



COMMENTARY

NAVIGATING NEPAL'S FOOD SECURITY ISSUES AMID CHANGING INDIA- CHINA DYNAMICS

PAVAN KUMAR



SOUTH ASIAN FUTURES FELLOWSHIP

THE SOUTH ASIAN FUTURES FELLOWSHIP ANNUALLY SUPPORTS EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS BASED IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION, INTERESTED IN EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF GEOPOLITICS ON REGIONAL COOPERATION. FELLOWS ARE AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS WITH EXPERTISE ON NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY ISSUES; THEY PARTICIPATE IN WORKSHOPS, PRODUCE POLICY PIECES, AND ARE PROVIDED THE OPPORTUNITY OF A 1-MONTH RESEARCH RESIDENCY IN A SOUTH ASIAN CITY. DURING THIS RESIDENCY THEY WORK AT A PARTNER THINK TANK, ENGAGE WITH EXPERTS, AND CONDUCT FIELD STUDY ON A TOPIC OF THEIR INTEREST. THE FELLOWSHIP PRODUCES, AND ENGAGES WITH, REGIONAL NARRATIVES AND FACILITATES KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE ON SHARED CHALLENGES IN AN EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION.

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Navigating Nepal's Food Security Issues Amid Changing India-China Dynamics

Nepal's Food Security: A Crisis in the Making

Nepal's growing food insecurity is a complex issue with far-reaching implications in its relations with neighbors, India and China. The country's vulnerability to changing climate lies at the core of this crisis, highlighting challenges that could reshape the geopolitical landscape in South Asia. The landlocked country relies heavily on agriculture, with a significant portion of its population engaged in farming. However, rising temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns, floods, landslides, and droughts have compounded its food security challenges. In recent decades, the Himalayan climate has undergone a deteriorating transformation, with certain regions experiencing either excessive rainfall or a complete absence of it. Such climatic disruptions further exacerbate the vulnerability of Nepal's agriculture sector and as a consequence its relations with important neighbors, India and China. This is due to various partnerships it has forged with both countries to balance its food insecurity.

Approximately 65% of the cultivable land in Nepal depends solely on rainfall for irrigation, yet only 25% is equipped with irrigation systems.¹ Any shift in rainfall patterns significantly impacts not only the farming workforce but also agricultural yield, which leads to crop failures, reduced productivity, and economic losses. Agriculture plays a crucial role in the economy, providing employment opportunities to approximately 65% of the population and contributing a significant 31% to the country's GDP.² The impact of climate change on the agricultural sector is twofold: firstly, it exacerbates the occurrence of floods and landslides due to excessive rainfall, and subsequently, it contributes to droughts and crop failure as a result of reduced precipitation. It is disheartening to acknowledge that despite some positive changes witnessed in previous decades, Nepal continues to grapple with the issue of food insecurity, affecting approximately 4.6 million individuals³, underscoring an urgent need to examine the effectiveness of Nepal's policy responses.

The findings of the 2016 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) shed light on a concerning issue plaguing the nation. Nearly 20% of households in Nepal grapple with mild food insecurity, while an additional 22% face a more moderate level of food insecurity.

Shockingly, 10% of households are trapped in the clutches of severe food insecurity.⁴ These statistics paint a grim picture of the country's food access and availability.

To overcome these food security challenges, successive governments in Nepal have implemented various policies to deal with the state's food security crisis. These policies include The National Nutrition Policy and Strategy (2004), Article 36 of The constitution of Nepal (2015), Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act (2018), The Fifteenth Plan (2019–2024), the National Nutrition Strategy (2020), The Agriculture Development Strategy (2015–2035), the Multi Sector Nutrition Plan (2018–2022), National Agriculture Policy (2004), and Food and Nutrition Security Plan (2013).⁵ These policies have a clear objective: to boost food production and combat the devastating effects of malnutrition and related deaths. However, despite many such efforts, the implementation gaps highlight a pressing need for robust strategies that align domestic production with a growing demand.

Nepal's Reliance on Partners Amid Rising Geopolitical Competition in the Neighborhood

Nepal now faces a precarious situation in food production, particularly with rice. While the country requires at least 4 million tonnes to meet its demand, its domestic production falls short at just 3.5 million tonnes, highlighting a significant gap that needs to be addressed. This glaring disparity leaves Nepal heavily reliant on importing rice from neighboring India and other countries.⁶ Like rice, other important agricultural products like cereals, fruits and vegetables, fertilizers, and electronic equipment are also imported by India and China.

Domestically, this reliance is not well-received in Nepal and has become a growing concern as observed by commentators and researchers.⁷ Purushottam Ojha, a trade expert, explains that for many farmers in Nepal, purchasing food has become a more cost-effective choice than cultivating it, driven by factors like the availability of remittance income and the inability of local produce to compete with cheaper, subsidized imports from India. While this may appear economically practical in the short term, it has significantly weakened Nepal's agricultural sector, leaving the country increasingly dependent on food imports and vulnerable to disruptions in supply chains or foreign exchange crises, thereby threatening long-term food security.⁸ As Nepal navigates the journey of closing its food insecurity gap,

India has been a consistent partner. India's assistance extends beyond supplying affordable rice and essential cereals. It has also played a pivotal role in supporting the development of agricultural research infrastructure in the country by providing necessary technologies to Nepal and by collaborating in agricultural research. An example is multiple irrigation and agricultural projects in Nepal, where India has provided assistance in building dams in Koshi, Devighat, and other crucial locations, along with the development of horticulture stations and agriculture labs.⁹ In 2018, the Prime Ministers of India and Nepal announced a new agricultural partnership, focusing on joint initiatives in R&D, education, climate resilience, seed technology, soil health, plant protection, animal husbandry, agroforestry, bio-pesticides, cooperative farming, and exchanges between the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the Nepal Agricultural Research Council (NARC).¹⁰ In addition to aid in constructing irrigation infrastructure, Nepal has greatly benefited from India providing fertilizers, technology, and education to bolster its agricultural sector and ensure food security.¹¹

However, in recent years, China's role in assisting Nepal with climate change and food security has also emerged as a noteworthy development. China's recent commitment to allocate a substantial amount of NPR145 million towards agricultural ventures reflects its increasing focus on supporting economic growth and sustaining livelihoods in Nepal.¹² During Nepali Prime Minister Dahal's visit to China in September 2023, discussions extended beyond food product provision to explore investments in Nepal's agricultural sector.¹³ China's initiatives to develop new rice strains better suited to the Nepalese climate highlight its long-term approach to addressing food security challenges in the country.¹⁴

With both countries emerging as key regional partners in addressing their food security challenges, Nepal has to carefully navigate its relationships with India and China, particularly as the two countries engage in rapidly evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Nepal's Food Security Crisis and What Lies Ahead for Nepal-India-China Relations

Nepal's economic conditions indicate that it is unlikely to find a solution to the food crisis on its own. Nepal finds itself in a situation where its reliance on partner countries for both food

assistance and solutions to its agricultural challenges brought on by the climate crisis is set to increase.

However, against the backdrop of the volatile geopolitical situation in the region, partnering with two competing development partners can become a tough balancing act for Nepal. As China remains committed to exerting its influence in South Asia through the provision of technical assistance and financial aid, such as that provided to Nepal, India too is responding with attempts to protect its sphere of influence and counterbalance China's growing influence. If Nepal were to navigate the political landscape with skill and finesse, it stands to reap significant benefits. However, Nepal's leadership should be aware of the risks involved in engaging both China and India. By doing so, they may inadvertently draw Nepal into an escalating dynamic within its own territory, potentially leading to complex conditions or geopolitically unfavorable circumstances with either neighbor. After all, as the saying goes: “there is no such thing as a free lunch”.

Endnotes

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