

**Bibek Chand (2023). *Reframing the buffer state in contemporary international relations: Nepal's relations with India and China*. Routledge. 180pp, hbk. ISBN: 978-1-0320-1417-3. UK£96.00.**

Chand urges scholars of international relations (IR) to consider how buffer states exercise agency within ‘buffer systems’: the frameworks in which buffer and buffered states interact. Bringing the buffer-state concept back to the fore is an ambitious endeavour. This is even more so because the study of small states – a category into which Chand places most buffer states – has often been neglected. Using his country of birth, Nepal, as a case study is a welcome contribution, given that state’s atypical geopolitical circumstances. Not only is Nepal landlocked but, along with Bhutan and Mongolia, it is one of only three states in the world to be completely surrounded by two nuclear-armed neighbours. Nepal therefore faces strategic risks and options that differ from those of many small states, which often have maritime access, multiple neighbours, or both.

Chand claims that discussions of the buffer-state concept must include “its roots in the field of geopolitics [which developed] in Europe just before World War I” (p. 14); yet, a little later, he describes it as “... an ancient form of state strategy ... traced back to the era of the Roman Empire” (p. 16). A reader unfamiliar with this history might find the chronology of this overview confusing; on closer reading, however, these assertions distinguish between concept and practice, rather than being contradictory. Most innovatively, Chand proposes a “new buffer state concept” (p. 22). Its overarching features are, firstly, the recognition that geography remains important in international affairs but has declined in relative importance because of advances in military technology. As a result, rather than simply utilising buffer states as ‘early warning systems’, buffered states increasingly use them as spaces in which to competitively make overtures and assess one another’s capabilities. Secondly, buffer states, having traditionally been viewed as passive objects, should have their limited degree of agency in determining their own course acknowledged in any serious IR studies.

After comprehensively outlining the buffer-state concept, Chand reminds readers – who might otherwise assume Nepal has always bordered India and China – that the modern iterations of these states became neighbours within living memory: India in 1947 (upon securing independence from the British Empire) and the People’s Republic of China in 1951 (when it annexed Tibet). It is within this context that the current China–India–Nepal buffer system emerged. Chand identifies twenty-one ‘critical junctures’ – meaning “major political events or crises that fostered policy changes within the buffer system” (p. 149) – in Nepal’s modern history. They had far-reaching consequences for Nepal’s internal governance and ability to influence its position as a buffer state. According to Chand’s references, critical-junctures theory originates from a study of (distant) Sweden and Ireland (p. 7). This reflects his wide engagement with the literature and demonstrates the applicability of theories of political development beyond the contexts in which they were originally developed.

The concept of neutrality features prominently in Nepal’s foreign policy, not just as a means of preserving agency, but to ensure state survival. Although Nepal’s bold attempt to be recognised as a ‘zone of peace’ was rejected by India, the proposal won the support of over seventy countries (p. 83) and Nepal has, in any case, asserted neutrality during multiple conflicts between China and India. While not stated explicitly, one might also deduce from Chand’s book that Nepal is a status quo power – with the proviso that the regional status quo can change dramatically. This is supported by his example of Nepal maintaining a balanced stance and calling for reconciliation between the warring parties during the 1971 Bangladesh

Liberation War (p. 80). This was consistent with its doctrine of neutrality, before quickly accepting the new reality of the Bangladeshi state and thereby placating India. Another interesting facet is Chand's implicit distinction between the interests of the small state's *regime* and those of the small state more broadly. For example, in response to China's expansion into Tibet in the late 1950s, Nepal opted to improve its ties with India, despite that country's support for opponents of Nepal's Rana regime. In other words, Chand observes that, for Nepal, "survival superseded all domestic considerations, including regime security" (p. 154).

It is unsurprising (given the book's title) that Chand focuses on the considerable constraints that China and India impose on Nepal's ability to exercise an independent foreign policy and the extent to which they (particularly India) interfere in Nepal's domestic politics. Even so, to his credit, Chand addresses the internationalisation of Nepal's diplomacy. The country has endeavoured to forge ties with the United States, the European Union, and other actors. Nonetheless, there remains room in the literature for a study into how the international market forces which buffet many small states apply specifically to those which are buffers. After all, Chand highlights how the buffer-state phenomenon – necessarily intertwined with notions of "geographical disposition" (p. 2) – is challenged by communications technology and the shortening of distances. Does being situated in a buffer system, particularly a landlocked one, hinder the ability of a small state to exploit free markets; or even reduce its vulnerability to the pressures of globalisation?

While Chand's account of Nepal's foreign policies toward India and China demonstrates the application of hedging strategies, it is surprising that the term only appears twice in the book. Instead, Chand uses the term 'equi-proximity' (which appears to have been coined by members of Nepal's government). Explicit references to the hedging concept would not necessarily add to the book's explanatory power, but they might have situated it more clearly within the small state literature. Furthermore, Chand provides a detailed account of how China and India's relationships with other regional and global powers impact on Nepal's fortunes. This account does not directly address whether Nepal benefits from being able to devote the lion's share of its foreign-policy attention and expertise to its two large neighbours; but it might prompt readers to ask. Presumably, Nepal only occupies a fraction of theirs.

Far from being criticisms, these questions and observations go to show how thought-provoking Chand's book is. It is both a notable contribution to the study of small states and a must-read for scholars of South Asian geopolitics. Furthermore, in convincingly demonstrating that Nepal's fate is not simply in the hands of India and China, Chand's book may inspire policymakers in other small states.

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