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Coping with Modi's India: Nepal's “pull-distance” Diplomacy

Dingkun Lei¹ & Zezhou Yang²

Abstract: As a small country sandwiched between China and India, Nepal has long been the focus of academic attention regarding its diplomatic thinking and foreign policy. Since the Modi government came to power, the relationship between Nepal and India has witnessed a series of fluctuations, with an overall trajectory characterized by ebbs and flows. India has adopted a more assertive policy towards Nepal, driven by its hegemonic mindset. In contrast, Nepal has pursued a more proactive foreign policy towards India in the context of domestic political stability. This article centers on Nepal's perspective and employs the concepts of “equidistance diplomacy” and “boomerang effect” to propose an analytical framework of “pull-distance diplomacy” that scrutinizes Nepal's fundamental logic in implementing its policy toward India across different phases and on various issues. This article argues that Nepal is situated in a “biased distance situation” that tilts towards India in historical and contemporary contexts. However, with the Modi government's increasingly pronounced hegemonic behavior and the intensifying strategic competition between China and India, Nepal has opted for an active strategy of projecting the boomerang towards China to strengthen its bilateral ties. Nonetheless, the ultimate purpose of this behavior is to signal India and enhance its bargaining power in the negotiation process. Simultaneously, in the process of deploying the boomerang effect, Nepal's national security and interests have been secured and promoted owing to the strategic pull from India. However, with India resorting to various measures to either lure Nepal closer or exert pressure on it, Nepal may encounter more pressure in the long run.

Keywords: Pull-distance Diplomacy; Nepal-India Interaction; Boomerang Effect;

1. Research Question

Nepal's strategic location, nestled between the two major powers of China and India, holds significant importance. Despite facing challenges in its nation-building process, Nepal has never been entirely subjugated by any foreign power and has maintained a relatively independent political identity. Nepal's geopolitical position has led to its basic security and relative autonomy between the two powers as a long-standing priority. Consequently, Nepal's foreign policy has evolved over time to reflect this objective.

During the rule of the Rana family, foreign policy was centered on the British Empire and colonial administration (Rose, 1971). In contrast, King Mahendra pursued a non-aligned foreign policy with a neutral diplomatic stance. King Birendra emphasized Nepal's status as a “Zone of Peace,” and following the *Jana Andolan* movement in the 1990s, Nepal adopted a pragmatic foreign policy. This approach has enabled Nepal to maintain its statehood and navigate the complex dynamics among major powers. Nepal's ability to strike a balance between major powers and ensure its continued sovereignty has allowed it to slowly prosper in a turbulent region. By adapting its foreign policy to changing geopolitical circumstances, Nepal has managed to preserve its independence and promote its interests in the face of competing regional powers.

It has to be acknowledged that being the sole country in the world to once have Hinduism as its state religion³ has further cemented Nepal's ties with India. As a regional hegemon in South Asia, India's sphere of influence naturally encompasses Nepal, which has frequently experienced India's pressure on various fronts, including culture, economy, and military. Since Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014, India-Nepal relations have witnessed notable diplomatic tensions. For instance, Modi's premiership initially raised considerable hopes in Nepal for improved relations, but this optimism soon gave way to frustration and a sense of powerlessness. A pivotal moment occurred with Nepal's adoption of its 2015 Constitution, whose provisions regarding the Madhesi community of the southern Terai region fell short of Indian expectations. India's response—a protracted informal border blockade—resulted in severe fuel shortages across Nepal, stifling economic growth and escalating into a humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, on August 8, 2020, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, during an international forum, listed Buddha alongside Mahatma Gandhi as one of the two greatest Indians—a remark that drew sharp criticism and protest from Nepal (Republica, 2020). Since then, Nepal has undergone several internal political changes, resulting in a more assertive diplomatic stance towards

¹ Dingkun Lei, Assistant Professor, Institute for International and Area Studies, Tsinghua University.

² Zezhou Yang, Postdoctoral Researcher, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

³ On May 18, 2006, Nepal's parliament passed a resolution to abolish Hinduism as the state religion, declaring Nepal a secular state.

India. For example, on June 13, 2020, Nepal's parliament passed an urgent vote for a second constitutional amendment and a new map, reaffirming its sovereignty over the disputed areas of Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura, which encompass approximately 355 square kilometers. This move demonstrates Nepal's efforts to assert its sovereignty and maintain a more balanced relationship with India, despite the challenges posed by their complex history and geopolitical interests.

How has Nepal's diplomatic approach to India changed since the Modi government came to power? How to perceive this change? Based on this change, can Nepal be understood to have abandoned equidistant or balanced diplomacy and instead moved away from India towards China? How can Nepal's diplomatic behavior be theoretically explained in the context of Indian hegemony in the South Asian sub-region? This paper will attempt to answer the above questions.

2. Existing Explanations and Deficiencies

There is not much literature on Nepal's policy towards India since Modi came to power. In summary, scholars have discussed four main aspects. First, the Chinese factor and the China-Indian game are used as variables to explain Nepal's policy towards India. An important basis of the Modi government's rule is its growing domestic nationalist aspirations. Even though it is facing development pressures such as high domestic unemployment and economic downturn, the Modi government has strived for popular votes by politicizing border security issues such as India-Pakistan and China-India (Lei, 2020), and Nepal has always sought a balance between China and India, adopting a friendly and sincere diplomatic attitude towards China and a mixture of friendship and hostility towards India (Dahal, 2018). After the promulgation of Nepal's new constitution, elections were held at all levels of the country, from the federal to the local level. The ruling party, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN), was largely unified within the party, making economic prosperity the primary goal of the country at the moment with relative political stability. Unlike India's suspicions and hesitations, Nepal immediately responded to China's One Belt One Road initiative and is firmly committed to participating in it. Despite India's geopolitical concerns about the depth of China-Nepali relations, Ram Dahal (2018) believes Nepal's choice was entirely in its own interest.

Secondly, some scholars attribute Nepal's recent shifts in attitude toward India essentially to its response to strategic overtures by both China and India. As regional powers, China and India have long been engaged in geopolitical competition. With their escalating security interests, their influence on Nepal's foreign policy orientation has become increasingly pronounced. Theoretically, as a small country sandwiched between two large nations, Nepal would choose to ally with a relatively weaker country (India) to counterbalance the stronger country, in order to achieve a state of equilibrium. However, scholars such as Dabhade and Pant (2004) have pointed out that Nepal's foreign policy has always emphasized maintaining a balance between China and India. Regardless of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war or subsequent border confrontations, Nepal has always remained neutral.

Thirdly, some scholars explain Nepal's policy towards India's changes from the perspective of India's regional hegemony. Nepali scholars Karki and Hari (2020) argue that a historical perspective alone cannot fully explain the essence of Nepal-India relations. Emphasizing the friendly interaction between the two countries in history and culture can ignore the fact that India's increasingly aggressive foreign policy and its status as a regional hegemon have interfered in Nepal's domestic affairs and hindered Nepal's development. They believe that India did not remove colonialism from its foreign policy path after independence but continued the colonial-era thinking mode in a new colonial manner. India has implemented a hegemonic foreign policy towards Nepal from the perspective of its own national security and geopolitics.

Furthermore, some scholars emphasize the asymmetry in power structures between Nepal and India, and argue that there has always been a kind of asymmetrical interdependence between the two countries, whether during the colonial period or since their independence (Bao, 2015). However, due to factors such as political party competition and geopolitics within Nepal, Nepal has always been unable to weaken or break away from this dependence on India. In recent years, however, the radical changes brought about by a series of democratic practices within Nepal's political system have made it possible to change the traditional path of India-Nepal relations. (Dahal, 2019) At present, Nepal finds itself at a crucial juncture. It is actively engaging with multilateral mechanisms, both internationally and regionally, aiming to transition from dependence toward self-reliance. To achieve sustained development, Nepal seeks to balance India's regional dominance by cultivating strategic cooperation with major global actors, notably US and China.

The fourth explanation for the change in Nepal's foreign policy is from the perspective of its domestic politics. Following the promulgation of a new constitution in 2015, the federal republic's basic framework has become increasingly stable, with orderly completion of elections at various levels from the federal center to local levels, resulting in a stable internal political situation and a more proactive foreign policy (Adhikari, 2020). Additionally, the personal factors of Prime Minister Oli, who returned to power, have had a significant impact, with his government

becoming more inclined towards a diversified range of foreign policy choices. In other words, some scholars tend to attribute the changes in Nepal's diplomacy with India solely to the personal factors of Prime Minister Oli.

The existing literature offers diverse explanations for Nepal's response to the Modi government's strong policies, with numerous influencing factors cited. From the perspective of some scholars, Nepal effectively lacks a coherent foreign policy (Baral, 2023). Although this viewpoint may appear somewhat extreme or pessimistic, it remains evident that, as a sovereign state, Nepal objectively possesses a foreign policy, regardless of whether such policy is subjectively consistent or systematically formulated. However, there is a lack of an overarching framework to explain the sustained changes and trajectory of Nepal's policy towards India, and insufficient attention has been paid to Nepal's agency in the face of endogenous changes and its bilateral and multilateral relationships. This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of Nepal's policy towards India since Modi took office, with a focus on the key aspects and trends that illustrate the changes. The paper further attempts to theoretically understand and explain these changes and predict the possible future trajectory of the Nepal-India relationship based on the aforementioned analysis.

3. Analytical Framework

This paper proposes a theoretical framework that is essentially derived from the refutation and development of equidistant diplomacy. The term “equidistant diplomacy” has no clear origin, and scholars often use it to describe the diplomatic strategies of middle-power countries such as South Korea and Japan in the context of great-power competition, sometimes interchangeably with “balancing strategies” or “hedging strategies.” (Kim, 2016; Sohn, 2020) However, from a practical perspective, Dong (2010) have referred to the political tactics that Zeng Guofan used to seek a balance between Emperor Xianfeng and Empress Dowager Cixi as “equidistant diplomacy,” as a political wisdom for skillfully handling hierarchical relations. According to Nepali scholar Dahal (2009) and Adhikari (2018), since the 1990s, equidistant diplomacy has increasingly been used to refer to Nepal's strategy of maintaining a balance between China and India. There is still no clear definition of equidistant diplomacy in academic circles, and there is a lack of systematic analysis of the concept. When the term emerged, it seemed to be more of a substitute for “balanced diplomacy.” However, if we were to make a detailed distinction, equidistant diplomacy has the following core attributes: three objects, two countries that can compete with each other, and a small country seeking security or maximizing interests by maintaining balance. Even so, in the current international political reality, it is difficult to find examples that truly adhere to the concept of “equidistant” diplomacy, and this concept cannot reflect the subjective intentions of small countries caught between two great powers. Compared to the vague concept of balanced diplomacy and the static and idealized nature of equidistant diplomacy, this paper will draw on the psychological concept of the “Boomerang Effect” to propose a theoretical framework for explaining Nepal's policy toward India.

The “Boomerang Effect,” or the “Flying Dart Effect,” is a frequently employed concept in psychology. It was first formally introduced by scholars Hovland, Janis, and Kelley in 1953. The term typically refers to a phenomenon in which an agent's persuasion efforts toward its target audience backfire, leading to unexpected harm or a result that is opposite to the original persuasion goal (Byrne and Hart, 2009; Cohen, 1962). In broader terms, the boomerang effect mainly describes a situation in which an agent's actions towards its target audience result in annoyance and resentment due to overzealousness or improper methods, ultimately leading to the opposite effect of what was intended. The boomerang effect effectively captures the phenomenon of “unintended consequences” or achieving outcomes that run counter to the original intent. Thus, the boomerang effect is often discussed in the context of public diplomacy and policy-making processes (Melissen, 2011; Wolf and Dooren, 2018), as it can be strategically applied to achieve the desired objectives by purposefully setting agendas and utilizing the boomerang effect.

This article proposes an analytical framework for tripartite interactions, the “pull-distance diplomacy,” drawing on the concepts of equidistance diplomacy and boomerang effect. The framework builds on the three basic analytical elements of equidistance diplomacy, involving a small country and two large powers with mutual balancing capabilities or strategic competition. However, unlike the aim of small countries in equidistance diplomacy to seek balance between the two great powers, this framework posits that small countries cannot achieve an “equidistant” position between the two great powers, and their initial and final states will not be in the middle equilibrium position, but rather will tend to lean towards one side, creating a “deviation” state. In pull-distance diplomacy, “pull” emphasizes the dynamic process in which a small country deliberately sends signals to maximize its own interests, by pulling closer to one country while distancing itself from the other, thus generating a boomerang effect. During the process of signaling, in which there are clear disputes or conflicts, the boomerang effect occurs and continues until the end. The small country will continue to engage in dialogue with the two great powers to ensure maximum benefit or prepare for the next “pulling” process. A simplified diagram of pull-distance diplomacy is shown below:

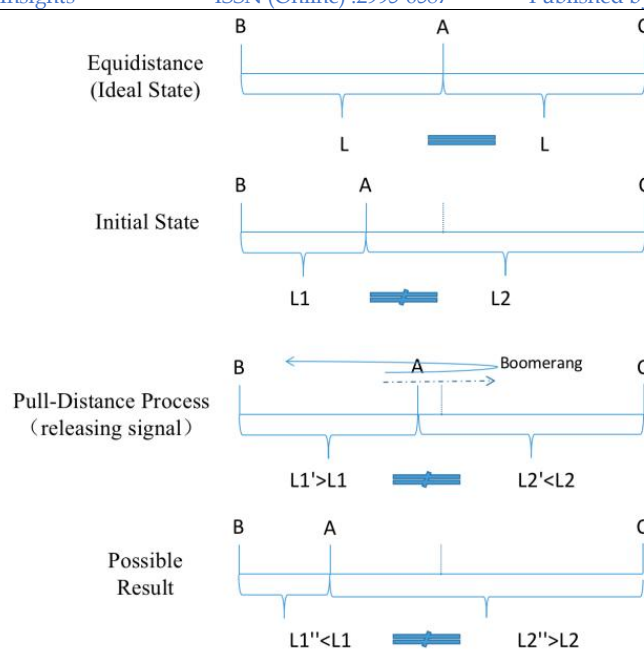


Figure 1: Schematic diagram of the Pull-Distance Process; Created by the authors.

In brief, as illustrated in the above figure, A (a small country) as the subject aims to influence B, but is unable to directly affect B due to hierarchical and power relations. Therefore, A influences C, who can ultimately determine the increase or decrease of B's power and even its survival, to achieve its desired impact on B. That is to say, A initially leans more towards B, but begins to approach C to signal B. As C accepts A's signal and further sends signals to B or A to influence B's judgment, the ultimate result may be that A benefits from both B and C, while B's attraction to A becomes stronger, bringing A and B closer together than their initial distance. To use the boomerang analogy, A's goal or target throughout is B, and A selects C as the target to better reach B.

This article applies the above analytical framework to attempt to understand Nepal's recent policies towards India and the trilateral relationship between China, India, and Nepal, especially in explaining the series of changes in Nepal's foreign policy since the Modi government came to power, the effects of these changes, and the potential future direction of Nepal's relationship with India.

4. Nepal's Changing Diplomatic Attitude and Intentions Towards India (2014-2022)

During his visit to Nepal, former Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai (1977) remarked that no textbook on international relations encompasses a relationship pattern that is completely similar to the one between India and Nepal, highlighting the uniqueness of their relationship. This distinctive relationship between the two sovereign nations, both located in South Asia, is widely perceived as “special” in both popular discourse and official propaganda. This is attributed to social and cultural ties, including their history, geographic proximity, economic cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges, as well as the constraints of agreements and accords signed between the two states, such as *The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship* (Hereinafter as “Friendship Treaty 1950”). As a result, the “distance” between Nepal and India is much smaller than that between China and India, and Nepal is situated in a position that is close to India.

(1) Deviation State: The “Highs and Lows” of India-Nepal Relations

Following Modi's inauguration in 2014, India-Nepal relations experienced a significant “high” largely due to the “Neighbourhood First” policy implemented by the Modi government. During his first term in office, Modi's administration placed great emphasis on improving relationships with all countries in the South Asian region, exhibiting a constructive approach towards regional cooperation (Khobragade, 2016). The policy was marked by high-level visits and interactions, including Sushma Swaraj's visit to Nepal in 2014, which preceded Modi's state visit to Nepal later that year. During Swaraj's visit, the India-Nepal Joint Commission meeting was held 23 years after the last one, where the two countries focused on reviewing and upgrading the “Friendship Treaty (1950)”, as well as enhancing

cooperation in various areas (MEA, 2014). The visit was considered a success by both sides (TET, 2014), and Nepal expressed its support for India's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. In August 2014, Modi made his state visit to Nepal, becoming the first Indian Prime Minister to do so in 17 years. During his visit, Modi emphasized the cultural and religious ties between India and Nepal and promised not to interfere in Nepal's constitution-making process. He also pledged to increase India's aid to Nepal and signed the Electric Power Trade, Cross-Border Transmission Interconnection and Grid Connectivity with Nepal at the 18th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in November of the same year. These interactions signaled a significant improvement in India-Nepal relations, which had been strained in the years prior.

In less than a year, Nepal-India relations rapidly deteriorated after the 8.1 magnitude earthquake in Nepal in May 2015. After the quake, political parties in Nepal set aside their differences and hastened the drafting and promulgation of a new Constitution (Hutt, 2020). The new constitution led to prolonged protests in Nepal's southern plains, the Madhesi community. India did not offer congratulations on the Constitution's promulgation but rather expressed concern about the possibility of the protests spreading into India (MEA, 2020). In December 2015, the Indian foreign minister criticized the Constitution for lacking inclusivity and not being representative of Nepal's diverse ethnic and social groups. India's subsequent blockade of essential goods aggravated the reconstruction efforts and exacerbated the already negative public sentiment towards India. Nepali citizens took to the streets and social media, with the hashtag "backoffindia" appearing everywhere. The newly elected Nepali Prime Minister, Oli, publicly stated that India's blockade was "cruel, inhumane, and beyond imagination." (TKP, 2015) Oli urged India to reflect on how its actions would affect the attitudes and perceptions of the younger generation of Nepali towards India.

In February and September 2016, Prime Minister Oli made two state visits to India to ease bilateral relations between Nepal and India. With Nepal's internal politics stabilizing, Oli attempted to pursue an active and forward-looking diplomacy by gradually sending signals to both India and China. While Oli's two visits to India were not particularly outstanding, the most important outcome was India's official recognition of Nepal's new constitution, which increased its legitimacy domestically and internationally. These events from 2015 to 2016 indicated that India still held Nepal's economic lifeline, and Nepal heavily imitated and relied on India in foreign trade and domestic economic development, giving India the confidence to intervene in Nepal's internal affairs and influence its foreign policy (Xu, 2015). Therefore, even if India's informal blockade led to a sharp deterioration in bilateral relations, repairing the relationship with India actively aligned with Nepal's national interests. Consequently, Nepal has never been equidistant between China and India and has been in a position of higher proximity to India in its foreign policy.

(2) Releasing Signal: a Comprehensive Reassessment of Nepal-India Relations

Since 2016, Nepal has gradually sent different signals to India and China, showing an overall diplomatic trend of moving away from India and closer to China. In February 2016, before India's informal blockade of Nepal was coming to an end, Prime Minister Oli visited India and ultimately facilitated the establishment of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) to comprehensively review the Nepal-India bilateral relationship. The EPG, consisting of eight core members, is led by the senior officials of India's ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the former Nepali high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bhekh Bahadur Thapa, who respectively lead expert groups in relevant fields. The goal of the EPG is to comprehensively reassess the bilateral agreements and protocols between the two countries, including the controversial 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, and to provide final policy recommendations on five major areas, namely political relations, government-to-government contacts, development cooperation, economic exchanges, and social and cultural relations.

Nepal's proposal to comprehensively reassess bilateral relations with India is itself an extremely clear signal. Among the most pressing issues for review is the "Friendship Treaty (1950)," which has long been seen by Nepali citizens as unequal. The most controversial elements are Articles 6 and 7, which permit equal treatment of citizens of both countries in industrial and economic development, immigration, and property ownership. When the treaty was signed in 1950, Nepal and India were not in a position of equal power. As the last prime minister of the Rana dynasty in Nepal, Mohan Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana sought India's support for his government by constructing a so-called "northern threat" in the face of communist influence (see Upadhyaya, 2012; Rose, 1971). Against this backdrop, the establishment of bilateral relations and the signing of the treaty did not occur on equal terms, but rather on the supplicant terms of the Rana regime. Over time, the loopholes in the treaty have caused many problems for Nepali society. For example, the settlement of large numbers of people from Indian states such as Bihar in Nepal has caused varying degrees of tension and gradually led to anti-foreigner sentiments among Nepali people.

The dissatisfaction of Nepal towards the "Friendship Treaty (1950)" with India is also attributed to the limitations it places on Nepal's national defense and security. In 1989, India imposed an economic blockade on Nepal on the grounds that Nepal violated Article V of the Treaty, which prohibits the purchase of military equipment from a third party, namely China, without informing India. Nepal argues that India's military equipment is five times more expensive than

that of China and that India's retaliatory actions have seriously damaged Nepal's sovereignty. Associate Professor Liu Ruonan (2017, 65, 88) from the University of International Business and Economics once analyzed the strategies of small countries in East Asia that rank at the bottom of the hierarchy of national power based on the criteria of power division. She proposed an explanatory framework that small countries face dual challenges, including regional systemic risks and internal and external risks, as well as potential threats from powerful, medium-sized neighboring countries. Therefore, small countries tend to establish special security contacts with the top-level great powers. Accordingly, if China is considered an external major power in South Asia, Nepal occupies a low position in the regional power hierarchy. Seeking to establish a special security relationship with the most powerful external actor, whether the United States or China, is a strategy that is fully in line with objective realities. However, given that China, India, and Nepal are all contiguous, such a special security relationship is bound to face significant challenges. Therefore, the first step for Nepal is to break through the limitations of formal treaties in name only.

In 2018, the Nepal-India Eminent Persons Group (EPG) report was almost complete, but as of the writing of this article, it has not been submitted to Prime Ministers Modi and Oli for review, and neither side has officially released its contents, with only partial leaks available. According to reports, the Indian government is dissatisfied with the report's coverage of border issues and the absence of a Madhesi representative on the Nepali four-member team (TKP, 2018). Rajendra Mahato, the then executive member of the Rastriya Janata Party-Nepal, stated in an interview that neither the Indian nor the Nepali governments would accept the EPG report without the input of the Madhesi community, and even if the Nepali government chose to accept it, they would protest its rejection (TAE, 2019).

Since 2016, Nepal has been sending signals to India by forming the EPG to comprehensively reassess the Nepal-India relationship and reduce its dependence on India, indicating a trend of distancing itself from India. However, this approach has not elicited a complete response from India, and Nepal has continued to widen its diplomatic distance from India in several areas, such as India-dominated multilateral cooperation, military exercises, and the Nepal-India border, seeking to break India's "blockade."

(3) From "Landlocked" to "India-locked": Nepal Actively Seeks Strategic Breakthroughs

Since the Modi government came into power, the Indian political establishment has been inclined to use India's status as a transit country as leverage in negotiations with Nepal. Whenever Nepal expresses a different opinion, India immediately threatens or tries to control Nepal's political direction by leveraging this bargaining chip. Looking back at the 2015 Madhesi blockade, India chose to remain indifferent and did not extend any help to Nepal in any form, which not only angered the Nepali people but also provided enough space for Nepali politicians to engage in full-scale political mobilization. Although India's veteran diplomat and former ambassador to Nepal, Shyam Saran (2018, 125), firmly believes that India should strive to become Nepal's preferred transit country, expand Nepal's efficient and economic services (supply) by opening up its transport networks and ports, so as to create positive interdependence between the two countries rather than a negative leverage. India's high-handed attitude towards Nepal's actual control and influence seems to be inevitable.

Looking at the results achieved in multiple phases, India's stance has caused greater resentment among the Nepali people towards Indian hegemony, leading to a subjective change in their perception of their country's transition from being "landlocked" to "India-locked" (Ojha, 2015). However, it must be acknowledged that Nepal currently faces extreme difficulty in breaking free from India's hegemonic blockade based on its own comprehensive strength, hence its decision to further exert efforts in multilateral relationships. For example, in 2018, under Prime Minister Oli's directive, the Nepali military withdrew from the India-led "Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)" military exercise. Prime Minister Oli himself and his spokesperson publicly stated that the withdrawal decision was made because the military exercise was not a unanimous decision made at the BIMSTEC summit, but rather a unilateral decision made by the Indian government.

Although Nepal hosted the BIMSTEC summit in late August 2018, the forum, largely driven by India, essentially serves as an alternative to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Notably, BIMSTEC excludes Pakistan, distinguishing it sharply from SAARC. On the one hand, Nepal is not directly connected to the Bay of Bengal, and on the other hand, India's dominance in BIMSTEC is stronger. Nepal's withdrawal from the anti-terrorism military exercise sends a clear signal to other countries that Nepal has the independence to choose.

Nepal has adopted a confrontational approach towards India in bilateral relations, while simultaneously attempting to distance itself from India on multilateral platforms. The Nepali government has projected a boomerang towards China, hoping to maximize its own benefits in the process of achieving the boomerang effect. On May 8, 2020, the Indian Defense Minister inaugurated an 80-kilometer-long new road connecting Dharchula in the northern state of Uttarakhand with Lipulekh pass. This move was met with strong opposition from Nepal. Only a day later, the Nepali Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement claiming that Kalapani, Limpiyadhura, and Lipulekh belong to Nepal, based on the Treaty of Sugauli signed between Nepal and British India in 1816 (MOFA, 2020). Nepal urged India not

to engage in any activities that violate Nepal's sovereignty. In official response, the Oli government introduced a new Nepali map and passed the second amendment to the Constitution on June 13, 2020, reaffirming its claim to the disputed area of approximately 355 square kilometers.

It is noteworthy that while the Nepali government took a clear stance on the Nepal-India border issue, tensions were high in the border region between China and India due to the Galwan Valley conflict. When a small country faces a significant power gap with its neighboring countries, especially when there are multiple powerful neighboring countries, its security is threatened both subjectively and objectively. If there is no conflict between the small country's powerful neighbors, then the situation is relatively secure. However, once there is a direct or potential conflict between the powerful neighboring countries, the security of the small country is greatly threatened (see Wei, 2014). In other words, the security of the small country depends heavily on the balance of power between the strong neighboring countries.

In 2020, Sino-Indian relations deteriorated due to the border dispute, and the two sides engaged in a conflict in the Galwan Valley, resulting in the death and injury of multiple soldiers. Clearly, as a small country, Nepal is facing the reality that the two major neighboring countries, China and India, have already engaged in a direct conflict, and India's series of unwarranted countermeasures have further weakened the relationship between the two countries, breaking the so-called balance or equilibrium. In this situation, Nepal has further utilized the territorial dispute between Nepal and India to reaffirm its sovereignty and sought a breakthrough by clearly distinguishing between “you” and “us”.

The demarcation of boundaries is often indistinct and arbitrary, yet the act of boundary definition bears profound psychological implications and serves as the foundation for the demarcation of national borders. Bradley Park (2006) has conducted extensive research on the concepts of boundary, border, frontier, and borderlands. He posits that boundary is a non-specific limitation or distinction that discerns different types and essentially serves as a nebulous separator. Park defines border as a fixed, linear dividing line in a specific space that functions as a marker symbol to distinguish political or administrative units, and is more commonly used to refer to the well-defined national borders of modern states. Frontier denotes a region that differentiates between different types of political or cultural units, where different units frequently do not directly interact with each other, and can also be a desolate area. As a region, the frontier can encompass various boundaries, which can be cultural, political, geographical, or economic distinctions between different ethnic groups. However, it is precisely these diverse boundaries that constitute the core of the frontier. Borderlands, according to cultural anthropologists, pertain to the land or region around modern international borders where new communities have already been formed or are in the process of formation. Borderlands have a broader geographical scope, and within this range, both borders and boundaries can coexist.

The Madhesi people in the Nepal-India border region continue to present a significant challenge due to the absence of a comprehensive resolution to their ongoing predicament. This issue arises from divergent perceptions of open borders between Nepal and India. While the Madhesi people residing in the Terai plains have established matrimonial ties with several families across the Indian border, thereby romanticizing their relationship as a “Roti-Beti” friendship between the two nations, those residing in Nepal's interior regions maintain a cultural boundary that separates them from the dominant culture of the Kathmandu Valley. This results in a certain degree of social distance in terms of language, customs, and other cultural aspects.

The living area of the Madhesi people in Nepal's border region is characterized by a plethora of cultural and political units that divide the territory into conflicting boundaries, which exacerbates the tension with the officially defined Nepal-India border. The “Friendship Treaty (1950)” allowed for free movement of goods and people between the two nations, with Nepali citizens merely needing to register to cross the border. However, the nationality, geographical location, and identity of the Madhesi people have created a nebulous understanding of the Nepal-India border, further complicating the establishment of stable bilateral relations (For a discussion of Madhesi identity and its activities in the construction of the Nepali state, see: Burket, 1997; Sijapati, 2013; Guneratne, 1998).

In recent years, Nepal has become increasingly vocal in its demands for border demarcation, as illustrated by the 2020 territorial dispute. This underscores Nepal's unwavering commitment to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, underscoring its tendency to distance itself from India and unify the definitions of borders, national boundaries, and boundaries to clarify distinctions between “you” and “me”. This growing divergence between Nepal and India has significant implications for the future of the region and necessitates careful consideration and analysis.

5. The Boomerang Effect: The Ever-closing Distance Between Nepal and India

In light of Nepal's clear signaling of its growing distance from India, the boomerang effect has emerged, with significant implications for regional relations. The most notable manifestation of this effect was observed in the latter half of 2020, when India, believing that the pandemic had abated, and with the frequent cross-border movements of the two countries' workers, urgently dispatched senior officials to visit Nepal on multiple occasions. One such example

was the secret visit of Samant Kumar Goel, Director of India's Research and Analysis Wing, to Kathmandu in October 2020, without the knowledge of Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he held a small-scale meeting with Prime Minister Oli. The following month, General M.M. Naravane, Chief of the Indian Army, made a formal three-day visit to Nepal. Additionally, India's Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, also visited Nepal again, displaying a great deal of sincerity during the visit. For instance, upon landing at the airport in Kathmandu, Shringla delivered his speech in Nepali, emphasizing his intention to enhance bilateral relations.

Despite the frequent changes in Nepal's internal political landscape in the past two years, the country has continued to converge with India. This convergence has been particularly pronounced as external powers, such as the United States, have become increasingly engaged in regional affairs. As a result, the pace of convergence has accelerated, and the boomerang effect has become even more significant, especially with Nepal signing the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact.

Four months after Nepal signed the BRI with China, in September 2017, Nepal signed a pact with the United States on the MCC project. This project aimed to construct a 400 KV high voltage transmission line and improve roads in Nepal. As the first South Asian country to qualify for the compact, Nepal met 16 out of the 20 policy indicators. In September 2017, Baikuntha Aryal, joint-secretary of Nepal, and Jonathan Nash, acting CEO of the MCC, signed the agreement in Washington, D.C., in the presence of then Finance Minister Gyandera Bahadur Karki and US Deputy Secretary of State John J. Sullivan. The US pledged to provide \$500 million in grants, while Nepal committed to contributing \$130 million to the project, which prioritized energy and transportation infrastructure development.

By February 2022, Nepal's House of Representatives of the Federal Parliament had finally approved the MCC compact (THT, 2022), which had become one of the most controversial issues during the Oli government's second stint (Chand, 2021). A key point of contention surrounding the MCC is whether it forms part of the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). If so, Nepal's participation in the MCC could be interpreted as joining the US's IPS, which is largely seen as an American strategy to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region (Wilkins & Kim, 2022). Consequently, Nepal's involvement in the IPS would not only conflict with its participation in China's BRI, but also contravene the non-alignment and Panchsheel principles guiding its foreign policy (Bhattarai et al., 2022). Although Nepali officials have repeatedly stated that the MCC is unrelated to the IPS and solely concerns infrastructure development and economic aid (Rising Nepal, 2019), high-level US officials and State Department reports indicate that the MCC is indeed a crucial component of the IPS (KTM, 2020; Department of State, 2019). The Nepali government was aware of this situation. Interestingly, the government of Nepal has also publicly asserted on multiple occasions that it will not join the IPS (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal, 2019; Sapkota, 2020). Nepal's approach and attitude towards the MCC and IPS underscore its consistent strategy of navigating regional and global power dynamics to preserve its sovereignty and protect its interests. This strategy has gradually shifted towards adopting a multi-alignment policy, as "it will rightly move to the direction of bringing gradual shift in its foreign policy to better accommodate the changing geopolitical scenarios" (Karki, 2021:380). Although India has its own security interests and national agendas within the IPS, it remains an influential proponent and active participant of the strategy (Yang, 2021; Wilkins & Kim, 2022).

However, Nepal's strategic imagination of involving an external power (the U.S.) amid Sino-Indian rivalry has objectively diminished due to shifts in U.S. domestic politics and its global retrenchment, reducing Nepal's room for strategic maneuver and rapidly enhancing India's influence over Nepal. In early 2025, the newly elected Trump Administration suspended all foreign development aid, including the flagship MCC infrastructure grant, pending a policy "reevaluation" (Sharma, 2025). This 90-day halt of the \$500 million MCC project sent shockwaves through Nepal's development plans. It signaled that U.S. support could be fickle, undermining confidence in Nepal's Western partnerships. The power transmission line under the MCC was itself intended to bolster Nepal-India energy trade while its now delay only reinforces that India remains the indispensable partner for Nepal's connectivity.

Furthermore, over the past few years, Nepal has witnessed an unprecedented surge in pro-monarchy, pro-Hindu demonstrations. A turning point came in November 2023, when tens of thousands of protestors flooded the streets of Kathmandu waving Nepali flags and saffron banners, demanding the return of King Gyanendra and the end of secular republicanism. These calls to re-establish Nepal as a Hindu state and even restore its deposed monarchy have intensified, directly mirroring the ideology of India's Hindu right (Siyech, 2024). According to the U.S. State Department's 2022 report on international religious freedom, organizations affiliated with India's ruling BJP have been funding influential Nepali politicians across party lines to advocate for Hindu statehood (Giri, 2023). The RPP, long a marginal royalist faction, has gained electoral ground and was briefly a coalition partner in government after the 2022 elections, giving the Hindu state agenda new political weight. The diffusion of Hindutva ideology into Nepalese political and social discourse exemplifies India's strategic use of soft power. India's ruling elites actively pursue this strategy to culturally align Nepal more closely with India, thereby weakening communist and secular groups previously inclined toward China. This convergence transcends cultural influence, significantly reshaping Nepal's domestic political landscape in line with India's strategic objectives.

Thus, Nepal's trajectory in recent years reveals a decisive swing into India's sphere of influence, encompassing strategic, political, and ideological realms. This shift has often outpaced external perceptions. While analysts fixated on China's growing footprint in Nepal, India was quietly regaining primacy – through expanded trade and connectivity links, deft use of regional diplomacy, and the export of a Hindu nationalist narrative that resonates with factions of Nepal's polity.

6. Conclusion

This paper presents an analysis of the development of the bilateral relationship between Nepal and India since the Modi government came into power. It examines the reasons behind the “high start and low walk” phase, the subsequent phase of tense confrontation, and now the ever-closing trend between Nepal and India. Drawing from Nepal's perspective, the paper proposes an analytical framework for understanding its diplomatic behavior called “pull-distance diplomacy.” According to this framework, Nepal's political and economic dependence on India, as well as its proximity in terms of religious and cultural ties, far outweigh its interaction with China in terms of historical origins and present circumstances. Nepal's position with respect to India and China has never been equidistant; instead, it has been situated in a position that is closer to India, representing a bias status towards India.

Since the Modi government took office, it has emphasized “personalized diplomacy” and has adhered to the strategic goal of strong leadership. The government has also made adjustments to its foreign policy priorities. Under the guise of these methods, however, Modi's diplomacy is a blend of the brutal realism of the Indira Gandhi era (Malone, 2012, 47) and pragmatic diplomacy since the 1990s. Therefore, in dealing with Nepal, it adopts a mixture of toughness and pragmatism, continuing to intervene in Nepal's internal affairs with a “big brother” attitude, driven by hegemonic thinking. As a result, Nepal has become increasingly eager to seek strategic breakthroughs. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that, faced with a global polycrisis characterized by complex and intertwined challenges, smaller states like Nepal are not passive, homogeneous participants in international politics. Rather, Nepal actively asserts its agency, strategically navigating between internal developmental priorities and external geopolitical pressures.

It is also worth noting that Nepal's national strength makes it difficult to engage in direct bargaining with India. Consequently, Nepal has chosen a diplomatic path that involves a boomerang effect. It has frequently sent signals to China to demonstrate its intention of creating distance from India. This strategy includes the establishment of an Eminent Persons Group to review Nepal-India relations, the assertion of sovereignty over the Madhesi issue, a strong response to the 2020 border dispute, and a positive response to China's economic development initiative. By doing so, Nepal aims to increase its bargaining power with India. This process has further continually stimulated India's efforts to court Nepal. With Nepal's signing of the MCC agreement with the United States, the objective binding of interests between Nepal and India has become even tighter, and the distance between them has further decreased. Nepal has also achieved growth in its national interests through the boomerang effect.

As a country situated between two major powers, Nepal's primary objectives are to ensure national sovereignty, maintain regional stability, and hedge risks by aligning itself with larger external powers. Despite the objective fact that Nepal's proximity to India has been increasing, with their interests becoming more intertwined, Nepal's wise leaders fully understand that strengthening economic and trade ties with China is not only in their national interest but also beneficial to the prosperity and stability of South Asia. However, the issue is that India, which has always been guided by a hegemonic mindset in its South Asian policy, will not allow Nepal to “drift away” from its sphere of influence. Nepal will continue to face dual pressure from both internal and external sources for a considerable period.

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