

Reflecting on The Borrowed Futures of Nepal's Foreign Policy

When I heard about the Gyaan Shrinkhala's inception course, my first question was: "How can a sovereign nation like ours possibly have '**Borrowed Futures**'?" And if not for Nepal's better future; whose future is Nepal's foreign policy actually serving?

After three days of immersive discussion and interaction with peer participants who were equally curious to decode the topic, and with the materials and guidance provided by facilitator Dr. Bhaskar Gautam¹ (Political Scientist and Social Science Researcher), a clearer (and considerably more uncomfortable) understanding began to take shape. The course was structured around three paradoxes, each peeling back a layer of the same underlying question: who actually gets to decide what is important for this country and its diplomatic relations?

Day One: The Paradox of Asymmetric Equiproximity

We began by testing the premise most of us had absorbed without question that Nepal maintains "**equiproximity**" between India and China. The premise did not survive the first hour. As one participant pointed out, even though the geographic majority of China lies physically nearer to us in some respects, Nepal has still ended up functionally closer to India. This proximity, as it turns out, is shaped by economic and infrastructural integration and relation, not only by distance on a map.

What struck me most was tracing the doctrinal evolution Dr. Gautam laid out:

Isolation → Non-alignment → Diversification → Progressive Diversification.

Each phase sounds like forward movement. But merely opening embassies in more countries is not, by itself, a strategy. The recurring metaphor of the session '*dui dhunga bich ko tarul*' i.e the yam caught between two boulders — captures something that has held true from the era of unification through to the present: a continuous thread of what, in IR terms, is called structural insecurity. We are told our geography is an asset. Rarely does that asset translate into actual negotiating leverage.

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The deeper argument that stayed with me: Nepal's weakness in the international order is not primarily externally imposed, it stems from weakness in the domestic order. We cannot bargain confidently abroad while we remain fragile at home.

Day Two: The Paradox of Nationalist Subservience

If Day One was about geography, Day Two was about how that geography gets used domestically. Here the core question sharpened considerably: when international development pacts are weaponized for domestic elite survival, how does Nepal maintain credibility as a reliable partner. Additionally, why does the state approach its own 2026 LDC graduation as a threat to be delayed rather than a milestone to be celebrated?

This is where the evidence became genuinely striking. Nepal's share of concessional loans in official development assistance has risen sharply over the past decade, particularly after 2015, while the grant share has declined. This means we are already moving toward a borrowing-heavy financing model, independent of the formal graduation date. Bhutan, by contrast, is undergoing the same LDC transition but has built a genuine economic base around hydropower. Nepal has not built a comparable niche, which is precisely why the private sector has, at points, lobbied to *delay* its own graduation rather than mark it as progress.

We kept returning to a single, uncomfortable question, one that Dr. Gautam pushed us not to let go of: **when access to information is denied on the grounds of "national interest," who actually gets to define that term?** At what historical juncture does "now" get to decide what national interest means? Without a legally anchored, clearly bounded definition, the term becomes elastic enough to justify almost anything and different tiers of citizens and officials have starkly unequal access to the information needed to even question it.

This, to me, is the real paradox of nationalist subservience: we invoke the nation to justify decisions the nation itself was never consulted on.

Day Three: The Paradox of Sovereign Deficit

The final day pushed the question of **"who decides"** into constitutional and digital territory. Dr. Gautam opened by asking us, plainly: based on an *actual* reading of the Constitution; what does Nepal's constitutional interpretation of sovereignty even amount to? Most of us, notes revealed, had strong opinions on a document we had not carefully read. That, in itself, was a small but pointed lesson.

The Preamble locates sovereignty with the Nepali citizens but given our multicultural, multilingual composition, and given that caste and geography are precisely where our biases form, the harder question follows immediately: *which "Nepali"* is that sovereignty actually resting upon? Territorial claims sit in tension with practice: the national anthem draws our boundaries from the Mahakali to the Mechi, yet Nepal has not stationed armed forces in the disputed Limpiyadhura and Lipulekh territories.

The discussion then moved into a domain few of us had considered under the heading of "foreign policy" at all: digital sovereignty. The 2022 Galwan clash catalyzed India's pivot toward technology-focused security policy; bans on Chinese platforms justified by data-security concerns, a shift toward new technology partners.

The point that landed hardest: where intelligence-gathering once required physical proximity, the digital era requires none. This is a third layer of sovereignty, distinct from the territorial one we grew up thinking about and Nepal's platforms (eSewa, Fonepay, the Nagarik App) rest on infrastructure whose data practices we have barely begun to interrogate. As one participant noted, food security is a sovereignty question too, given how much of Nepal's basic supply chain — down to maize seed itself — now depends on external inputs we can no longer produce independently.

The Thread Running Through All Three Days

Underneath the three paradoxes sat one recurring, foundational question, asked in different forms each day: **who gets to decide what is important? What should be the nation's priority? What should count as security?** Not one session answered it cleanly and I don't think it's meant to be answered cleanly. But the course made clear that whoever controls that definition i.e. of interest, of priority, of security, controls the actual direction of Nepal's foreign policy, regardless of what the doctrine says on paper.

What ties this back to "borrowed futures" is something Dr. Gautam named directly: **historical amnesia**. Every Nepali political leader, across ideological lines, has anchored their platform in "**development**", portraying it as a framework whose roots trace to a post-World War II, distinctly colonial premise that "civilized" nations must help "under-civilized" ones catch up.

Repackaged once a decade under a new name, this same logic has run continuously from the Tribhuvan era to the present. The amnesia is not accidental; a state occupied with a perpetual present-tense focus on development delivery has little incentive to look backward and ask whether the frame itself deserves scrutiny. And when we stop asking, we stop noticing that the questions of "what matters," "what's the priority," "what's security" are being answered for us, not by us.

Why This Matters to Me

I came into this course assuming foreign policy was something that happened at a level far removed from where I work i.e. in institutional partnerships, in workshop rooms, in policy dialogues. Three days in, I no longer believe that. The same question that structures Nepal's relationship with India and China — who decides what matters, and on whose terms. If we do not consciously interrogate the frames we've inherited, we end up executing someone else's priorities while calling them our own.

The task ahead, as I understood it by the close of Day Three, is not to arrive at a tidier definition of sovereignty or national interest. It is to keep asking who is doing the defining and to resist the historical amnesia that makes that question feel unnecessary in the first place.