing assertiveness and confidence are worrying as they might push the communist leadership to take part in foreign military adventures. (Adhikari 2014). Beijing in recent years has very actively outreached to Nepal, this reportedly has been spurred in part by India's increased military posturing along its border. (Sidgel 2019). The strategy of India to limit Nepal's interaction with China is not a reality anymore. Furthermore, the sheer size of China's plan and its economic might are changing the course of global order. Many in Asia and abroad are suspicious of Beijing's steadily increasing defence expenditure and sometimes its assertive nationalistic rhetoric and other actions over contested territory and other issues (Bindra 2009). With China as a partner, the smaller states in South Asia can counterbalance the traditional dominance of India. With respect to bilateral relations between South Asian countries with China, Nepal-China relations have undergone



the most dramatic change. Among many reasons for this to happen, the border closure of 2015-2016 is the most talked about. As part of the Kathmandu visit in October 2019 Xi Jinping inaugurated various new projects of road and rail, Indian monopoly on internet connection also ended. The Nepal-India relations moved to a new low in mid-2020 over an unsolved border clash, Nepal's domestic politics is shifting towards China which hinders India's conventional influence.

Ten agreements with China during Prime Minister Oli's visit to Beijing in 2016 were concluded; Nepal called back its ambassador from New Delhi and cancelled India's visit by President Bidya Bhandari (Jha 2016). The tilt of Nepali political parties particularly after the introduction of a secular republican order towards China and the growing ties between the PRC and other countries of the region have caused alarm in India. China's strategic concern in the region deepened in 2013 with its growing interest in Nepal. Nepal-China Military relations have been further consolidated with China pledging huge moral and material support to the Nepali Army (Adhikari 2014). China has a wide range of economic, military and cultural and even political engagements. Such comprehensive engagement unquestionably jeopardises Indian security and economic interests. Nepal-India relations deteriorated during the writing of Nepal's new constitution followed by an unofficial economic blockade in Nepal and this period was crucial for improved Nepal-China relations. (Zhaoli 2019, 96). The defence cooperation between Nepal and China has undergone a dramatic shift after the Maoists came to power in Nepal (Sahoo & Nataraj 2013,3). This led to Nepal's inclination towards China in the defence sector and undermined the Indian stance of being the largest military supplier. It will also heavily undermine the security establishment. The unresolved Indo-Nepal border became a thorn in India-Nepal relations. Border areas are underdeveloped, with poor governance and inadequate infrastructure, India feels that unresolved Indo-Nepal border issues would increase more space for infiltration by Chinese agents and their covert operations against India which has caused considerable concern in the Indian security establishment. Indian officials feel that Nepal may be bringing up the border issue at the behest of a third party, alluding to China due to the growing influence of China in Nepal (Xavier, 2020). Investments by China in the road and railway networks in Nepal to give Beijing better access to Nepalese territory will eventually undermine Indian security (Singh and Shah, 2016). Nepal joined China's project of BRI against India's strong opposition to BRI on the grounds of sovereignty. The BRI and Beijing-led connectivity projects in Nepal have consequences for Indian strategic concerns in general (Baruah 2017,2). China is also seeking to expand its presence by establishing Confucius Institutes, such institutes create awareness and act as a barrier to Indian influence in Nepal by bringing China closer. The conventional India-centric policymaking dependency is evolving toward one that emphasizes maintaining equidistance with India and China (Schmidt and Thapa 2012, 2).

## Conclusion

Nepal has struggled with the difficult transition since the end of the Maoist insurgency in 2006. The development of politics in Nepal has never been free from externalities. It goes without saying that foreign policy change is not entirely and exclusively driven by internal factors. There has been a global power shift in Asia, the rise of India and China, and the remaking of international order, are some of the contemporary realities. The arrival of the Maoists' incorporation into the mainstream political process has changed the electoral stage. Post Monarchy Nepal is attempting to possess a policy of 'equiproximity' with the two Asian giants, India and China. It has uncovered the intricacy of maintaining diplomacy with India. Democratic Nepal is more challenging and complex for India from a foreign policy perspective. China's traditional aim of keeping Nepal free from the anti-Chinese voices



in Tibet is changing and the new objectives of China in Nepal are similar to what it has looked for in the remaining South Asian countries to deter the traditional Indian influence.

The historical perspectives show, how the fog of misunderstanding started between Nepal and India, since India's independence, and gradually expanded in the period of the monarchy. The period followed the approach based on the notion of the special Nepal-India friendship. However, Nepal-China relations are changing and counterbalancing India's traditional influence. India must reshape its Nepal foreign policy and should be proactive in its engagements with Nepal through diversifying cooperation, innovative strategies and policies to counter China's rising influence in Nepal. There is also an urgent need for Nepal to carefully analyse and deal with appropriate diplomacy with the changing regional and international power structure.

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