

Role of Discourse in Shaping Nepal's Foreign Policy: An Assessment Post-2015

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of discourse in shaping Nepal's foreign policy since the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution. Drawing on constructivist insights, it conceptualizes foreign policy discourse as the language, narratives, and rhetorical strategies through which institutional actors, political elites, and the public construct meaning and legitimize policy choices. Using qualitative discourse analysis, the study analyzes three levels of discourse—institutional, political, and public—through two critical case studies: Nepal's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the U.S.-led Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact. The analysis shows that while official rhetoric consistently emphasizes sovereignty, non-alignment, and development, political and public discourses are more contested and polarized. These competing narratives have contributed to a shift from elite-driven foreign policymaking toward a more participatory and publicly contested process. The paper argues that post-2015 Nepal's foreign policy reflects a strategy of diversified engagement, discursively framed as sovereign choice rather than alignment, underscoring the growing importance of domestic discourse in shaping external relations.

Keywords: Foreign Policy Discourse, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), Sovereignty.

Introduction

The term *discourse* in foreign policy refers to the language, narratives, and rhetorical strategies through which policymakers, elites, and publics construct meaning and justify decisions¹. In Nepal's context, discourse encompasses official statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the constitution, leaders' speeches and political party platforms, and media and social media debates. Since 2015 – the year of Nepal's new constitution and a devastating earthquake – Nepalese foreign policy has been shaped not only by geopolitics but also by how key issues are *talked about* domestically. As a small state wedged between India and China, Nepal's leaders draw on historical principles of sovereign equality, nonalignment, and Panchsheel (mutual respect for sovereignty) enshrined in the 2015 constitution². Yet, the meanings of these principles are contested. This paper explores how discourse at three levels –

¹ Daddow, O. (2015, October 27). *Interpreting foreign policy through discourse analysis*. British Politics and Policy at LSE. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/interpreting-foreign-policy-through-discourse-analysis/>

² Adhikari, D. (2018). A SMALL STATE BETWEEN TWO MAJOR POWERS: NEPAL'S FOREIGN POLICY SINCE 1816. *ResearchGate*, 2(1), 43–74. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334963677_A_SMALL_STATE_BETWEEN_TWO_MAJOR_POWERS_NEPAL

institutional (government documents and official policy), **political** (elite speeches, party positions), and **public** (media narratives and social media debates) – has influenced Nepal’s foreign policy decisions since 2015. In particular, this paper analyses two emblematic cases: Nepal’s engagement with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the U.S.-led Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact. This paper seeks to understand how various actors employ rhetoric on sovereignty, development, and alignment to legitimize or challenge these initiatives. Further, this paper argues that post-2015, foreign policy discourse indicates a shift toward more participatory and contested foreign policymaking in Nepal, reflecting the interplay of global power competition, systemic changes, and domestic political currents.

Literature Review

An expanding body of scholarship underscores the significance of discourse in foreign policy analysis. Constructivist theorists argue that the underlying beliefs of foreign policy actors can be understood through the interpretation of publicly available texts and statements delivered by or about those individuals. Discourse analysis uncovers the assumptions and narratives that underlie policy decisions. For example, Oliver Daddow (2015) argues that repeated policy “soundbite[s]” reveal leaders’ worldviews and serve to persuade audiences of their stance. Applying discourse analysis to Nepal is novel, but parallels can be drawn with studies of other small states. Small powers often engage in *normative conformance*, adopting the language of great powers or international norms to “punch above their weight” and secure status³. Nepal’s recent foreign policy choices reflect these structural constraints: as a lower-middle-income, landlocked state situated between China and India, Kathmandu has actively embraced diversified partnerships—with China, the United States, and multilateral institutions—while consistently and rhetorically asserting its sovereignty⁴. Within this broader strategy, studies of India–Nepal relations during the Modi era demonstrate that foreign policy interactions are increasingly shaped by cultural and religious narratives, in which shared civilizational symbols and historical memory are mobilized as instruments of diplomacy. Such narratives significantly influence Nepal’s domestic debates on sovereignty and alignment, often blurring the boundary between cultural affinity and strategic intent.⁵

Scholars have argued that Nepal pursues a strategy of “social mobility” via normative convergence – aligning rhetorically with powerful actors to bolster its status as a small sovereign state. At the same time, Nepal’s leaders profess a balanced foreign policy (“enmity with none, amity with all”). However, critics warn that domestic political pressures and populist rhetoric often override long-term strategy⁶.

In South Asia, the discourses of small states often emphasize nonalignment and national identity. Nepal’s 2015 constitution mandated an “independent foreign policy” grounded in the UN Charter and Panchsheel⁷. Historically, Nepali elites have invoked these principles to navigate between India, China, and other

³ Chand, B. (2024). Nepal’s Status-Seeking Endeavors: Between Normative Convergence and Geopolitical Interests. *Politics and Governance*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9032>

⁴ Khadga K.C., & Binod Khanda Timilsana. (2023). *Redefining Nepal’s Foreign Policy on the Basis of Its Soft-Power Assets*. 79–103. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ncwaj.v54i1.54917>

⁵ Kumar, K. (2025). RELIGION, CULTURE AND FOREIGN POLICY: A STUDY OF INDIA–NEPAL RELATIONS DURING THE MODI ERA (2014–2024). *Zenodo (CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research)*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17937854>

⁶ Baral, L. (2025). *Nepal’s foreign policy failure*. @Kathmandupost; The Kathmandu Post. <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2021/06/23/nepal-s-foreign-policy-failure>

⁷ Unofficial translation CONSTITUTION OF NEPAL 2015 Constituent Assembly Secretariat Singha Durbar. (n.d.). <https://lpr.adb.org/sites/default/files/resource/629/nepal-constitution.pdf.pdf>

powers. However, the literature also shows that Nepal's foreign policy has been highly *domesticated*: domestic politics frequently overshadowed foreign objectives, and policy shifts have often been driven by short-term party interests or populist turns⁸. This suggests that discourse – the way issues are publicly narrated – can be as important as formal agreements. Prior studies on related topics (e.g., analyses of Nepal's United Nations speeches or Nepali media on China) underscore that narratives of sovereignty, development, and external influence pervade Nepal's international engagement. Yet there is a gap in the analysis of how *domestic discourse* specifically shapes foreign policy outcomes in Nepal post-2015. This paper fills that gap by systematically examining rhetoric at multiple levels in two critical case studies, drawing on insights from both international relations theory and Nepal-focused studies.

Methodology

This research employs qualitative discourse analysis. Primarily, it has collected textual data from three categories: (1) **institutional** sources – e.g. the 2015 Constitution, MOFA press releases, policy frameworks (such as the Sino-Nepal BRI Framework), and parliamentary records; (2) **political** sources – notably speeches, interviews, and statements by Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, and party leaders; and (3) **public** sources – including major media reports, editorials, on air and broadcasted debates, and social media content (tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube videos) related to the BRI and MCC. An inductive approach constructs a thematic understanding of Nepal's foreign policy narratives in the post-2015 era. No quantitative methods (e.g. surveys) are used; instead, published or archival texts, expert interviews reported in media, and social media posts have been considered to approximate the “public sphere” discourse in Nepal.

Case Study 1: Belt and Road Initiative

Nepal's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) began in earnest in 2017. On 12 May 2017, the governments of Nepal and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding on BRI cooperation. This was followed by high-level visits: Nepal's President visited China in April 2019 and hosted Xi Jinping in Nepal in October 2019⁹. During these events, both sides emphasized friendship and development. For example, the official **Framework for BRI Cooperation** (MOFA 2024) reiterates that China and Nepal share “time-honored traditional friendship” and pledges “win-win” economic cooperation while explicitly pledging to “respect each other's sovereignty”¹⁰. This **institutional-level** discourse reflects Nepal's institutional-level stance: BRI is presented as a mutual-development project consonant with Nepal's constitutionally guided diplomacy (sovereign equality and benefit). MOFA's language echoes Chinese diplomatic rhetoric (e.g., openness, win-win, green development) and assures Nepali audiences that Nepal sets its own terms under the BRI umbrella. In short, the government's institutional rhetoric on the BRI emphasizes partnership, connectivity, and respecting Nepal's autonomy. At the **political level**, discourse around BRI has been largely favorable among ruling elites. Prime Minister K.P. Oli (2015–16, 2018–21) portrayed himself as a “*pro-China*” leader. His government actively

⁸ Baral, L. (2025). *Nepal's foreign policy failure*. @Kathmandupost; The Kathmandu Post. <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2021/06/23/nepal-s-foreign-policy-failure>

⁹ *FRAMEWORK FOR BELT AND ROAD COOPERATION between the Government of Nepal and the Government of the People's Republic of China* | Ministry Of Foreign Affairs. (2024). Mofa.gov.np. <https://mofa.gov.np/content/641/framework-for-belt-and-road-cooperation-between/>

¹⁰ *ibid*

promoted BRI projects, including plans for a Trans-Himalayan railway and cross-border power lines¹¹. During Oli's first term, the government signed a BRI MoU (2017) and an India-China trade and transit agreement (2016), efforts framed as balancing relations with both neighbors¹². In interviews, Oli and other leaders emphasized BRI as an opportunity for infrastructure and economic growth. Even when Nepal's foreign ministers changed, the BRI narrative remained one of securing Chinese investment and aid. For instance, former Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali (UML) lamented that later governments "*pushed [BRI] projects to the backburner*" and that BRI had been unfairly smeared as a "debt trap"¹³. Gyawali's rhetoric illustrates how political leaders use discourse: he invokes success stories from other BRI countries (Bangladesh, Mongolia) to counter negative narratives, and he positions himself as defending national interest against mischaracterizations. The opposition (mainly Nepali Congress or Maoist factions during 2019–21, when they led the government) generally accepted BRI but stressed that projects should be transparent and beneficial to Nepal, reflecting minor partisan nuances rather than outright rejection. Thus, political leaders' discourse on BRI has largely been pro-engagement, focusing on development gains and Nepal's agency in negotiations.

In the **public sphere**, media coverage and social debate on BRI have been mixed. A content analysis of leading English-language newspapers shows that Nepal's press frames BRI along economic, geopolitical, and cultural lines¹⁴. Some articles highlight infrastructure (roads and hydropower), tourism, and trade as potential positives of BRI. Others echo the common "debt-trap" critique seen globally: concerns that large Chinese loans may saddle Nepal with unsustainable debt. **Pradeep Gyawali** (perhaps the only Nepalese politician to have served an uninterrupted three-year term as foreign minister in the post-2015 period) interview note captures this dichotomy: "*BRI has been undermined with the narrative of debt trap... We have not yet done anything concrete [on projects], but we are blanketly saying BRI is a debt trap scheme.*"¹⁵. This indicates a contest in discourse: journalists and commentators debated whether to frame BRI as a boon or a threat. Kumar (2025)¹⁶ argues that Chinese engagement in Nepal operates not only through economic instruments but also through cultural and symbolic channels. Media cooperation, educational programs, and the discursive framing of China as a development partner contribute to shaping elite and public perceptions, thereby normalizing China's presence within Nepal's strategic imagination. These elite narratives intersect with public discourse, where social media posts oscillate between patriotic enthusiasm for Chinese-funded projects and skepticism regarding foreign influence. Notably, civil society groups and nationalist voices have occasionally warned of security and environmental risks—such as the

¹¹ Sai, B. (2025, October 21). *China recalibrates in Nepal after Oli's fall*. East Asia Forum. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/10/21/china-recalibrates-in-nepal-after-olis-fall/>

¹² Mahabir Paudyal. (2024, June 23). *Discoursing Nepal's foreign policy and domestic politics with Pradeep Gyawali - The DMN News | Breaking News, Live Updates, Analysis from Nepal*. The DMN News | Breaking News, Live Updates, Analysis from Nepal. <https://thedmnnews.com/discoursing-nepals-foreign-policy-and-domestic-politics-with-pradeep-gyawali/>

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ BK, L. B., Dai, Y., Poudel, A., & Devkota, D. (2024). Media Narratives on China's Belt and Road Initiative in Nepal: Impact on Nepal-China Relations. *Studies in Media and Communication*, 12(4), 190. <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i4.7253>

¹⁵ Mahabir Paudyal. (2024, June 23). *Discoursing Nepal's foreign policy and domestic politics with Pradeep Gyawali - The DMN News | Breaking News, Live Updates, Analysis from Nepal*. The DMN News | Breaking News, Live Updates, Analysis from Nepal. <https://thedmnnews.com/discoursing-nepals-foreign-policy-and-domestic-politics-with-pradeep-gyawali/>

¹⁶ Kumar, K. (2025). *An analysis of China's cultural incursion in Nepal and its implications for India*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/394842224_An_Analysis_of_China%27s_Cultural_Incursion_in_Nepal_and_Its_Implications_for_India

ecological impact of infrastructure projects—although such concerns have been less prominent than those raised during the MCC debates. Overall, public discourse surrounding the BRI has been comparatively less polarized than that on the MCC; nevertheless, it continues to shape perceptions, as favorable coverage can build public support for China ties, while negative framing can constrain policy momentum. As Pradeep Gyawali himself acknowledged, media narratives play a decisive role in shaping public views on the BRI.

Case Study 2: Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact

The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) is a U.S. foreign aid agency that signed a USD 500 million grant compact with Nepal in 2017 to support electricity transmission lines and road infrastructure projects. However, the ratification of the Compact was delayed until 2022 due to intense public and political controversy. This debate is particularly salient given that the MCC is widely perceived in Nepal as being embedded within the broader U.S. Indo-Pacific strategic framework. Nepal's discourse surrounding the MCC vividly illustrates all three levels of analysis.

At the **institutional level**, official discourse sought to portray the MCC as a mutually beneficial development initiative. The Nepali government negotiated a 12-point interpretative declaration (12ID) alongside the Compact, emphasizing that Nepal would not cede sovereignty. For example, a clause in the 12ID reaffirmed that if the Compact “*did not abide by the stipulated terms,*” it would be null and void¹⁷. This legalistic language was intended to reassure sceptics that Nepal remained supreme under its constitution. Official statements by leaders like Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and President Bhandari repeatedly asserted that the MCC project would be “fully in conformity with Nepal's laws and constitution,” and that it targeted **economic growth** and poverty reduction – not military presence¹⁸. The Nepali Ministry of Finance also produced Q&A bulletins explaining clauses, seeking to institutionalize a narrative of *sovereign control and mutual benefit*. Thus, institutional discourse emphasized procedural safeguards (like the 12ID) and economic rationales to legitimize the policy.

Politically, however, the MCC became highly divisive. Almost all leftist parties (including the former ruling parties, the UML, then the Maoist Centre, and others) initially opposed the Compact, framing it as a violation of sovereignty. Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal and UML's Bhim Rawal warned that MCC was a vehicle of U.S. influence in the region. In speeches and tweets, opponents argued that provisions allowing disputes to be resolved under international law meant U.S. override of Nepali courts – a “compromise of sovereignty.” The “sovereignty” frame dominated the left-party rhetoric¹⁹. Meanwhile, ruling coalition leaders (the Nepali Congress, then the Maoists after mid-2021) advocated ratification. Prime Minister Deuba and others stressed “strategic diversification” of partnerships – implicitly referencing China and India – by welcoming U.S. aid. Deuba repeatedly asserted that ratification would plug Nepal's electricity shortage and improve roads, a narrative of practical development and reciprocity. Notably, the leading opposition party, UML, had previously supported MCC when in power (2017) but

¹⁷ Maskey, M. (2024, October 23). *Nepal's Fight for Sovereignty, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the US's New Cold War against China*. Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. <https://thetricontinental.org/asia/ticaa-issue-1-the-millennium-challenge-corporation/>

¹⁸ Dhungana, S. (2025). *US Embassy takes to social media to dispel MCC rumours*. @Kathmandupost; The Kathmandu Post. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/02/19/us-embassy-takes-to-social-media-to-dispel-mcc-rumours>

¹⁹ Adhikari, A. (2022). Millennium Challenge Corporation: Interpretations and Implications for the National Security of Nepal. *Unity Journal*, 3(01), 40–50. <https://doi.org/10.3126/unityj.v3i01.43314>

pivoted to opposition for domestic political reasons. This flip-flop itself became a topic of debate: some analysts (and the left press) portrayed the ratification as a *concession* made under external and internal pressure, with the 12ID serving only as a face-saving “fig leaf”²⁰. The political discourse thus featured competing frames: **developmentalist/strategic** (government) vs. **sovereignty/nationalist** (opposition).

Public and media discourse on the MCC appeared intense. The Kathmandu Post reported that as parliament prepared to discuss the Compact in early 2022, “*protests erupted*” and police used tear gas to disperse crowds. Social media was rife with false narratives – for instance, viral videos falsely claimed U.S. military bases would be built in Nepal. The U.S. Embassy in Kathmandu publicly targeted “disinformation” on Twitter and Facebook, warning Nepalese about propaganda and outright lying²¹. Mainstream media reflected the debate: some editorials called for sober discussion of facts (e.g., explaining that the MCC contains no military clause), while others amplified the conspiracy frames (U.S. neo-colonialism, geo-containment). Independent journalists and civil society also weighed in; one prominent columnist lamented “*an embarrassing display of political fraud with willful mischaracterizations*” that had poisoned public discourse²². At the same time, regular citizens – from taxi drivers to students – eagerly shared rumors on social media, saying the MCC would “*allow American troops to build a base*” or turn Nepal into a vassal²³. In sum, the MCC debate was shaped by a potent mix of media framing and grassroots social media activism, reflecting highly contested narratives. The “sovereignty vs. development” dichotomy was spelled out explicitly in television debates and news reports.

Foreign governments also engaged in discourse: U.S. officials repeatedly explained that MCC was “*purely grant assistance*” to help build infrastructure, while Chinese media and diplomats seized on the controversy. For example, Chinese state outlets highlighted the protests and argued that Nepal’s internal discord was exacerbated by foreign meddling²⁴. Chinese Ambassador to Nepal was even reported to have encouraged Nepali groups to view MCC as a U.S. “trap”²⁵. These external voices added to the nationalist frames within Nepal.

Analysis: Discursive Actors and Frames. Comparing the two cases reveals how discourse at different levels serves to legitimate or contest policy. At the **institutional level**, official texts and statements aim to frame policies in consonance with Nepal’s stated foreign policy identity. For both BRI and MCC, Kathmandu’s bureaucrats and leaders consistently invoke **sovereignty** and **mutual benefit**. For example, the China-Nepal BRI Framework explicitly states both sides will “*respect each other’s sovereignty*” and pursue “*mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation.*” Similarly, the Nepali Parliament’s adoptive language (the 12ID) repeatedly asserts Nepal’s supreme authority under its constitution. These

²⁰ Maskey, M. (2024, October 23). *Nepal’s Fight for Sovereignty, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the US’s New Cold War against China*. Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. <https://thetricontinental.org/asia/ticaa-issue-1-the-millennium-challenge-corporation/>

²¹ Dhungana, S. (2025). *US Embassy takes to social media to dispel MCC rumours*. @Kathmandupost; The Kathmandu Post. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/02/19/us-embassy-takes-to-social-media-to-dispel-mcc-rumours>

²² Rana, pranaya sjb. (2021). *To MCC or not to MCC - The Record*. @Recordnepal. <https://www.recordnepal.com/to-mcc-or-not-to-mcc>

²³ ibid

²⁴ Sai, B. (2025, October 21). *China recalibrates in Nepal after Oli’s fall*. East Asia Forum. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/10/21/china-recalibrates-in-nepal-after-olis-fall/>

²⁵ Kumar, A. (2024, September 25). *How China Soured on Nepal*. Thediplomat.com; The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/how-china-soured-on-nepal/>

institutional-level discourses use formal jargon and legalese to assure audiences that Nepal remains independent in decision-making. They also highlight **developmental rationales**: Nepal's official justification for both BRI and MCC was primarily economic (infrastructure, energy, trade). This can be seen as a continuation of Nepal's constitutional goal to "*mobilize development cooperation*" for national prosperity. By framing these foreign partnerships as consistent with constitutional principles (sovereign equality, benefit, lawfulness), officials seek to legitimize decisions that might otherwise seem to compromise Nepal's neutrality.

At the **political level**, party leaders and elites interpret and amplify these institutional narratives through partisan lenses. Ruling parties across periods tended to emphasize **benefits and diversity** in partnerships. The Nepali Congress (under Deuba) and Maoist Centre framed the MCC as a practical step to diversify aid (away from only India/China) – a discourse of *multi-alignment*. In their view, embracing the MCC was a form of pragmatic nationalism, reducing over-dependence on immediate neighbors. By contrast, opposition leaders (UML, some Maoists) deployed a **nationalist/sovereignty** discourse. They warned that entering into compacts with great powers risked Nepal's autonomy. In their speeches, terms like "*violation of sovereignty*," "*imperialism*," and "*foreign interference*" recurred. This aligns with literature noting that small states often fear entrapment by larger powers when invoked (the "debt trap" narrative for BRI and "troop bases" narrative for MCC). The data show that Nepalese elites chose these frames opportunistically. For example, UML's volte-face on MCC (from support to opposition) was less about the Compact's content and more about party competition. This indicates that elites deploy discourse to mobilize constituencies. Notably, some political rhetoric explicitly invoked identity: former FM Gyawali stressed that Nepal must "demarcate the red line" and clearly prioritize national interests when dealing with big powers²⁶, signaling a call for coherent discourse around Nepal's interplay among India, China, and the U.S.

The **public-level** discourse – on media and social platforms – reflects and shapes popular attitudes. Media narratives on the BRI case, for instance, have covered a spectrum: The Kathmandu Post and Republica ran detailed analyses of project proposals, while investigative reports flagged potential debt issues. Studies of Nepali media frame BRI articles as mixing optimism (connectivity, jobs) with caution (environment, finance)²⁷. These narratives feed into public opinion. During the MCC debate, social media became a battleground of misinformation and activism. Tweets and Facebook posts from U.S. and Nepali officials sought to correct falsehoods, illustrating how external actors also joined the domestic discourse. Simultaneously, rumors (about U.S. troops, base) thrived in online groups, demonstrating how *disinformation* can be a potent counter-discourse. Civil society and youth activists amplified these messages offline: protest signs and rally slogans often echoed the "sovereignty" frame or demanded transparency. As one commentator noted, even common Nepalis (e.g., a taxi driver) had absorbed conspiratorial language ("sell the country," "American slaves")²⁸. This shows that foreign policy

²⁶ Mahabir Paudyal. (2024, June 23). *Discoursing Nepal's foreign policy and domestic politics with Pradeep Gyawali - The DMN News | Breaking News, Live Updates, Analysis from Nepal*. The DMN News | Breaking News, Live Updates, Analysis from Nepal. <https://thedmnnews.com/discoursing-nepals-foreign-policy-and-domestic-politics-with-pradeep-gyawali/>

²⁷ BK, L. B., Dai, Y., Poudel, A., & Devkota, D. (2024). Media Narratives on China's Belt and Road Initiative in Nepal: Impact on Nepal-China Relations. *Studies in Media and Communication*, 12(4), 190. <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i4.7253>

²⁸ Rana, pranaya sjb. (2021). *To MCC or not to MCC - The Record*. @Recordnepal. <https://www.recordnepal.com/to-mcc-or-not-to-mcc>

contestations have permeated popular discourse, forcing policymakers to respond to public sentiment. In sum, public discourse – while heterogeneous – has increasingly influenced policy by raising issues (sovereignty, transparency) that politicians must address.

Implications: From Elite-Driven to Participatory Foreign Policy. The analysis above suggests that since 2015, Nepalese foreign policy has become more discursively contested, reflecting deeper shifts in Nepal’s diplomacy. First, the prominence of multiple narratives – both pro-development and nationalist – indicates a move away from exclusively elite-driven decision-making. Whereas in the past foreign policy was largely the domain of a few leaders (with minimal public debate), today even major agreements must withstand scrutiny in parliament, media, and the streets. The MCC saga especially revealed how *democratic debate* can both hinder and refine foreign policy: the extensive debate MCC prompted across multiple levels was “a sign of democracy in action,” even if it was tainted by conspiracy. Likewise, the 2025 Gen Z protests underscore how Nepali youth and civil society now see foreign policy issues as integral to national reform. In other words, the discursive arena has expanded from closed-door diplomacy to a vibrant public sphere. This blurring of domestic/foreign politics was a longstanding trend. Since 2015, major incidents in Nepal with geopolitical implications made it explicit that issues such as BRI and MCC have become lightning rods for demands for accountability and sovereignty.

Second, the content of discourse reflects changing diplomatic dynamics. Nepal’s official rhetoric still nominally endorses **nonalignment and balanced relations**, but the emphasis is pragmatic. The willingness to ratify the MCC (despite initial internal opposition) and simultaneously pursue BRI projects demonstrates strategic diversification of partners. This aligns with studies of normative convergence: Nepal is rhetorically aligning with Western norms (transparent aid, multilateral agreements) to gain access to development resources, while also maintaining ties with China. Discursively, Nepal projects itself as an active stakeholder and reliable actor in global initiatives (BRI, MCC, UN, etc.) rather than a passive buffer state. For example, Nepal’s hydropower potential and transport connectivity are significant **national assets**. Narratives of turning geographical challenges into opportunities with foreign aid support an argument on Nepal’s quest for prosperity while balancing major powers. The institutional discourse thus weaves a story of *Nepal as a bridging nation*, echoing Chinese appeals to “new international relations of win-win cooperation” and US calls for a development partnership. However, the persistence of skepticism (e.g., debt-trap fears) also means Nepalese diplomacy is now forced to address public concerns openly.

Finally, this discursive shift has normative implications. Scholars have warned that the lack of consensus and rampant politicization of foreign policy agendas can undermine Nepal’s coherence. Indeed, Unity Journal analysis finds that divergent MCC narratives threaten “*national unity*” and create policy confusion²⁹. The move to a more participatory foreign policy demands new consensus-building: elite visions must now be communicated and, at times, moderated by public expectations. On the positive side, greater transparency can make foreign policy more reflective of Nepali interests (e.g., insisting on the 12-point or on meeting domestic needs). On the negative side, it can empower misinformation and factionalism, complicating diplomacy. Nepalese leaders have begun to acknowledge this complexity. Foreign Minister Gyawali, for instance, cautioned against allowing partisan agendas to dictate Nepal’s

²⁹ Adhikari, A. (2022). Millennium Challenge Corporation: Interpretations and Implications for the National Security of Nepal. *Unity Journal*, 3(01), 40–50. <https://doi.org/10.3126/unityj.v3i01.43314>

foreign ties, underscoring the challenge of channelling democratic discourse into a coherent and effective strategy. In this context, the study highlights that Nepal's contemporary foreign policy is characterized by a conscious strategy of balancing, in which engagement with India, China, and other external partners is discursively framed as an expression of sovereign choice rather than alignment. This narrative enables Nepali elites to justify diversifying partnerships while formally maintaining a commitment to non-alignment³⁰.

As a recent analysis of youth politics concluded, "*Nepal's Gen Z movement has already transformed political discourse...introducing digital activism as a legitimate form of political mobilization*"³¹. Foreign policy debates are now part of this transformation, signaling that future Nepali diplomacy will likely be more public-oriented, contested, and, if managed well, responsive to broader national interests.

Conclusion

In the post-2015 era, discourse has played a central role in shaping Nepal's foreign policy trajectory. Institutional rhetoric has continued to invoke sovereignty and mutually beneficial cooperation, aligning with Nepal's constitutional directives. However, political leaders and parties have used divergent narratives to support or oppose key initiatives, framing issues as either pragmatic development or threats to autonomy. The public – through media and social networks – has amplified these narratives, often in polarized forms, forcing foreign policy to be debated openly. The cases of the BRI and the MCC compact illustrate this dynamic: both are renowned international projects, but each became controversial through different discourses (economic opportunity vs. debt trap; development grant vs. imperialist ploy) that cut across institutional statements and popular opinion. The clash and co-existence of these discourses reveal that Nepal's foreign policy process is no longer insular. As analysts have observed, Nepal's foreign policy-making was once "*hijacked*" by domestic politics and patronage³². Today, it is being renegotiated in public forums.

This discursive opening may ultimately strengthen Nepal's diplomacy by forcing clarity: leaders must justify foreign deals in public terms, and citizens can demand adherence to national goals. It also reflects Nepal's status-seeking strategy: by engaging in global initiatives and debating them at home, Nepal asserts its agency and sovereign voice on the world stage. Nonetheless, the transition from elite-driven to more participatory foreign policymaking is unfinished. Whether Nepal can harness its newfound discourse to achieve "development and prosperity" (as promised in official narratives) while preserving national unity remains an open question. What is clear is that since 2015, discourse has ceased to be background noise; it is now itself a driver of Nepal's foreign policy.

³⁰ Kumar, K. (2024). India-Nepal Relations in the Modi Era: Dynamics, Challenges, and Prospects. *International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies.*, 03(08), 424–429. <https://doi.org/10.70333/ijeks-03-07-036>

³¹ Jaiswal, P., & Thapa, B. D. (2025). *Nepal's Gen Z: The New Wave of Youth Politics in Geopolitical Crosscurrents* | Asia-Pacific Leadership Network. Apln.network. <https://www.apln.network/analysis/the-korea-times-column/nepals-gen-z-the-new-wave-of-youth-politics-in-geopolitical-crosscurrents>

³² Baral, L. (2025). *Nepal's foreign policy failure*. @Kathmandupost; The Kathmandu Post. <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2021/06/23/nepal-s-foreign-policy-failure>

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