

Foreign Policy of Nepal: Continuity and Changes

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Abstract

After the unification of Nepal, the founder of the nation, King Prithvi Narayan Shah formulated an underlying principle of Nepal's foreign policy based on Geopolitics. He described the geographical situation of Nepal as a yam between two boulders,' referring to the two big neighbours of Nepal – China and India. King Prithvi Narayan Shah was not only a great warrior but a visionary leader, who had appropriately assessed the geopolitical sensitivities of Nepal and adopted non-aligned foreign policy. He also said it was important for the county to keep a balanced relationship with these two huge neighbours. He cautiously moved maintained distance and balance considering the imperatives of the fragile situation. Nepal's foreign policy thereafter has passed through the turbulent periods; extreme loyalty had been maintained to the southern neighbour and pro-northern approach surfaced consequently. With the formation of the elected government after the promulgation of new constitution, major shift is observed in Nepal's foreign policy- the diversification of Nepal's trade and transit to China.

Key Words: Geopolitics, balance, non-alignment, Zone of Peace, interferences

Introduction

Foreign Policy determines the state of relationships between countries and guides the diplomatic negotiations. In the modern globalized world, every country has foreign policy to protect its national interest. In a digitally convergence world, isolationism in foreign policy does not exist. All countries, in a way or other, have been forging alliances and partnership for the common goals of shared development and prosperity. In the discipline of International Relations, there is a System Theory that interprets the world as a system. The sovereign states are naturally the part of global system. Ever since its introduction in the late 1950's, System Approach has been regularly used by a large number of Political Scientists for analyzing relations among nations'. This theory is an attempt to capture the relationship between the units of the international system (generally, the states) and the elements of the structure of the international system most relevant to their behavior.

The approach to study the historical development of Nepal's foreign policy in this paper is based on this System Theory. Nepal has glorious history of independence. The greatest powers of world have experienced the tempestuous history - demolition, dissolution, and colonization- but Nepal never faced such confrontational situation.

Despite this sovereign history, which is exception in forming and framing the state from ancient to modern period, Nepal's foreign policy and relation has sometimes been dragged into controversy. No historic formal written document has found about the first formal ruling dynasty of Nepal, who were Gopal Bansa and Mahishpal Bansa (dynasty), even the authentic documents on Kirant rulers could not be acquired. From Licchavi period, which was also called the golden period, Nepal's history has been formally documented in written form. In Malla Dynasty, Nepal was divided in 22 and 24 principalities, which period was known for business, also known for loyal to British India. King Prithvi Narayan Shaw of Gorkha unified Nepal winning all the small states in 1769. Since he unified Nepal, he is called the father and architect of modern Nepal.

This article will try to find out the historical perspective of Nepal's foreign policy. Similarly, it will highlight the major features of Nepal's foreign policy- continuity and changes. I have covered the period of King Prithvi Narayan Shaw to the current Republican period focusing on major departure and continuity. The main objective of the article is to analyze the changing dynamics of Nepal's foreign policy. Similarly, this article will briefly present the evolution of Nepal's foreign policy, continuity and changes.

Methodology

Descriptive and Analytic study is the methodological design. The secondary books, journals, newspapers are the sources of data and information. The qualitative method is followed.

Evolution of Foreign Policy

King Prithvi Narayan Shah is the founding father of modern and unified Nepal. While describing Nepal's geopolitical situation, he said, "Nepal is a yam between two boulders". This statement had rightly mentioned the geographical location and size of the two giant neighbors. After projecting the neighbourhood policy, he separately attributed the two neighbours. He said Nepal should be cautious with the South, while a close friendship should be maintained with the North- China. Similarly, King Prithvi Narayan Shah dismissed the European missionaries and cleric, who were here to spread Christianity. He suggested that Nepal should forever maintain good friendship with China. Regarding the policy towards the British on the South, however, he suggested to maintain friendship but also warned of their shrewdness. "In terms of regional neighbours, Prithvi Narayan advises to maintain a treaty of friendship with the emperor of China. Further, he emphasizes the significance of a treaty of friendship with the emperor of the southern sea (the British Company in Hindustan)" (Adhikari, 2015).

He was very clear in his advice that Nepal should not operate military initiatives against either of them. Its preparedness should only be for defensive wars. Prithvi Narayan Shah had no imperialistic ambition. His sole aim was to unify Nepal. This explains why he did not treat Kathmandu as a vanquished city and plunder it. He not only reassured the people of Kathmandu through his amicable treatment, but also chose Kantipur as his capital. The Kingdom that he unified not only remains unified till today, but also continuously maintains independent existence and expresses the collective consciousness of its people.

Policy of Isolation

Rana period began in Nepal after the rise of Jung Bahadur Rana in Nepal on 1846. Jung Bahadur Rana became Nepal's first Prime Minister to wield absolute power relegating the Shah King to mere figurative heads. He started a hereditary reign of Rana Prime Ministers that lasted for 104 years. Rana period was the period of isolation in foreign policy. The foreign policy of Rana was clearly the British India-centric. Jung Bahadur was the first Prime Minister of Nepal who had visited UK on 1850. He was aware that that time British power had dominated the whole region and China's power was declining. So he adopted British-India centric policy (Rose, 1971, p. 106). According to Rose, Jung Bahadur's rise to power resulted in a major redefinition of Nepal's foreign policy, more particularly viz-a-viz China and British India. The foreign policy Jung Bahadur adopted is also evident of the British support for making him powerful. He was indebted to the British and adopted British-centric policy, which continued throughout the Rana rule (Lamsal, 2017).

As a result, Nepal remained in isolation for many years. His appeasement policy was to ensure security for his regime. China, at that time, was not much interested in Nepal's internal affairs as it was more occupied with its own internal problems. Beijing did not want to antagonize the British. China was satisfied as long as its Tibet's border with Nepal was secure. China's only interest and intention of that time was to contain Nepal and keep British far from the Himalayas, for which Beijing wanted Nepal to remain a weak buffer between China and British-India so that there might not be any chance of direct confrontation with the British. Jung Bahadur made some important choices regarding Nepal's foreign policy. "Firstly, he decided that Nepal was to remain isolated from the outside world. Secondly, he decided to ignore China since it was a declining power and thirdly, relationship with the British was strengthened by helping to quell the *sepoy mutiny* in 1857, in which Nepali troops fought in Lucknow for the British (Lohani, 2011, p. 3).

Special Relationship

The Ranas were overthrown in a democratic movement of the early 1950s. Soon after the overthrow of the Rana oligarchy, King Tribhuvan was reinstated as the executive Head of the country. Under the leadership of King Tribhuvan, Nepal first introduced democratic system in the country. But the foreign policy of Nepal was dominated and directed by Indian government. In fact, during the period of King Tribhuvan, there was no official formal foreign policy of Nepal. "Nepal had no foreign policy during the period of 1951 to 1955, Delhi used to represent Nepal in international forum" (Rose & Dayal, 1969, p. 60). Democracy and interventions of India came along with the throne of King Tribhuvan. Indian government had sent Govind Narayan Singh, then Secretary of Bihar provincial government along with King Tribhuvan as his Personal Secretary. Nepal's every information were first reported to India. During the four years of rule of Tribhuvan, Nepal was colonized by India imposing New Delhi's decision to

Nepal. Even the Indian Ambassador of that period was powerful, who used to direct to the King to fulfill the Indian desires. It was in practice that the Indian Ambassadors attended the cabinet meetings.

When Nepal and India signed the treaty of Peace and Friendship on April 1950, Indian Prime Minister Nehru presented this treaty as an evidence of "Special Relationship" between Nepal and India. The two countries were described as having had "special relation" with each other (Muni, 2016).

During the Tribhuvan period, diversification was not totally abandoned but it was severely handicapped by Nepal's explicit alignment with India. King Mahendra not only has revived the diversification but has vastly expanded its scope and significance within the total context of Nepali foreign policy. The four years of the post revolution period were characterized to have an excessive influence of India on both the internal and external fronts of Nepal. The period witnessed the special relationship with Nepal (Adhikari, 2000. p. 27)

Diversification of Foreign Policy

After the King Tribhuvan, his son Mahendra ascended to the throne. King Mahendra was nationalist Monarch though he was ambitious for power. In early 1959, Mahendra issued a new constitution and the first democratic elections for National Assembly were held. The Nepali Congress got two third of seats and Nepali Congress leader BP Koirala became first elected Prime Minister of Nepal. But by 1960, King Mahendra dissolved parliament, dismissing the first democratic government. Despite his authoritarian rule, King Mahendra brought a change in foreign relations. King Mahendra is considered the architect of Nepal's foreign policy. He extended Nepal's foreign relations and initiated substantive relations with China. During his tenure (1955-1972), Nepal maintained diplomatic relations with many countries and got the membership of United Nations. Nepal became the member of Afro-Asian community and participated in Bandung conference (Acharya, 2070, p. 126).

Prime Minister BP Koirala signed a historic peace and friendship treaty with China on 1960. Chau En Lai, Premier of China and BP Koirala signed in that historic document in Kathmandu. Similarly, both the countries signed the border agreement. During the period of King Mahendra, China agreed to construct the Kodari Road, the first road linked Nepal to North China. Upon King Mahendra's accession to the throne, diplomatic relations with China quickly gained a new significance. It was in that period that Nepal's historical role as a channel of communication between the civilizations of south and East Asia began to be emphasized by both the Nepali officials and intellectuals, often in extravagantly exaggerated terms (Rose, 1971, p. 218).

The tactics devised to achieve these objectives were, first, a careful balancing of relevant external forces in order. It was aimed to minimize their capacity to restrict Nepal's freedom of maneuver, to maximize the benefit (e.g. foreign aid) derived there from and to contribute to a Nepal's security and secondly, a cautious tackling back and forth between Nepal's two great neighbors as circumstances seemed to dictate. During the Mahendra period, political diversification, though the diplomatic relations with a large number of countries and an active role in the United Nations was accomplished in a relatively short time and with a minimum of fuss and bother (Rose, 1971, p. 284).

Prime Minister Kirtinidhi Bista made the most explicit statement in June 1969 on the diversification of Nepal's foreign policy. "It is not possible for Nepal to compromise its sovereignty or accept what may be called limited sovereignty for India's so called security". B.P. Koirala and King Mahendra shared an opinion that Nepal's independence would be bolstered by having formal diplomatic relations with Peoples Republic of China (Sangroula, 2018, p. 489). King Mahendra was bold enough to thrash the Indian leadership for their highhandedness in Nepal. 'India should behave with us as friend if we behave with them as a friend. We should not be distracted by the irresponsible behavior of the spoilers' (Panchayat Smarika, 2043, p. 423).

Zone of Peace: Non-Alignment Policy

Another change in Nepal's foreign policy was the manifestation proposal of Nepal as non-align nation. This was declared by King Birendra as Nepal a Peace of Zone. The slogan of non alignment which had been adopted in 1956 "equal friendship for all" was gradually reinterpreted to mean equal friendship with India and China. This led eventually to a declaration of non alignment in the Sino-Indian dispute- that is, formal neutralization" of Nepal (Rose, 1971, p. 282). In the 1970s and early 1980s, Nepal tried to continue its policy of equidistance between China and India. Though China recognized India's influence

in Nepal, it was also trying to counter Indian influence by supporting Nepal's independence and calling for foreign non-interferences. But, this proposal of King Birendra was not accepted by India while China and Pakistan had immediately accepted. Later it was supported by 114 nations of the world but it was not endorsed after the obstruction of immediate neighbour-India. Though this proposal had not been considered as a major policy departure in Nepal's foreign policy, it had enduring impact thereafter. King Birendra fought against the Indian blockade and maintained balance relations with both India and China.

The thrust of King Birendra's foreign policy was - "Friendship with all, enmity with none". The main theme of declaring Nepal as "Zone of Peace" was to maintain neutrality in external and regional conflicts and ensure domestic political stability and economic development (Muni, 2016, p. 234-235).

Democracy-centric Foreign Policy

India's role was sought to end the King's autocracy. Absolute monarchy was abolished; constitutional Monarchy and Multiparty democracy was established. In April 1990 the Panchayat System was replaced by a multiparty system of governance. This twin pillar - Monarch as titular head and Multiparty System - was a result of power and personality cult between the Gandhi and Shah dynasty of Nepal. Democracy, however, was in centre as the foremost priority of Nepali leaders. The political leaders of India lend its support to the democratic forces of Nepal. The new government in India decided to improve its relations with Nepal on a priority basis. India adopted a liberal approach towards the interim government of Nepal and initiated a process of normalization (Upreti, 2009, p. 20). During this period, Nepal-China relations remained close, warm, friendly and cooperative even though Nepal embraced multiparty democracy while China remains communist state. This policy of Nepal continued even in the period of republican movement. In republican period, Nepal's foreign policy seems to be more India-centric. This period had the replica of first Delhi agreement- that was the period of King Tribhuvan.

"The second Delhi agreement, which is known as 12-point agreement between Nepal's seven Party Alliances (SPA) and the warring Maoists was signed in New Delhi." (Khanal, 2073, p. 347). Though Nepali leaders denied the role of India's establishment in facilitating the 12-point agreement; it was possible due the India's tacit support. After the establishment of Republic Nepal, India's micro management in the daily affairs of Nepal was pervasive as a result Nepali Prime Minister's tenure was an issue of constant change.

Shift in Foreign Policy

In the history of Nepal's foreign policy and relations, the period of elected government after the promulgation of new constitution, remained as major departure. Oli became Prime Minister first time on 2016 and second time on 2018. His first premiership was full of adversaries. India had imposed the fourth blockade on Nepal. The then government fought against India's blockade with maintaining national interest. The evident of historic departure in foreign policy was to sign an agreement with China on Trade and Transit. In 2016, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed for trade and transit and that was signed in Beijing (Joint Statement, Nepal-China, 2016)

Nepal had been relying in India for transport and transit facilities. This agreement had diversified Nepal's trade and transit with China. Nepal should not depend upon India for transporting goods even from the third countries. The recently concluded transport transit agreement with our friendly neighbour China has transformed our country, which was once dependent on a single country for transit, into a truly land locked country (Selected Speeches of KP Sharma Oli, 2016). Not only that, some other agreements were made during that period. The majors are - opening up new routes to northern borders, transmissions line- which could have an enduring impact in bilateral and multilateral relations of Nepal and China. The government further enhanced the relations with China beginning the implementations of those agreements signed in 2016. The protocols were prepared. Now all the foundations are ready to shift the agreement into action. The further agreement made by the Oli government is the rail connectivity. Nepal and China agreed to connect Chinese role to Nepal via Kerung-Rasuwadhi way.

Balance Relationship

The term balance relationship is not absolute balance, it is relative balance. It was previously interpreted as equi-distance, later as equal proximity. The balance relationship is more of geopolitical urgency than a policy. In Nepal's history, a delicate balance has been maintained by this government. Oli became Prime Minister second time after the first election held under this constitution. When he became Prime Minister

first time he was the chairman of Nepal Communist Party - Marxist and Leninist. When he became Prime Minister second time, he was the chairman of Nepal Communist Party. Unlike his first time, his second innings was very convenient. He gave a foreign policy speech introducing the 'Neighbourhood Policy' officially, where the balance relationship to both the neighbour has been mentioned (Foreign Policy Speech, 2018). He was welcomed by both India and China. Prime Minister Oli visited India first and China second. In both the visit, Prime Minister put the national interest at the top through the endeavour to maintain good relationship with them. With India, the normalcy in relation was restored. The railway agreement was signed between Nepal and India.

With China, the rail way agreement was signed. Both sides expressed happiness over the signing of the MOU on Cooperation for Railway Connectivity. They underscored it as the most significant initiative in the history of bilateral cooperation and believed it would herald a new era of the cross-border connectivity (Joint Statement, Nepal and China, 2018). The approach of balancing relations was further evident when Prime Minister Oli agreed with India for connecting Indian rail to Nepal. In the state visit of India, Prime Minister Oli and Prime Minister Narendra Modi agreed for rail way linkages (Joint Statement, Nepal and India, 12 May 2018).

Conclusion

Nepal's Foreign policy, formally formulated by King Prithvi Narayan Shaw has passed through many ups and downs but the fundamental element has still remained the same. The geopolitical locations of Nepal have drawn the global attention at a time when the world's power balance is shifting towards Asia. The shifting global diplomatic order has further brought Nepal in limelight that could have more opportunities and complex Challenges as well. Prithvi Narayan Shaw cautiously handled the adversaries and maintained the balance relations with both the giant neighbours. After King Prithvi Narayan Shaw, the conduction of Nepal's foreign policy was based on the interest of rulers, not in the interest of the nation and people. Ranas were the sincere aides to British India for continuously ruling the country without obstruction. King Mahendra boldly diversified Nepal's relations with China but he compromised with India just to sustain the power signing the secret arms deal. King Birendra brought the concept of non-aligned foreign Policy but could not implement it effectively. The democratic period saw the petty interest in terms of formulating and conducting foreign policy. The southern intervention in the domestic affairs of Nepal and the counter strategy of northern neighbour are the phenomena constantly seen. But after long period of political instability, the stable government with the overwhelming majority has been focusing on economic development and prosperity. The new republican constitution has set out the journey towards 'Happy Nepali, Prosperous Nepal'.

The government has deployed the balance foreign policy to India and China openly urging the rising economies to invest in Nepal. Neighbourhood policy has been formed and relations of mutual benefit have been practically executed. Foreign Policy is called the extension of domestic policy. The long-achieved political stability should be reflected in foreign policy too. Nepali political parties and other concern stakeholders should formally ready to formulate uniform foreign policy. For this to happen, the identification of national interest is pre-requisite.

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