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ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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Abstract

India and Nepal have deep historic ties built on shared lineage, language and culture, religion, civilization and common heritage. The relationship is special with an open border (around 1,850 km), 27 designated entry/exit points and a bulk of trade from five major corridors. Yet, the ties are complicated due to unsettled border problems, nationalist sentiments, political interests and geopolitical influences.

The paper argues that Nepal is shifting from a “buffer state” to a “contested strategic space”. It is using hedging to extract economic and strategic benefits from all sides, rather than being aligned to one partner. There is a shift in Nepal’s strategic thinking with a consciousness that economic dependence could potentially become political vulnerability. There is also strategic transformation in Nepal, where foreign powers do not challenge/threaten India or compete with India but gradually erode India’s exclusivity and reduce structural advantages. Balendra Shah as the new young Prime Minister only translates to transactional nationalism plus strategic autonomy.

From an Indian point of view, the security problem is cumulative, i.e., geography + dependence + competing external narratives + domestic political fragmentation. Roads, airfields, border infrastructure, and surveillance all combined alter the strategic environment. In India’s calculus, driven by the Curzonian mindset (legacy of British Raj security architecture), Nepal is the first line of defence for the Gangetic Plains. However, for Nepal, survival depends on balancing the two giants-India and China.

The external influence is multi-domain, where the US development diplomacy, Chinese infrastructure and political networks, European civil society engagement, transnational identity networks and Pakistan’s Muslim networks operate simultaneously, while Tibet is the strategic hinge. For China, Nepal’s value is inseparable from border stability and preventing Tibet-related political mobilization. India’s vulnerability is relational. India may interpret Nepal plus China as Chinese

influence, but for Nepal, India, along with China, the US, Europe, and Pakistan, all combined, provides bargaining power. That distinction is fundamental.

The contest in Nepal is no longer “India vs China” but a complex, crowded influence and operations space in which infrastructure and development projects (like BRI and MCC); governance networks; AI and technology; cyber security and data infrastructure; religion and identity networks (NGOs and conversion groups); Tibet security and post-Dalai groups; surveillance structure; Trade and commerce (hydropower and energy) and political groups, civil society and administrative networks combined change the entire matrix.

The greatest risks are cumulative and often emerge below the threshold of traditional military conflict. With massive disruption from post- Gen Z protests, there inevitably emerges a disoriented power structure that is covertly supported and funded by external actors. On the one hand, there is growing sentiment of revival of constitutional monarchy and demand for the declaration of Nepal as a “Hindu” state, but on the other, religious conversion groups have become active. Youths are being pulled towards extreme ends to change the basic character and language of Nepali society. Any change in socio-political character will reshape the norms of engagement with Nepal. The new forces of technology are transforming the interaction of citizens with the state. It is full of risks of disconnecting Nepali youth with its civilizational roots and establishing a fragile power centre prone to civilizational contestation of external powers.

Military alliance and realignment of Nepal are the key interests of foreign powers. Although Nepali youth are conscious of the position and role of small power-Nepal, in the region, yet, they are highly likely to become a tool of realignment, pushing Nepal’s nationalism to their advantage. India needs all four lenses-competition, attraction, identity and securitization-at once to reevaluate its relation and security paradigm with Nepal.