

**Bibek Chand (2023). *Reframing the buffer state in contemporary international relations: Nepal's relations with India and China*. Routledge. 180pp, pbk, ISBN: 978-1-0320-1418-0. £39.99.**

The challenges for a small state manoeuvring its way amidst the realpolitik of international relations amplify exponentially if geography is cruel to it. Buffer states, smaller states sandwiched between two more powerful contesting states, are perhaps the most vulnerable to the cruelties of their geographical disposition. Chand's book – *Reframing the buffer state in contemporary international relations: Nepal's relations with India and China* – is a timely contribution that addresses the limited theoretical attention to buffer states, and which seeks to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding them.

The book proposes a new conceptual framing for understanding a buffer state. It encourages moving away from the outdated view which limits buffer states to a static geographic space separating larger powers, only serving as a “territorial discontinuity” (p. 17) and an “early warning system” (p. 22) for potential conflict. It reconceptualises the buffer state as an active participant in the buffer system with its own strategic utility and agency. The buffer state's strategic utility lies in its importance as a dynamic political space where both the rival buffered states showcase their competitive overtures to assess each other's influence, formidability, and stakes. The buffer state thus becomes a centre of the dynamic relations between the two contending powers and a critical venue to measure their relative capabilities and foreign policy's tact. The new conception also places special emphasis on the agency of the buffer state, despite it being constrained by the limits of the buffer system. It interacts with both the contending powers and makes decisions based on its active assessment of their relationship dynamics at any particular point in time.

Chand puts the new analytical framework to the test by using the case of the China-India-Nepal (CIN) buffer system. He identifies 21 specific events, called “critical junctures” (p. 24), within the CIN buffer system and organises them into four timeframes, spanning from 1947 to 2023. These critical junctures are essentially crises or major political events that triggered significant policy or strategic changes among one or more actors in the system. These events cover a range of events, including major developments in Nepal's tumultuous domestic politics, changes in Nepal's relations with either of the buffered states, and critical points in Sino-Indian ties. Chand delves deep into each critical juncture, excellently laying out the historical context for each event and unpacking the nuances within. The insights from each critical juncture are then used to assess the two pillars of the new framework: the strategic utility of the buffer state and its agency.

Combining observations from all 21 critical junctures, Chand sheds light on the predicaments and actions of a small buffer state while, at the same time, seamlessly weaving a coherent narrative of the evolution of Nepal's ties with its giant neighbours. The analysis offers in-depth insights on how the buffer state maximises its agency via three major strategies: maintaining neutrality, internationalisation of diplomacy, and forging closer ties with one of the contending buffered states. Thus, Chand's framework reconceptualises buffer states as dynamic political spaces which are not just passive spectators but actors who strive to maximise their agency even while operating within the constraints of the buffer system.

Chand's book is an important intervention in the study of small states and territories. The main achievement of this study is that it accomplishes a fine balance: exploring the case of a small state in depth and detail but keeping it in constant dialogue with a rigorous theoretical analysis. It is not uncommon for studies dealing with individual case studies to get entangled in history and other descriptive details and fall short of proposing and testing cogent theoretical

contributions. Chand defies this trap and succeeds in addressing a significant gap in the literature on small buffer states. This work is also crucial because of the relatively scant theoretical literature on small states in South Asia. While a plethora of works on South Asian small states like Nepal are journalistic accounts, memoirs, accounts focusing on diplomatic history, and foreign policy analyses, studies employing lenses of a rigorous theoretical framework are fewer.

While contextualising Nepal as a buffer state, the book also brings in perspectives about the evolution of its political self-perception. Chand acknowledges that while the idea of being a buffer state has not been explicitly discussed by Nepal, these inferences can be deduced from official statements, speeches, and documents. The book refrains from problematising the colonial connotations of the term “buffer state” and does not explore instances of alternative self-perceptions. For example, the Zone of Peace proposal (1975) is discussed extensively but the book does not explore how Nepal’s self-perception might also have undergone changes during this period. King Birendra, the monarch of Nepal who floated the proposal, had mentioned in a few of his statements about the concept of buffer state being outmoded. In that period, there were even references to the Zone of Peace proposal as being a means to preserve Nepal’s “identity” as a nation. Thus, the book could also have touched upon ideas about identity and self-perception that might have occasionally clashed with the concept of buffer zone.

Chand’s reconceptualisation of the buffer state concept is a refreshing take on developing an analytical framework to understand a small state’s predicaments, roles, and expectations in contemporary geopolitics. The case of Nepal also makes this quite a relevant study as, with the shift of the locus of power politics to the Indo-Pacific region, South Asian small states are facing a rise in both challenges and opportunities with respect to their foreign policies.

In sum, Chand’s book is a must-read for those wishing to understand the nuances of the strategic utility and agency of a buffer state in contemporary international relations.

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