



Trilateral Engagement in Nepalese Geopolitics: Soft Power Approach in Nepal's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The contemporary South Asian geopolitics in general and Nepalese geopolitics, in particular, is a crucial factor to analyze trilateral engagement, and their affairs in Nepal. Geopolitics is one of the major factors of shaping and reshaping bilateral and multilateral relations. It is influenced by the actions and reactions of geopolitical players. They sometimes push their actions broadly to achieve their national and global interests, and sometimes even narrow down their actions. But, whatever their actions, their national and global interests continue to grow. China, India and the USA have been dealing, in one way or the other, to widen, broaden and defend their national and regional interests. Dealing of three super and great powers in Nepal have dealt based on the changing geopolitics which greatly implicates Nepalese domestic affairs and foreign policy. This paper mainly assesses the engagement of the USA, China, and India in Nepal, and how their power play implicates Nepal's foreign policies. It aims to explore Nepal's way of moving forward in the context of the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and the newly emerged China-Russia security dialogue platform. The paper adapts interpretivism as the philosophical position and hence method is qualitative. It only focuses on geopolitics, BRI, MCC, and China-Russia security dialogue platform. The conclusion of the paper is that Nepal's foreign policy should be based on soft power discourse to eliminate the issues of any kind of regional and global security alliance with super and great powers.

Keywords: geopolitics, belt and road initiatives, millennium challenge corporation (mcc), global and nepalese geopolitical context, Nepal's soft power approach

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1. Introduction

The China-India affair is principally not an independent variable. It depends on some of the regional and global political phenomena. On one hand, it impacts their domestic affairs and development, and on other hand, their global relations are polylaterally evolved and developed. Global and regional politics are not static. It changes itself based on the changing interests of actors involved in it. The political actors concentrate in a certain geography to enlarge, widen, and broaden their national and global interests. When every actor makes an effort, even the political battle creating conflict and confrontation between and among the actors, can be resolved. This paper focuses on aspects of examining the issues, and geopolitical situation newly developed in Nepal due to external engagement. It also concentrates on assessing China-India relations in terms of cooperation and confrontation in changing Asian geopolitics, and the US engagement through Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) in Nepal.

It is relevant to study those issues to find out major challenges and opportunities of changing geopolitics of Nepal to formulate and conduct her foreign policy as per the needs and demands. Nepal's foreign policy and the dynamics of its relationship with neighboring states have been conditioned by complexity of factors, of which the political component is one of the most important (Rose, 1971, P. 3). Rose discusses that Nepal's cultural relationship with India and Tibet, for instance, or its role in the trade and economic system between south and East Asia could easily be an important issue for contemporary geopolitics. Cultural and trade relations with both neighbors and other global powers are still quite important, and hence we can experience the emphasis on MCC and the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) of the USA and China, respectively. King Prithvi Narayan Shah's notion of Nepal as a 'yam between two boulders' also clearly indicates Nepal's complex geopolitics in mid 18th century which continues consistently in different forms during the last two and half centuries. Since, being encircled by giant neighbors which are far more stronger in military, economy, science and technology, education, innovation and discovery, and level of influence than Nepal, Nepal cannot compete with them in these aspects. Ever since, Nepal has been experiencing great challenges in conducting her foreign policy and diplomacy. Therefore, the paper focuses on finding an appropriate way for Nepal's foreign policy (MoFA, 2020b) in the changed scenario.

In this paper, the Heartland Theory under geopolitics is applied as theoretical perspective to evaluate trilateral engagement in Nepal. Iseri writes:

"I have considered the US grand strategy as a combination of wartime and peacetime strategies and argued that the Caspian region and its hinterland, where I call the Eurasian Heartland, to use the term of Sir Halford Mackinder" (Iseri, 2009, p. 26).

Ismailov and Papava defines that Heartland has served as a pivotal of all types of the geopolitical changes and its shift from one discourse to the other of historical dimensions within the World Island. The Heartland is the region where the Eurasian masses were concentrated. Advancement and expansion of Europe were stimulated by the necessity to respond to the pressure coming from the outside world, especially the central Asia. The same situation in the changing world is occurring in South Asia, in general, and in Nepal, in particular. Hence, this paper examines the trilateral external pressure in Nepal via different global projects and their impacts on Nepal's foreign policy (MoFA, 2020b) domain based on the theoretical foundation of Heartland. Nepal's foreign policy (MoFA, 2020b) is still guided by the Yam

doctrine of King Prithvi Narayan Shah as the geopolitics of Nepal in his era is the major foundation of current Nepalese geopolitics in the 21st century world.

This paper tries to address and explore Nepal's dilemma about how she should conduct her foreign policy in the context of geopolitical rivalry among the BRI, MCC, and China-Russia Security Dialogue Platform (CRSDP) from the perspective of global actors and initiatives, and among China, the USA, and India. The main objective of this paper is to critically evaluate an impact of trilateral engagement through those three global projects and actors on Nepalese geopolitics - which is the research gap of the paper as well.

2. Research Methodology

This paper borrows the Heartland Theory of Mackinder as the theoretical framework. However, it does not exclude the theory of geopolitics as the heartland theory itself is a part of the geopolitical theory. The whole data are collected and analyzed based on the perspective and worldview of geopolitics. The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) and the CRSDP are developed keeping in view the changed and complex global geopolitical circumstances. Nepal cannot be excluded from the influential factors raised by these geopolitics. Therefore, Nepalese politics and foreign policy are obviously influenced by the changed geopolitics and geopolitical actors. Philosophically, this paper tries to investigate the nature of the reality of changing geopolitical developments and their impact on Nepal's foreign policy under ontological aspects of the research. Similarly, this paper tries to investigate the values developed in Heartland and Geopolitical theory and practices as well as its implication on Nepal's foreign policy under Axiology. In addition, this paper also focuses on investigating the difference between knowledge and truth, knowledge and opinion, and truth and falsification under epistemological positions. Hence, this paper is entirely developed by adapting qualitative method under descriptive and analytical approaches. Scholarly journals, textbooks, policy reports, government publications, authentic websites, authentic TV/YouTube debates etc are the sources of secondary data. Text analysis is the basic analytical tool of the collected data in the form of texts for reaching conclusion via critical observation and analysis.

3. Issues Debated

3.1 Geopolitics: Perspective, Debate and Discussion

Heartland, a perspective of the theory of geopolitics, is claimed by Mackinder. The Heartland provides a sufficient physical basis for strategical thinking (Mackinder, 1943, p.598). Strategy is the part of power politics which takes place in certain geography, and can be known as political geography. The political geography is developed as a branch of the discipline of geography, and was in common use until the invention of geopolitics in 1899 (Gokmen, 2010, p.13). When the term 'geopolitics' was coined in 1899 by Rudolf Kjellen (Gokmen, 2010, p.9), it became more popular in the academic discipline. The distinction between political geography and geopolitics is clear: —geopolitics is concerned with the spatial requirements of a state, while political geography examines only its spatial conditions (Goodall, n.d., p.191). Similarly, geopolitics is analysis of the geographic influences on power relationship in international relations. as per Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English geopolitics can be defined as the study of the effect of a country's position, population, etc. on its politics. Moreover,

Rudolf Kjellen who invented the term, defines geopolitics as the theory of the state as a geographical organism or phenomenon in space. It means that the states behave like an organism which expands or grows in nature. Geopolitics deals with such types of characteristics of a state. The definition by Hagan is that geopolitics is a contemporary rationalization of power politics (Hagan, 1942, p. 485). Gokmen elaborates, geopolitics can also be considered to be a combination of history (political process) and geography (Gokmen, 2010, p. 16). He has quoted from Cohen's Geopolitics of the World System about geopolitics which gives a new definition:

Geopolitics is the analysis of the interaction between, on the one hand, geographical settings and perspectives and, on the other hand, political processes. (...) Both geographical settings and political processes are dynamic, and each influences and is influenced by the other. Geopolitics addresses the consequences of this interaction (Gokmen, 2010, p. 16).

Therefore, by summarizing all the above discussions and debates of different scholars, geopolitics is all about the power exercised by any influential powers in a certain geography to control or influence over that territory explicitly or implicitly.

As mentioned above, the Heartland is part of geography, which attracts geopolitics, and covers the Eurasian territory. Through his "Heartland" theory, Mackinder argues that any state that was able to control the heartland would control world politics and thus pose the threat of a worldwide empire (Deudney, n.d., Para.4) and explores the idea of Heartland based on the British war in South Africa which was indeed in 1902 and the Russian war in Manchuria around 1904 (Mackinder, 1943, p. 596). The concept of Heartland emerged based on the geographical significance of the pivot position. In history, significance of the territories from the northern part and the interior Euro-Asia, the Arctic coast down to the central deserts, Baltic and Black Seas were vital as Mackinder puts these areas under the area of the Heartland which is quite strategic. In Heartland, there are three aspects of physical geography which reinforce each another. The first is the lowland plain on the face of the globe, the second is some great plain navigable rivers, and the last one is the grassland zone of the Heartland. These all are categorized based on the global politics for power exercise, strategic part for offensive and defensive measures, and ideological influence for global domination. As per the changing world, the Heartland is no more static, it is dynamic and shifting in nature towards the regions of China and India - where Nepal is located in the middle of those countries. For oriental scholars, it can be termed as the 'One of the New Heartland'.

In international politics, everything keeps changing. For example, in 1850, Russia was at the top in terms of military power having 767,423 military personnel followed by France with 450, 651 number (YouTube, 2020). In 1863, the USA reached the top position with 838, 608 numbers, and Russia fell behind the USA with 771,828. In 1872, France reached the top having 862,608 numbers of military personnel followed by Germany having 846,593 (YouTube, 2020). In 1920, Germany reached the top and Russia fell to the second position. In 1932, China reached the top with 1,736,839 military personnel. In 1950, again Germany gained the top position followed by Japan, USSR, China, and then the USA. Such a phenomenon keeps changing as per change in geopolitics. If geopolitics would not be changed, world power and politics would have been unchanged. Since the Heartland theory is part of geopolitics, it keeps changing and shifting from one geography to another based on the priority and concentration

of world powers. Therefore, the Heartland focused on Eurasian land in the 1950s now has significantly been changed based on changing global political actors, their intension, and effort. The author claims that this change in Heartland influences Nepal and its surroundings. Therefore, one of the new Heartlands is now developed in South Asia, in general, and Nepal, in particular.

3.2 MCC and other Emerging Geopolitical Factors

Nepal's geopolitics is also part of the world's geopolitics where regional and global actors are concentrated. As Nihar R. Nayak (2014) focuses on his book, Nepal is the central geopolitical actor itself which attracts super and great powers to Nepal (see table of content of *Strategic Himalayas: Republican Nepal and External Powers*). The author not only covers the massive engagement of India and China but also the involvement of the European countries and the USA as well. Similarly, Kumar claims, Nepal has also been drawing the attention of world powers both India and China are taking interest in Nepal mainly because of its natural resource base and for security concern (Kumar, 2017, p. 30). Likewise, Khadka makes clear that Nepal's situation provides an interesting example of how geopolitics has imposed an extremely serious obstacle in harmonizing external relations with aspirations for peace, security, and development (Khadka, 1992, p.134). As Khadka claims, Nepal has been facing critical challenges to expand and diversify her relations in the wider horizon of the global arena basically because of neighbors' contested concerns and some other powers' interest in Nepal. Arvind Gupta states that Nepal is well-known for its strategic location in the Himalayas. It is situated at the meeting point of East Asia and South Asia, and between two big and powerful countries—India and China—who have gone to war with each other in the past (Gupta, 2014, p. xi). Therefore, the regional and global powers are concentrated in Nepal's geopolitics.

The complex geopolitics of Nepal has provided the ground for those concentrated regional and global powers to be engaged under their global interest. The priority given to Nepal in BRI and MCC is the consequence of the strategic importance of Nepal's geopolitics. Nepal is almost 69 times smaller than the USA, 68 times smaller than China, and 23 times smaller than India (Agrawal & Upadhyay, 2006) quoted in (Kumar, 2017, p. 30). However, its strategic importance for those powers is significantly higher than other bigger states in South Asia. China began BRI in 2013 aiming to promote economic engagement and investment along two main routes: the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (The Economic Intelligence Unit, 2015, p. 3). Nepal signed the BRI on 12 May 2017 (The Himalayan Times, 2017, Para. 1). After four months of signing the BRI, Nepal signed an agreement on the USA's MCC project on 14 September 2017 for building 400 KV high voltage transmission line and upgrading roads (Millennium Challenge Corporation, n. d., Para. 3). India and the European Union are other regional and global actors which have long been engaged in Nepal covertly and overtly. Hence, Nepal's geopolitics has been the fertile ground for external actors for a long time.

India's interest in Nepal also needs to be examined. India wants to put her neighbors under her sphere of influence including Nepal. Indian Ambassadors to Nepal think of themselves even above Nepal's Head of State. As quoted by S. D. Muni, B. P. Koirala writes in his *Atmabrittant* (Autobiography) that ... Indian Ambassador behaved as if he was bigger than even the King of Nepal (Muni, 2009, p. 37). Nepal and India both are equally sovereign states, and the value

of their independence are also equal. Ironically, Indian mindset in fact is hegemonic in Nepal and India wants Nepal to ask for permission with her before taking any decisions by Nepal. India imposed an economic blockade in 2015. Ojha reports that the blockade, which the Nepal government blames on India and New Delhi denies its involvement, immediately followed the passage of the new constitution by Nepal on 20 September 2015 (Ojha, 2015, Para. 1). Similarly, Roy reports, Upset over Nepal's newly promulgated Constitution, New Delhi wants Kathmandu to carry out 'seven amendments' to ensure it is acceptable to the Madhesis and Janjatis, South Block sources told The Indian Express Tuesday (Roy, 2015, Para. 1). This is because Nepal did not ask India before the promulgation of the Constitution.

Not only in 2015 but also India's behavior was similar even in 1950s. According to Muni, in a statement in December 1950, Nehru said:

Our interest in the internal conditions of Nepal has become still more acute and personal, because of the developments across our borders, to be frank, specially those in China and Tibet. Besides our sympathetic interest in Nepal, we were also interested in the security of our own country.

From time immemorial, the Himalayan have provided us with a magnificent frontier. Of course they are no longer as impassable as they used to be but are still very effective. We cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also the principal barrier to India...we cannot allow anything to go wrong in Nepal or permit that barrier to be crossed or weakened...(Muni, 2009, p. 36).

It is well understood from the above statements that India wants to direct and instruct Nepal in every external and internal matter. Similarly, Chinese communist leader had described this region (Himalayan region of South Asia) as forming China's hand, wherein Tibet was its palm, and Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh (then called North-East Frontier Agency or NEFA) were its five fingers (Schram, 1963, p. 257) quoted in (Muni, 2009, p. 31). Such types of rivalry between China and India in Nepal threaten Nepalese sovereignty knowingly and unknowingly. Furthermore, both countries included a point in the joint statement to use the Lipulek pass as a bilateral trade pass without taking any consent from Nepal in 2015. Point number 28 of the agreement says that the two sides are agreed for holding negotiation and expanding border trade via Nathu La, Qiangla/Lipu-Lekh Pass and Shipki La (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015, Para. 34). Immediately after this statement, Nepal objected to the India-China trade pact that included the Lipu-Lekh pass as well. The Economic Times reports that Nepal's Parliament raised objection over an agreement made between China and India for boosting border trade at Qiangla/Lipu-Lekh Pass which is close to the area which Nepal claims to be part of its territory. Nepal also asked to both countries for necessary correction of their pact immediately (Economic Times, 2015, Para. 1). Such types of bilateral cooperation between India and China in case of Nepal for their mutual gain will negatively impact on Nepal's China and India policy. It is their underestimation of Nepalese sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and Nepal's diplomatic capability as well as her world affairs.

India published her updated political map on 2 November 2019. It included Nepal's territory Limpiyadhura, Kalapani, and Lipu-Lekh in the far western region of Nepal. It created a huge criticism of India in Nepal against her hegemonic nature particularly towards Nepal. Budhathoki reports that after sparking a regional and worldwide controversy by changing the internal status of Kashmir, India's new official political map is stirring criticism in Nepal,

including from Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) (Budhathoki, 2019, Para. 1). After four days of the map's release, MoFA released a press statement objecting to the inclusion of Kalapani in the Indian map. Nepal government clearly wrote that Kalapani is an integral part of the country and that talks are still on between New Delhi and Kathmandu over this "unresolved" area (Mohan, 2019, Para. 3). The press statement further clarified that the remaining issues related to the border should be resolved in bilateral consensus, and any unilateral actions will be unacceptable to the Nepal government. (Mohan, 2019, Para. 6). India unilaterally inaugurated 'Link Road' on 8 May 2020 connecting to Lipu-Lekh (Nepal), which passes through Nepalese territory, without any consent of Nepal government. On the following day, MoFA released a press statement strongly objecting to the Indian unilateral action in Nepal's territory (MoFA, 2020a). There are so many examples that India exhibits hegemonic behavior towards Nepal but the Nepalese counterparts seem unable to resolve the problem with diplomatic measures and capability. All these Indian activities are related to the geopolitics of Nepal and it attracts the world powers like the USA, China, and the EU countries in Nepalese geopolitics which creates the one of the new Heartland in 21st century.

Coming to the BRI, after signing it, the way has been opened, even at least theoretically to diversify Nepal's relations with north East Asian nations for Nepal. Chand writes that one of the historic agreements made during Prime Minister Oli's visit to China in 2018 is the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on railway connectivity which is the second milestone in the diversification of Nepal's external affairs (Chand, 2018, Para. 4 and 6). He further argues that both countries considered it as one of the most significant initiatives in the history of bilateral cooperation. They hoped that it would herald a new era of bilateral connectivity affairs. Other key agreements during his visit are: 1) to cooperate for development and prosperity under the framework of Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, 2) Protocol on the utilization of Highways in Tibet Autonomous Region, China, by Nepal, for cargo transport, 3) MoU on energy cooperation, 4) Agreement on economic and technical cooperation, 5) Deal on human resource development (Chand, 2018). Similarly, China has included the Nepal-China Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, including Nepal-China cross-border railway in point no. 23 of the annex of Joint Communiqué of the Leaders' Roundtable of the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (The Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 2019, Para. 42). Likewise, the Joint Communiqué says that ...we support policy and activities that help land-locked countries to transform into land-linked ones, including by strengthening connectivity and cooperation on transit arrangements and infrastructure (The Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 2019, Para. 16). Nepal has access to Tianjin port, the Eastern part of China, after the deal of 'Treaty of Transit Transport' made in March 2016. Moreover, China and Nepal are agreed to cooperate for the construction of Koshi Economic Corridor, Gandaki Economic Corridor, and Karnali Economic Corridor which was committed during the state visit of the Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2019 (Bashyal & Chand, 2019, p. 29). On top of that, China has agreed to provide the transit facility to Nepal from four Chinese ports named Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang, and Zhanjiang and three dry ports named Lanzhou, Lhasa, and Xigatse as well as roads to these facilities (Sharma, 2018, Para. 4 and 5). All those agreements and MoUs are under the BRI cooperation between two countries. Thus, if all the agreements made are implemented, the way of Nepal to access rest part of the world will be opened as Nepal will have the opportunity to use all the seven economic corridors of

BRI being its signatory country. Such types of bilateral activities accelerate the process of changing geopolitics, and Nepal will get benefits from such changed geopolitics due to agreements and engagement of both Nepal and China.

China and the USA are focused on African countries, Latin America, West Asian nations, and Southeast Asian nations. The USA basically invests under MCC in agriculture, education, energy, health, land and property rights, roads and transportation infrastructure, water sanitation, and irrigation (<https://www.mcc.gov/sectors>). Similarly, China invests in agriculture-forestry and fishing, communications, industry-mining-construction, transport-storage, and energy generation and supply (<https://www.aiddata.org/china-official-finance>). The then president of the USA Barack Obama announced 'Pivot Asia' policy which is also termed as re-balancing Asia in 2009 (Manyin, et al., 2012, p. 2). They claim that many countries have encouraged the USA to gear up its activity in the region to provide a balance to China's rising influence (Manyin, et al., 2012, p. ii). It means the American allies in the region have supported the USA to balance China. Likewise, Schiavenza believes that the United States is the only country with enough muscle to check China's rise and many of the smaller countries in East Asia have sought reassurance from Washington that it remains invested in the region (Schiavenza, 2013, Para. 6). When Donald Trump came to power on 20 January 2017 in the USA, he announced the America First policy and initiated Indo Pacific Strategy (IPS) aiming to make free and open Indo Pacific region (Department of State, 2019). In the meantime, China and the USA fought the trade war, and still, there are many bilateral issues between them. Swanson writes that a trade war between the world's two largest economies officially began on Friday morning to impose tariffs on \$34 billion worth of Chinese products (Swanson, 2018, Para. 1). China also has imposed tariffs on US products in China. Thus, the geopolitical rivalry is ongoing between the USA and China.

Not only India, but also the USA and China have been focused on Nepal. Their concentration in Nepal for their strategic and economic interest has created geopolitical rivalries in contemporary world affairs. Four months after Nepal's signing of the BRI, the USA signed an agreement with Nepal on MCC compact project on 14 September 2017. The USA claims that the MCC is an innovative and independent U.S. foreign assistance agency that is helping the fight against global poverty whereas the anti-US bloc considers it as the part of IPS which aims to fight against common security challenges among its member countries. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov criticized the United States for introducing a new Indo-Pacific concept which aims to contain China. He questioned that why do you need to call Asia-Pacific as Indo-Pacific? The answer is evident – to exclude China (Sharma, 2020, Para. 1&4). The USA has put the MCC under Indo-Pacific Strategy. The report published by the Department of State of the USA mentions that to date, support has included \$2.9 billion through the Department of State and USAID for the economic pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategy...and hundreds of millions more through other agencies, including the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) (Department of State, 2019, p. 13). The MCC became quite controversial in Nepal as many intellectuals have perceived it as a US economic project having strategic interest in its hidden part which aims to balance China in Nepal (Chand & Karki, 2020, Para. 6). The US embassy has been lobbying in Nepal with different power centers to ensure the ratification of the MCC by the parliament of Nepal. Jha argues that the process of ratification of the MCC is getting delayed. One of the major factors that has led to this situation is the rivalry between the US

and China in Nepal (Jha, 2020, Para. 1). In this way, the USA and China are highly concentrated in Nepal and Nepal's geopolitics is becoming more critical. Thus, the BRI and the MCC are the most critical factors affecting Nepal's geopolitics.

3.3 Cooperation versus Rivalry of Nepal's Immediate Neighbors

Various factors do not allow China and India to go to war and confrontation. They share 3488 kilometer long international border. They have large geography i.e. 9,390,784 sq. km. of China and 3,287,263 sq. km. of India. They are first and the second biggest countries in the world in terms of population. China's population is 1.398 billion and India's population is 1.366 billion in April 2021. They have similar and world's fastest economic growth rates. China's targeted growth rate is above 6 % and India's targeted growth rate is above 8%. Similarly, they have good trade relations, and are interdependent to each other. These sort of common variables do not allow China and India to go into the war and confrontation. By 2020, China-India trade could surpass \$409.2 billion that is half of the total projected US-China trade in 2020. (Gupta & Wang, 2009, Para. 1). This shows the greater economic integration between the countries. Recently, the incorporation of Yoga¹ in the daily lifestyle of Chinese people is a new dimension of people's relation between China and India. The relation developed from Yoga can be understood as the constructivist mindset of Chinese people whose effect on the level of inter-dependence between the countries is very positive.

On the other hand, politically, India has become the main geopolitical rival of China along with the decline of Russia and Japan. Pakistan seems quite useful to counterbalance India in the strategic calculations of Beijing. Thus, it seems China wants to pursue a 'classic balance of power strategy' in South Asia based on the relationship with Pakistan. In the meantime, India is not happy with China over this strategic partnership and hence her partnership is with the USA and Japan to counterweight China. In such a situation, the action and the counteraction between India and China will determine the future of Asian dominance in global politics. Despite some strategic competition, the positive signs were developed around 2005 for a good relationship between China and India. The relation between the two countries was normalized by the China-visit of the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1988. (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998, Para. 1). During Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to India in April 2005, the two sides signed an agreement entitled "strategic partnership for peace and prosperity." In 2006, the two sides marked "friendship year," and 2007 was declared "year of friendship through tourism." Exchanges of official visits led to diplomatic advances of a symbolic nature such as the reopening on 4 July 2006 of the Nathu La border pass between Sikkim and Tibet after 44 years of closure (Jayaram & Huchet, 2008, p. 2).

In spite of the above agreement made between the countries there is always doubt against each other and about their behavior. New Delhi's views of Chinese policies aim at the strategic encirclement of India whereas Beijing's calculation of India's act to limit China's strategic influence in South Asia and Southeast Asia and its power projection into the Indian Ocean, has overridden their conventional statements of common interests as partners in strengthening a multi-polar world order. Moreover, the new reality of rivalry is evident from the following security issues: (1) the escalation of the Sino-Indian border dispute; (2) the deepening of the

1 Yoga has been a part of the lives of Chinese people. Most of the Chinese people have been practicing yoga in China based on my direct observation in Sichuan province.

strategic alliance between China and Pakistan; (3) China-India rivalry in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean; and (4) India's "Look East" now "Act East" policy to promote bilateral ties with other countries that have tense relations with China in the region (Frankel, 2011, p. 3). These are the factors affecting the Sino-Indian affairs in the international arena. Therefore, their cooperation in the field of bilateral, multi-lateral, and regional security has been always affecting despite their good trade relations.

One of the most crucial factors affecting Sino-Indian relations is Sino-Indian border dispute. Sino-Indian border disputes are complex historical phenomena as both countries are not agreed on border delimitation, the Sino-Indian border has never been drawn officially. When India came under British rule, it began to advance the two countries' traditional border to the Chinese side (Neville, 2003). Similarly, Zhang and Li write that during the 1913-1914 tripartite conference involving a Tibetan delegate India felt threatened due to Chinese military presence in Tibet and quickly extended administrative and military control in the eastern sector (Zhang & Li, 2013, p. 4). In this way, Sino-Indian border dispute emerged, and they fought 1962 border war. Similarly, Lidarev reports that fifty years ago, on 20 October 1962, with the world's terrified gaze Provoked by a territorial dispute over Tibet, the war was brief and eventually China emerged victorious. Similarly, the Doklam Standoff in the summer of 2017 had emerged.

Therefore, China and India time and again go into disputes and border confrontation in the South Asian Himalayan range which tries to affect Nepal's non-alignment and independent foreign policy matters.

On the other hand, these two countries are involved in many international organizations and institutions together. Sajjanhar (2016) writes that there is a memorandum made on commitments of India and Pakistan with the goal of acquisition by them a status of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member-states (Sajjanhar, 2016, Para. 3). Furthermore, India is a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) established by China and the member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Both the countries are involved together to establish New Development Bank under the BRICS. In addition, as prominent members of the G-20, their influence will be increased ... in global politics, and in the global security matters. The analysis concludes that the rivalry has taken almost half of the deal (Wolf, Dalal, DaVanzo, Larson, Akhmedjonov, Dogo, Huang, & Montoya, 2011, p. 5)

3.4 BRI: Global and Nepalese Context

The Chinese president, Xi Jinping, announced One Belt, One Road (later Belt and Road Initiative) in 2013. Core objective of the initiatives is building the "*Community of Common Destiny*" which will be a destiny of all South Asian countries and beyond as envisioned by the Chinese President Xi Jinping. The initiative includes two components – the Silk Road Economic Belt (One Belt) and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (One Road).

The BRI has formed a development strategy that focuses on economic integration as well as cooperation among all the countries, primarily in the Eurasian continent. A document entitled "Visions and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" which was issued by the National Development and Reform Commission on 28 March 2015, outlined the co-operation mechanisms and the areas of co-operation regarding the BRI. According to the conceptual framework, the BRI aims to connect

Asia, Europe and Africa along five routes². The BRI relates six international economic corridors for the vibrant co-operation among the number of countries in multi-region and sub-region. The corridors have been identified as; a) the New Eurasia Land Bridge, b) China-Mongolia-Russia, c) China-Central Asia-West Asia, d) China-Indochina Peninsula, e) China-Pakistan, and f) Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar. (HKTDC RESEARCH, 2016, Para. 4). Thus BRI includes five major routes and six major corridors.

The cooperation between China and India on BRI has been affected by two major routes and one major corridor of BRI. The routes written above in points 3 and 4 and the corridor written above in point (e) are the key components behind India's reluctance to BRI. Sharad Kumar Soni says that India may also take part in China's BRI in the future. But, he more emphasizes on series of dialogue and clarifications on series of misunderstanding about BRI. India views that the BRI brings obviously political and security implications for it. (Saran, 2015, Para. 38). Soni's implicit indication of his statement 'series of misunderstanding' is also related to the political and security implications of BRI in the Indian Ocean Region. China on the other hand rejects allegations that the BRI is its exclusive initiative. Dai Yonghong, during a face-to-face interview held in 2016, says that India should accept China's BRI concept not only in the case of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor but also in the case of the Indian Ocean and beyond for a win-win situation. Therefore, there is no mutual understanding between China and India about how BRI should be implemented regionally.

In the recent times, it seems positive competition between China and India to develop the connectivity with Nepal. China and Nepal signed agreement on some developmental projects under BRI. One of the historic agreements made during Nepal's Prime Minister Mr. KP Sharma Oli's second visit to China as Head of Government is the signing of the MoU on railway connectivity. Both countries underlined the MoU as one of the most significant initiatives in the history for bilateral cooperation (Chand, 2018). Based on this understanding, the Chinese team of experts conducted a preliminary study on railway construction to link Kathmandu with Kerong and they submitted the report to the government of Nepal in December 2018. Similarly, Transit Trade Agreement (TTA) was inked during Prime Minister Oli's first official visit to China conducted from 20 to 27 March 2016. The avenue of sea access of Nepal via the Chinese Tianjin port, which is almost 3500 kilometer away from Nepal, is opened under this agreement theoretically. If the transit trade agreement is fully implemented, Nepal will not only be the gateway for China to South Asia but also China will be the gateway for Nepal to North East Asian Nations.

Dev Raj Dahal opines that rejecting the old concept of buffer status, King Birendra in the 1970s and 1980s, articulated the notion as a gateway between South Asia and Central Asia (Adhikari et. al., 2013). Theoretically, his gateway concept is now on the real ground through transit trade agreement and MoUs of Nepal with China. Li Tao (2017) writes that South Asia

2 Five routes of the BRI are: (1) linking China to Europe through Central Asia and Russia; (2) connecting China with the Middle East through Central Asia; and (3) bringing together China and Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, meanwhile, focuses on using Chinese coastal ports; (4) link China with Europe through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean; and (5) connect China with the South Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea.

has important geostrategic position in developing the BRI which will be a gateway for China to promote the initiative westward (Tao, 2017). It means the Chinese scholars analyze Nepal as the gateway for South Asia and at the same time South Asia as the gateway towards the rest of the western world.

China, in recent years, has come up proactively for implementing and partnering the BRI with Nepal and South Asian countries. India did not participate in the B&R summit in May 2017 in Beijing. However, the Global Times has reported that train from Beijing to Bihar will be a reality in the next decade under the BRI. China wants to extend its Nepal rail link to India. The rail network of China, which was expected to be completed by 2020 up to Kerong (Gyirong) near the border of Nepal, will create the environment for Nepal to become a vibrant bridge between the two giants. The discourse of bridge between India and China was reintroduced by Baburam Bhattarai in 2012 so that Nepal could take advantage of the rapid economic development of the two biggest and fast-growing economies. But now the discourse of bridge is shifted towards the Gateway. For Bihar, trade with China through the rail link will be easier along this route than through Kolkata, saving time, cost, and distance. The distance from Rasuwagadhi to Birgunj, which borders Bihar, is only 240 KM. Therefore, to import and export goods and commodities from and to Bihar is viable through Nepal to and from China.

Next argument is that the Himalayan frontier has already been penetrated along with the plan of China's rail link up to Kerong and in the future, up to Kathmandu. The Himalayas as a natural frontier may have become less relevant in an era of nuclear weapons, globalization, technology, and the improvement in the Sino-Indian relationship in recent years (Nayak, 2014). The Chinese technology of railway construction in the Himalaya range has proven his argument. Recently, China has agreed to provide transit facility to Nepal from four Chinese seaports named Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang, and Zhanjiang and three Chinese dry ports named Lanzhou, Lhasa and Shigatse (My Republica, 2018, Para. 3). All these circumstances claim that China will be connected soon with South Asia via Nepal and Nepal will connect her immediate neighbors through road and rail networks which will be a milestone for Nepal's connectivity with her neighbors in changing geopolitics.

India has also been proactive to develop connectivity facility with Nepal. On April 7, 2018, the two Governments issued a joint statement on expanding rail linkages, agreeing to construct a newly electrified rail line, with India's financial support, connecting the border city of Raxaul in India to Kathmandu in Nepal (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018, Para. 1). In August 2018, exchange of a MoU between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal regarding preliminary engineering-cum-traffic survey of the broad-gauge line between Raxaul and Kathmandu was made which was witnessed by the Prime Ministers of both the countries. If the MoU came into force for constructing the rail link, the breakthrough will happen in neighborhood policy of Nepal, especially to maximize the benefits with lower investment and risk but for that Nepal's domestic policy should be focused on massive production which will be connected with the rail links in the north and south through the export.

Likewise, on 7 April 2018, Nepal and India signed an MoU on inland waterways development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, Para. 1).

In September 2018, Nepalese technical team visited Varanasi of India on their way to Kolkata for the purpose of a study on the construction of infrastructural development for inland

waterways in India and explored ways to develop waterways up to the Nepal border. There are so many routes to extend the waterways near the Nepal border. India is launching inland waterways in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh soon and has expressed readiness to extend up to the Nepal border via the Narayani River. India has already begun building infrastructure to develop inland waterways from Kolkata to Varanasi via Ganga River. Once completed, Nepal-bound cargos can be transported from Kolkata to Varanasi that can then be brought in to Birgunj and Bhairahawa via rail and roads (Neupane, 2018, Para. 7). Regarding the best option for Nepal to export and import, the Indian officials have proposed that Nepal can export and import using big vessels from Kolkata to Kalughat in Bihar and transport to Nepal border on smaller ships. Likewise, Nepal can export or import goods by using 180 km long Kalughat-Raxual road. They have also proposed Nepal to transport goods on big vessels via Kolkata-Shaibgunj waterway using small ships up to the Nepal border. Then, Nepal can bring goods by road using the 150 km long Shaibgunj-Manihari-Birgunj corridor. India is also positive to use of cross-border railway lines by Nepal which are under construction at various border points. In this way, China and India are focused on Nepal in the context of the BRI in emerging Nepalese geopolitics.

3.5 China-Russia Security Dialogue Platform:

Regional and global platforms emerge along with the changes in the geopolitical arena. After World War II, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was formed on 4 April 1949. It was an intergovernmental military alliance between 28 European countries and two North American countries at the beginning. Its purpose is to guarantee freedom and security of its members through political and military means, especially to secure democracies from the former USSR. This formation changes global power configuration, and it demanded a parallel military organization. As a result, the former USSR led to establishing the Warsaw Treaty Organization, the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, commonly known as the Warsaw Pact, on 14 May 1955. It was a collective defense treaty signed in Warsaw, Poland between the former USSR and seven other Eastern Bloc socialist republics of Central and Eastern Europe. These two global military alliances are the result of changing geopolitics after World War II. Rivalry and competition of the USA and former USSR during the Cold War period shifted to the USA-China rivalry after the end of the Cold War. The rapid rise of China motivated the USA to initiate some global security platforms excluding NATO after the end of the Cold War and it materialized only under the Trump administration. The former US President Donald J. Trump announced QUAD in 2017. During the 2017 ASEAN Summits in Manila held on 28-29 April 2017, Head of Governments of the USA, Australia, Japan, and India agreed to revive the quadrilateral alliance in order to counter China in strategic and diplomatic fronts. After this agreement, many scholars and analysts have predicted that the tensions between the QUAD countries and China would lead to a new form of Cold War in the region. Jamali and O'Connor report that President Donald Trump was pushing to build on increasingly robust partnerships ...in 2017 among four countries. After materializing the partnership among them, security challenge is felt by China (O'Connor and Jamali, 2020, Para. 1 and 4).

In March 2021, the major Indo-Pacific powers of Australia, India, Japan, and the USA concluded the first summit of the QUAD group. It was conducted virtually due to global pandemic of Covid-19 and paved the way for a de facto "Asian NATO" amid increasing their concern over China's assertive behavior in recent years (Heydarian, 2021, Para. 1 and 2). The

four countries are united thus to fight against common threats to be raised by China in the South China Sea. Such developments are the result of geopolitical changes and complexity raised.

In the same month of the first-ever summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, China and Russia agreed to establish security dialogue platform. Journals of India report that China and Russia have rejected the US calls for a 'rule-based order' (Journals of India, 2021, Para. 1). The proposal came following a meeting between Foreign Ministers of both countries. The Journals of India report about the decisions of the meeting. Key decisions are a) the both countries have proposed the establishment of a regional security dialogue platform, b) they rejected U.S. calls for "a rules-based order", c) all countries should follow the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, d) the US should reflect on the damage it has done to global peace and development (Journals of India, 2021).

Thus, due to the emerging threat posed by the QUAD countries and unexpectedly changed geopolitics, China and Russia proposed to establish such a dialogue platform targeting the threat posed by the QUAD. Nepal, in such a situation, cannot be excluded from its implications on the foreign policy and diplomacy of Nepal.

4. Limitations and Future Scope

This research paper focuses on trilateral engagement in Nepal's geopolitics in general and in the Belt and Road Initiative, the MCC, and the China-Russia Security Dialogue Platform, in particular. At this time, as the debate over the MCC and the Belt and Road Initiative is intensifying in Nepal's current geopolitics, this article also focuses more on these two issues and includes the China-Russian Security Dialogue Platform as the third focus. Since the MCC was started by the USA and the BRI by China, the engagement of these two countries is more visible in the article, but India's involvement and interference in Nepal's domestic politics, seen in a new form from the early 1950s is even more dangerous. The paper excludes the details of India's such covert and overt involvement and interference. However, the author's future research will be on "India's Involvement in Nepal and Its Impact on Nepal's India Policy". In the next phase research, India's involvement, intervention and cooperation in Nepal will be analyzed in three phases and three dimensions. India's interest, engagement, interference and cooperation in Nepal will be analyzed in three phases from 1950 to 1990, from 1990 to 2015 and after 2015 period. Similarly, India's political, economic and cultural interests and involvement in Nepal will be analyzed as three dimensions. Therefore, in this paper, even though India is the main actor in Nepal's geopolitics, its involvement has been obscured due to MCC and BRI.

5. Implications and Conclusion

According to Nepal's Constitution promulgated in 2015, Nepal should conduct an independent foreign policy based on the Charter of the United Nations, non-alignment, principles of *Panchsheel*, international law and the norms of world peace safeguarding the sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and national interest of Nepal (Article 51, m, 2) (Nepal Constitution, 2015, p. 41). It is clearly mentioned in the constitution that non-alignment and principles of *Panchsheel* are the core values and principles of Nepal's foreign policy. But this

author analyses that these values and principles are the global principles and values of many member countries of global and regional organizations rather than only being Nepal's own indigenous principles. The geopolitics, as analyzed in detail under the section of Issues debated, definitely impacts on Nepal's geopolitics but the foreign policy has been kept almost the same for more than the last 50 years because the similar provisions of foreign policy of Nepal are frequently repeated in Nepal's earlier constitutions without conducting scientific research. Therefore, provision of Nepal's foreign policy in Nepal's Constitution was only the regularity of the past provisions whereas the geopolitics of Nepal was massively changed during the same period. So, Nepal's foreign policy should be reoriented, redefined, and revisited based on new geopolitics (New Heartland) to defend national interest.

Nepal government brought out its first ever foreign policy document in 2077 B.S. This document is a milestone in the history of Nepal's foreign policy and is the first official comprehensive document as well. It has included numerous issues, sectors, and agendas. However, it seems unable to examine geopolitics and its massive implications for foreign policy. The document is silent about MCC, Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), China-Russia Security Dialogue Platform and their implications. In addition, the document is lacked on how to deal with the superpower, great powers, and their priorities and interests. Next, it seems entirely descriptive, but not researched and evidence-based. It lacks the whole scientific research process and steps. It is completely silent about the stakeholders, experts, and researchers involved in drafting the document.

The document speaks only in a single sentence about the soft power approach in foreign policy. However, it includes many dimensions of soft power in other ways. So, its framework is quite general. It has not specifically predicted any possible threats posed to Nepal by bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral geopolitical rivalries as explained above. Therefore, though it is a historic and comprehensive one, it is an incomplete and general document. If real and contextual challenges and threats are not well analyzed while implementing the policy, it may be difficult to achieve, defend and expand the country's national interest.

Based on the aforementioned review and analysis, it can be said that Nepal is facing challenges in formulating, implementing and conducting, her appropriate foreign policy in a changing geopolitical context without any external pressure. It is concluded by the fact of pending MCC for a long time and the delayed projects signed with China under the BRI. As the United States, China, and India have moved forward intensively and aggressively in Nepal's geopolitics, the geography of Nepal and its neighbors appears to be in danger of emerging as the new Heartland of the 21st century. Due to the concentration of global political actors in Nepal and the difficulties faced in advancing Nepal's foreign policy without their pressure, Nepal and the South Asian region are also becoming one of the emerging new Heartlands in the global geopolitics. This indicates that the process of creating new Heartlands in the world will accelerate further and that Nepal will face challenges in implementing its foreign policy. Despite being members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), both China's and Russia's proposal of a separate platform to combat the effects of the Indo-Pacific strategy, indicates multi-dimensional interests, equations, and possibilities in the world. When super and great powers pursue security cooperation with security as their primary destination, the impact will surely be felt in a country with sensitive geopolitics like Nepal. Faced with a global and regional power struggle, Nepal may encounter the challenges of preserving the legacy of its

non-aligned foreign policy. To move forward in such a complex situation, Nepal must now incorporate a soft power approach into its foreign policy. If Nepal openly pursues its foreign policy in the concept of soft power, Nepal cannot participate militarily in any external affairs. In such a situation, Nepal will not be involved in any global and regional power and security equation and alliance. Only in such a condition and through the use of soft power, Nepal can pursue its non-aligned foreign policy and move forward on the path of neutralizing the challenges posed by geopolitical power struggles.

6. Recommendation:

This paper seeks to recommend the formation of a formal group of experts in international relations by the government. The foreign policy formulated by the Nepalese government in 2077 B.S. is only based on consultation with experts for few hours or few days. But, for scientific research, it is quite insufficient. This document comprises nine different priority areas which comprise: a) Bilateral Relations, b) Multilateral Supports, c) Rule-based World Order, d) Regional Support, e) Economic Diplomacy, f) Protection of the Rights of Natural and Legal Persons, g) Public Diplomacy, h) Track Two Diplomacy, i) Institutional Setup and Building. It has also highlighted the top twenty policies in the document (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2077 B.S.). However, the document is silent about the formation of expert groups for the above nine different areas and twenty priorities. The government is recommended to form nine groups of experts for nine priority areas and twenty sub-groups for highlighted policies. Experts should be mobilized to conduct intensive scientific research for detailed scientific policy drafting. One special group of experts should be composed to scientifically explore the contextual aspects of Nepal's soft power. Nepal has been able to defend her national interest especially during and after the Rana regime based on the soft power approach but it is not scientifically studied so far. All these expert groups should focus on assessing the challenges posed and implications of BRI, MCC, and China-Russia Security Dialogue Platform on Nepal's foreign policy. Therefore, the government is recommended to conduct a detailed scientific research on the soft power approach in Nepal's foreign policy to cope with all the challenges, issues, and threats raised and posed by New Heartland that has emerged in this region.

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