Commentary

Trilateral Security Cooperation: Nepal’s New Foreign Policy

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Introduction

Nepal’s King Prithvi Narayan Shah’s famous ‘Yam between two boulders’ quote reflects the great understanding of Nepal’s security dilemma, even as far back as the 18th century. This has remained a cornerstone of Nepal’s foreign policy to date, primarily driven by Nepal’s geographic location. Shah understood well that Nepal would always remain insecure vis-à-vis its powerful neighbours, that is, China and India, and urged the need to keep refining, adapting and adjusting Nepal’s foreign policy in order to deal with its powerful regional neighbours. However, successive Nepalese governments have looked to build ties with its powerful neighbours to bolster their own hold on power rather than to maintain the difficult balancing act outlined by Shah. This trend will continue in the foreseeable future, unless Nepal as a nation is ready to conduct its foreign policy as per the imperatives of the 21st century world, dominated by the rise of China and India. While both China and India are competing for global and regional influence, there is also a concern about securing their interests in their close neighbourhoods. Both countries are vying for influence in Nepal as they fear that Nepali soil can be used to harm their respective core interests. Ultimately, as argued by Manish Dabhade and Harsh V. Pant, both countries have increased their interference in Nepal, while severely undermining ‘Nepal’s sovereignty and its ability to cope’ with these regional giants effectively. In light of this, this commentary focuses its attention on the primacy of the element of change in Nepal’s foreign policy and attempts to propose ‘trilateral security cooperation’ as a new foreign policy for Nepal to manage the growing China–India strategic interests in Nepal. The proposed change in Nepal’s foreign policy is to manage the increasing foreign and security policy challenges of China and India in Nepal.

Assessing India–China security concerns in Nepal

India and China have legitimate security concerns and different threat perceptions about each other’s intentions in Nepal. John W. Garver argues that the main concern for India, with regards to Nepal’s geostrategic location, is China’s real motive in Nepal, especially after ‘China’s annexation of Tibet in 1957’. Time and again, this issue has been raised by Indian strategic thinkers, driven by the late Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who articulated the thought that Nepal acts as a ‘strategic Himalayan frontier’ against a possible Chinese threat. The recent Chinese engagement in Nepal...
Additionally, India has overwhelming security concerns in Nepal, besides its geo-strategic interests. These concerns relate to the operation of counterfeit fake Indian currency, international criminal organisations operating within Nepal, the vulnerability of Nepal’s international airport, insecure Indian investment, Maoist movements, and Islamist terrorism, amongst others. Moreover, the Nepal–India open border is a constant source of distress for the Indian security establishment, as it fears it would be exploited by anti-Indian elements. All these factors have created significant insecurity in India, and a specific provision in the Nepal–India 1950 treaty provides: ‘India has de facto say over Nepal’s security, especially regarding the consultations about third country threats emanating from Nepal’. 9

China on the other hand is concerned about the increasing ‘free Tibet movement’ in Nepal and its impact on ‘territorial integrity’. Approximately 20,000 Tibetan refugees now reside in settlements scattered throughout Nepal. The Tibetans and their descendants residing in Nepal are in a ‘state of legal limbo’; they are neither recognised as refugees nor given any legal status. Additionally, Nepal is not a ‘signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol’ and does not have a ‘domestic Refugee Legislation’, despite hosting a large number of refugees and asylum seekers. Nepal has acceded to the ‘Gentlemen’s Agreement’, whereby it facilitates the transit of new Tibetan arrivals through Nepal, typically to Tibetan exile communities in India. However, the flow of people has rarely been unidirectional. Many Tibetans instead are choosing to stay in Nepal and, increasingly, Tibetans who have returned from India are reportedly participating in various political activities in Nepal. One of the recent examples was when one Tibetan, who had returned from India, died by self-immolation in Nepal. China always held a deep suspicion towards India’s role in instigating the free Tibet movement in Nepal. Additionally, China is concerned about the impact of a possible federal Nepal with the provision of ethnic self-determination on Tibetan nationalism. The Nepali government firmly supports the ‘One China Policy’, upholding the belief that Tibet is part of China, and remains adamant that Nepali territory should not be used for Tibetan protests against China. However, with Nepal’s national divisions and a possible future transition to federal structure along ethnic lines, China is worried about how such an arrangement will impact Tibetan refugee issues. It was relatively easy for the Chinese government to convey their concern and receive Nepali government’s assurance on ‘One China Policy’ with Nepal’s unitary model, but China is nervous and uncertain as to how various ethnic provinces will deal with the Tibetan refugee issues in a likely federal structure. Hence, China fears instability in Nepal as a threat to its security interests and is eager to devise a policy to contain the ‘free Tibet movement’ on Nepali soil. The Tibetan refugee issue raises a range of sensitive conceptual security and foreign policy debates in Nepal which cannot be easily resolved. The act of returning refugees to a state where their lives or freedom may be threatened violates the bedrock principle of international refugee law. But failing to do so will invite Chinese wrath, which is the last thing Nepal can afford.

In the above-mentioned strategic games, one thing is clear that each country has its own foreign and security policy interest in Nepal. However, this picture is not particularly favourable for Nepal and poses a real challenge to Nepal’s sovereignty. Nepal is turning into a battlefield for competing security interests of India–China, with its own weak domestic politics setting the stage. There can be no match between Nepal and China or between Nepal and India in terms of power configuration, e.g., territory, population, economic and military strength. Diplomacy is the only mechanism for Nepal.
environment and clearly shows that it has undermined Nepal’s ability to cope while dealing with India’s and China’s foreign and security policy interests in Nepal.

Is trilateral security cooperation feasible?

Analysts in South Asia, such as S.D. Muni in recent times, have started a debate on the need to form a ‘cooperative security framework’ in South Asia.17 However, Smruti S. Pattanaik and Nihar Nayak argue that forming a ‘South Asian regional security architecture is fraught with challenges and complexity’.18 In light of this and taking into consideration Nepal’s own national interests, Nepal should limit its focus to the development of a trilateral security architecture. There will always be a temptation to focus on building economic cooperation between India, China and Nepal, however, in international relations; one country’s defensive move is interpreted as an offensive approach by another country.19 Hence, every move by China in Nepal, for example—in terms of the development of Lumbini, opening new Chinese Confucian centres, hydropower development, bringing rail linkages from Tibet to Nepal and so forth—will be regarded in suspicion by Delhi. This will result in Delhi making a counter move to tackle it, which was evident when Delhi publicly raised its eyebrows on the increasing Chinese interest in Nepal.20 It is also evident that the Indian security establishment is closely monitoring Chinese activities in Nepal and expressing its deep concerns on growing Chinese military and diplomatic activities in Nepal. This will further derail Nepal’s infrastructure development, energy security issues, constitution writing process, and result in negative economic outputs for Nepal due to the perceived threat perception of two countries, towards each other’s intentions in Nepal.

Nepal needs to focus on addressing its respective security concerns in Nepal and different threat perceptions first, in order for Nepal to prosper economically. Although Nepal conducts bilateral security meetings with India and China respectively, it would be wise to bring both the countries together in one forum and discuss their respective security concerns in Nepal. This trilateral dialogue would also help to further minimise the common threat perceptions of both the countries against each other in Nepal. The steps to initiate trilateral security cooperation is in itself fraught with challenges, however, Nepal needs to take it on board as one of its foreign policy challenges in the coming era. It is understandable that the Nepalese government will find it difficult to propose ‘trilateral security cooperation’ as a new foreign policy at the governmental level immediately. And both India and China will have certain reservations at the proposal. For India, driven by Nehru’s thinking, consider that the great Himalayas on its northern side act as a natural sentinel for the defence of the country.21 Although a sizeable percentage of these Himalayas are situated in Nepal, Nehru deliberately ignored this, because of India’s supreme national interest. This strategic thinking developed by Nehru continues to guide India to date when it comes to dealing with Nepal. Hence, proposing the trilateral dialogue at the government level in India will be a non-starter. On the other hand, compared to India, China is still a distant neighbour for Nepal. Nepal does not share many economic, cultural and people-to-people relations with China, unlike India. Tibet is China’s foremost concern in Nepal. The Nepalese government has thus far failed to assuage the Chinese apprehension that Nepali soil will be used as a launch pad for the free Tibet movement. Therefore, understanding China’s concerns fully requires further time for Nepalese policy-makers before this proposal can be floated at the government level.
‘Track-II diplomacy’ mechanism. In order to proceed with the concept of Track-II diplomacy, first, a Nepalese strategic community should be formed, that can act as a facilitator to carry this concept forward. The Nepalese strategic community should initiate the formation of Track-II diplomacy, where the proposal for the development of trilateral security cooperation should be discussed with the Indian and the Chinese strategic community. This will help to ascertain the views of Indian and Chinese strategic thinkers alike on the proposal. Second, once Track-II diplomacy is formally established, the major Nepalese political leaders should be brought onto one common platform, and own it as a new foreign policy of Nepal. Thereafter, a series of high-level political visits comprising the major political leaders of Nepal should be conducted with leaders from India and China, with the aim of taking them into confidence on the proposal. Third, once Nepal receives a positive response about this proposal from the Indian and the Chinese leaders, the Government of Nepal needs to ensure that this is projected as a new official foreign policy of Nepal. Lastly, the Nepalese ministry of foreign affairs should coordinate with its respective counterparts in India and China in organising a trilateral security dialogue in close cooperation with the ministry of home affairs and defence. A regular meeting every three months at the foreign ministers level should be conducted and held in the respective countries. Such engagements at the government level may get off the ground only if the terms and conditions set down by the powerful countries are agreed to. In many cases, such terms and conditions will try, in a veiled way, to advance their national interests. Hence, Nepal needs to take into confidence the two regional neighbours’ national interests, while at the same time being in a position to articulate its own national interests clearly. These steps are one part of broader engagement towards the formation of a trilateral mechanism. Further avenues should also be explored which can ensure the institutionalisation of trilateral security cooperation in the near future. At this point in time, therefore, the Nepalese strategic community needs to deeply engage with the Indian and the Chinese strategic community, to further dwell into a formation of a trilateral security cooperation initiative before engaging with two mammoth and competing neighbours at the government level.

**Conclusion**

The proposal to make changes to Nepal’s foreign policy stems from the need to manage India’s and China’s strategic competition in Nepal. Nepalese politicians and policy-makers do not understand this, and believe that Nepal will only benefit from increasing economic cooperation between India and China. However, Nepalese politicians and policy-makers are underestimating the strategic rivalry of China and India that is taking place in Nepal. Hence, the proposal to change Nepal’s foreign policy is to address Nepal’s increasing geo-strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis its powerful regional neighbours. Nepal cannot remain a passive actor in this changing strategic environment. It cannot hope that economic interdependence will ultimately prohibit China–India from playing out their strategic rivalry in Nepal. Nepal cannot continue to adopt the same old policies or continue to suffer from the perennial security dilemma of being ‘Yam between two boulders’. Nepal needs to act proactively and take an active lead in the conduct of its own foreign policy, and adopt trilateral security cooperation as a new foreign policy approach. This will give due importance to the primacy of the element of change in Nepal’s foreign policy in this changing strategic environment.
India and China through this proposed change in foreign policy approach, before the country embarks on the quest of benefitting from their economic progress.

Notes


2. Ibid.


6. India’s Prime Minister Nehru spoke in the Indian parliament of the geo-strategic importance of Nepal, while justifying the significance of the Nepal–India 1950 treaty. He stated: ‘Apart from our sympathetic interest in Nepal, we are also interested in the security of our own country. From time immemorial, the Himalayas have provided us with a magnificent frontier. Of course, they are no longer as impassable as they used to be, but they are still fairly effective. We cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also the principal barrier to India’. For details on the speech see Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946–April 1961, Government of India Publications Division, New Delhi, 1971, p. 436. Additionally see John W. Garver, no. 5, p. 142.


15. Ibid.


20. ‘Chinese Movement in Nepal Raises Concerns for India’s Security Establishment’, 
Indiatoday.com, November 27, 2012, at http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/chinese-movement-
22. For a conceptual understanding of Track-II diplomacy, see Brian L. Job, ‘Track 2 Diplomacy: 
Ideational Contribution to the Evolving Asia Security Order’, in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), Asian 
Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 