

Geopolitics of India's Responses To The Interference of China in Indian-Subcontinent: A Case Study of Nepal

Dr. Anand Kumar

Assistant Professor
School of Humanities

Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab, India

Gurveek Singh Maan

Assistant Professor
School of Humanities

Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab, India

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 open Indo-Nepal 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 analyse the factors which have led to deteriorating Indo-Nepal relationship leading to China's influence into the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: Geopolitics, India, China, Nepal, South Asia, encroachment.

Introduction

The regular planned economic and infrastructural development in 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 growing interference 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? In the light of these questions it becomes essential on the part of India to defend its traditional fort in Indian-subcontinent. And it further becomes important to know what kind responses India has taken in the recent past to counter the China's growing interference in Nepal.

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.



Figure: Geopolitics of India-China-Nepal
Discussion:

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. There has been a long tradition of free movement of people 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 considered 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.

Geography plays very important role in deciding the fate of the country's political relationship with its neighbor and also far away countries. As truly described by a famous American geo-strategist named Nicholas Spykmen, that "geography being the most fundamental conditioning factor in the foreign policy states because it is the most permanent¹". The very location of Nepal has created many misunderstanding in Indo-Nepal political relationship. For instance once India's first Prime Minister Nehru when he said in 1950 that²:

"Nepal is geographically almost a part of India, although she is an independent country".

This statement as said by Nehru may have more emotional value rather than political one, but it created misunderstanding among many Nepalese politicians and think tanks who took it as

¹ Spykman, N. J. (1944), *"The Geography of the Peace"*.

imperialistic and paternalistic in nature. Such statement for many reasons does not create a healthy image of India in many Nepalese politicians.

Nevertheless by virtue of its strategic location, Nepal becomes quite crucial to India's regional geopolitics. As Dahal³ argues that "according to Mackinder's terminology, Nepal hold the pivotal location in Indian Sub-continental region". This view point becomes more significant with respect to the prevailing geopolitical situation between emerging India and rising China in the Asian geopolitical realm.

It was long ago since during King Mahendra that Nepal started moving towards China, in order to bargain from India. And it is being continued till date, even after Nepal being converted to Republic from monarchy. It was Maoist that soon after coming to power as a largest majority party in 2008, which openly invited China to reduce Nepal's dependence over India. Not only this, Nepal's first Prime minister under republican form of government Pushpa Kamal Dahel Prachanda visited Beijing and also participated Olympic Games. Although he denied several times after coming from Beijing, saying that his 'China visit' was not political but just a foreign tour and his first political visit will be to India⁴.

It is very essential to note that when compared to India, about 40 formal Chinese delegations paid a state visit to Nepal when Pushpa Kamal Dahel was the Prime Minister. And when this compared to India, only few were there to visit Nepal. This shows how much interest does India shows to Nepal- to its one of the significant geostrategic neighbor. 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.

Further, Nepal's frequent use of the "China card" in its relations with India is also unknown. The Maoists policy of Prachanda's maintained equidistant from India and China which was followed by several successive governments in Nepal after becoming republic. Further, on the line the

³ Ibid, p-5

⁴ Cailmail, B. (2008), "The Fall of a Hindu Monarchy: Maoist in Power in Nepal".

other successive governments in Nepal has more or less followed similar approach towards China.

China too sensing the Nepal political crisis has been heavily engaged in Nepal that also sometime against India's interest.

In the Indian subcontinent, any hostility from the neighbourhood may lead to the issue of insecurity for India. So India's foreign policy has always been updated towards its neighbor. For instance, the 'Gujral doctrine' supposed to be the one of the most innovative foreign policy approach to have been introduced especially to deal with the India's small neighboring countries. It has helped India to deal with its neighboring countries in a much better way⁵.

At the very beginning of the Modi government, it seemed that opposing to previous conjecture about his Look East policy, he was interested in strengthening relationship with India's neighbors and at the same time to reduce Chinese sphere of influence in these small states⁶. 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 governments 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 grip⁷. According to BBC news⁸:

“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”.

⁵ Murthy, P. (2011), “The Gujral Doctrine and Beyond”, Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis.

⁶ Atres, A. (2014), “The Modi Doctrine”, *Outlook*, Washington.

⁷ Swain, A. (2017), “Me-First, The Core of Modi Doctrine of Foreign Policy Damaging For India?”.

While on the one hand India puts blame game of this blockade over Nepal's ill-conceived constitutional policy, but the Nepal government has dubbed the impasse an "unofficial obstruction" by India as Madhesis of Terai belt of Nepal 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 any such allegation. On the other side, India believed that Indian vehicles motorists are scared to cross the Indo-Nepal open perimeter and that solution can be found through discourse between the protesters and political entities in Nepal⁹.

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 regional level there could not reach to any conclusion.

Research Methodology

This research work is based on analytical and descriptive framework on the basis of the available secondary data, like UN documents, various summit reports, declarations of various protocols and conventions, the minutes of various conferences, official statements, books, journals, monographs and articles etc.

Since the nature of the topic is contemporary, help has been taken from newspaper reports, websites and other such tools. Deductive approach has been applied in the proposed research work. The variables which will be tested here are primarily categorized in the form of independent, intervening and dependent variables. In this study the independent variable is the case study of Nepal, intervening variable is the encroachment of China in South Asia, and dependent variable is the responses of India. On the basis of secondary sources, analytical and descriptive have been carried out to study the ongoing geopolitical changes in the Indian-subcontinent.

Conclusion:

Emergence of China as an influencing power has created a geopolitical shift to the Indian subcontinent region. It seems that China's ever growing investment in Nepal has been pushing it

⁹ Pokharel, K. (2015), "The Two-Month Blokade of Nepal Explained", The Wall Street Journal, 26 November 2015.

more towards former. This also reflects that India's 'Neighbors first policy' is becoming less relevant and effective in South Asia. Further, if India unable to control the China's ever intruding role in South Asia, it may lose its traditional influence in its region.

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