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Recommended Citation

Adhikary, Ashis. "A Chinese Fallacy of Communist Lynchpin and American Retort in Nepal." (2023).
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nsc_research/98

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A Chinese Fallacy of Communist Lynchpin and American Retort in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Why are Chinese and American activities escalating in Nepal? This research question frames the objective of this study. To opt for an answer, the paper delves into two distinct areas: the rise of Nepal's communist forces and the corresponding influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the historic role of America in curbing communism inside Nepal. It argues, the visible Chinese intent of forming a favorable communist power in Nepal, especially during and after the general elections of 2017, is a fallacy as it undermines American presence to limit the communist influence. Conceptually, the paper claims that the recent regular debates about Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and State Partnership Program (SPP) fail to elucidate the historic role of the United States' ideological hawkish foreign policy in curbing communism in Nepal. To do so, this paper analyzes events inside Nepal in a sequential manner to comprehend the Chinese influence and American retort. To elaborate on Chinese influence, it covers the period of post-2017 elections whereas it traverses back to the 1951 Point Four Program between America and Nepal to explain the American influence inside Nepal. Methodologically, it follows a qualitative method and sources data from newspaper articles, policy documents, official government press releases, and verifiable existing literature.

Keywords: China, Nepal, United States, lynchpin, communism

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1 Introduction

Recent Chinese statements and activities manifest a strategy to unify communists into power and refute the American presence inside Nepal. A few months before Pelosi's Taiwan visit, Nepal, the Himalayan country of South Asia, encountered intense contestation between China and the United States. China deplored American projects Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and State Partnership Program (SPP). The foreign ministry (2022c) accused MCC of "coercive diplomacy", labeled it a "pandora's box", and classified Nepal as its "strategic partner" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2022a).

2 Insistent China in Nepal

The genesis of insistent China inside Nepal starts after the Indian blockade of 2015 and rise of communist forces into power through the anti-Indian nationalist narratives. Nepal signed a landmark trade and transit agreement with China ending its dependency with Indian ports (THT Online, 2016).

Both countries signed the Memorandum of Understanding on China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Gradually, Chinese investment increased in Nepal's tourism, hydropower, and infrastructure development. In countries with fragile institutions, increased investment opts for reliable political power.

In the 2017 general elections, the Communist Party of Nepal Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN UML) and CPN Maoist Center allied and won a landslide victory. Next year they merged into Nepal Communist Party (NCP) forming a powerful communist force.

After this unification, the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) began apparent activities in Nepal. It started with sharing China's governance experience with Nepal's communist parties. In September 2019, it organized a two-day training program on 'Xi Thoughts' for the leaders of the ruling NCP (Pradhan, 2019). They also signed a six-point memorandum on mutual learning.

The Chinese president Xi Jinping visited Nepal in the following month. A Joint Statement (2019) during his visit granted a "new phase" in Nepal-China relations. At that point, both countries acknowledged the bilateral relationship as a "strategic partnership of cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2019). However, specific areas of strategic partnership

and cooperation are still unknown. Today, every Chinese delegation visiting Nepal includes this text in their speech. The genesis of visible China inside Nepal initiated from this narrative.

This visible relationship even undermined the fragile India-China border relations. NCP's school department organized a virtual conference with CPC amid an ongoing aggressive melee between Chinese and Indian soldiers. Experts criticized its timing because of escalating tensions between neighbors at the border. To irony, the leader of the organizer, Ishwor Pokhrel, was the defense minister of the Nepali government (Giri, 2020).

The Chinese relished a unified communist force in the form of NCP into power. But their misunderstanding of Nepali politics became evident after rifts started between two chairpersons of NCP, KP Oli and Prachanda, and eventually split the party.

China wanted to prevent this separation. Though unsuccessful, Ambassador Hou Yanqi lobbied perceptibly with the head of state President Bidhya Bhandari, and other leaders (THT Online, 2020). The official spokesperson of the Chinese embassy Zhang Si affirmed their desire for a trouble-free and united NCP (The Kathmandu Post, 2022a). However, the NCP split through a Supreme Court verdict in March 2020. One fraction of the NCP further divided losing the majority in the parliament.

This division and ongoing political chaos questioned Chinese approach in Nepal. For this reason, a delegation of the International Department of the CPC (IDCPC) visited Nepal in December 2020. They assessed the new political order and encouraged communist unification (The Kathmandu Post, 2022b).

Nonetheless, the communist forces remained divided. The democratic party Nepali Congress (NC) led a new coalition and the government together with the divided communists.

The next phase of evident and vocal China in Nepal's external affairs commenced after the communist fraction of this government refused to ratify MCC from parliament. China openly and publicly disparaged the American grant.

Wang Yiwei, Professor of International Relations, stated it is an American ploy to divide people (Ghimire, 2021). The Chinese foreign ministry accused the United States of 'coercive diplomacy' towards Nepal and labeled MCC as Pandora's Box. Few Nepali leaders and intellectuals also criticized it. Communist leaders, Jhalanath Khanal, Bhim Rawal, Dev Gurung, and public

intellect Surya Acharya and Yubaraj Sangraula disapproved of MCC citing it as a tool for Chinese containment (Adhikary, 2022).

These objections fueled agitation against the US and staged MCC opposite with the Chinese BRI. The Chinese interest of vacating America in Nepal coincided with homegrown anti-American narratives. However, the Nepali parliament ratified MCC in February 2022, with an interpretative declaration.

This ratification, a failure in Chinese diplomacy, was serious concern for China. For this reason, the external minister Wang Yi visited Nepal. He reminded Nepali leaders about Xi Jinping's visit and the "strategic partnership of cooperation" between the two countries. Eventually, he (2022d) stressed Chinese support for Nepal in pursuing an independent domestic and foreign policy. Such statements and interpretations of MCC validate Chinese rebuff in the Nepal – USA relations.

With MCC ratified and increasing American incidence, increased Chinese engagement was evident. The new minister of IDCPC, Liu Joanchu replacing Song Tao, held video conferencing with the chairpersons of the divided communist party. He visited Nepal for four days on the 10th of July in the pretext of the forthcoming Nepali elections and the Chinese National Congress.

His visit and meeting with communist leaders surged new narratives of communist alliance. Communist leaders Narayan Kaji Shrestha and Bam Dev Gautam initiated this discussion. Jhalanath Khanal, former Prime Minister and leader of the divided faction of UML, met with the chairperson of UML, K P Oli. The Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai, traversing various parties, returned to his alma mater led by Prachanda. There is news of socialist alliance by leaders of communist background. Now, these events aim securing seats in the upcoming election but it also endorses Chinese interest in unifying communists and vacating the United States.

3 American Presence and Communist Check

The United States was the second country to start diplomatic relations with Nepal after Britain. Both signed the Peace and Friendship agreement in 1947 and America started assisting in 1951 through the Point Four Program. This program, brain child of the 1949 US Legislative

Committee on Foreign Affairs, believed that material progress in underdeveloped region reinforces freedom and democracy in the world. President Truman also believed long-run development as a tool against communism. Therefore, the Point Four Program aimed not only Nepal's development but also fighting communist influence and supporting democratic values.

After the 1950s, the Nepali monarch recognized Chinese importance because of Nepal's landlocked geography. However, they were cautious of the communists. In the 1960s, they were worried after workers from China distributed red books during the construction of the Araniko Highway connecting Nepal with Tibet. To convince America and India against communist influence through road connectivity, King Mahendra used the phrase "Communism doesn't arrive in a taxi".

From 1962 to 1990, Nepal practiced a nonpartisan authoritarian monarchy called 'Panchayat'. China was experimenting with a commune organization and cultural revolution. India was practicing a state-controlled licensing economic regime. Despite surrounded with communist and socialist ideology, Nepal departed toward liberal political and economic values.

In 1962, the Peace Corps volunteer program started in Nepal. It mixed young American students with poor and isolated Nepali villagers. One volunteer Broughton Courbon drove 70 years old widowed "aamaa" (mother in local language) around Kathmandu on his motorbike and later flew her to the United States. Jimi delved into ways of different religions and cultures residing together in a village. Mike Frame opened a popular restaurant called 'Mike's Breakfast' in the capital city. Two others have published their experiences as books. Anderson exhibits his experience as a search for enlightenment in Buddhism and Fisher describes the Corps as a template of globalization.

Important, these volunteers are the genesis of today's people-to-people relations between two countries. A 2019 Pew Research by Budiman (2021) estimates around two hundred thousand Nepali living in the US. Today, several local hair-cutting saloons in Nepal exhibit photos of Titanic star, Leonardo DiCaprio. Many colleges draw their names from American cities and institutions of Texas, the White House, and the Pentagon. Burgers and sandwiches, enduring food icons, are popular among Nepali youth. Long lines lay outside internet cafes to fill the Diversity Visa lottery program. The Peace Corps was significant to inject the virtue of American liberty, freedom, and development inside Nepali society.

But alongside soft influence, America also assisted to strengthen the military capacity of Nepal. It gained height during the domestic guerilla warfare by the Maoists. The army support aimed at curbing these rebel communists. The US gave modern equipment training to the Nepal Army and equipped them with M16 rifles (Manchanda, 2003). To battle Maoism, it helped in establishing the Mahabir Ranger Battalion for special operations.

The United States continued assisting Nepal even during the royal coup of 2005. In 2004, the disbursed help through the Department of Defense was 3.65 Million USD and by USAID was 35.31 Million USD. During the coup year, the defense part decreased to 1.62 Million but the USAID increased to 43.59 Million USD.

Supporting a ruler who overthrew a democratic government exposes the American importance of anti-communism. It exhausted the guerilla forces making avenues for peaceful negotiations. In 2006, rebel communists peacefully entered the democratic parliamentary multi-party framework.

4 Chinese Fallacy

The rise of communist China has influenced the democratizing left forces of Nepal. However, the Chinese fiddle to unify them and create power is a fallacy mounting geopolitical contestation in Nepal. From Point Four Agreement in 1951, Peace Corps in 1962, military support to tame Maoist guerilla warfare after 2001, to ongoing technical and financial help, America has invested both hard and soft assets to curb communism and daub democratic values.

Historically, Nepal's democratic traversal has survived both internal communist warfare and neighborhood influence. The Nepali Panchayat of the 1960s metamorphosed neither into commune-based ideology nor state-controlled 'dirigisme'. It traversed towards freedom and liberty.

Two violent Nepali communist movements ended with adherence to democratic values. First, in 1990, the armed movement settled in the constitutional monarchy. Renowned leader Madan Bhandari pronounced a new principle called People's Multiparty Democracy. Unlike any left ideology, it accepted democratic values of periodic elections, parliament, and multi-party competition under a communist manifesto.

In 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) started a second armed revolution under the leadership of Prachanda. But this violence, which took seventeen thousand lives, couldn't centralize power. Rather it ended with the progression of liberal values through inclusion, federalism, republican, and secularism. American presence and support inside Nepal are the catalysts of this democratic pathway.

Therefore, as China advances communist unification for acquiring power to disdain America, the American presence will augment to instill liberal political and economic values. Both the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the State Partnership Program are indication of American resistance. MCC aims to strengthen the parliament, and the rule of law reinforcing the economy of privatization, free market, and competition disdaining 'state-centric' and 'state-owned' narratives of China. SPP attempts to cooperate with the Nepal Army to prevent communist influences inside the security forces. Assistant Secretary Donald Lu's two visits in nine months validate American priority in this small Himalayan country.

Today, ceaseless and inconclusive political alliancing, and government formation after the November 2022 elections has triggered both Chinese and American attention. The congratulatory message by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to new Nepali Prime Minister Prachanda, who became Prime Minister after the November 2022 elections, wished to push forward the President Xi initiated "strategic partnership of cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2022b). Song (2023), the new ambassador to Nepal, further added Chinese intent to support Nepal in safeguarding sovereignty and dignity along with the strategic partnership.

The American retort is visible in the form of frequent visits. On January 29, 2003, Victoria Nuland, undersecretary of political affairs; on February 7, Samantha Power, Administrator of United States Agency for Development (USAID) and on February 13, Afreen Akhtar, Deputy Assistant Secretary of South and Central Asian affairs visited Nepal.

Possible political alliancing for government formation and president elections will further implicate Chinese behavior and American retort. Debates and discussions regarding revival of the Nepal Communist Party, which failed previously, is taking shape. Visible Chinese role in its formation or increased incidence if it forms will escalate the American interest and insistence. In future, Chinese role and position will shape the subsequent geopolitical landscape of Nepal.

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