

NEPAL AND SOUTH ASIAN REGIONAL SECURITY

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Nepal's important place in South Asian regional security stems from her geostrategic position. She lies not only in the crossroads of two powerful civilizations, but also in the heart of the Himalayas, the formidable mountain range separating the Indo-subcontinent from the Tibeto-Chinese region. Although India is about two-thousand miles long, the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau are the controlling features of the physical and political geography of the subcontinent.¹ It is Nepal that occupies the central position in the Himalayas and controls one-third of the mountain chain. According to one source, the name Nepal is derived from the word Ne, which means the centre.² Her spatial element has been the key element in determining her role in South and East Asia.

Her geostrategic significance arises from two factors. First, from political perspective, Nepal's position linking the two land masses of India and China has given to her a unique buffer status enjoyed by few countries in the world.³ Second, from a commercial perspective, her control of the two vital passes Kuti (Nyilam) and Kerong (Kyirong) in the central Himalayas enabled Nepal to monopolize the trans-Himalayan trade from the ancient period to the turn of this century. The role of political and commercial buffer Nepal fulfilled through ages made Kathmandu the entrepot for all goods and ideas that flowed between South and East Asia.

The opening of the Phari route via Kalimpong, India, by the British towards the close of the nineteenth century led to an eclipse of Nepal's monopoly of Trans-Himalayan trade. Her economic premiership in the Trans-Himalayan trade was never regained, yet, the emergence of two powerful states with divergent political systems on opposite sides of the Himalayan region made Nepal alive and sensitive in the post-1950 decades.⁴ In these decades the two super powers, as well as Nepal's immediate neighbors, India

and China, were competing for their sphere of influence in the Himalayan belt, particularly Nepal. This is seen in the rapid increase in the numbers of aid donors and amounts of aid entering Nepal.⁵

There is neither a unified security policy in South Asia nor a shared perception of a common threat to bid the countries of the region together in the manner of the ASEAN and the NATO countries. In fact, there are fundamental cleavages in political and security perceptions of South Asian countries reflecting rather a deep sense of insecurity. The past history, moulded by the wounds of partition, the dominance of India and the disparity between India and her neighbors in size, population and GDP, has clouded the need for evolution of security pattern and regional cooperation. There is thus no "strategic consensus" or even a sense of belonging to the security community in the South Asian region. It is only India that feels that the Himalayan region and the sunshine island of Sri Lanka are an integral part of her defence system.

The exit of the British from the subcontinent led India to try to build a security community of the Himalayan neighbors, in which she formulated the southern Himalayan policy network that brought Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim within her security umbrella. Though India inherited a full-fledged secretariat from the British, the ministry of external affairs was born only in the summer of 1947. As the ministry was new and the bureaucracy inexperienced, the definition of foreign policy towards the three "border states" -- Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan -- was a difficult problem for independent India. Many high ranking Indian officials, such as the deputy premier Sardar V. Patel urged the annexation of the border states in the Himalayas in the manner of the "native states".⁶ However, Premier Nehru, who headed the ministry of external affairs, was against such an idea.

Though accession of the "border states" in the central Himalayas was impractical, India never the less maintained a special interest in the Himalayan region by labeling it a sensitive area. India, thus, concluded separate bilateral treaties with each of the Himalayan states. Sikkim's autonomy was very much limited both externally and internally. Bhutan's internal autonomy was recognized, but India retained the right to "advise her" on external affairs. Nepal, which possessed five hundred miles of contiguous territory with the heartland of India -- United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh), Bihar and Bengal -- drew special attention from India. She concluded the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with Nepal on July 31, 1950.⁷

The Treaty of Peace and Friendship was hastily signed by India and Nepal at Kathmandu during the hot summer of 1950. Two factors were instrumental in paving the way for Rana Nepal and the independent India to formulate this treaty at this juncture: the clear emergence of the Chinese sovereignty in

Tibet and the increasing probability of "an armed revolution" in Nepal. After the conclusion of the treaty, Premier Mohan had strong reasons to feel that the favor of Pandit Nehru was on his side. For Premier Nehru, Nepal had to be brought within the India security system at all cost. By his astute diplomacy, Nehru took "time by the forelock" and carefully guided the course of events in the Himalayas. He clearly saw that the Chinese sovereignty over Tibet was a foregone conclusion. So the communist infiltration south of the Himalayas had to be prevented. Again, any violent upheaval in Nepal like an "armed revolution" that could promote anarchy had to be prevented. He sincerely believed that any radical departure from the past by Nepal would not only give rise to chaos and confusion in Nepal but also pave the way for a communist takeover. Nehru, thus, decided to crib and curb the wings of the Nepali "revolution". Premier Mohan could derive little comfort from this reasoning, for the days of Rana oligarchy in Nepal in the new scheme of things devised by India were sealed.

India's security perception of South Asia was the overriding factor that promoted India to control the developments south of the Himalayas. On November 31, 1949 Peking Radio gave the orders to "liberate the whole of Tibet."⁸ When New Delhi protested, China quickly asserted that Tibet was an integral part of China and foreign interference would not be tolerated. The speech delivered by Premier Nehru before the Indian parliament on December 5, 1950 clarifies the policy of the Government of India during these turbulent times. This important speech in part ran:

We are interested in our country's security and our own country's border. We have had from the time immemorial a magnificent frontier—the Himalayas We are not going to tolerate any person coming over that barrier. Therefore much as we appreciate the independence of Nepal; we cannot risk our own security by anything not done in Nepal which permits that barrier to be crossed, or otherwise leads to the weakening of that frontier.⁹

In other words, Pandit Nehru felt that the Nepali Himalayas was a common defence line, whose protection was the duty of both India and Nepal.

It was with the above background that the Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed between India and Nepal in the summer of 1950. The Indo-Nepal treaty shows signs of haste. The final draft of the treaty had nine clauses. Article Nine states, "the treaty shall be in force for a period of ten years ... unless terminated by either party by giving a notice of not less than one year in writing, continue to be in force for another ten years."¹⁰ But the final draft was amended during the last moment to include ten articles. Article Nine of

the draft became the Article Ten of the treaty, which ran "the treaty shall remain in force until it is terminated by either party by giving one year notice."¹¹

Here we can visualize what was going on in the mind of the Indian leadership. Among the two treaties signed on July 31, 1950, the Treaty of Trade and Commerce between the Government of Nepal and the Government of India was limited for a period of ten years; in contrast, the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Nepal and India was to be of a more permanent character and was to last for an indefinite period. India was indeed right in her contemplation. Even during 1989–1990 when Nepal-India relations reached a state of an all time low the Nepal Government could not give the one year notice necessary for the termination of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950; she rather asked only for the removal of the distortions of the treaty.

The principal clause of the treaty that brings Nepal within the parameter of the Indian security system is Article 2, which makes it obligatory on part of both the governments "to inform each other of any serious friction or misunderstanding with any neighbouring state likely to cause any breach of the friendly relations existing between two governments."

The two treaties were not all Nepal received from India on the eve of July 31, 1950. She was also the recipient of the "Letters of Exchange", which was kept under tight secrecy for almost a decade. But since its release in 1959, it has been increasingly looked upon as representing India's domination of South Asia. The "Letters of Exchange" is a novel feature of India's diplomacy. These contain far more important provisions than the treaty itself. They were not included in the treaty and kept in tight secrecy because India did not want to come under public controversy. India possibly felt that the "Letters of Exchange" could be interpreted as "penalty clauses" imposed by a big power over a small one.

The same psychology was prevalent among the Indian leadership during the signing of the of the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement at Colombo on July 29, 1987. Here also, as in the case of Nepal, letters were exchanged between the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi and the Sri Lankan President Mr. J. R. Jayewardene. These letters brought Sri Lanka within the Indian security system. India on this occasion again desired these "Letters of Exchange" be kept a secret. But the president of Sri Lanka declined and insisted that they must be known to all. To quote the president, "I said no. They should be made public."¹³

Some of the important security oriented provisions in the "Letters of Exchange" between Nepal and India were as follows.

Neither Government shall tolerate any threat to the security of the other by a foreign aggressor. To deal with any such threat the two governments shall consult each other and devise effective counter measure.

Any arms and ammunition or warlike materials and equipments necessary for the security of Nepal that the Government of Nepal may import through the territory of India shall also be imported with *the assistance and agreement* of the Government of India. (emphasis in the original).

Both the Governments agreed not to employ any foreigners whose activities may be prejudicial to the security of the other...¹⁴

In doing so the leaders of independent India were trying to insulate South Asia from the Chinese communist influence. Looking across the Himalaya with western spectacles, they were only stepping into the Anglo-American shoes with their China-phobia. The Government of India felt that the "Letters of Exchange", attached to the annexes of the treaty were as valid as the treaty itself and that they served as important tools of Indian diplomacy.

Again, the *aide memoire* handed to D. R. Regmi by the Government of India at the conclusion of the talks in July 1958 summarized the views of the Government of India since 1950. The *aide memoire* had seven clauses pertaining to the security of both the countries. Among them clauses three and four are the most important.

The government of Nepal will likewise consult the Government of India regards to any matters relating to foreign policy or relations with foreign powers, with the view to coordinate policy, in particular in matters relating to the relations with Tibet and China, consultations will take place with the Government of India.¹⁵

Then came the Agreement between India and Nepal of January 30, 1965 in which Nepal gave India the monopoly of fulfilling all her military needs, including the training of her personnel. In return India also withdrew its support to the Nepali Congress and the Nepali Communists, who were living in exile in India. The details of this Agreement were kept a secret up to April 1989 when the Indian newspapers disclosed the important text of the Agreement.

Thus, the evolution on Nepal's joint security perception with India took place in three steps: The Treaty of Peace and Friendship with India of 1950, including the "Exchange of Letters" that were attached with the treaty of

1950, the *aide memoire* of 1958, and the Agreement of January 1965. All these steps were carefully designed to insulate the Chinese influence from south of the Himalayas.

However, in the subsequent years this miniature security system so neatly and carefully devised by the leaders of India suffered a major setback when Nepal, in spite of the Treaty of 1950, evolved its own security perspective on its border contiguous with China (Tibet). To the surprise and even dismay of the Indian leaders, Nepal not only followed "a China Policy" in the late 1950s but also cultivated diplomatic relationship with as many countries as possible.

Today, Sikkim has formally become a state in the Indian Union, and Bhutan is the only country in the Himalayas that is formally and practically tied with the Indian security system. However, in 1979 even the King of Bhutan openly came out and asked for the revision of the treaty with India.

It is true that Nepal still retains the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with India, yet it has been able to diversify its foreign policy to such an extent that it has developed its own security perspective vis-a-vis China. Thus, her treaty with India of 1950 remains more in letter than in spirit. Nepal's claim to be recognized as a zone of peace since 1975 further helped in the erosion of the original spirit of the treaty. As a small state, Nepal has no ambition to play a grandiose role in regional and world politics. It cannot risk its independence by becoming a part of the larger South Asian polity; or to put it in different perspective, Nepal has no desire to follow the Sikkim model. The reality that India and China are the real guarantors of Nepal's security cannot be wishfully washed away. Nepal, thus, must remain unaligned from either of her two neighbours, despite her extensive relations with India on the social, economic, cultural, and political levels.

As the decade of 1950s came to a close, Nepal slowly began to pull out herself from the Indian security system. Refusing to accept the status of a political buffer for the Indian security system, King Birendra went to the extent of saying, "Nepal is not a part of the subcontinent. It is really a part of Asia that touches both India and China."¹⁶ Again, in a demand for the withdrawal of the Indian military mission from Kathmandu, the Nepali prime-minister Kirtinidhi Bista summed up the Nepali position with the words "Nepal could not compromise its sovereignty for India's so-called security."¹⁷

There are fundamental differences in political and security perceptions in South Asia, reflecting a deep sense of insecurity. The fear of Indian dominance is a major phenomenon in South Asian politics. The deep wounds of partition which created three independent states -- India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh-- out of what was once known as British India proper, has created a cloud of distrust and misunderstanding, which even "Time", the best

physician, has proved to be a poor healer. This mistrust has in fact climbed to greater-heights than reality justifies.

Nepal-India relations experienced a similar trend. In 1961 Nepal and China agreed to construct a 104 km. road linking Kathmandu with Kodari (Nepal-Tibeto-China border) without paying any attention to the strong Indian criticism that the Himalayas was a natural security frontier of India and Nepal. This road was completed in 1967 and became a plus factor in China's strategic consideration vis-a-vis India. This geostrategic change remains unacceptable in the minds of Indian policy makers, Nepali statesmen have always rejected the existence of any threat.

In the early 1960s, Indo-Nepal relations reached such a crisis stage that the Chinese foreign minister had to come to Nepal's rescue. To quote the Chinese Minister, "in case any foreign army makes a foolhardy attempt to attack Nepal, China will side the Nepalese people."¹⁸ Thus, the Treaty of 1950 between India and Nepal took a sharp about-turn. For the first time China came out openly against India on the behalf of Nepal. Nepal played the China card to her advantage with considerable dexterity in the early years of 1960s.

Nepal's political reliance on China was altered by the Bangladesh liberation movement in 1971.¹⁹ Nepal power-elites began to sense a rapidly changing political map of South Asia in which India was to emerge as the dominant power. India's bold determination to create Bangladesh, inspite of China's support of Pakistan, compelled Nepal to change her policy towards East Pakistan. As events dramatically unfolded the breakup of Pakistan became inevitable. The appearance of a new neighbor so close to her eastern border compelled Nepal to change her position. Thus, in an unexpected move, Nepal did not join the United Nation's call on India for an immediate ceasefire on the Indo-Pakistan border. Nepal's permanent representative to the United Nations explained her last hour shift in her policy this way: as his country was surrounded by big and powerful neighbors it was "incapable of defending itself alone from external attacks or imposing her will on others by means of the use of threat of force."²⁰ To Nepal a close neighbor like Bangladesh was more important politically and economically than the distant Pakistan. It was her own security perceptions and economic well-being that compelled Nepal to change her earlier stand in the Bangladesh movement.

Nepal-India relations again reached a crisis stage between 1989-1990. Out of 19 entry points between Nepal and India, India closed all except two: one at Joghani and the other at Raxaul. India charged Nepal for violating the Treaty of 1950. India's anger had been instigated by Nepal's purchase of arms from China by work-permits issued by Nepal to Indian workers, and by questions relating to the overall treatment of Indians in Nepal. For real as

well as psychological reasons India perceived the measures taken by Nepal as a threat to her security.

It is therefore quite clear that Nepal looks at certain foreign policy issues differently from India, whether it may be the Chinese threat across the Himalayas, or the Afghanistan or the Cambodian issue. These differences have often clouded Nepal-India relations from time-to-time. But a small country can hardly ignore the security perception of a large and powerful neighbor whether whatever continent it may be in. If a small nation does not follow a policy of "self restraint" and "reassurance" towards a big and a powerful neighbor, then it is only natural that the latter should use its sinews to bring pressures on the former to change its direction.

It is tempting for a political analysts to compare Nepal's position in recent experience with that of Finland. One would even use the expression "Finlandisation" of Nepal by India. According to Alvin Rubinstein "Finlandisation" is "commonly used to signify a process whereby the former Soviet Union influenced the domestic and foreign policy behavior of a non-communist countries so that they voluntarily follow policies congenial or approved by the Soviet Union."²¹ As a political metaphore, the term is often used to describe the efforts of a powerful country to carve out its sphere of influence among small ones.

There are indeed some parallels between Nepal and Finland. With the outbreak of World War II, the former Soviet Union became increasingly alarmed at the possibility of a German invasion of the Soviet Union through Finland. The Soviet Union charged Finland with anti-Soviet preparations, providing an excuse to invade Finland in November 1939. This war proved to be catastrophic for Finland for she was compelled to surrender 12% of her territory to the Soviet Union, which remains occupied.²² Nepal similarly came into conflict with British India during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and in the subsequent war Nepal lost one-third of her territory of which India still retains almost all. After the War, Nepal continued to serve the Indian interest by helping her with men, material, and resources. The policy of independent India followed very much the same line as that of imperial India, especially with regards to the policy of recruitment and security perceptions. With the emergence of Communist China north of the Himalayas, Nepal figures more prominently in India's security perceptions than ever before.

After World War II, Finland and the Soviet Union signed a treaty. With a treaty signed between Finland and the Soviet Union following World War II, close ties with the Soviet Union became the cornerstone of Finnish foreign policy. After the Communist takeover of Tibet, India and Nepal also signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950. This initiated the development of a

special political relationship between India and Nepal.

The parallels between Finland and Nepal, however, merely indicate broad parameters of certain realities in the relationship of big power and a small country. The analogy of Finland is relevant to Nepal only to the extent of emphasizing the need to follow a policy of "self-restraint and reassurance" towards a big and powerful neighbor. In fact the position of Nepal is much more precarious and vulnerable than that of Finland. Unlike Finland, Nepal is not only landlocked or even "India-locked," but also one of the least developed countries in the world.

The price paid by a small country for good neighborliness and regional peace often consists of formulating its security perceptions along the line of its powerful neighbor. Today we are living not only in an age of superpowers but also of regional powers like India in South Asia. In the Western hemisphere, small states like Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cuba, Grenada and even larger polities like Canada and Mexico have learned to adjust according to the security interests of the United States. The U.S. feels that her security is jeopardized whenever a leftist government comes into power (Chile, Grenada) or when Soviet arms cross the Atlantic (Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama). Likewise the countries of Eastern Europe (Finland, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary), could hardly ignore the Soviet interest in their foreign and domestic policy. In West Asia the Arabs have been painfully made aware of Israel's security perceptions. Likewise, in South Asia smaller polities like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives have little choice but to adjust according to the security perceptions of a powerful neighbor like India. Otherwise, much hardship and misery await such countries as manifested by the Nepali and Sri Lankan experience.

Notes

1. D. R. Regmi, *Nepal* (Banaras: Nepal National Congress, n.d.), p. 1.
2. For more on the physical features of the subcontinent in historical perspective, see Halford J. Mackinder, "The Subcontinent of India" in *Cambridge History of India* (ed.), E.J. Rapson, Vol. I, *Ancient India* (Delhi: S. Chad & Co., 1962), pp. 1-32.
3. For a detailed account on Nepal's buffer status, see "Stray Speeches and Impressions," by Kasher Bahadur K.C., *Civil Service Journal of Nepal*, Jan.-April, 1965, pp. 6-7.
4. Prem R. Uprety, *Nepal-Tibet Relations, 1850-1930; Years of Hopes Challenges and Frustrations* (Kathmandu: Puga Nara, 1980), pp. 23-33.

5. Ramakant, *Indo-Nepalese Relations, 1816-1887* (New Delhi: S. Chad & Co., 1968) pp. v-vii.
6. The Imperial Gazetters of India in 1881 places Nepal outside the pale of native states. To quote, "Nepal as an independent territory is beyond the scope of this book but some account can be expected in the Imperial Gazetters of India. See W. H. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetters of India*, Vol. IV (Administrative) (London: Tuber & Co. 1881) p. 103.
7. See *Poka* entitled *treaties* in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kathmandu.
8. *Amrit bazar Patrika*, December 29, 1949.
9. For the speech of the Indian Premier see *Parliamentary Debates* Vol. VI, No. 17, Cols. 1285-86.
10. for the text and the final draft of the treaty see the *Poka* entitled *Treaties*, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kathmandu.
11. *Ibid.*
12. For the text of the Commercial Treaty, see the *Poka* entitled *Treaties*.
13. *The Sunday Observer*, August 16, 1987.
14. Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946-April 1961* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcast, 1961), p. 374.
15. *Jhyali*, July 8, 1958, p. 2.
16. Chitra K. Tiwari, "Indian Northern Security and the Himalayan States," *Asian Profile*, vol. 14 (No. 5), August 1986. P. 448
17. *Ibid.* 444.
18. See *National China News Agency* October 6, 1962.
19. Anthony Mascaren has, *The Rape of Bangladesh* (Delhi: Vikash Publications, 1971; also Seikh Mujibur Rahaman, *Bangladesh My Bangladesh*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972.
20. *Rising Nepal*, October 8, 1971, p. 1.
21. Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Soviet Foreign Policy Since World War II: Imperial and Global* (New York: Little Brown & Co, 1985), p. 112.
22. Max Jacobson, "Substance and Appearance: Finland", *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 18, No. 5, p. 1038.