

Geopolitical aspects of Himalayan region: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the various geopolitical aspects of the Himalayan region. The geopolitical theories like Sea Power, the Heartland theory, the Rimland theory etc are observed. The geographical expanse of the Himalayas, the youngest and the highest mountain ranges of the world form the northern border of the Indian subcontinent. The major players in the region India and China are aspiring global powers although China is leading the way with India not far behind. China with its policies on Tibet (previously “The Five Finger Policy”), Belt and road Initiative, new silk road, hydropower projects, heavy militarization and urbanization has not only posed security threats for India and other countries like Nepal, Bhutan but have also disturbed the eco sensitive Himalayan region. The other countries especially India too are securing their national interests in the Himalayan region to counter China. The principles of international relations like realism, hegemony and security dilemma are at work. Climate change also poses serious threat to this region. The need is to discover areas like common Himalayan heritage or geostrategic equilibrium to tackle various issues of this geopolitical and biodiversity hotspot region.

Keywords: Heartland, Rimland, security dilemma, Geostrategic equilibrium, shatterbelt.

“Geography is destiny” (Heywood, A. (2014). p. 414).

Nicholas Spykman once wrote that “ministers come and go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed.” (Nicholas J. Spykman, 1942), p. 41.)

The paper attempts to study the various theories of geopolitics and international relations and their relations with the Himalayan region. This paper will begin by defining Geopolitics.

The word *geopolitics* was originally coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén about the turn of the 20th century, and its use spread throughout Europe in the period between World Wars I and II (1918–39) and came into worldwide use during the latter. (Deudney, D. H. (2024, January 6)).

Defining Geopolitics as ‘the spatial study and practice of international relations’, which ‘explains the dynamic spatial dimension to some persisting patterns of conflict in international relations’, Colin Gray considers that ‘Geopolitics is a variant of classical realism’ (Venier, P. (2011), 12.)

Geopolitics can be defined as the struggle over the control of geographical entities with an international and global dimension and the use of such geographical entities for political advantage. (Flint, C. (2021, July 1).

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The major theories of geopolitics are as follows:

Mahan's concept of sea Power

He wrote a book called "The Influence Of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783"

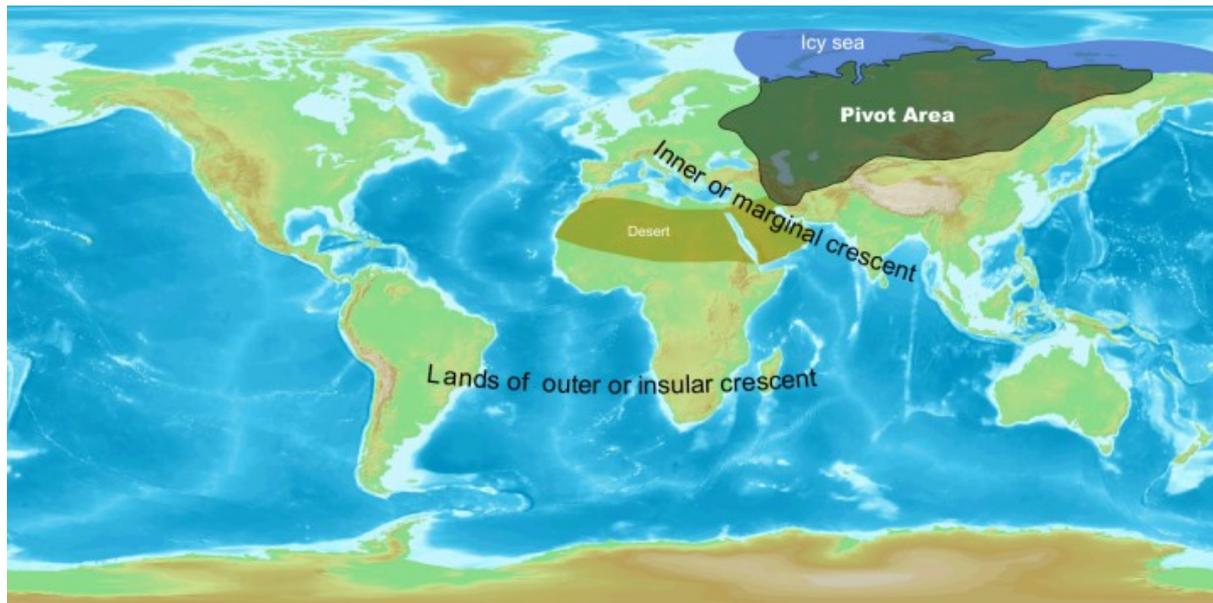
In essence his concept comprised three principles

1. The United States should be a world power.
2. Control of seas is necessary for world power status.
3. The way to maintain such a status is a powerful navy. (Manship, H. K. (1964))

The Heartland Thesis

Mackinder gave the heartland thesis in which he argued that the central Asia region has long been important in world politics, and he called it the "pivot of the world's politics." He further elaborated this thesis by dividing the world into three regions: heartland, inner crescent and outer crescent. According to him the power which will control the heartland will control the world. His famous dictum:

"Who rules the east Europe commands the Heartland, who rules the heartland commands the world Island, who rules the world island commands the world." (Baylis, 2014, p. 184-86)



The Rimland Thesis

It was propagated By Nicolas Spykman as modification of the Heartland Thesis. In line with Mackinder's dictum, he quoted: "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia, who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world." This formed the basis of U.S policy of containment of USSR.(Baylis, 2014, p. 184-86)

Mahan influenced a German geographer and zoologist, Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), who also believed in naval power, but concentrated his writings more on land: ominously, this follower of Darwin's theories was the first person to coin the term 'Lebensraum' ('living space), in an essay on 'bio geopolitik'. This term led to the use of the term 'geopolitik': the Swede Rudolf Kjellen (1864-1922), influenced in turn by Ratzel, used the term. By now, the German approach laid particular emphasis on the state being an organic entity, thus implying that strong and growing states could break down borders in the quest to grow. (Mallinson, W., & Ristik, Z. (2016))

Cohen forwarded a reality base geographical geopolitics by which structure and direction of world system could be predicted and formulated. He considers the world as an organic whole where parts are linked to each other with specific patterns. (Antonsich, M. (2004, 801–804))

Yves Lacoste mentioned that 'in order to understand a conflict or a geopolitical rivalry, it is not enough to mention and map its stakes, one must attempt, especially when the causes are complex, to understand motivations, ideas of main actors ...the role of ideas – even though false – is capital in geopolitics, since they are the ones explaining projects and, as material data, are determining the choice of strategies. We call these geopolitical ideas REPRESENTATIONS'.(Lazar, M., & MATAOI, E. (2020), 7). Yves Lacoste has attempted to combine the theoretical foundations of both geography and history, and rather than developing a geopolitical theory, he has focused on developing a methodology for geopolitical analysis. (Venier, P. (2011), 12)

The Himalayan Region

Himalayas, great mountain system of Asia forming a barrier between the Plateau of Tibet to the north and the alluvial plains of the Indian subcontinent to the south. The Himalayas include the highest mountains in the world. The Sanskrit name Himalaya is *hima* ("snow") and *alaya* ("abode). The ranges, which form the northern border of the Indian subcontinent and an almost impassable barrier between it and the lands to the north. The Himalayas themselves stretch uninterruptedly for about 2,500 km from west to east. Between those western and eastern extremities lie the two Himalayan countries of Nepal and Bhutan. The Himalayas are bordered to the northwest by the mountain ranges of the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram and to the north by the high and vast Plateau of Tibet. Though India, Nepal, and Bhutan have sovereignty over most of the Himalayas, Pakistan and China also occupy parts of them. (Chatterjee, S. P. and Bishop, . Barry C. (2024, February 7))

The Himalayan region has various implications on the geopolitics of South Asia, especially the Indian subcontinent. The major players in this region are China, India, and Pakistan. To some lesser extent one can include Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Bhutan. But the resurgence of China as a major global power and India's growing global astute has made this region a geopolitical hotbed. Let us consider the various aspects of this geopolitical region one by one.

Tibet

Tibet is not called the roof of the world, it is also called the Water Tower of Asia as it is the origin of 10 major river systems of the world and has the largest water source after the Two poles. No doubt China is undertaking hydropower projects in this region. (Michigan State University. (2023, March 9), (D. P. (2019, November 1))

The Tibet policy was formulated by Mao and was called the “The five fingers policy” where Tibet was the palm. The five fingers were namely Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Nepal and Ladakh. (Singh, T. (2013),1.)

Before the occupation of Tibet, it was a buffer state between India and China. But after 1950, China and India came into direct confrontation. It led to the full-scale war between India and China in 1962. The diplomatic relations deteriorated and there was no revival till 1977. It still hampers India China relations as China considers Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin region its own. It has led to rising temperatures between the two countries every now then the latest being the Doklam issue and Galwan Valley issue.

Considering the importance of Tibet due to its water resources and strategic location it has important implications to China's growing clout and its relations with its neighbours especially India.

Belt and Road Initiative

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is referred to as the New Silk Road. Xi's vision included creating a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, both westward—through the mountainous former Soviet republics—and southward, to Pakistan, India, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Such a network would expand the international use of Chinese currency, the renminbi, and “break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity,” according to Xi. For Xi, the BRI serves as pushback against the much-touted U.S. “Pivot to Asia” policy. (Mcbride, J., Berman, N., & Chatzky, A. (2023, February 2)).It includes the economic corridor from Nepal to China and the China- Pakistan economic Corridor(CPEC). As such these networks will be in the Himalayan region. China's “major country diplomacy” is President Xi's main feature of its foreign policy. It implies that the boundaries of legitimate state action have been dramatically expanded since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. (Smith, S. (2021), 17(2)). These projects are also damaging the ecologically fragile system of the Himalayan region.

Pakistan

Pakistan is major player in this Himalayan region as it is friendly to China and hostile to India. The Himalayan state of Kashmir is in disputed occupation of Pakistan. The CPEC is dedicated economic corridor in Pakistan connecting its port of Gwadar to mainland China. The port serves strategic interest of China since it is indulged in South China Sea conflict. In case of blockade of China their trade as well as supplies will not be hampered.

Ecology of Himalayas

Due to the geopolitical importance of the region, there is heavy militarization whether it is India Pakistan Line of Control, India -China line of actual control and Sikkim Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. There is heavy infrastructure development also to support the military on both sides.

Not only China but India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan are focusing on building hydropower projects in this region to secure energy needs of the future. Similarly, tourism in this region is hampering the sensitive ecology of the region. The greatest example is how Mt. Everest scaling has become commercial. Similar problems are there in Kashmir, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, including Northeast Indian States. The recent example being the

massive floods in Sikkim. The cloud bursts have become common to the region. Climate change is impacting the ecology of the region as the glaciers are melting. The Himalayas are rich in biodiversity, but this biodiversity is depleting fast owing to the above reasons. The contesting states of this region must come together to fight climate change as well as cooperate to save the ecology of the region before it's too late.

India

India has sovereignty over majority of Himalayan region, so it has its natural impacts too. For centuries it was conceived that the Himalayas form the natural border to the north till the 1962 war happened. In today's modern warfare the Himalayas are not impregnable. India has territorial disputes in this Himalayan region with China and Pakistan thus the biggest security challenge for India is no doubt the Himalayan region. Moreover, Kashmir and the northeast states of India suffer from cross border terrorism, infiltration, refugee issues, drug and human trafficking. The Chinese policy in the Himalayas completes the encirclement of India complementing the "string of Pearls" strategy. The Himalayas are the main area of interest in foreign policy and strategic policies of India. This has led to an increase in militarization of the region with heavy infrastructure development to counter any threat from the mountains. India is heavily opposed to the Belt and Road Initiative of China as it considers it to be the direct attack on its sovereignty. To counter the Chinese move of operating at Gwadar port under the above initiative India chose Chabahar port.

India hugely depends on Himalayan rivers for its agricultural needs. Climate change in the region may be catastrophic for the Indian population. The melting of glaciers may cause heavy flooding downstream. The frequency of natural disasters will increase in the region may wreak havoc on the population.

In order to increase sources of clean energy as well as renewable sources of energy India has built number of hydropower projects in the region. Last but not the least population in the mountains are heavily dependent on tourism for their living. For India the Himalayas are indispensable.

Theories of geopolitics, IR and the Himalayas.

Realists as well as neo realists believe in the concept of balance of power. If there is balance of power the chances of confrontation are minimized. At present the situation is tense between India and China following the events at Galwaan valley. As both the powers have nuclear weapons they definitely act as a deterrent. India has also developed long range nuclear missiles, air defence system and nuclear triad. It is very necessary for India to maintain balance of power with China to maintain equilibrium in the Himalayan region otherwise territorial disputes in this region may lead to drastic results.

Neorealists view international relations as anarchy where states are forced to take up any of three options of Security Dilemma, self-help and relative gains. (Heywood, A. (2014). p. 63)) .Security dilemma is a classic condition where each country is suspicious of each other's actions further raising the tensions. India – China – Pakistan relations viewed from this point of view justify each of these nations' actions in the disputed region. India justified its nuclear tests of 1999 based on this doctrine and immediately after India's nuclear test Pakistan too conducted the tests.

Viewed from the interdependence school of liberalism (Heywood, A. (2014),66)) aggression and expansionism are deterred by the spirit of commerce. According to a report of the economic times dated January 13, 2023, India China trade climbed to 135.98 billion USD with a trade deficit for the first time crossing the 100 billion USD mark. This is despite tensions across borders. This is what this school of liberalism believes that if trade grows then interdependence between two states will be more and the chance of conflict will be less. In other words when low politics surpasses issues of high politics peace will prevail. Husain puts a multicultural model of liberalism which prevents hegemony of unicultural nationalism, which is very much related to the democratization process. (Husain,2023) An organic connection exists between Multiculturalism and democratization. The earlier unicultural nationalism had taken a back seat, paving the way for multicultural societies. In an ever globalised world order, every state is compelled to incorporate Multiculturalism in one way or another. (Husain, 2023 p.22)

Hegemony as a concept was given by Antonio Gramsci which implies ideological domination but in international relations hegemony operates through a mixture of coercion and consent. (Heywood, A. (2014), p. 63) India and China both are vying for hegemony not only in the Asian region but also globally. India recently conducted a G-20 meeting and showcased its soft power and growing stature in global politics. Recent examples of China befriending countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives etc. show Chinese aspiration of establishing regional hegemony.

Cohen in his analysis finds South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar), which constitutes an independent geopolitical region shattered by continuous turmoil. This latter region together with the Middle East Shatterbelt (which, for Cohen, also include Libya, Egypt and Sudan) form what he calls an “arc of geostrategic instability”. (Antonsich, M. (2004), 801–804,) As he suggested that geostrategic equilibrium can be achieved through economic interdependence between Washington and Beijing.(Antonsich, M. (2004), 801–804) same can be the way for China and India.

Brahma Chellaney, who has written extensively about the area, suggests that without intergovernmental agreements, the Himalaya would become Asia's ‘treacherous new battleground’. (Alexander E. Davis, Ruth Gamble, Gerald Roche & Lauren Gawne (2021, 15-35)

In a useful intervention, LHM Lingand Mahendra Lama (2016) rejected the great power contestation model and its focus on competing, territorially marked states. They sought to ask questions beyond ‘cooperation and conflict’. They instead referred to ‘India-China’ as ‘civilizational twins’ with various shared inheritances, many of which emerged from the Himalaya (Alexander E. Davis, Ruth Gamble, Gerald Roche & Lauren Gawne (2021), 15-35). This entirely new viewpoint without the power politics dimensions as well as economics dimension focuses on the cultural aspects which can be explored in future which draws on common Himalayan heritage.

Conclusion

In this paper, various theories of geopolitics were analysed. The major players in the Himalayan region were also studied. Based on this some conclusions can be drawn.

- China is the major player in the Himalayan region with aspirations of becoming Global power and control over the Himalayas will provide it an upper hand. Example: Occupation of Tibet, Belt and Road Initiative and New silk road.
- India is a growing power, but it is involved with China and Pakistan in territorial disputes in the Himalayan region. So, for India the Himalayas pose a significant security challenge.
- Pakistan, an ally of China, is weaker due to the economic crisis and political turmoil, but it supports China in its grand plan.
- IR theories of Realism like state centrism, balance of power and security Dilemma are at work in this region.
- Hegemonic aspirations of China and India.
- Despite tensions with China, India-China trade is increasing.
- Because of territorial disputes, heavy militarization has been undertaken by the concerned states in this region.
- Hydropower projects in the region have hampered the ecology of the region.
- Urbanization and increase in tourism has also disturbed the fragile ecology of the region.
- Climate change has also disturbed the ecosystem of this region.
- The common Himalayan heritage which can include language, religion or culture can be discovered to strengthen relations among Himalayan states.
- Geostrategic equilibrium.

At the heart of geopolitical thinking is the realist notion of the importance of achieving world order through a balance of power which seeks to prevent regional or global hegemony from arising. (Baylis, 2014, p. 184-86)

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