



**‘CONTEXTUALIZING’ INTELLIGENCE IN STRATEGIC BEHAVIOUR OF INDIA
TOWARDS NEPAL**

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Abstract

Applying the concept of ‘contextual intelligence’, the paper assesses the strategic behaviour of India under different leaderships and explores Nepal’s changing political contexts since the end of the civil war in November 2006 to 2020. In assessing the behaviour of different leaderships, the available resources have been presented in a defined manner and supplemented with data collected through interviews with experts in India and Nepal. The paper argues that India’s strategy towards Nepal has been affected by the way different leaderships construed the changing political contexts particularly in Nepal to devise their strategies to create a favourable environment.

Keywords: Strategic Behaviour; Contextual Intelligence; Political Contexts; Command Behaviour; Co-optive Behaviour

Introduction

In the dynamic context of international politics, the political leaders/leadership tries to create a favourable environment for their respective state(s) by projecting different strategic behaviours towards other state(s). This phenomenon is visible in the Indian leadership’s strategic behaviour towards Nepal. Nepal is a small, landlocked, neighbouring state which has historical similarities with India. These similarities at the social, cultural, and religious levels are driven by civil society from both sides (Muni, 2023) (Rae, 2023). Apart from this,



Nepal has enormous strategic significance for India on account of sharing 1690 kilometres open border with China, thus acting as a buffer state between the two Asian heavyweights. As a result, the post-independence (political) leadership in India has tried to create a 'favourable' environment in Nepal to safeguard its interests.

Consequently, the Indian leadership took three core strategic steps with reference to Nepal in the post-Independence context: First, it elevated historical 'similarities' at the political level through the Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950, thereby, formalising the 'informal' relations with Nepal through state involvement (Nayak, 2023). Second, India signed a Trade and Transit Treaty in 1950 allowing Nepal to trade through Indian soil. This treaty provided land-locked Nepal access to the international markets. It supported Nepal's development through economic aid and investments in areas like agriculture, healthcare, education, infrastructure, and hydroelectric power projects, aiming to enhance connections and bolster Nepal's economic growth. Third, the Indian leadership played a leading role in the aid and assistance sector and played a crucial role in resolving Nepal's internal political unrest resulting in the formation of a 'tripartite' government in 1951. Thus, the Indian leadership established India's broad strategic, political, and economic relations with Nepal in the period following India's Independence (Adhikari, 2014) (Rae, 2023).

Notably, the political 'context' prevalent in the region as well as in Nepal at that time affected India's strategic behaviour. At regional level, the geopolitics of the region during India's Independence was marked by the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) and the annexation of Tibet in 1951. There was also the influence of Cold War politics in the region. It is in this context that the Indian leadership established cordial relations with Nepal and created a favourable environment in the region to safeguard its security interests. However, at domestic level, Nepal's internal political situation was more vulnerable, with various stakeholders vying for power and influence. Three significant situations at that time were discernible: First, there were democratic forces protesting against the Rana autocratic regime (1846-1951), gaining significant public support. Second, Nepal's King, Tribhuvan, was also opposed to the Rana regime and supported the democratic movement. Third, Nepal's Prime Minister Shamsher Jung Bahadur Rana still held a firm grip on the government and maintained loyalty towards India (Bhatt, 2012, pp. 57-58). Given this politically complex situation, the Indian leadership facilitated the negotiations process



between the three stakeholders - King Tribhuvan, the Ranas and Nepali Congress, bringing them to the table in the government formation process to form a 'tripartite' government in February 1951 and also restored the power of the King. Consequently, the Indian leadership successfully established the 'special' relations with Nepal in this period (Meena, 2020, p. 81-83) (Rae, 2023).

However, India's historically 'special' relationship with Nepal began to shift notably under the reign of King Mahendra, commencing in 1955. King Mahendra displayed a strategic inclination toward China, formalizing diplomatic ties with Beijing in 1956 under an 'Equidistance policy.' This policy apparently advocated for balanced relations with both neighbouring powers, India and China, yet King Mahendra refrained from specifying the principles for this 'equidistant' stance. In practice, the equidistance policy functioned more as rhetoric than substantive impartiality; rather, it served as a diplomatic strategy to counterbalance India's predominant influence in Nepal by projecting a closer alignment with China (Bhattarai, 2023). Amid this diplomatic recalibration, King Mahendra appointed Tanak Prasad Acharya, a known pro-China communist leader, as Prime Minister (Bhatt, 2012, pp. 55-56). In the years that followed, King Mahendra and the communist leadership collectively projected a pro-China orientation while regarding India's engagement as interference in Nepal's internal affairs. Nonetheless, despite the intermittent diplomatic fluctuations, India remained an essential player in Nepal's geopolitical landscape until as recently as 2006 (Thakur, 2023) (Rae, 2023).

Following the end of Nepal's civil war in November 2006, the country underwent significant political changes, marked by the rise of new political leaders from the Hill and Tarai regions, a change in political structure from monarchy to republican democracy, and a strengthened sense of Nepali nationalism. Of particular note, Nepal adopted a more pragmatic approach toward India within the sphere of international politics. Concurrently, China's influence in Nepal grew substantially, expanding from development and diplomatic engagement to an assertive role in managing domestic political dynamics. China emerged as a major actor in Nepal's political, economic, and social arenas, exemplified by its key role in facilitating the 2018 merger between Nepal's two largest communist parties: the Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist Centre (CPN-MC) and the Communist Party of Nepal – Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML). In 2020, when internal tensions surfaced within Nepal's ruling party (Nepal



Communist Party) due to disagreements between Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and party's co-chair, Prachanda, both leaders notably recalibrated their traditionally pro-China stance by adopting a more balanced approach in favour of cooperation with India. During this period, China actively sought to mitigate the rift between the two leaders, employing diplomatic influence to preserve stability in Nepal's political landscape.

Therefore, in the light of all above developments, the paper analyses Nepal's changing political contexts since the end of the civil war in November 2006 and assesses the strategic behaviour of Indian leadership towards Nepal during these changing political contexts. By applying the conceptual framework of 'contextual intelligence', the paper addresses pertinent questions: How have the changing contexts in Nepal affected India's strategies? How has the China factor affected Indian strategic disposition towards Nepal?

Conceptualizing Contextual intelligence

Today international politics is more complex and dynamic because of its changing political 'contexts.' This situation of complexity and dynamism poses significant challenges for states around the world. Therefore, the role of political leaders/leadership has become more crucial and demanding. The political leadership is often responsible for creating a 'favourable' (political) environment for their respective states in international politics. In other words, the stature of a state in international politics is very much a function of the political leadership of that state (Nye, 2008, pp. 28-31). The manner in which the political leadership creates a favourable environment is called their strategy/strategic behaviour.

However, the strategic behaviour of political leadership varies depending on the (political) context. This phenomenon occurs because different contexts demand for different behaviours—some demand co-optive behaviour while others demand command behaviour. The use of the 'command' and 'co-optive' behaviours is an outcome of the varied political contexts. Through the use of command behaviour, the political leadership (of a given state) tries to shape the behaviour of other/targeted state(s) through the projection of coercion and inducement. Similarly, in the case of co-optive behaviour the political leadership shapes other/ targeted state(s) preferences by the projection of agenda setting and attraction. This (core) ability of political leaders which helps them identify and project an 'appropriate' strategic behaviour in varying contexts is referred to as 'Contextual Intelligence' (Nye, 2008,



pp. 85-86). In other words, ‘Contextual Intelligence’ is the crucial ability by which political leaders identify which strategy/strategic behaviour would be appropriate in a given context and would help achieve the expected outcomes or would help in creating a favourable political environment for their respective state. The same phenomenon can be seen in the strategic behaviour of Indian leadership towards Nepal in the changing political contexts between the years 2006 to 2020. The Indian leadership’s strategy has been analysed on the basis of a defined parameter of ‘contextual intelligence’ (See Table No.1).

Table 1: Analytical framework on strategic behavioural aspects of Contextual Intelligence

	Strategic Behavioural Aspects			
	Command Behaviour (Ability to shape what others do)		Co-Optive Behaviour (Ability to shape others preferences)	
	Coercion	Inducement	Agenda Setting	Attraction
Primary Currencies	Use of economic power	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Payments• Bribe	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutions• Media/ Social Media Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Culture• Education/ Academia• Political Values
Government Policy	Economic Sanctions/ Blockade	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aid and Investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bilateral Diplomacy and Multilateral Diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foreign Policies• Public Diplomacy

Source: Joseph S. Nye Jr., Soft Power: Means to Success in World Politics, 2004

India’s strategy in the changing political ‘contexts’ since 2006

A momentous shift came in Nepal’s politics after signing the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) between the King and Maoists in November 2006. This accord provided a ground for



the end of a decade-long civil war. India played a crucial role to facilitate the process for CPA because it was challenging to bring the involved parties in this accord on the peace table. There were ideological differences between the Maoists and the mainstream political parties and both had contentious relationships with the King. In this context, Indian leadership successfully co-opted the concerned parties (i.e. King, Maoists and mainstream political parties¹) and set the agenda to resolve differences among them and created a favourable environment for dialogue and peace process. Notably, the core implication of CPA for the Maoists was that they preferred to join mainstream politics in spite of their previous belligerent activities (Gautam, 2023).

Interestingly, India's strategy to treat the (Nepali) Maoists as a political player in Nepali politics emerged from a complex situation, characterized by an absence of consensus among Indian policymakers on the matter. Within this context, two distinct factions within the Indian leadership proposed divergent strategies regarding the Maoists in Nepal. The first faction advocated recognizing the Maoists as an essential political player and actively encouraging their inclusion in Nepal's mainstream politics. This perspective was underpinned by two primary perceptions. First, it was believed that the Maoists, upon entering electoral politics, would struggle to garner substantial public support, leaving them unlikely to form a government independently. In such a scenario, they would be compelled to align with the Nepali Congress (NC), a party historically aligned with Indian interests. This alignment, it was reasoned, would be favourable for India's interests in 'New Nepal.' Second, this faction held the view that India's instrumental role in resolving Nepal's decade-long internal conflict would engender a sense of indebtedness among the Maoists, reducing the likelihood of their opposing India's strategic interests in Nepal. In contrast, contrary to this faction, the second faction believed that since the Maoists had strong ideological connections with China, their entry into the mainstream politics within Nepal would be detrimental for Indian interests. Ultimately, the stance advocated by the first faction gained ascendancy, determining India's strategy toward the Maoists and their evolving role in Nepal's political landscape (Nayak, 2023).

Following the CPA, Nepal's interim government conducted the Constituent Assembly (CA) elections for forming an elected government and an assembly for drafting the new constitution. The CA elections took place in April 2008. The Indian leadership successfully



opted for a command behaviour providing economic assistance for logistic support to conduct the fair elections. In this election, the Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (the political party of Maoists) emerged as the largest political party securing 38.2 per cent of the total seats (Commission, 2008). Therefore, Maoists formed the government and Prachanda became the Prime Minister of Nepal. Notably, it was an unexpected result for Indian leadership because it was optimistic that Prime Minister Prachanda would maintain cordial relations with India like his predecessors.

Following the rise of the Maoists as a significant political player in Kathmandu's power dynamics, the favourable environment previously enjoyed by India in Nepal began to diminish. The Maoist leadership, under Prime Minister Prachanda, exhibited a discernible shift toward China, as evidenced by Prachanda's decision to undertake his first 'unofficial' visit to China for the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games in August 2008. This shift underscored the challenges confronting Indian leadership, which could not afford to remain indifferent to the evolving political context.

During this period, the Indian leadership faced three fundamental challenges. First, it had to navigate its relationship with the Maoists (CPN-M), Nepal's most prominent political entity, which maintained a strong ideological affinity with China. Second, India needed to cultivate amicable relations with emerging political actors, such as the Madhes parties and the CPN-UML, whose growing influence was reshaping the traditional dominance of hill-based leaders in Kathmandu's political structure. Third, New Delhi had to address the increasing influence of China in Nepal, particularly as Kathmandu sought to diversify its alliances and establish new, reliable partnerships following the abolition of the monarchy (Mulmi, 2023). Additionally, the rise of 'anti-Indian' sentiment within Nepal further complicated the situation. This evolving political and social milieu proved increasingly unfavourable for India, not only at the governmental level but also in terms of its broader people-to-people relations. In response to these challenges, the Indian leadership prioritized a strategy of co-optive engagement to navigate Nepal's transformed political context effectively (Upadhyya, 2021, p. 137).



India's strategy after Prime Minister Prachanda's resignation

A significant change in Nepal's domestic politics occurred in May 2009, when Prime Prachanda resigned. This decision was prompted by a contentious disagreement over the dismissal of the then-Army Chief, General Rookmangud Katawal. Following Prachanda's resignation, Madhav Kumar Nepal, a senior leader of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist), assumed the position of prime minister. Madhav Kumar Nepal subsequently established a coalition government with the support of the Nepali Congress, a party noted for its historically amicable relations with India. The evolving political context proved advantageous for India, facilitating Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna's official visit to Nepal in 2010. During this visit, the Indian foreign minister co-opted Nepal into discussions concerning the future of its peace process and addressed a range of bilateral issues, including security, civil aviation, the trade treaty, and the establishment of a joint committee on water resources. Additionally, he underscored the importance of sustaining regular high-level bilateral engagements and announced a developmental investment of USD 98.8 million in Nepal (MEA, 2010). This approach replicated India's strategic projection of both command and co-optive behaviours to manage its relationship with Nepal during this period. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that while these efforts aimed to restore cordial political relations, the Indian foreign minister could not project any 'concrete' strategic step to mitigate the entrenched 'anti-Indian' sentiments prevalent among the Nepali people (Gautam, 2023).

A year later, S.M. Krishna made his second state visit to Nepal in April 2011. This visit was based on the vision of 'continuous bilateral dialogue' between the two states. Although the Indian foreign minister visit entailed meetings with Nepali leaders but fell short of signing any Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) or issuing a joint statement. Despite the absence of these 'official' formalities, the visit yielded significant outcomes (Mishra B. P., 2019, p. 105). The visit was pivotal in establishing the foundation for the integrated customs office in Birgunj. Moreover, three crucial decisions were made during the visit: first, the longstanding internal conflict in Nepali Congress was resolvedⁱⁱ; second, Prachanda supported the making of Nepal's new constitution and peace process; and third, the visit made way for Baburam Bhattarai to assume the position of prime minister of Nepal.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, Nepal was successfully co-opted at the 'political' level by the use of bilateral diplomacy by the Indian leadership.



However, much like the previous visit the ‘anti-Indian’ sentiments among Nepali people were largely left unaddressed. Two years later Salman Khurshid made an official visit to Nepal as the new Foreign Minister of India in July 2013. The visit saw New Delhi offer financial assistance to Nepal’s Election Commission and security agencies for the upcoming CA elections in November 2013, thus, projecting command behaviour towards Kathmandu (Jha, 2013). It also demonstrated India’s commitment towards the success of Nepal’s election process and its democratic transition.

The Transformation in India’s strategic behaviour under Modi’s government

India’s strategic behaviour towards Nepal transformed after Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014. The new Indian leadership started prioritizing its neighbouring states under the vision of the ‘Neighbourhood First Policy.’ As part of this policy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Nepal in 2014. This visit was viewed as a strategic decision to bolster the bilateral ties and to set the agenda in Nepal through engagement at three levels—politics, people, and development—on a priority basis. In the context of the visit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi used both command and co-optive behaviour to create a favourable environment at the three levels.

On the political level, Prime Minister Narendra Modi co-opted Nepal through bilateral diplomacy taking an initiative to discuss the key contentious issues between the two states. The Indian Prime Minister addressed the issue of India’s alleged interference in Nepal’s internal affairs, which was a significant cause of ‘anti-Indian’ sentiments in Nepal. Prime Minister Narendra Modi assured the Nepali leadership of New Delhi’s commitment towards the principles of sovereignty and assured Kathmandu of non-interference in its internal affairs. Furthermore, the Prime Minister agreed to revise the Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 which had emerged as a source of contention on account of being perceived as ‘unfair’ and ‘unequal’ by Nepal. The step aimed to consolidate and expand the multifaceted and deep-rooted relationships between the two countries in a forward-looking manner (Nayak 2023). Through the visit the Indian Prime Minister also nudged Nepal towards the constitution-making process. During his address to the Nepali CA, the Prime Minister stressed on the importance of a constitution urging the CA members to create a constitution that everyone would recognise, including a vision to prevent future conflicts or



misunderstandings (Kumar, 2015). More importantly, the Prime Minister agreed to establish the Eminent Persons Group on Nepal-India Relations (EPG-NIR) with the aim of broadening and reinforcing the strong and multifaceted relations between the two countries (Bhattarai, 2023).

The Indian Prime Minister simultaneously exhibited command behaviour by announcing a USD 1 billion soft loan for infrastructure and hydropower development towards Nepal (The Kathmandu Post, 2014). Further, the much stalled Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project, a 250 Mega Watt Hydro Project, which was proposed as a part of the Mahakali Treaty of 1996 was green lighted paving the way for the establishment of the Pancheshwar Development Authority. India also agreed to conclude a Power Trade Agreement (PTA) within 45 days of the Prime Minister's visit which was expected to serve as a framework pact for the Commerce and Power sector. Similarly, two governments also directed the concerned authorities to complete negotiations within 45 days on the Project Development Agreement (PDA) between the Investment Board of Nepal and GMR Group of India to develop the Upper Karnali hydropower project. These agreements and negotiations demonstrated a commitment by both countries to improve cooperation and connectivity in the energy sector (The Kathmandu Post, 2014). To promote people-to-people ties and to dispel the 'anti-India' sentiments prevailing in Nepal the Indian Prime Minister drew on the socio-cultural linkages between the two countries by referring to Nepal as the land of *Sita* and *Janak*.^{iv} In addition, as mentioned above, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's support for Nepal sovereignty influenced the Nepali people and produced expected outcomes for India (Mulmi, 2023).

Thus, all the projected strategies successfully created a favourable environment for India in Nepal and successfully altered the negative perception of Nepal towards India. Interestingly, as Kamal Dev Bhattarai argues, following Prime Minister Modi's visit, Nepal experienced the initiation of several significant development projects not only from India, but even from China. The Indian Prime Minister preferred supporting development projects funded by India within Nepal and also worked on a strategy to speed up political and economic engagement. This was one of the reasons that the Cross Border Petroleum Pipeline Project was completed before the timeline.^v



India's strategy during the 2015 earthquake

The crisis in international politics, as Joseph Nye says, provides both 'opportunity' and 'challenge' for political leaders of a given country (Nye, 2008, p. 89-91). The Indian leadership experienced this phenomenon when Nepal faced a catastrophic earthquake in April 2015. As the earthquake hit, the Indian Army launched *Operation Maitri*, which aimed to provide rescue and relief materials such as food, water, and blankets, equipment, specialists, and medical personnels to Nepal. India also provided two full-fledged army field hospitals with 18 medical teams, 18 army engineering teams, and 16 NDRF teams. Similarly, India played a crucial role in evacuating foreign nationals and transporting Nepali troops, relief teams, and rescue teams from other countries like China and the USA to their designated places. India also facilitated on-arrival visa facilities at the India-Nepal border for foreign nationals who were evacuated from Nepal (Rae, 2021, p. 202).

In the context of the earthquake, India's primary objectives were helping the Nepalese government and people, as well as safeguarding the safety and security of its citizens residing in Nepal. India sent a prominent delegation, comprising Foreign Secretary Dr. S. Jaishankar, Additional Principal Secretary to Prime Minister, P.K. Mishra, and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, to demonstrate its support for Nepal. Sushma Swaraj, India's Minister of External Affairs, offered to provide USD 1 billion for Nepal's reconstruction efforts. It was the largest amount of humanitarian assistance that India ever provided to a foreign state. The financial assistance provided consisted of a concessional loan worth USD 750 million and a grant worth USD 250 million (Rae, 2021, pp. 203-204). Thus, the Indian leadership successfully dealt with the catastrophic situation using its contextual intelligence. Its swift response to the humanitarian crisis won the hearts and minds of Nepali people. By providing grants and loans, the Indian leadership successfully won the confidence of Nepali leaders reaffirming their belief that India still exists as a friend in 'need' (Pandit, 2023).

However, Indian leadership faced some strategic challenges due to 'irresponsible' media reporting from both sides - Indian and Nepali. Following the earthquake, Indian news channels swiftly arrived to cover the on-going relief and rescue efforts. Through the ground report, an (Indian) news channel highlighted India's leading role in most rescue efforts, inadvertently giving rise to a perception that the Nepali leadership was not capable of



handling the crisis. This ‘reporting’ led to great embarrassment for the Nepali leadership and it also stoked ordinary Nepalese resentment. Therefore, in retaliation, the media channels in Nepal openly started the false propaganda stating that the Indian rescue and relief operations were mostly focused on evacuating the Indian citizens (Rae, 2021, p. 204).

To counter this fabricated projection about Indian actions by the Nepali media, the Indian leadership strategically used media platforms to deal with the ‘unfavourable’ situation. The then Indian Ambassador to Nepal, Ranjit Rae, was directed by India’s NSA Ajit Doval to engage with the Nepali media through interviews to control the situation. As a result, Ambassador Rae used different media platforms as a strategy to control the false projection in the Nepali media about India’s actions in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake (Rae, 2021, p. 104). However, this strategy could not produce the anticipated outcomes and the Nepali leadership formally requested the Chief of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) to conclude their operations. Consequently, the Indian leadership withdrew the NDRF teams from Nepal on the ground that their mission had been successfully accomplished (Bhattarai, 2023) (Rae, 2023).

Thus, in the context of the crisis, the media on both sides played a critical role in shaping the perception of the Nepali people towards India’s rescue and relief operations within Nepal. The reportage on both sides posed a strategic challenge for the Indian leadership. Such a situation emerged because of a lack of comprehensive knowledge about the complexities of foreign policy and sensitivity in inter-state relations among the media houses/ personnel of the two countries. Therefore, the media’s reporting resulted in an unfavourable environment for India within Nepal in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake (Thapliyal, 2023) (Mulmi, 2023).

India’s Strategy during the promulgation of Nepal’s New Constitution in 2015

Few months following the earthquake, Nepal promulgated its new constitution in September 2015. It marked a significant step towards establishing republicanism, federalism, secularism, and inclusiveness in the country.^{vi} The international community welcomed the new constitution but India expressed its disappointment. The Indian leadership felt that the newly promulgated constitution had failed to address the concerns of the Madhesi people who were seeking greater inclusion and representation in the new constitution (Meena, 2023) (Muni,



2023). In this context, the Indian leadership tried to ‘co-opt’ the Nepali leadership through the use of bilateral diplomacy. The then Indian Foreign Secretary, Dr. S. Jaishankar, visited Nepal requesting the Nepali leadership to make adequate amendments in the new constitution to ensure inclusiveness by addressing the key concerns of the Madhesi people.

Noteworthy, India’s behaviour was perceived differently by the Nepali people and political leaders. A faction of Nepali people and political leaders, especially those who belonged to Madhes region, favoured India’s stance because they also perceived the new constitution as discriminatory primarily because it did not fully address their demands of proportional representation and equal citizenship rights. However, another section of the Nepali people and political leaders primarily from the hill region perceived India’s behaviour as interference in Nepal’s internal affairs and felt that the Madhesi discontent over the new constitution was backed by India. This view was also present among the then Nepali leadership which led them to ignore the Madhesi demands. This ‘ignorance’ led to widespread protests and demonstrations by the Madhesi people on the India-Nepal border. As a result, the border was blocked which led to severe shortages of essential supplies from the Indian side, creating an economic crisis in Nepal. This resulted in the tense relations between the two countries. The Nepali leadership used this context as an opportunity to manipulate the ‘realities’ (loopholes in the new constitution) and started ‘fear-mongering’ against India among the ordinary Nepali people (Acharya, 2023) (Muni, 2023). Furthermore, the media in Nepal, along with social media platforms, played a significant role in portraying false narratives against India. Thus, the Nepali leadership successfully created a narrative blaming India for the ‘unofficial’ blockade which helped them cloak their own shortfalls. However, this led to ordinary Nepali people, who were unaware of the actual issue, developing a misperception towards India (Bhattarai, 2023).

However, India vehemently rejected the ‘false’ allegations originating from Kathmandu holding it responsible for blocking the border. The then Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson, Vikas Swarup noted,

“Our stand is very clear. We do not want to be prescriptive. It is for the people of Nepal and the political parties in Nepal to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution, something for which ownership can be taken by all sections..... We can only take goods up to the border and



beyond the border. It is the responsibility of the Nepalese side to ensure that there is adequate safety and security for the trucks to enter that side” (Times, 2015).

Due to the influence of media narratives that shaped perceptions in a contrived manner, the effectiveness of the Indian government's strategy was undermined. This, in turn, contributed to a natural gravitation towards closer ties between China and Nepal, while simultaneously fostering sentiments of ‘anti-Indianism.’ Consequently, these dynamics signalled the onset of a gradual decline in the amicable relations between India and Nepal (Baral, 2016).

The shift in India’s strategic behaviour after disagreement over new constitution

Post constitution fallout, the Indian leadership began to work on setting the agenda to ease the tense relations with Nepal. In pursuit of this objective, then Indian President Pranab Mukherjee visited Nepal in November 2016. During this visit, President Mukherjee held ‘informal’ meetings with prominent CPN-UML, NC and Madhesi leaders (Kumar, 2016). However, the most notable move of the Indian President was his visit to *Janakpur* in Madhes region. The decision to visit Madhes region was a strategic step for two reasons; first, *Janakpur* works as a historical foundation of India-Nepal socio-cultural relations and the visit was an attempt by New Delhi to project cultural diplomacy aimed at engaging with the Madhes region and ‘strategically’ intended to maintain a strong bond of socio-cultural relations between the two countries. Second, *Janakpur* was emerging as a crucial ‘political’ hub for the Madhes politics and the visit, thus, symbolised India’s interest in strengthening political connections with the region. In a way, this context proved a shift in India’s strategy to co-opt Nepal through the Madhes region in post constitution fallout (Thapliyal, 2023).

Further, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi used his ‘individual’ co-optive behaviour at the political level. According to B.P. Mishra, Prime Minister utilised the on-going elections to set the agenda to create a favourable environment in Nepal. He congratulated the then Nepali Prime Minister Prachanda for successfully conducting the initial round of local elections in May 2017. The step was noteworthy as it demonstrated the Prime Minister’s earnestness in nurturing a positive relation with Prachanda, irrespective of electoral outcomes. Moreover, in June 2017, Prime Minister Modi congratulated Sher Bahadur Deuba on his assumption of the prime ministerial role after a prolonged 12-year absence. The



gesture further exemplified the Prime Minister's diplomatic overtures and eagerness to foster amicable relations with Sher Bhadur Deuba (Mishra, 2019, p. 221). The strengthening of Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic endeavours was also evident when he conveyed his best wishes to the 'would-be' Prime Minister of Nepal, K.P. Sharma Oli, on January 21, 2018, via a personal phone call. During the conversation, the Prime Minister greeted K.P. Sharma Oli for the forthcoming New Year and congratulated him on assuming the leadership of the country. Prime Minister Modi openly acknowledged his interactions with Nepali leaders on his Twitter account, underscoring his commitment to transparency in diplomatic engagements with Nepal. Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic efforts with Nepal were indicative of gradually adopting a more strategic approach, less reliant on official communication channels between the two countries (Mishra B. P., 2019, p. 222). Thus, Prime Minister Modi aimed at systematically nurturing and strengthening ties with Nepal by maintaining 'favourable' relations with key political actors in Nepali politics- Prachanda, K.P. Sharma Oli, and Sher Bahadur Deuba.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi sought to strengthen cultural and economic relations with Nepal as part of a broader effort to foster a favourable bilateral environment. During his visit to Nepal in 2018, he made significant visits at two sacred sites—*Janakpur* and *Muktinath*—both of which hold profound historical and cultural ties with India.

In *Janakpur*, Prime Minister Modi emphasized deepening the enduring socio-cultural connections between the two nations. As part of this initiative, he announced developmental assistance of USD 12.05 million for the Madhes region, a measure aimed at enhancing political and economic relations in the area. Furthermore, he inaugurated the Janakpur-Ayodhya bus service and launched the "Ramayana Circuit," initiatives designed to promote cross-border tourism and cultural exchange between India and Nepal (Bhattarai, 2018). The visit to *Muktinath* carried a strategic cultural and geopolitical dimension. By engaging with the Hindu and Buddhist communities in the region, the Prime Minister sought to strengthen India's cultural ties with Nepal's hill population while countering the growing cultural influence of China in the country (Thapliyal, 2023).



The Political Context of 2019 and Afterwards

Despite the above strategic effort to ease the tense relations, the Indian leadership faced a ‘strong’ unfavourable context in 2019 due to a border dispute with Nepal. This context was a reflection of two major developments; first, there was a political development due to the publication of a new political map, in November 2019, after the abolition of Articles 370 and 35A in Jammu and Kashmir. The new political map depicted *Kalapani*, *Limpiyadhura*, and *Lipulekh Pass* areas as being located in the Indian state of Uttarakhand. These areas were claimed by Nepal, which strongly objected to India’s move. Second, approximately six months later in May 2020, India’s Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated an 80-km long road connecting *Lipulekh Pass* to the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This new road opened up a new route for the pilgrimage to the *Kailash Mansarovar* which is considered a significant religious site for Hindus (Peri, 2020). Nepal immediately protested against this development, issuing an administrative map in retaliation, which showcased *Kalapani*, *Limpiyadhura* and *Lipulekh Pass* as part of its territory (Karki, 2022).

As a ‘retaliatory’ action, the Nepali leadership introduced a constitutional amendment bill to update the political map, passed by Nepal’s Parliament (*Pratinidhi Sabha*) in June 2020. This bill had overwhelming support, with 258 members voting in favour while 11 members were absent. Only one member voted against this bill (Gautam, 2023). Moreover, Nepali Prime Minister Oli got engaged in retaliatory behaviour accusing India as ‘Indian virus’ (Giri, 2020). He also stated that Ram was born in *Thori*, Nepal, instead of *Ayodhya* in India (PTI, 2020). This statement of Nepali Prime Minister not only challenged India at the political level but he also challenged the historical social-cultural foundation between the two states. This leadership position, established Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli was a popular leader in Nepal and his image became a symbol of ‘Nepali nationalism’ (Nuepane, 2023). In such unfavourable context, the Indian leadership used the media platform as a key tool to set the agenda to create a favourable environment. Therefore, on one side, the Indian leadership denied ‘outrightly’ all the ‘false’ claims of Nepal, and on the other, emphasised that India and Nepal share ‘unbreakable’ relations (Meena, 2023) (Acharya, 2023).

Unfortunately, in December 2020, Nepal faced internal political tension due to a split in the ruling party- the Nepal Communist Party. The party was split into two factions- Prime



Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and party co-chair Prachanda factions. The two leaders (Oli and Prachanda), were looking for India's support. For this, Prachanda was setting the agenda through the media platforms. Therefore, pointing to India, Prachanda delivered a statement in the media that 'democracies' should support democracy in Nepal. While contrary to Prachanda, Nepali Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli was setting his agenda by using both media platforms and bilateral diplomacy by asserting that there were no longer any 'misperceptions' with India to 'renew' amicable ties. In addition, Prime Minister K.P. Sharma 'Oli' sent his Foreign Minister, Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, on India's visit for three days in January 2021. However, in this context, without issuing any statement on Nepal's internal political situation, the Indian leadership co-opted Nepal by providing medical assistance to fight against the covid-19 virus. Thus, it was a shift in India's behaviour towards Nepal's 'internal' political affairs. Through this behaviour, the Indian leadership effectively shaped Nepal's perception from that of 'interference' to 'non-interference' in its internal political affairs (Rae, 2023).

Conclusion

The strategic behaviour of Indian leadership towards Nepal has demonstrated substantial variation, shaped by evolving political contexts. During the tenure of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government under Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh (2006–2014), India primarily adopted a strategy of command behaviour. This approach emphasized bilateral diplomacy and developmental initiatives such as economic investment and assistance as the central tools to achieve its objectives. While these strategic tools succeeded in fostering a politically favourable environment, they failed to produce the anticipated outcomes at the people's level, leaving public sentiment less engaged. For the UPA, maintaining cordial political relations with Nepal was a predominant priority during this period.

In contrast, the strategic behaviour under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014–2020) underwent notable changes. This period can be divided into two distinct phases. In the first phase (2014 to mid-2015), the Indian leadership employed a balance of co-optive behaviour—leveraging bilateral, public, and cultural diplomacy—and command behaviour, emphasizing developmental strategies. These efforts initially succeeded in fostering positive perceptions at both the political and public levels. However, the second phase (mid-2015 to



2020) marked decay in the bilateral relations, caused by India's discontent with Nepal's promulgation of its new constitution in 2015. During this time, India's strategic focus shifted towards the Madhes region. Moreover, since 2020, India's strategic behaviour has further evolved, with a heightened interest in Nepal. A notable facet of India's strategy under Prime Minister Modi has been the effective use of co-optive behaviour, particularly through cultural and public diplomacy, to counter negative perceptions of India within Nepal. Media platforms have also emerged as a major instrument in shaping narratives and achieving desired outcomes in India's relations with Nepal. However, despite these efforts, the 'failure' to mitigate negative public perceptions in Nepal (in 2015) not only strained bilateral relations but also presented a formidable challenge for the Indian leadership. Therefore, concerning today's realities, India has to prioritize strengthening its engagement at the people-to-people level in Nepal. Positive public perception remains pivotal for India as it forms the foundation of bilateral ties and directly influences its broader geostrategic and security interests in the Himalayan region, particularly in counterbalancing China's influence.



Table No. 2. Projected different strategic behaviour by the Indian leadership in varying political contexts from 2006 to 2020

Political Context	Nature of Existing Political Context	Types of Behaviour		Tool/Tactic of Strategy		Action/projected behaviour	Outcome/Produced Environment		
		Command	Co-optive	Command Tool	Co-optive Tool		Favourable	Unfavourable	Neutral
During the interim government (2006-08)	Favourable	✓	✓	Economic assistance	Bilateral Diplomacy	The Indian leadership set the agenda for Maoists to join mainstream politics and provided logistic support for Nepal constituent elections.	Political level		
Prachanda's first tenure (2008-09)	Unfavourable		✓		Bilateral Diplomacy	The Indian leadership used a 'wait and watch' stance, observed Nepal's Maoist leadership behaviour, and asked for Prachanda's official visit to India.		✓	
After Prachanda resignation) Madhav Nepal became Prime Minister (2009-10)	Favourable	✓	✓	Economic investment		Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna visited Nepal and met with Nepal's Influential leaders, providing 820 cr. for development projects.	Political level		
S.M. Krishna's second visit during	Favourable		✓		Bilateral Diplomacy	Indian Foreign Minister resolved the internal dispute in NC; persuade Prachanda for giving a chance to Dr. Baburam Bhattarai.	Political level		



prime ministership of Jhalanath Khanal (2011)									
Frequent Changes in Nepali Leadership (2011-13)	Favourable					No high-level visits from India; bureaucracy handled the relations.			✓
Salman Khushid visit(2013)	Favourable	✓		Economic assistance		Provided logistic support for conducting the CA elections.	Political level.		
Prime Minister Modi's visit (2014)	Favourable	✓	✓	Economic aid and investment	Bilateral diplomacy, Cultural diplomacy Public diplomacy	Provided economic investment and aid for development in several sectors in Nepal. Discussed contentious issues, formed EPG, and emphasized historical relations between the two countries.	Absolute influence at Political and people's level.		
During earthquake in 2015	Favourable	✓	✓	Economic assistances	Media, bilateral diplomacy	Provided economic assistance for the reconstruction of Nepal after the earthquake. Setting the agenda to control the false projection of media on India's action during the earthquake.			✓
Promulgation of New constitution and	Unfavourable		✓		Bilateral diplomacy	Expressed displeasure on some provisions in the New constitution regarding Madhes issues.		✓	



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Madhesis' protest (2015)									
Post Constitution fallout President Pranab Mukherjee visit to Nepal	Unfavourable		✓		Bilateral diplomacy, Cultural diplomacy	Meeting with CPN-UML leaders, Madhes Leaders. Visited Janakpur in Madhes region (Janakpur's relations with Ayodhya is the foundation of India-Nepal social relations)	Political and (Madhesi)people's level		
Modi visit to Nepal in 2018	Neutral	✓	✓	Economic aid.	Bilateral diplomacy, Cultural diplomacy	Provided economic 1 billion rupees to development in Madhes region, visited Janakpur and Muktinath.	Political and people's level		
Dispute over India's new political map (2019)	Neutral		✓		Bilateral diplomacy, Media	India rejected the false claim of Nepal over India's territories (Kalapani, Limpiyadhura, and Lipulekh Pass).	Political Level		
Nepal's Political crisis due to split in NCP in 2020	Unfavourable		✓		Bilateral diplomacy (Medical diplomacy)	Indian leadership avoided issuing any statement on Nepal's internal political crisis and provided medical assistance to fight against COVID-19.	Political and people's level (Nepali people and political leaders perceived that India had stopped micromanaging Nepal's internal politics.)		



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Endnotes

ⁱ The political parties were- Nepali Congress (NC), Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), Nepali Congress (Democratic) (NC-D), Janamorcha Nepal, Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party (NWPP), United Left Front (ULF), and Sadbhavana Party (Nepal) – primarily representing the Madhesi community in the Terai region.

ⁱⁱ The Nepali Congress had divided into two factions due to a disagreement over whether to keep the emergency enacted between the then-party leader, Girija Prasad Koirala and the prime minister at that time, Sher Bahadur Deuba. In 2002, Deuba founded the Nepali Congress (Democratic). The two parties reunited five years later, although their attitudes remained polarised. Prem Raj Joshi in "No More Factions." The Kathmandu Post, Published on February 24, 2016, Accessed on September 2, 2023. From <https://kathmandupost.com/opinion/2016/02/24/no-more-factions>.

ⁱⁱⁱ However, during Dr. Baburam Bhattarai's government, the Constituent Assembly (CA) was abolished without drafting a constitution, thereby leaving a void in the constitutional process. B.P. Misra (2019) in *Essays on Indian Diplomatic Dilemma in Nepal*. p. 105.

^{iv} This behaviour of Prime Minister Modi was based on the historical socio-cultural relations between Ayodhya (India) and Janakpur (Nepal) which is mentioned in *Ramayana*.

^v The Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) and Nepal Oil Corporation collaborated to build the project, which started in April 2018. Covering 69 km, it is the first petroleum product cross-border pipeline in South Asia, supplying fuel from the Barauni refinery in Bihar to Amlekhgunj in southeast Nepal. India provided 3.24 billion rupees, or \$45 to this project. Personal interview with Kamal Dev Bhattarai 10 May 2023.

^{vi} It is important to note that when the Constitution was promulgated, Shushil Koirala was Prime Minister of Nepal. But a month later, on 10 October 2015, he was succeeded by K.P. Sharma Oli.