

---

# THREE SOUTH ASIAN LANDLOCKED STATES RELATION DYNAMICS WITH THE USA, CHINA, AND INDIA: CHALLENGES TO BALANCED RELATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR COOPERATION

**Mohammad Shakil Bhuiyan**

*School of Political Science and Public Management,  
Shanxi University, China*

**Wang Yi**

*School of Political Science and Public Management,  
Shanxi University, China*

*This paper examines the relationship dynamics of three South Asian landlocked states (LLS), Bhutan, Nepal, and Afghanistan, with the USA, China, and India. Our focal objective is to identify and comprehend the challenges these three landlocked countries face in maintaining a strategic balance with these powers. The pivotal geographical position of the three LLS makes them critically important for major powers. Our analysis reveals that the strategic interests of the US and India in countering China's growing engagement in South Asia are creating a complex and competitive dynamic relationship among them. This competing power play has significant implications for the ties between the three landlocked countries and these powers. The paper also identifies long-standing unresolved border disagreements and security concerns at the state-to-state level as other factors impacting their relations. On top of that, the domestic economic and political features within LLS influence the patterns of their interactions with the major powers. The analysis highlights the challenges LLS face in balancing relations with the three major powers and proposes specific areas where cooperation is possible. The paper provides fresh insights into South Asian foreign relations, offering important perspectives for policymakers and researchers working on LLS.*

**Keywords:** *South Asian Landlocked States, Strategic Competition, Balanced Relations, Cooperation.*

## **1. Introduction**

Bhutan, Afghanistan, and Nepal are the three strategically vital smaller landlocked South Asian states (LLS). They are gaining increasing importance in the regional geopolitical landscape, particularly in the context of the interactions and agendas of the US,

Recommended citation: Bhuiyan, M. S., and Yi, W. Three South Asian Landlocked States Relation Dynamics with the USA, China, and India: Challenges to Balanced Relations and Options for Cooperation. *Journal of Globalization Studies*, Vol. 16 No. 2, November 2025, pp. 135–152. DOI: 10.30884/jogs/2025.02.07.

China, and India. Their strategic location, security dynamics, and economic potential contribute to their growing significance to the regional and global powers. For example, China, the globe's largest economic power after the US, has direct borders with three LLS. Due to such proximity, these countries are significant regarding border security aspects for China's national and international security management. Today, China positions itself as the leading trading ally and investor for South Asian nations like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Rahman (2014) indicates that China's soft power strategy towards South Asia focuses on economic expansion, security stability, regional harmony, peace, and development.

On the other hand, India, the region's most powerful nation both militarily and economically, sees China's growing economic and diplomatic footholds under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in its neighboring countries as a security threat and a challenge to its regional dominance. So, to lessen the Chinese effect, India has been trying to strengthen its relations with neighbors through strategies like the 'Neighborhood First' and 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region). The US, on the flip side, views China as its main rival and holds key interests in South Asia, including addressing security concerns, limiting China's influence, and advancing partnerships through coalitions and trade (Khizar and Hassan 2024). Since strategic tug-of-competition between Beijing and Washington has intensified, India aims to broaden its geopolitical ambitions by cashing in on the China-US rivalry. To achieve this, India supports the so-called US's rule-based Indo-Pacific governance through collaboration within the 'QUAD' framework and strengthened defense partnership (Schleich 2020).

Therefore, countries in the Indian subcontinent are struggling to balance their relations with Washington, New Delhi, and Beijing amidst the complex and multifaceted strategic competition among the three powers. For example, border concerns between Bhutan and China are interwoven with long-standing tensions between India and China over their shared border (Bhonsale 2020; Shekhawat 2021). Despite being in a favorable geostrategic position, sharing borders with two top global economies in the aspiration age of the Asian century, Bhutan faces compulsion due to ongoing tensions between Delhi and Beijing (Ethirajan 2023). Bhutan is often described as 'sandwiched' between its two neighboring countries (Subhash 2018). As things stand, Bhutan is making efforts to develop stable relations with China while avoiding strain on its relationship with India.

In the same vein, Nepal's place between India and China poses both advantages and disadvantages. Both China and India have extensively invested in Nepal (Lama 2023). Nepal seeks to maintain "equi-proximity" ties with its two neighbors (Sharma 2022). Acharya (2023) cautions that pitting neighbors against each other could endanger Nepal's national interests. Like elsewhere, the US's prime objective in Nepal is to fend off Beijing's influence. The divergent strategic priorities of China, the US, and India have pushed Kathmandu into a tougher balancing act.

The extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan reflects Afghanistan's desire to leverage China's massive infrastructure investment. While India's previous relationship with the Taliban leaves Afghanistan with a credible alternative to China, its calculative diplomatic outreach to Taliban 2.0 also signals that

India is not going to hand over the power vacuum to China completely. However, Afghanistan's uneasy relations with Pakistan and Iran may impact its relations with China. Afghanistan's strategic location in Asia has made it a significant area of interest for India and China. India and China are adapting country-specific regional political and economic strategies in response to South Asia's complex geopolitical landscape and a mix of traditional and non-traditional security issues (Akhter and Yuan 2020).

South Asian geopolitics today reflects changing alliances, increased economic engagement with China, and heightened nationalist sentiments. The region is shifting toward a multipolar system in which smaller states have more choices, many of which favor China as a more benevolent and less interfering ally than India. Thus, India's strong allies, such as Bhutan and Nepal, are also stepping towards China (Lego 2025). This paper utilizes a qualitative–descriptive approach for its analysis. It closely examines the dynamics of relations between three South Asian LLS and three global powers. The paper sets its aims to analyze the three LLS's challenges associated with maintaining balanced relations with major powers and identify potential avenues for cooperation with these states.

## 2. Bhutan: Delicate Journey of Achieving Balance

Bhutan is an inland country nestled in the Eastern Himalayas, and has a glorious carbon-neutral country status. Historically, it has shared close ties with India and has been deeply influenced by Indian culture, politics, and development assistance. In recent years, however, Bhutan has sought to balance its foreign relations by engaging with other countries, including the United States and China. India's influence in Bhutan is primarily due to geopolitical proximity, cultural affinity, and historical ties. India provides Bhutan with significant financial and technical assistance, as well as support for infrastructure development. The very foundation of India-Bhutan relations is the historic India-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship of 1949. This treaty establishes India as a consultative state for Bhutan on matters relating to external and security issues, while respecting Bhutan's sovereignty and refraining from interfering in the country's internal affairs. The exports from Bhutan to India constituted an average of 86.5 % of its overall exports, while India contained an average of 79 % of the total Bhutan's imports from 1981 to 2001 (Choden 2004). This statistic evidently highlights the strong economic dependence of Bhutan on India. India, on the other hand, is the largest importer of Bhutan's hydroelectricity. India imports between 5,000 and 5,000 million megawatt-hours per year (Times of India 2017). However, Thimphu has expressed concern over its Indian debt of INR118.77 billion (2016–2017) that is largely owing to the development of hydro-power entities (Ranjan 2019). Bhutan's recent bid to tie with China stems from its interest in accessing China's expanding economic opportunities (Shivamurthy 2022). Although Bhutan enjoyed certain flexibility to pursue its foreign policy without India's counsel and guidance under the 2007 Indo-Bhutan treaty, it maintained warm ties with India because of Delhi's influence over Bhutan's diplomacy, defense, and economy (Dorji *et al.* 2021).

Bhutan also shares a border with China and has a deep-rooted religious-cultural engagement with Tibet, but it is China's only neighbor without official diplomatic ties.

Nevertheless, economic and commercial ties between the two nations are minimal, and their shared border is still closed (Mathou 2004). The ties between China and Bhutan have experienced variations due to different events, including the Tibetan issue, boundary negotiations, and the Sino-Indian War. However, relations have started to normalize since the 1980s. China is eager to settle its border issue with Bhutan, and the two parties have officially met 24 times in boundary dialogues since 1984 and agreed on a 'Three-Step Roadmap' resolution. The two nations 'Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility in Bhutan-China Border Areas' was a major development in their bilateral relationship. This is one of the Bhutan's significant bilateral accords. Bhutan's non-deployment of soldiers following the Doklam stalemate and Bhutan's Prime Minister Tshering's remarks on the border discussion, that China-Bhutan has no significant border issues, only certain areas remain to be demarcated (Haidar 2023), signal Bhutan's current China policy. Again, Tshering asserted that the Doklam matter should be settled through the collaboration between the three countries. This perspective was taken by certain individuals in New Delhi as an endorsement of Chinese claims on the area. Furthermore, Bhutanese analyst W. Sangey suggests that Bhutan should pursue a strategy to develop a parallel import pathway, hence decreasing Bhutan's heavy reliance on India (Malhotra 2023; Ethirajan 2023). Bhutan's silence on the Doklam boundary issue suggests that it is not a matter of its crucial interest. Bhutan is now trying to take independent steps to engage with China on its own terms (Menon and Kanisetti 2018). Bhutan consciously employed a silence approach on Doklam incident to avoid potential encounters with both powers. Consequently, due to its responsible position, a state of equilibrium was maintained between the two powers (Kaul 2022). Bhutan also stands on the 'One China' principle and stays away from any actions which may potentially upset China. These findings further underscore Bhutanese efforts to carry out a hedging strategy. Bhutan's current orientation toward China may be partly driven by lingering concerns related to India's defeat in the 1962 war. Acknowledging Beijing's rapid growth in economic and military strength, Bhutan likely approaches its relations with China cautiously to protect its interests and steer clear of risks arising from strategic competition. It is worth noting that China is Bhutan's sixth-largest import market, despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations between the two neighbors (Talukdar 2013). Still, according to political analysts, the unresolved boundary issue between China, India, and Bhutan is a major factor influencing trilateral cooperation. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize India as a significant factor when analyzing Bhutan's relations with China. The interactions and ties between China and India, as well as between China and Bhutan, are in fact complex and tangled (Dorji *et al.* 2021). Indian factors, undoubtedly, continue to play an important role in shaping Bhutan's China policy.

In recent years, the United States and Bhutan have steadily strengthened their cooperation, despite not having official diplomatic relations. The United States has provided Bhutan with development aid assistance in areas such as education, healthcare, and others (Kumar 2025). In 2019, J. Sullivan, the then US Deputy Secretary of State, visited Bhutan, marking the highest-level American diplomatic visit to the country in two decades. Mike Pompeo's statement on Bhutan as a key partner in "advancing a rules-based Indo-Pacific" (The Economic Times 2019) underlines the US's interest in the country.

More precisely, the US's strategic attention in Bhutan is primarily due to its position between India and China. Hence, this engagement can also be seen as part of its tracking of China's rise. Bhutan's relationship with India remains its strongest and most influential. Bhutan's engagement with the United States and its cautious approach to China, however, reflect its desire to balance its relationship and diversify its foreign policy options. Historical ties, geo-economic considerations, and the broader context of regional geopolitics shape the dynamics of US-China-India relations in Bhutan.

### **3. Afghanistan: The Shared Interests and Dilemma**

Afghanistan, another strategically important South Asian country, can serve as a potential doorway to Greater Central Asia and is the site of some of the world's rare mineral resources. The interaction of the US, China, and India in Afghanistan involves a mix of cooperation, competition, and differing interests. Over the years, Afghanistan has been featured on the front page of newspapers due to its unstable political conditions, terrorism and extremist activities, invasion, Civil War, and status as a theater of major power contestation. Afghanistan went through the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) and the US war in Afghanistan (2001–2021), both of which influenced and impacted its political trajectory. It is unique in this respect since it has also witnessed both communist and radical religious governance. Besides their respective geopolitical and economic motives, the US, China, and India hold a shared objective in Afghanistan, namely to combat terrorism and keep Afghanistan away from terrorist organizations as a safer home. The US, China, and India are all fearful of the possible spillover consequences of Afghanistan's terrorism in the border region.

Afghanistan was passive to US policies until the onset of the Cold War. The US prioritized Afghanistan during the Cold War out of concern that the expansionist Soviet Union would conquer Afghanistan and advance south to the Arabian Peninsula. The Cold War facilitated the receipt of almost US\$1 billion in financial assistance for Kabul from both giants. Both the Soviet Union and the US constructed modern transport infrastructure in Afghanistan. A substantial portion of military men pursued their education and training at military colleges in both the USSR and the US. However, political scholars believe that the US strategy performed a major part in turning Afghanistan into a Soviet Union ally. The Soviet Union's substantial financial aid compared to the US during 1955 and 1965, and the US's almost negligible support between 1965 and 1973, led to Afghanistan's alignment with the Soviet Union (Rubin 1996; Emadi 1997; cited in Jabeen et al. 2010). After Soviet invasion in 1979, the US realized the threat of a communist control in Afghanistan. The US President, Jimmy Carter, warned Soviet President Brezhnev to leave Afghanistan or suffer repercussions. The US utilized Pakistan to contest the Soviets in Afghan land up until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The USA provided military supplies to Soviet opposition groups (Mujahideen and other resistance groups) through Pakistan without being involved directly. In 1981, the US government funded a \$3.2 billion military assistance program aimed at providing support to Pakistan in its efforts to back the Afghan resistance movement. The United States sought to circumvent an open war with the Soviet Union and hence embraced a strategy of clandestine assistance to resistance movements. American and Pakistani intelligence

agencies, the CIA and ISI, supplied a majority of arms to the Mujahideen (Jabeen *et al.* 2010).

The US involvement in Afghanistan declined again following the Soviet withdrawal. The post-war conflict among various resistance groups stemming from disagreements over power sharing led to the onset of a civil war in Afghanistan. After a long power struggle between internal power groups, the Taliban, a radical religious group, took political control for the first time in 1996. Initially, the US views the Taliban as an agent to establish order in Afghanistan and the region, aiming to facilitate the building of an oil pipeline. However, for a number of reasons, the United States quickly shifted its approach to the Taliban. In 1998, the founder of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, was accused of bombing US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The US also accused the Taliban of harboring Al-Qaeda camps and other terrorists in Afghanistan. In response, the US fired a long-range missile towards alleged Al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan. When the Taliban refused to extradite the Al-Qaeda chief, the USA persuaded the UNO to enforce economic sanctions on Afghanistan. The US employed multiple strategies to depose the Taliban over the years, but was unsuccessful. In retaliation for the 9/11 tragedy and the failed diplomatic endeavor to ensure bin Laden's surrender, the prime accused of the terrorist attack, the US, launched a joint military operation in Afghanistan in the name of the war on terrorism. Within a month of operation, US coalition forces succeeded in dethroning the Taliban and establishing a pro-western government in Afghanistan. However, the US fought a tough and lengthy war against Taliban fighters in Afghanistan for the next 20 years and withdrew in 2021 after negotiating with the Taliban. The Taliban 2.0 regime was established after the US withdrawal. The US and Soviet war fates in Afghanistan were similar in nature. More precisely, the US has encountered substantial expenses in its efforts to perpetually immobilize Al Qaeda and its associates. In the war on terror, the US has reportedly lost 6,874 lives and spent US\$4.4 trillion (Goepner 2016). Several political scholars have argued that the US's wars on terror have had limited effectiveness, while the USA and the West as a whole are allegedly plundering 'Just War' discourses to justify their action in Afghanistan and the application of aggression in the Global War on Terror campaign (Connah 2021). The US's military campaign in Afghanistan has been perceived as a comprehensive defeat. The defeat is also a defeat for NATO and the European Union (Bobkin 2022). Nevertheless, according to some, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is part of Joe Biden's foreign affairs approach: (1) using military power sparingly; (2) restricting the US's military actions solely to safeguarding crucial national interests; and (3) concentrating US policy more on the Indo-Pacific region. Yet, some scholars believe that withdrawal from Afghanistan will give America more space to focus on China (Vinjamuri 2022; The Wall Street Journal 2021).

Afghanistan, one of China's neighbors, had not received adequate attention in Chinese foreign policy until the 2000s. China's involvement in Afghan affairs, particularly on the political spectrum, was limited. Except a few regional conferences and discussions, China's relationship with Afghanistan before 2018 was primarily economic. China's primary concern in its relationship with the Taliban/Afghanistan has always been security. The internal stability of Xinjiang is China's principal security issue regarding

Afghanistan. The Chinese government remained concerned about the presence of ethnic Uighur insurgents on Afghan soil. China was especially apprehensive about the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Nonetheless, Chinese concerns also include militant and radical extremists to utilize Afghanistan as a stronghold, which could expand to other states in the region and threaten Chinese investments and citizens (Zhao 2013; Szczudlik-Tatar 2014; Zhou *et al.* 2022). The China-Afghanistan relationship has been developing since 2001. China holds the title of being the primary foreign investor in Afghanistan. It secured the deal for oil exploration in the Amu Darya basin, developed the Mes Aynak copper field in Logar, and constructed extensive railway infrastructure (Pandey 2019). However, the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan has culminated in a natural expansion of neighboring countries' influence and related liabilities. Thus, the withdrawal and the Taliban's ascend to authority shifted China's approach to Afghanistan in different ways. The growing Chinese engagement in the security, economic, and humanitarian spheres in Afghanistan has led to both possibilities and challenges for its interests there and beyond (Marvoti *et al.* 2022; Zhou *et al.* 2022). China has become the first nation to approve the Taliban 2.0's chosen representative as Afghanistan's diplomat to Beijing (Ghosh 2023).

The 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' notion of China's new approach to Afghanistan recognizes the country's autonomy, sovereignty, territorial stability, and people-selected developmental pathway. China places importance on the principle of non-interference from both sides (Szczudlik-Tatar 2014). Beijing recognizes the necessity of engaging with the ruling administration, regardless of its composition, in order to obtain the necessary protection it needs. Wang Wenbin, the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, stated China's stance on Afghanistan is unwavering and consistent. China urges Afghanistan to actively respond to international apprehensions and calls for collaborative efforts in reconstruction, development, and combating terrorist threats, thereby fostering "regional peace, stability, and prosperity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2024).

Its current Afghanistan policy and relationship with the Taliban are guided by the aforementioned policy directives. A recent remark by the Taliban spokesman, citing China as their principal partner, and the appointment of a Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan imply a growing collaboration between the two nations. However, to safeguard its investment ventures in Afghanistan and the neighboring regions, China needs assurance that the Taliban will actively contribute to the necessary stability (Jami *et al.* 2021).

Afghanistan and India have had historic, socio-cultural, and civilizational ties since before their independence. Thus, India maintained strong ambassadorial ties with all Afghan administrations, from Zahir Shah to those that assumed power following the Soviet intervention. This continued until the establishment of the first regime of the Taliban. Indian policy and relations with Afghanistan, however, have always been influenced by its mutual animosity with Pakistan and security concerns. For instance, India maintained good relations with Soviet-backed regimes in Afghanistan and overlooked the Soviet invasion because it worried a Mujahedeen triumph would give Pakistan geopolitical clout in Afghanistan. Due to the strained bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, India decided to extend support to the adversaries of Pakistan, thereby align-

ing itself with the ruling groups in Kabul that were supported by the Soviet Union (Rais 1993; Sharma 2011; Pant 2012). Although India was the leading proponent of a non-alignment strategy at the time, the US's proximity and aid assistance to Pakistan also influenced to the development of this policy for maintaining the balance of power. However, following the Soviet withdrawal and the Taliban's subsequent rise to power, India's strategy underwent a complete reversal. India accused the Taliban and Pakistan's military and ISI of sheltering anti-Indian extremist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed to destabilize India and Kashmir, and broke all ties with the Taliban. In addition, India's mistrust of the Taliban was reinforced by the 1999 Indian Airlines hijacking episode and the Taliban's position on India-administered Kashmir. India-Afghanistan ties during the Taliban 1.0 regime are seen as a dark episode in their relationship's history. India's antipathy towards the Taliban continued until September 11, 2001 (Paliwal 2015; Price 2013). The US-led ISAF's military takeover of Afghanistan in 2001 and the collapse of the Taliban rule offered India an opportunity to resume relations with Afghanistan. Since then, India has followed a soft power policy characterized by non-armed, non-forceful, and cooperative approaches in its dealings with Afghanistan. The soft power strategy includes and emphasizes financial assistance, humanitarian efforts, capacity building, and institutional ties. India's post-Taliban 1.0 strategy prioritizes blocking an Islamist government that could aid Pakistani and Kashmiri radicals over promoting a Delhi-friendly government (Ahmad 2022; Price 2013).

To pursue these objectives, India supported Afghanistan's full SAARC membership and became the principal regional aid contributor to Afghanistan in the post-Taliban 1.0 era. By late 2021, India's investment in development and reconstruction initiatives in Afghanistan reached roughly \$3 billion (Chandra 2007; Ganaie and Ganaie 2022). After the US exit and the Taliban's regained to authority, it is anticipated that India's interests will once again be at risk, similar to the Taliban's first administration, and that India may return to its previous policy. But developments went in another direction. The resolution passed during India's presidency at the UNO Security Council, which recognizes the Taliban as a pivotal actor, signals that India seeks to keep its engagement with the Taliban (Roy 2021). India supplied 6,500 MT of wheat to Afghanistan during food shortages following the Taliban's takeover. Delhi allocated Rs. 200 crores for Afghanistan's aid in the 2022/23 budget. In reaction to Delhi's humanitarian aid, the Afghan ambassador to India, Farid Mamundzay, stated that India is not withdrawing assistance despite the Taliban taking power (Haider 2022; Laskar 2022). The resumption of India's Embassy in Kabul, after a one-year suspension, is widely seen as a significant step aimed at establishing communication with the Taliban and securing India's very existence in Afghanistan. Pakistan sees India's outreach to the Taliban as tactical and believes a total disengagement from Kabul will increase its insecurity. India wants to capitalize on Afghanistan-Pakistan border tensions. Pakistan suspects that improved ties between India and the Taliban might lead Delhi to use Afghan territory against Islamabad. Pakistani academics argued that aiding the TTP's anti-Pakistan acts might enable India to undermine Pakistan and distract Islamabad from Afghanistan (Farooq 2022). However, the changing Indian policy to the Taliban can also be interpreted in regard to contemporary China-India competition and regional security concerns.

Beijing has indicated that it is looking at dealing with the Taliban, even though it does not recognize the current government yet. New Delhi is worried that the space left behind by America may potentially be occupied by China (Sharma 2022). Kaura (2020) believes the rising Chinese footprint in Afghanistan via BRI has the capacity to compromise the US and India's geopolitical interests in Afghanistan. The promising future for China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan in Afghanistan, consequently, would put the US and India in an opposite position (Hussain 2020). However, India is currently adopting a circumspect stance to avoid raising Western doubts that it might formally recognize the Taliban government. On the contrary, it is advised that the US's Afghanistan strategy should not be based on its rivalry with China (Felbab-Brown 2020). However, Trump's plan to reclaim Bagram air base, which would enable the US to monitor China from Afghanistan, underscores America's strategic interest in containing China in the region.

Despite the Taliban's efforts to balance power, such as agreeing to extend the CPEC and professing an intention to establish good relations with India, they will experience a range of challenges in the near future. The challenges include security concerns, border tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the regional and global dynamics of US-India-China and Pakistan-India relations. However, for many optimists, China's closeness to Afghanistan, its historical non-intervention in Afghan domestic issues, and its strategic influence over Pakistan are some of the variables that could potentially contribute to Afghanistan's ability to overcome its long-standing vulnerabilities (Pandey 2019). Overall, a combination of common interests, strategic competition, and diverging priorities shapes the dynamics of US-China-India relations in Afghanistan. The future of these dynamics will depend on the development of the situation in Afghanistan and the actions and policies pursued by each nation.

#### **4. Nepal: Puzzling on Geopolitical Balancing Acts**

Nepal is considered a buffer state between China and India. Nepal's geo-strategic benefits dwells in maintaining amicable ties with its two neighbors and strengthening relations with the wider international community (Bhattarai 2005). Both India and China have a common matter of attention regarding their territorial security associated with Nepal. Each country is apprehensive that this politically vulnerable territory could be exploited in ways that may undermine its national interests (Nepal 2021). Nepal shares a border with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and TAR is a key consideration that influences China's approach to South Asia. Therefore, both countries strive to keep Nepal in their security observation.

India's extensive influence in Nepal can be attributed to several factors. A few of them are Nepal's landlocked status, shared cultural and religious affinities, exclusive trade, and the 1950 treaty between the two countries. Nepal has always been part of India's security posture. India has been involved in many of Nepal's development efforts. It helps improve Nepal's connectivity, energy supply, and critical infrastructure. The connection between Nepal and China, on the other hand, dates back to ancient times. The two neighbors officially established their diplomatic relations in 1955 (Dahal 2019). The partnership between China and Nepal has undergone significant improve-

ment since 2015. China's entry with the BRI in the Himalayan region has brought a sharp rise in Chinese investment in Nepal. China has become a major development partner for Nepal and is actively participating in infrastructure projects, trade, and investment. Between 2015 and 2017, China emerged as the top foreign direct investor in Nepal. Similarly, military collaboration between Nepal and China is gaining traction (Sahoo 2024). China and Nepal launched their inaugural joint military drill, named "Sagarmatha Friendship" 2017 (Zongyi 2017). Following a significant downturn in its relationship with India after 2015, Nepal has begun to diversify its trade, actively seeking new economic partnerships with China.

During the Maoist rule in Nepal, there was a deliberate effort to offset India's significant influence by inviting China to assume a more prominent role. Pushpa Kamal Dahal made China his first international visit after becoming Prime Minister. Indian observers feared that Prime Minister Prachanda's trip to China suggested a shift in the regional power dynamics favoring China. Indian media interpreted the Maoists' strategy of balancing relations with Beijing as the termination of the "Special India-Nepal relationship". Likewise, the CPN (UML) under Madhav Kumar Bhattarai's and Regmi's governments faced opposition criticism, being labeled as pro-Indian due to signing agreement like 'BIPPA' (Kandel 2024). These influences and internal political mechanisms disclose that Nepalese foreign policies are shaped by the regime's preferences (Bao 2021). It is commonly perceived that democratic forces tend to receive backing and sponsorship from the India and West, whereas socialist/ leftists parties are backed by China. China has indeed provided extensive support to leftist regimes since rise to power. However, it is essential to recognize that, prior to this, China maintained a strong relationship with Nepal's monarch. For instance, between 1970 and 1989, China funded 42 different projects in Nepal through outright grants, which supported the construction of roads, factories, and other essential structures (Garver 1991; cited in Johny 2024).

Nepal has faced four blockades from India: 1970 and 1989 owing to Chinese affiliation, and 1990 due to discontent with Nepal's new constitution and an unofficial financial blockade of 2015. Nepal's growing political and economic alignment with China has become a major point of discussion and analysis within Indian policy and academic circles. India traditionally views Nepal as a territory within its sphere of influence. Any ambitious initiative from Nepal that has ties to China is typically viewed with suspicion by India. India worries about China's position in Nepal and the Himalayas. India perceives the growing Sino-Nepalese cooperation as a direct threat to its 'interests in Nepal'. Politicians, traditional security forces, and scholars in India have "China phobia". They oppose a Marxist union in Nepal because they see it as a means for China to spread its influence. India's top priority is to keep Nepal away from Chinese foot trails. China, on the other hand, is much concern about stopping Tibetan anti- China activities in Nepalese territory. China wants a politically stable and cohesive Nepal and is interested in trade expansion via TAR (Neupane 2022).

In a shift in foreign policy, Nepal has adopted a 'hedging' strategy toward both of its powerful neighbors. A key motivation is to secure alternative economic and infrastructure development and to reduce over-dependency and domination of India. Nepal

seeks infrastructure and economic growth through Chinese investments such as the BRI, aiming to navigate its geopolitical constraints (Johny 2024). But some Indian officials, like former Ambassador Krishna V. Rajan, and scholars like Prof. B. C. Upreti, view it as a political tactic, suggesting Nepali political parties use anti-India rhetoric and the 'China card' for political gain. However, Kumar (2020), argues the India-Nepal relation deterioration is largely 'self-inflicted' by India's flawed political decisions and 'short-sighted policy' towards its neighbors. An illustration of this is the 2015 fuel crisis, when India's blockade of oil supplies, despite assurances, led to a serious shortage in Nepal. Such policy stance has contributed to a growth in public resentment towards India in Nepal. On the other side, China's subsequent positive intervention, providing free fuel and signing a historic oil agreement, broke India's monopoly and directly enabled Nepal's energy diversification, significantly reducing a key point of Indian influence. Support and opposition to the US's MCC accord and Chinese BRI can be understood from dynamics of influenced Nepalese politics by the external actors. Nepal, between two powers vying for global influence, is seen as having the prospect to take advantage of the situation and become a significant frontline for the strategic contest between emerging China and cautious India (Bhattacharya 2009).

On the other hand, the US and Nepal have a history of cooperation in various sectors, including development assistance, trade, and people-to-people exchanges. The US has been one of the largest donors of development aid to Nepal and has provided tax exemptions to certain Nepali products for the US marketplace under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has been active in Nepal, and is implementing several programs aimed at supporting economic growth and reducing poverty. Nepal's importance to the US is mainly due to its geographical position. In the context of changing global power dynamics, the US views rising China as its prime geopolitical competitor; thus, it is normal for the US to make efforts to increase its influence over China's neighbors. Many consider the Millennium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) grant to Nepal as a counter to China's BRI. In Nepal, political groups have questioned the objectives of the MCC, alleging that it is a component of the US's IPS (Indo-Pacific Strategy) and poses a threat to Nepalese sovereignty and security. Following a sequence of public demonstrations, contentious debates, and political unrest, the parliament of Nepal eventually ratified the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact (Al Jazeera 2022; Global Times 2022). Although the US does not have the same level of influence as China and India in Nepal, MCC's approval demonstrated that the USA is still in the game. For China, the US – not India – is the primary concern regarding other powers using Nepal to undermine its strategic objectives. China's security specialists believe the US employs Nepal to encircle China (Wolfe 2006).

### **5. Three LLS Challenges to Balance Relations with these three Powers**

Based on the above discussion, this paper has identified several present and future challenges that the three LLSs encounter in balancing their relationships with the three major powers. The challenges can be summarized as follows:

1. The nature of the power balance between the three LLS and the three global powers is largely determined by the regional and global strategic competition sets. The

worsening relations between the US and China, as well as China and India, generate critical tests for the LLS in maintaining a balanced approach. However, if competition among these powers remains without significant confrontations, it provides some relief for the LLS to preserve easier interactions. Staying neutral in contested global power game events and avoiding unnecessary clashes of interstate interests while engaging in mature diplomatic contacts to address differences in mutual opinions could serve as political strategies to avoid being caught in the crossfire of strategic competition.

2. Border negotiations between Bhutan and China are a significant strategic worry for India. Any settlement in that case India views unfavorably, as it perceives its security being undermined in the long run, and diminishes its influence and domination in the kingdom. The entry of the US into Bhutan-China-India relations could distract the efforts to maintain a balanced line. All depends on how Bhutan efficiently manages its balanced relations with its two giant neighbors in the days to come.
3. India keeps a skeptical eye on any of Nepal's partnerships with China. It is because of India's perceived China phobia. This may have contributed to India's harsh policies, including economic embargos on Nepal. Internal political divisions of Nepal over international engagement may impact its development initiatives and governance. US efforts to expand influence in Nepal to counter China's engagement further complicate the political landscape. By pursuing a cautious strategy of political engagement, combined with a focus on economic diplomacy and the institutionalization of democratic norms in domestic and foreign affairs, Nepal can work to maintain balanced relations with these major powers.
4. The Taliban's desire for a robust relationship with China could be undermined by their volatile relations with Pakistan and Iran. Furthermore, the US may perceive a strengthening of the Taliban's relationship with China as contradictory to its vision for Central Asia. Similarly, Pakistan may be displeased by India's closeness to the Taliban. The Taliban's failure to fulfill security commitments and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for extremists could prompt the three competing countries to adopt an assertive and exclusionary stance. Kabul's active communications and exchanges could become effective mechanisms for maintaining stable relations with the US. At the same time, Chinese investment could contribute to achieving development goals without relying on conditional loans from international lenders. Thus, the current relationship scenario represents a historic opportunity for war-torn Afghanistan to advance its national interests.
5. Policy inconsistency, political instability, disunity, and lack of consensus on principles of external interaction, and the inability to effectively leverage strategic influence, pose serious challenges, particularly for Nepal and Afghanistan, in achieving balance in relations with competing powers. The new US approach to Asia, aimed at countering China's influence and, to some extent, India's participation in US strategies, further thwarts this balancing act.

These points emphasize the need to develop individual strategies to address the challenges specific to each country and achieve balanced relations. Wise leadership and carefully executing adapted strategies, considering the international political circumstances, are crucial in this regard.

## **6. Relations with China, the USA and India: Potential Areas for Cooperation for Three LLS**

Despite the challenges encountered in maintaining balanced relations with competing powers, this paper proposes particular areas in which the three LLS have the potential to develop cooperation within the framework of their interactions. The key areas of cooperation are as follows:

- Human resource development is one domain where the three LLS can benefit from China, the USA, and India. Through bilateral/ trilateral agreements, authorities can promote and foster academic interactions and partnerships between educational institutions. This collaboration would provide access to advanced knowledge and skills, allowing these countries to meet the local demand for professional experts in various fields.

- Infrastructure and hydropower development cooperation and tourism are areas in which Nepal and Bhutan may collaborate with China, the US, and India to achieve national goals. Nepal and Bhutan can create an investment-friendly structure that is competitive and transparent in these areas to attract investors from China, the US, and India. The countries can formulate the policy like different baskets with different fruits to ensure the multiplicity of investments.

- All three LLS can equally leverage China, India, and the US to address their security concerns in the region. In the case of Afghanistan, a joint security framework involving these three parties could be established. Such a framework would not only ensure the security of Afghanistan but also help alleviate and manage the security anxieties of these nations, especially for India and China.

- Investments from the three powers can help the landlocked countries overcome their geographic constraints, improving connectivity and supporting trade, commerce, and industrial growth. Such integration could significantly advance their economic development.

- The three LLS, thanks to their strategic locations, can use their positions as buffer states to promote peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. Developing positive relations between China and India is crucial for South Asia's prosperity. This can help minimize the risk of their tense relations being exploited by others.

- Cultural exchanges and people-to-people interactions are practical ways that can help these countries better understand each other and build trust in their partnerships. The three LLS can actively participate in regional dialogues and initiatives led by India and China. Engaging in such multilateral activities enables them to foster balanced relations with their neighbors and contribute to regional stability and growth.

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

Balanced and healthy relations between states bring mutual benefits. In the era of globalization, interstate cooperation is not only essential but also indispensable. Each state strives to achieve its national goals and, therefore, cooperates with other states to address its limitations and inadequacies. Consequently, clashes of interest and conflicts are commonplace in international relations and politics. From the strategic point of view, the three South Asian LLSs have become crucial for major regional and global

powers. However, with rising strategic competition and other geopolitical postures, the LLS face a critical challenge in balancing their relations with competing global and regional powers. These three countries have significant opportunities to leverage their geostrategic advantages and establish development partnerships with the three largest global economies: China, the United States, and India. Any form of pragmatic and mutually beneficial bilateral or trilateral collaboration, undoubtedly, has the potential to accelerate the pace of national development and foster prosperity in these countries. Similarly, failing to maintain balanced relations could leave them vulnerable to the pressures of strategic competition. This type of situation can ultimately limit their prospects and be seen as a missed opportunity to achieve their potential. Therefore, pursuing well-planned foreign policy strategies can help address these challenges and maintain balanced relationships that protect their interests.

### REFERENCES

- Acharya, A. 2023. A Painful Balancing Act in China. *The Kathmandu Post*, September 6. URL: <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2023/09/06/a-painful-balancing-act-in-china>.
- Ahmad, P. T. 2022. An Analysis of India's Soft Power Policy in Afghanistan. *India Quarterly* 78 (4): 634–653.
- Akhter, M. N., and Yuan, L. 2020. China India in Afghanistan. *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* 3 (2): 455–464.
- Al Jazeera. 2022. Nepal Police Fired Tear Gas to Disperse Protest over US Aid Grant. *Al Jazeera*, February 20. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/20/nepal-police-fire-tear-gas-to-disperse-protest-over-us-aid-grant>.
- Bao, B. L. 2021. Trilateral Relations among China, Nepal and India: Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies (JHSSS)* 3 (7): 5–14.
- Bhattacharya, A. 2009. China's Inroads into Nepal: India's Concerns. *IDSIA Comment*, May 18. URL: [https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/ChinasInroadsintoNepal\\_ABhattacharya\\_180509](https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/ChinasInroadsintoNepal_ABhattacharya_180509).
- Bhattarai, R. 2005. *Geopolitics of Nepal and Internal Response to Conflict Transformation*. Kathmandu: FFP Publications.
- Bhonsale, M. 2020. Bhutan: Walking on Tight Rope, Balancing India and China. *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, July 14. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/bhutan-walking-on-tight-rope-balancing-india-and-china/>.
- Bobkin, N. N. 2022. The End of the War in Afghanistan: The Defeat of the United States and the Consequences for Regional Security. *Her. Russ. Acad. Sci.*, 92 (Suppl 4): 331–339.
- Chandra, A. 2007. India and Afghanistan: Renewing Economic Relations. In Warikoo, K. (ed.), *Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities*. Vol. 2 (pp. 182–183). New Delhi: Pentagon Press.
- Choden, T. 2004. Indo-Bhutan Relations Recent Trends. *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 11: 112–128.
- Connah, L. 2021. US Intervention in Afghanistan: Justifying the Unjustifiable? *South Asia Research* 41 (1): 70–86.
- Dahal, G. 2019. An Overview of Foreign Relation of Nepal with China. *Journal of Political Science* 19: 85–99.

- Dorji, L., Galay, P., Wangdi, S., Chophel, S., and Dorji, T. 2021. A Study on Trilateral Relationships of China-India and Bhutan. *Sherub Doenme: The Research Journal of Sherubtse College* 14 (1): 38–41.
- Ethirajan, A. 2023. Bhutan Wants a Border Deal with China: Will India Accept? *BBC News*, April 26. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65396384>.
- Farooq, M. 2022. Indian Engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan and Implications for Pakistan. *Margalla Papers* 26 (2): 87–95.
- Felbab-Brown, V. 2020. A BRI (d)ge too Far: The Unfulfilled Promise and Limitations of China's Involvement in Afghanistan. *Brookings*. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-bridge-too-far-the-unfulfilled-promise-and-limitations-of-chinas-involvement-in-afghanistan/>.
- Ganaie, R. A., and Ganaie, M. A. 2022. India's Afghanistan Policy: A Quest for Strategic Space Post the US Withdrawal. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 9 (462).
- Global Times. 2022. China Opposes 'Coercive Diplomacy' of US in Pushing MCC Compact in Nepal. February 18. URL: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1252597.shtml>.
- Goepner, E. W. 2016. Measuring the Effectiveness of America's War on Terror. *Parameters*, 46 (1): 107–120.
- Ghosh, A. 2023. China become the first country to host Taliban Ambassador. Indian Council of World Affairs, December 14. URL: [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=10268&lid=6538](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10268&lid=6538).
- Haider, S. 2022. India Signs MoU to Hand over Wheat to WFP in Kandahar. *The Hindu*. February 12. URL: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-signs-mou-to-hand-over-wheat-to-wfp-in-kandahar/article38420123.ece>.
- Haidar, S. 2023. Boundaries could be Demarcated within Next One or Two Meetings: Bhutan PM on Talks with China. *The Hindu*, March 29. URL: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/boundaries-could-be-demarcated-within-next-one-or-two-meetings-bhutan-pm-on-talks-with-china/article66672984.ece>.
- Hussain, K. 2020. U.S.-China-India Relations: Implications for Afghanistan. *South Asian voices*, October 14. URL: <https://southasianvoices.org/u-s-china-india-relations-implications-for-afghanistan/>.
- Jabeen, M., Mazhar, M., and Goraya, N. 2010. US Afghan Relations: A Historical Perspective of Events of 9/11. *South Asian Studies: A Research Journal of South Asian Studies* 25 (1): 143–173.
- Johny, E. 2024. Foreign Policy Strategies of Nepal between China and India: Bandwagon or Hedging. *International Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00560-1>.
- Jami, M., Rizwan, A. and Taieb, R. 2021. *Sino-Afghan Security Relations beyond 2021*. Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Afghanistan and Institute of War and Peace Studies. URL: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kabul/18638.pdf>.
- Kandel, I. P. 2024. The Political and Historical Dynamics of Nepal-India Relations. *Interdisciplinary Issues in Education* 2 (2): 11–16.
- Kaul, N. 2022. Beyond India and China: Bhutan as a Small State in International Relations. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22 (2): 297–337.

- Kaura, V. 2020. What does China's Growing Engagement in Afghanistan Mean for the US? *Middle East Institute*. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-does-chinas-growing-engagement-afghanistan-mean-us>.
- Khizar, S., & Hassan, W. Z. 2024. Navigating US-South Asia Relations: Strategic Interests and Future Trajectories. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 8 (2): 782–794.
- Kumar, V. L. 2020. From Blockade to Demonetisation: India–Nepal Relations. *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 2 (56): 66–83.
- Kumar, A. 2025. Why Bhutan and the U.S. Have No Diplomatic Ties: A Royal Mystery of Modern Diplomacy. *Medium*, March 23. URL: <https://medium.com/@archievkumar/why-bhutan-and-the-u-s-have-no-diplomatic-ties-a-royal-mystery-of-modern-diplomacy-31c76953062d>.
- Lama, N. 2023. Balancing Act: Nepal's Delicate Dance with China and India. *Myrepublica*. May 20. URL: <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/balancing-act-nepal-s-delicate-dance-with-china-and-india/>.
- Laskar, R. H. 2022. In India's Budget, a Message to Afghan People that New Delhi isn't Switching off. *The Hindustan Times*, February 1. URL: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/business/in-india-s-budget-a-message-to-afghan-people-that-new-delhi-isn-t-switching-off-101643728484121.html>.
- Lego, L. R. 2025. India's Eroding Influence in South Asia: A Structural Decline? *IAPSS*, July 2. URL: <https://iapss.org/indias-eroding-influence-in-south-asia-a-structural-decline/>.
- Malhotra, J. 2023. Bhutan Desperate to Settle Dispute with China. It will Change how India Looks at its North. *The Print*, March 31. URL: <https://theprint.in/opinion/global-print/bhutan-desperate-to-settle-dispute-with-china-it-will-change-how-india-looks-at-its-north/1486684/>.
- Marvoti, S., Ahmadi, H., and Zakarian, M. 2022. Afghanistan and China: Changing to Strategic Partnership. *The Fundamental and Applied Studies of the Islamic World* 4 (2): 1–29.
- Mathou, T. 2004. Bhutan-China Relations: Towards a new Step in Himalayan Politics. In *The Spider and the Piglet: Proceedings of the First Seminar on Bhutan Studies*. Thimphu, Centre for Bhutan Studies (pp. 388–411).
- Menon, P., and Kaniseti, A. 2018. *The Doklam Imbroglia*. Takshashila Institute. URL: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328419236\\_The\\_Doklam\\_Imbroglia](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328419236_The_Doklam_Imbroglia).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC. 2024. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on January 31, 2024. URL: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530\\_11347691.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347691.html).
- Nepal, D. 2021. Nepal's Relationship with India and China in the Changing Context. *Mangal Research Journal* 2 (1): 37–46.
- Neupane, R. 2022. *China and India in Nepal: What Does it Entail?* Master's Thesis in Asia and Middle East Studies, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo. URL: <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/98573/SAS4691.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
- Paliwal, A. 2015. India's Taliban Dilemma: to Contain or to Engage? *J Strateg Stud* 40 (1–2): 35–67.
- Pandey, S. 2019. *Understanding China's Afghanistan Policy: From Calculated Indifference to Strategic Engagement*. Issue Brief No. 305, Observer Research Foundation. URL:

- <https://www.orfonline.org/research/understanding-chinas-afghanistan-policy-from-calculated-indifference-strategic-engagement-54126/>.
- Pant, H. V. 2012. *India's Changing Afghanistan Policy: Regional and Global Implications*. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11447>.
- Price, G. 2013. India's Policy towards Afghanistan. *Chatham House*, Asia ASP 2013/04. URL: [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0813pp\\_indiaafghanistan.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0813pp_indiaafghanistan.pdf).
- Rahman, H. M. T. 2014. China's Strategic Interests in South Asia: implications. *NDC E-Journal* 13 (1): 17–32.
- Rais, R. B. 1993. Afghanistan and the Regional Powers. *Asian Survey* 33 (9): 905–922.
- Ranjan, A. 2019. During Visit to Bhutan, Jaishankar Must Address Hydropower Issues. *The Wire*, June 08. URL: <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-bhutan-jaishankar-visit-hydropower-projects>.
- Roy, S. 2021. India in Chair, UNSC Adopts Resolution on Taliban; Russia and China abstain” *The Indian Express*, September 1. URL: <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/indias-presidency-unscc-strong-resolution-afghanistan-china-russia-abstain-7479719/>.
- Sahoo, P. 2024. New Dynamics in India-Nepal Relations. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 5 (9): 9–14.
- Schleich, A. 2020. Geopolitics in the Himalayas: A Kingdom Sandwiched between China and India. *ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security*, Issue No. 694, Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung ISPSW. URL: [https://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/694\\_Schleich-1](https://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/694_Schleich-1).
- Sharma, R. 2011. India's relations with Afghanistan. In Scott D. (ed.), *Handbook of India's International Relations* (pp. 107–108). Routledge, New York.
- Shivamurthy, A. G. 2022. *The Changing Contours of Bhutan's Foreign Policy and the Implications for China and India*. New Delhi, India: ORF, Observer Research Foundation.
- Sharma, G. 2022. Nepal's New Government Seeks to Balance Ties with India, China, Economy in Focus. *Reuters*, December 27. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nepals-new-govt-seeks-balance-its-ties-with-india-china-growth-pursuit-2022-12-26/>.
- Sharma, K. 2022. India's Taliban Outreach Offers Afghanistan a China Alternative. *Nikkei*, June 20. URL: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/India-s-Taliban-outreach-offers-Afghanistan-a-China-alternative>.
- Shekhawat, S. 2021. The India Factor in China's Bhutan Outreach. *Organisation for Research on China and Asia*, December 15. URL: <https://orcasia.org/article/196/the-india-factor-in-chinas-bhutan-outreach>.
- Subhash, C. 2018. *Geo Strategic Status of Bhutan & Its Importance in the Security of India*. URL: [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3151927](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3151927).
- Szczudlik-Tatar, J. 2014. China's Evolving Stance on Afghanistan: Towards More Robust Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics. *PISM Strategic Files* 58: 1–06.
- Talukder, I. 2013. Bhutan and China Relations: Its Impact on India. *Air Power Journal* 8 (1): 137–148.

- Times of India. 2017. Expanding Exports Point to Slow Growth in Home Power Demand. *Times of India*, March 30. URL: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/expanding-exports-point-to-slow-growth-in-home-power-demand/articleshow/57904840.cms>.
- The Wall Street Journal. 2021. U.S. Tightens Focus on China after Afghanistan Withdrawal. *The Wall Street Journal*, August 19. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-tightens-focus-on-china-after-afghanistan-withdrawal-11629378244>.
- The Economic Times. 2019. Top US diplomat visits Bhutan, calls for rule-based order in Indo-Pacific region. Aug 14. URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/de-fence/top-us-diplomat-visits-bhutan-calls-for-rule-based-order-in-indo-pacific-region/articleshow/70670082.cms?from=mdr>.
- Vinjamuri L. 2022. Biden's Realism, US Restraint, and the Future of the Transatlantic Partnership. *LSE Public Policy Review* 2 (3): 1–6.
- Wolfe, A. 2006. Nepal's Instability in the Regional Power Struggle. *World Security Network*, February 3. URL: <https://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/Asia/Wolfe-Adam/Nepals-Instability-in-the-Regional-Power-Struggle>.
- Zhao H. 2013. China's Afghan Policy: The Forming of the 'March West' Strategy? *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 27 (2): 1–29.
- Zhou, J., Su, F., and Yuan, J. 2022. Treading Lightly: China's Footprint in Taliban-Led Afghanistan. *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*. No. 2022/08. [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/202211/sipriinsights\\_2208\\_china\\_and\\_afghanistan\\_2.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/202211/sipriinsights_2208_china_and_afghanistan_2.pdf).
- Zongyi. L. 2017. Indian Worry over China-Nepal Drill Outdated. *Global Times*. URL: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/201704/1043393.shtml>.