

Nihar R. Nayak. 2014. *Strategic Himalayas: Republican Nepal and External Powers*. New Delhi: Pentagon Press and Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

The idea that Nepal is a pawn in a grand chess game of the super and regional powers is a commonplace perception among Nepalis. The mass media, public sphere and local tea shops are filled with allegations and counter allegations that Nepal's political and economic aspirations are somehow being thwarted by the powerful countries because of their geopolitical interests. Nevertheless, these claims become just what they are – claims without solid evidences to back them. In this context, *Strategic Himalayas: Republican Nepal and External Powers* by Nihar R. Nayak attempts to fill in the gaps and provide some detailed documentation of the foreign presence in Nepal and the Nepal's interaction with foreign powers.

Nayak is a research fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), a government of India supported think-tank in New Delhi. Much of his academic work comprises of journal articles related to Nepal and its politics, while the IDSA website describes his expertise as, “Nepal, Bhutan, Left wing extremism/Maoist conflict, Cooperative Security in South Asia.” The book itself is co-published by IDSA, which sees itself as “a non-partisan, autonomous body” and hence makes a disclaimer that the book does not reflect the views of the IDSA or the government of India. Nevertheless, the book gives an interesting insight into how Indian policy makers assess geopolitics in Nepal.

The first chapter of the book is the introductory chapter, briefly discussing what will follow in the subsequent chapters. The second chapter records the history of the foreign policy of Nepal especially after the demise of the Rana regime in 1951. It states how King Mahendra and later King Birendra took a diversified foreign policy stance after 1955 that was independent of blatant Indian influence. At a pessimistic time when Nepalis have not seen their government’s credible presence in international forums, the chapter sheds light on Nepal’s activism in multilateral forums such as the non-aligned movement (NAM) and its advocacy for land-locked developing countries (LLDCs). The chapter concludes with how the foreign powers have gained their interest during and after the civil war.

The third chapter begins with the famous quote of Nehru in 1950 that the Himalayas have been India’s protectors from a long time and that India cannot allow the Himalayas to be penetrated (by China). Therefore, like the title of the chapter suggests, India’s policy towards Nepal seems to have been guided by treating the latter as the former’s “sphere of influence” and guarding it against any other foreign power. Regarding the Madhes movement since 2007, the chapter admits that India has been supportive of the federalist demands in Nepal. It goes on to explain how Pahades have continued to see the Madhesi cause with suspicion because of the latter’s connections with India.

The author discusses China in Nepal in the fourth chapter with regards to the former’s relationship with India. The chapter’s astute observation is that China’s foreign policy objective globally has shifted from Deng Xiaoping’s “keeping a low profile, and getting something accomplished” (p. 76) to Hu Jintao’s “multi-directional diplomacy and focused on... neighbouring countries” (p. 76). Hence, there is no surprise that China is

increasing its presence in Nepal in socio cultural projects and foreign direct investment (FDI) as it has been doing elsewhere in the world as well. Nepal has indeed been a country in the side-lines of China's foreign policy but it is increasingly gaining significance, especially with China's Tibetan concern and its competition with India and the USA in Nepal.

On the other hand, the USA, the only super power of the world would not stay timidly in Nepali politics. The fifth chapter demonstrates how the US was interested in Nepal to contain China's communism since the 1950s. But from the 1970s, the US became less interested in Nepal as it followed the policy of rapprochement with China. Hence, American aid in Nepal had reduced from 1970 to 2001, when again Nepal became a country of interest to the US because of the implications of the 9/11 attacks. Following its anti-communist instincts, the US had opposed the peace talks of the Maoists and the then government in 2003. The US opposition to the peace talks continued even in 2005 when the historic 12-point agreement was signed in Delhi. After 2006, the US has been funding social projects more than before and has taken out the Nepali Maoists from its terrorist list in 2012.

Like the USA, other western countries are also active in Nepal. The sixth chapter states that the European Union (EU) and its major member countries (namely, the UK, Germany, and Norway), along with Switzerland, increased their funds and presence in Nepal mostly since the 1970s. With regards to the nature of the Maoist conflict, there were differences between the EU members too. While Nordic countries saw structural issues like poverty and inequality as the main causes of the conflict, countries such as the UK went in line with the US and saw the Maoists as terrorists. It was only after the peace talks that the EU countries had a fairly unified political line. Nayak observes that the EU countries started to support the peace process by "providing technical and financial assistance" (p. 139). He also notes that the *Janajāti* cause benefitted with substantial EU funds as they could fund their political and social activism with these funds.

Surprisingly to this reviewer, the seventh chapter in the book features Pakistan as an influential country in Nepal. Since the 1950s, Pakistan took an initiative to maintain a harmonious relationship with Nepal because both the countries' elites had a common cause to unite against – India. Following on from this anti-India stance, the chapter notes that the former prime minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had equated the relationship between Nepal and Pakistan with the relationship between India and Afghanistan. True to the

present scenario, the book also mentions how the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan has been affecting the whole SAARC region.

The concluding chapter sees the increasing political roles of the extra-regional countries like the USA, the EU and, to some extent, China in Nepal as the biggest contributors to the present souring of relations between India and Nepal. Likewise, as the external powers were divided in various political and constitutional issues in the constituent assembly, Nepali domestic players could not come up with a constitution for too long. Towards the end, the book suggests Nepal to “engage...India and China by taking into account their genuine security concerns...[and] take advantage of the economic rise of its neighbours” (p. 182).

The major strength of the book is that it lays out in open, the ups and downs in the relationships between Nepal and powerful countries through comprehensive primary and secondary research. The official documents and media reports are extensively used. The author has also made an effort to interview major Nepali and Indian politicians and civil servants himself. After reading the book, a Nepali reader will feel that the stories in the Nepali mass media about foreign influence are not just an ultranationalist narrative but it does have some substantive basis.

However, the major flaw of the book is that though there is a disclaimer that it does not reflect the ethos of the co-publisher IDSA, a reader would wonder if the author’s biases stem from his association with a prominent state-funded think-tank. There is a clear attempt to justify Indian policies and activities in Nepal. For instance, for the author, King Mahendra was guided not by the sovereignty of Nepal but just by the desire to consolidate his monarchy when he diversified Nepal’s foreign policy from 1955. The book is littered with value judgements and assumptions such as this, without any concrete evidence to base them upon.

Likewise, more than 70 countries had supported King Birendra’s proposal of signifying Nepal as the “zone of peace” (ZoP). But India did not endorse the proposal. The author does not delve deep into India’s reasons except for a line that ZoP would “undermine the 1950 Friendship Treaty” (p. 22). So much so, the author justifies the 1989 Indian blockade against Nepal as legitimate under “international law” without making an effort to consider the plight of the common Nepalis during that blockade or engaging with the views of many Nepali commentators who have suggested that India’s then actions violated international laws and norms. The book also discusses

dissenting voices in Nepal against the 1950 India-Nepal Friendship Treaty but it is quick to dismiss them merely as nationalist voices as opposed to rational ones. For instance, the author does not engage with arguments such as those of sociologist Chaitanya Mishra that see the treaty as problematic. Mishra goes in detail why clause six and seven of the treaty make the Nepali economy depended on India (Mishra 2070 v.s.: 201).

On the contrary, when it comes to the relationships between China and Nepal or Pakistan and Nepal, the book is strongly direct about its claims with pure value judgements. For instance, the author asserts, "...China has been seen as a hegemon in its dealings with neighbours..." (p. 102). The immediate question that follows is: who sees China as a hegemon and why? These questions are not asked and answered in the book. Therefore, to me, it seems futile to label a fellow neighboring country as a hegemon. Similarly, describing Pakistani activities in Nepal, the book directly links Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) with terrorism without any qualifier. Much of the sources quoted against the Pakistani activities in Nepal are Indian media and a few academics. Even if all the Indian sources were correct, it would be apt to question whether the ISI operatives are part of a completely state sponsored policy or a nefarious mischief of some government officials. Nevertheless, it should be noted that not all instances and sources cited are biased. For instance, the book makes a point that Nepali police had raided a hotel in Kathmandu and seized documents that disclosed ISI operations.

However, these instances do not justify the hyperbolic version of the book against Pakistan. In fact, there are many cases like that of Yashim Bhatkal, a known radical Islamic terrorist from India not Pakistan, who was arrested from Raxaul, Bihar in 2013 (Singh and Ghimire 2013). He was suspected to have visited madrasas in the Nepal Tarai but he obviously crossed the border from India. The tendency of Indian agencies, as is demonstrated in the book, has been to point their fingers towards Nepal as being "insensitive" to the former's "security concerns." Whereas, the fact is that even if there are a few instances of cross-border terrorism, they need to be tackled by both the countries by cooperating together and having an appropriate plan in the porous border areas.

The conclusion of the book concedes that India's policy over Nepal has been security-centric. However, in a classic realist fashion, Nepal is valued by the author based on its utility for India's relationship particularly with China and not with Nepal itself. "India has built physical defences all

along the India-China border but it remains vulnerable along Nepal's border with China" (p. 44). The book also states that Rasuwagadhi-Syabrubeshi-Kathmandu-Birganj road, which crosses Nepal from its northern border to the southern border, will be more conducive to Nepal and China for trade and transport than the current Arniko highway. Reading these two statements together only points towards the vindication of a usual apprehension in Nepal that the Indian policy poses impediment to the north-south development of Nepal. Similarly, without an ounce of basis, the book asserts that "Nepal... would prefer to maintain its close relationship with India as a deterrent for any potential Chinese aggression" (p. 45) when the prevalent mood of a large section of Nepalis is just the opposite.

The author has presented a large set of Indian perceptions on Nepal in this book. Though its value judgements can be clearly questioned and the book does not present anything entirely new, it is still an important read, especially if it is read with an acceptance that it is bound to give a perspective (if not the perspective) on Nepal from New Delhi. After all, views from New Delhi are significant to anybody interested in Nepal, whether they are academics, journalists or general readers.

References

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