

## Dispatches from The Hall of Ideas!

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### WHAT WE DON'T SEE IN NEPAL'S GEOPOLITICS\*

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I am an observer of geopolitics, and whatever I have to say should be treated as such. The subject is merely a matter of interest, and for over fifteen years, it has remained one. One of the most frequent debates we encounter is whether everything that happens in Nepal is the result of “foreign play” or whether it is entirely internal. Some subscribe to conspiracy theories that every political shift, whether a change in party leadership or a youth movement, is directed from abroad. Others dismiss the idea of foreign influence altogether as a hoax. In my view, the truth lies somewhere in the grey.

For a long time, we viewed ourselves through the lens of King Prithvi Narayan Shah's famous metaphor, a “yam between two rocks.” In those days, isolation was a survival strategy. We could remain tucked between the Himalayas and the jungles of the Terai, largely ignored by the global radar. But that era of isolation is over. Today, those “rocks” are shifting, and the pressure on the “yam” is increasing as the world order undergoes a fundamental transformation.

A decade ago, many believed geopolitics was becoming irrelevant in an increasingly globalised world. However, we are now witnessing a clear revival of geopolitics. Our territorial location, once a barrier that kept us isolated, has become a strategic asset because we sit between the world's two rising economic giants, China and India. When I look at the current state of the world, I see a shift from the unipolarity that followed the Cold War towards a far more complex, multipolar reality.

The international institutions that were designed to protect the interests of smaller nations, such as the United Nations or regional bodies like SAARC, are becoming increasingly weak or irrelevant. In this vacuum, the pressure on a country like Nepal intensifies. We are no longer just a dot on the map. We are a territory where the aspirations and interests of the West, China, and India intersect and often collide.

Our relationship with our neighbours has also changed fundamentally since 2008. That year was a watershed moment: Nepal became a republic, and the process of state restructuring began. Until then, India had been the dominant external player. In the same year, following the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China asserted itself more strongly on the global stage and sought to expand its political influence in Nepal, bringing it into friction with

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India. Before 2008, China's concerns in Nepal were limited. They wanted to ensure Tibetan refugees did not create instability, and they sought to avoid tension with India. Today, China's presence is far more assertive. It has moved from soft influence and economic engagement towards a more direct political engagement, even as it struggles with the contradiction of wanting influence in Nepal without completely alienating India.

India, meanwhile, has traditionally viewed Nepal primarily through a security lens, managed by the "North Desk" in its Ministry of External Affairs, the same desk that handled Bhutan and, historically, Sikkim. India expects Nepal to remain within certain boundaries, and this expectation generates constant tension. While India remains our most vital partner for day to day survival, as demonstrated during the blockade, we must learn to communicate our needs without fear while maintaining a stable and trustworthy relationship.

The West, led by the United States, has historically viewed Nepal as an independent buffer state. In the current shifting world order, however, Western concerns are increasingly shaped by the need to balance China and India. We often see Western diplomats in Kathmandu expressing heightened concern about China, while Chinese and Indian diplomats remain focused on each other and the West. Nepal has become a battleground for these

competing interests, and at times we suffer not because of our own actions, but because of the friction between these larger powers.

In recent years, one can also observe a worrying trend. Our foreign policy is increasingly driven by populism rather than realism. Since 2006 to 2007, we have seen leaders adopt positions based on what resonates with the domestic masses rather than what serves the long term national interest. A prime example is the Kalapani and Lipulekh issue. While I was among the first journalists to report on this matter in the mid 1990s, the recent decision to include Limpiyadhura in our map, though not necessarily wrong in principle, appears to have been motivated more by populism than by a realistic negotiation strategy.

By making such a high profile claim without a concrete plan to either regain the territory or persuade the local population, we may have inadvertently stalled negotiations that were already moving towards a possible resolution of the Kalapani issue. Foreign policy cannot be driven by emotion. It must be grounded in cold, hard national interest.

Given this changing global order, the old strategy of non alignment is no longer sufficient. We cannot simply remain un aligned and isolated. We must be actively engaged. We need investment, we need development support, and we need meaningful





participation in the global economy. This means we should be able to accept the MCC from the United States and the BRI from China simultaneously, provided we maintain clear red lines when it comes to military and strategic security concerns.

We must also look beyond the so called big three, India, China, and the West. Our foreign policy remains dangerously centred on our immediate neighbours, even though our economy and society are now deeply global. Nearly every Nepali family is connected to the diaspora. We have a massive workforce in the Middle East that sustains our economy through remittances, yet we rarely discuss Middle Eastern policy unless a crisis erupts. Similarly, we have a growing and influential diaspora in Australia, Korea, and Japan that we have failed to leverage as a source of soft power.

We often speak of Nepal's soft power, particularly Buddhism and the fact that Buddha was born in Lumbini, yet we have done little to utilise it effectively. Bhutan offers a useful comparison. It has practised what might be called smart diplomacy, effectively handling the narrative of Buddhist diplomacy and positioning itself as an international hub for peace and spiritual reflection. At the same time, Bhutan has built deep political and business linkages with India's power centres, engaging not only with bureaucratic institutions but directly with political leadership.

Many in Nepal argue that what we need most is political stability. In reality, given our diversity and electoral system, a single party majority is unlikely. What we truly need is policy stability. There must be consensus among major political forces on our foreign policy red lines and our fundamental approach to the world. When governments change, foreign policy should not swing by 180 degrees.

We are a land linked country, not merely a land locked one. Our location between the world's two most populous nations presents a massive opportunity, if we can build the infrastructure to connect them. Historically, Nepal was a trading hub for knowledge, technology, and goods such as paper and sugar. There is no reason we cannot reclaim that role.

Ultimately, the primary driver of our destiny remains our internal foundation. However, because our institutions are weak and our systems incoherent, we are particularly vulnerable to external influence. Our bureaucracy, ministries, and political leadership often lack clear red lines or policy clarity, making it difficult to resist external pressure. When internal capacity is weak, it becomes easy for external powers to operate within our system.

Unlike India, which inherited a strong and disciplined bureaucratic legacy from the British, or China, with its centralised party structure, Nepal has spent the past two decades in a constant state of transition, dismantling old institutions without constructing effective new ones. We must strengthen the capacity of the Foreign Ministry to function as a nodal agency, coordinating economic, military, and labour diplomacy under a single strategic vision.

We need to move from being a yam that is pushed around to becoming a bridge that connects. This will require us to stop being distracted by rhetoric and begin doing the quiet, difficult work of institutional strengthening and long-term strategic planning. Only then can we turn our geographic challenge into a source of national prosperity.

