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The Role of Soft Power in U.S.-Nepal Relations Post-Monarchy (2008): Insights from International Relations Theory

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Abstract

Soft power, primarily via interpersonal connections, diaspora involvement, and academic exchanges, has become an essential instrument in strengthening U.S.-Nepal relations. This study examines how these soft power processes have fortified relations between the two nations since 2008, after the dissolution of Nepal's monarchy. This article analyses the possibility of enhanced collaboration in trade, culture, and education by concentrating on educational exchanges, the influence of the Nepali diaspora, and people-to-people diplomacy. Utilising the frameworks of Liberalism and Constructivism in International Relations (IR) theory, it recognises soft power as a strategic means for both nations to attain enduring stability and reciprocal advantage.

Keywords: *Soft power, U.S.-Nepal relations, diaspora, educational exchange, people-to-people diplomacy*

I. Introduction: Soft Power and International Relations Theory

Scholars of International Relations (IR) have consistently highlighted the significance of soft power in influencing foreign relations. Joseph Nye (2004) articulated that soft power denotes a nation's capacity to sway others by allure and persuasion rather than through coercion or force. This contrasts with hard power, which depends on military and economic strength. For small states such as Nepal, soft power is crucial for sustaining and enhancing relationships with influential countries like the United States.

In 2008, Nepal underwent a pivotal transformation, abolishing the monarchy and establishing a federal democratic republic. This political transition redefined Nepal's foreign policy, offering new opportunities for participation, especially in soft power diplomacy. Since then, U.S.-Nepal ties have progressively depended on non-coercive instruments, including people-to-people interactions, diaspora involvement, and cultural diplomacy. These procedures have significantly contributed to increasing mutual understanding,

boosting bilateral relations, and creating chances for partnership in education, trade, and development.

This article employs Liberalism and Constructivism as theoretical frameworks to examine the influence of soft power in U.S.-Nepal relations. Liberalism underscores collaboration among states via institutions, economic interdependence, and shared values (Keohane, 2005). Constructivism asserts that collective norms, identities, and cultural values influence state interactions (Wendt, 1999). The paper emphasises the influence of theoretical concepts on U.S.-Nepal ties, particularly following Nepal's political upheaval.

II. Soft Power in U.S.-Nepal Relations: The Role of the Nepali Diaspora

The active involvement of the Nepali diaspora in U.S.-Nepal relations is a prominent expression of soft power. The Non-Resident Nepali (NRN) community, comprising professionals, students, and businesspeople, is crucial in enhancing bilateral relations between the two countries. Following the fall of the monarchy in 2008, the Nepali diaspora in the United States has emerged as a pivotal force in economic and cultural diplomacy.

Economic Contributions

The diaspora substantially aids Nepal's economic development through remittances. According to World Bank data from 2022, remittances constituted over 25% of Nepal's GDP in recent years, positioning it among the most remittance-dependent nations globally (World Bank, 2023). This economic support assists individual households and drives national development efforts, encompassing infrastructure, education, and healthcare activities. Remittance flows have enabled establishing schools and healthcare facilities in remote regions, improving access to essential services.

Table 1: Remittances from the U.S. to Nepal, USD in billions (2008–2023)

Yr.	\$	% of Nepal's GDP	Yr.	\$	% of Nepal's GDP
2008	1.8	14%	2016	3.2	22%
2009	1.9	15%	2017	3.3	22%
2010	2.0	16%	2018	3.4	23%
2011	2.1	17%	2019	3.5	23%
2012	2.4	18%	2020	3.5	23%
2013	2.5	19%	2021	3.6	24%
2014	2.6	20%	2022	3.7	25%
2015	2.8	21%	-----		

(Source: World Bank, 2023)

Additionally, Nepali professionals in the U.S. have significantly contributed to advancing technological and educational partnerships between institutions in both nations. Mentorship programmes and internships have equipped Nepali students with essential skills and experience, which they can utilise upon their return to Nepal. Collaborations between U.S. universities and Nepali institutions, including Tribhuvan University, have resulted

in research initiatives centred on sustainable agriculture and renewable energy, tackling significant challenges confronted by Nepalese society (Shrestha et al., 2021).

Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy constitutes a crucial element of diaspora involvement. Festivals like Dashain, Tihar, and Nepali New Year are extensively celebrated in the U.S. and coordinated by numerous Nepali diaspora organisations. These cultural festivals exhibit Nepal's abundant traditions, arts, and cuisine and promote mutual understanding and respect between the two nations. Events such as the Nepali New Year celebration in New York draw substantial crowds, including Americans eager to engage with Nepali culture directly. Such interactions foster cultural exchange and dialogue, improving bilateral relations (Sharma, 2021).

Furthermore, cultural interactions facilitated by NRNs have enhanced Nepal's prominence as a tourist destination and investment centre. Promoting Nepal's natural beauty and tradition via social media campaigns and cultural events has drawn tourists from the U.S., benefiting the local economy. Nepali artists, writers, and scholars in the United States contribute to media and academic endeavours that emphasise the nation's culture, history, and current challenges. This has transformed perceptions of Nepal, depicting it as a nation in development and abundant in culture and history (Ghimire, 2021; K.C., 2020).

People-to-people Connections

From a liberal perspective, these actions correspond with shared values and collaboration ideals. The Nepali diaspora in the U.S. promotes interpersonal connections, strengthening cultural bonds and encouraging enduring partnerships between the two countries. These links may also enhance political engagement, as diaspora members advocate policies favouring Nepal and advancing its interests within U.S. governmental spheres.

For instance, NRNs have organised to advocate for safeguarding Nepali workers' rights and advancing trade deals advantageous to Nepal. Their endeavours illustrate how diaspora communities may impact foreign policy and promote a more favourable atmosphere for bilateral collaboration.

Based on multiple estimates and publications, the following is an approximate table of the Nepali diaspora population in the U.S. (including NRNs) from 2008 to 2022:

Table-2: Nepali diaspora (NRN) population in the U.S. (2008-2022)

Year	Estimated NRN	Year	Estimated NRN
2008	75,000	2016	160,000
2009	80,000	2017	182,000
2010	85,000	2018	175,000
2011	90,000	2019	198,000
2012	95,000	2020	171,000
2013	99,000	2021	230,000
2014	135,000	2022	261,000
2015	140,000	-----	

(Sources: US Census Bureau, 2008-2022; Pew Research Centre, 2008-2022)

These figures are just approximations, as detailed, official annual statistics are unavailable. The population has predominantly risen due to migration, particularly for educational and occupational reasons.

The involvement of the Nepali diaspora in economic and cultural diplomacy has generated substantial prospects for enhancing U.S.-Nepal relations. The diaspora has contributed to Nepal's growth not only through remittances, cultural festivities, and activism, but also by improving its image and influence in the United States. This interaction illustrates the efficacy of soft diplomacy in promoting mutual understanding and collaboration across states.

III. Educational Exchanges: Strengthening Bilateral Ties

Educational interactions between the United States and Nepal have been essential in cultivating soft power and strengthening bilateral relations. Following the collapse of the monarchy in 2008, there has been a significant rise in the number of Nepali students seeking higher education in the United States. The Institute of International Education (2020) reported that the population of Nepali students in the U.S. increased by around 15% per annum from 2008 to 2020, positioning Nepal as a leading source of international students. In 2022, more than 11,000 Nepali students were enrolled in U.S. universities, positioning Nepal among the top 12 countries for student enrolment in the U.S. (Open Doors Report, 2022). These students gain essential knowledge and skills and act as cultural ambassadors, enhancing the understanding of Nepal inside American academic and policy spheres.

Table-3: Number of Nepali students in the U.S. (2008-2022)

Year	Nepali Students	Year	Nepali Students
2008	7,754	2016	9,662
2009	8,936	2017	11,607
2010	11,581	2018	13,270
2011	10,301	2019	13,229
2012	8,920	2020	12,730
2013	8,920	2021	11,172
2014	8,155	2022	11,779
2015	8,158	-----	

(Sources: Open Doors Report, 2022)

The figures demonstrate variations in the enrolment of Nepali students in U.S. educational institutions, influenced by global issues such as visa regulations and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact of U.S. Government Initiatives

The U.S. government has strongly supported educational exchanges through numerous projects, with the Fulbright Programme being among the most prominent. Founded in 1946, the Fulbright Programme promotes cross-cultural exchange by providing scholarships to students, academics, and professionals. American Fulbright scholars researching Nepal acquire significant insights into the nation's cultural, sociological, and environmental intricacies, promoting mutual understanding and enhancing diplomatic relations. Their research dealt with crucial issues,

including public health and environmental sustainability, facilitating information exchange between the two nations (U.S. Embassy in Nepal, 2022).

Moreover, entities such as the U.S.-Nepal Education Foundation have enabled these exchanges. The foundation has awarded over 500 scholarships and various training programmes, greatly aiding Nepal's development while fostering enduring interpersonal connections, a crucial aspect of soft power diplomacy (U.S.-Nepal Education Foundation, 2022).

Joint Research Initiatives

A significant collaboration is the ten-year partnership between the University of Texas and Tribhuvan University, concentrating on water resource management and agricultural innovation. This collaboration has effectively applied sustainable water conservation methods in rural Nepal, providing farmers with the resources to adjust to fluctuating climatic circumstances and improving agricultural output (Singh et al., 2018). These efforts advocate for sustainable practices and empower local communities, illustrating the tangible advantages of educational exchanges.

The partnership between Kathmandu University and Stanford University has led to 20 collaborative research initiatives, especially in renewable energy. The projects, encompassing advancements in solar energy and effective irrigation systems, have greatly aided local populations and furthered Nepal's sustainable development (Shrestha et al., 2021). These projects promote collaboration in advanced research, facilitating the connection between academic knowledge and practical application, by Nepal's overarching development objectives.

The influence of these educational interactions goes beyond immediate academic accomplishments. They also establish a network of professionals and scholars who promote enhanced U.S.-Nepal relations. Many graduates return to Nepal possessing advanced skills and knowledge, adopting leadership positions in sectors including government, non-profit organisations, and private firms. Their experiences in the United States offer distinctive insights that influence policy and practice in Nepal (Bhattarai & Kandel, 2020).

Constructivist Perspective

From a Constructivist viewpoint, these educational interactions are essential for cultivating shared norms and identities, promoting enduring cooperation between the two nations. Constructivism asserts that international relations are characterised not only by material capabilities but also by the identities and interests of states, which are shaped via interactions and exchanges. The collective experiences of Nepali students in the U.S. foster a feeling of shared purpose and comprehension, which is vital for maintaining diplomatic relations.

Moreover, the cultural exposure and academic accomplishments of Nepali students enhance the portrayal of Nepal as a nation dedicated to education and progress. Their success narratives can contest preconceptions and foster a more nuanced comprehension of Nepal within American society.

Consequently, educational exchanges between the U.S. and Nepal have been essential in fortifying bilateral relations and augmenting soft power. These exchanges foster more robust cooperation by facilitating knowledge transfer, cultural interaction, and collaboration on crucial issues. As both nations address global concerns, cultivating educational connections will persist as a

strategic means to attain reciprocal advantages and enduring stability.

IV. People-to-People Diplomacy: Enhancing U.S.-Nepal Relations

People-to-people diplomacy is an essential element of soft power in U.S.-Nepal relations. It is based on the notion that interactions among ordinary citizens can enhance diplomatic relations. This strategy includes diverse cultural exchange programmes, volunteer efforts, and collaborative research projects aimed at enhancing grassroots connections and fostering mutual understanding.

Volunteer Initiatives and the Role of the Peace Corps

The U.S. Peace Corps has been notably impactful in this context, establishing a substantial presence in Nepal since 1962. Around 4,000 Peace Corps volunteers have operated in diverse sectors such as education, health, and environmental sustainability, fostering community development and empowering local populations in Nepal from its establishment to 2005. Peace Corps volunteers have implemented educational programmes that improve literacy and foster critical thinking abilities among Nepali youth, significantly influencing the nation's future workforce (U.S. Peace Corps, 2022). These initiatives not only advantage Nepali communities but also cultivate profound personal relationships between the inhabitants of both countries, as volunteers frequently establish enduring friendships and cultural exchanges with their host families and communities.

Table-4: Number of Peace Corps Volunteers in Nepal (2008-2022)

Year	Peace Corps	Year	Peace Corps
2015	53	2019	75
2016	72	2020	0
2017	70	2021	0
2018	78	2022	0

Sources: Peace Corps Nepal Annual Reports (2015-2022)

The Peace Corps programme in Nepal was initially discontinued in 2005 due to security concerns stemming from the Maoist insurgency. It was re-established in 2012 with partial funding from USAID and launched operations with a food security initiative in 2015 (Peace Corps, Nepal, 2015). The programme was interrupted once more in 2020 owing to the COVID-19 epidemic and remained inactive until 2022.

Tourism as a Connector

The increase in tourism from the U.S. to Nepal, especially in adventure and eco-tourism, has notably strengthened interpersonal connections. American tourists in Nepal enhance the local economy while immersing themselves in the nation's vibrant culture and stunning landscapes. In 2022, U.S. visitors constituted about 12.54% of international arrivals, indicating an increasing interest in Nepal as a tourism destination (GoN, 2023). The influx of tourists yields economic advantages and promotes cultural exchanges that deepen understanding and respect between the two nations.

Table-5: The U.S. tourist arrivals in Nepal (2008-2022)

Year	Total Int'l Arrivals	US Tourist Arrivals	% of US Tourists
2008	500,277	37,481	7.49%
2009	509,956	41,835	8.20%
2010	602,867	43,902	7.28%
2011	736,215	46,295	6.29%
2012	803,092	48,985	6.10%
2013	797,616	47,355	5.90%
2014	790,118	49,830	6.30%
2015	538,970	53,897	10.00%
2016	753,002	53,645	7.12%
2017	940,218	79,146	8.42%
2018	1,173,072	91,895	7.83%
2019	1,197,191	93,241	7.80%
2020	230,085	17,767	7.70%
2021	150,962	22,854	15.13%
2022	614,869	77,083	12.54%

(Sources: Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation of Nepal, 2023)

Shared Values and Norms

People-to-people diplomacy fosters mutual trust and collaboration, aligning with Liberalism and Constructivism in International Relations theory. From a Liberal standpoint, this diplomatic approach prioritises collaboration founded on shared values and principles. Volunteer efforts and tourism cultivate a sense of community and shared purpose among the residents of both nations. Cultural exchange programmes, including art exhibitions and culinary festivals, showcase the rich traditions of Nepal and promote American engagement with Nepali culture (Ghimire, 2021).

From a Constructivist perspective, interpersonal diplomacy is essential in building identities and cultivating shared narratives. As citizens from both nations connect directly, they cultivate a profound comprehension of each other's cultures, history, and societal concerns. This improved comprehension can foster a shared identity that encourages cooperative problem-solving in climate change, public health, and economic development.

Collaborative Research Projects

Furthermore, collaborative research endeavours between U.S. and Nepali universities illustrate the essence of people-to-people diplomacy. Projects addressing public health issues, such as maternal and child health in rural Nepal, have united American and Nepali experts to design lasting solutions. These collaborations tackle urgent challenges and foster ties that may result in more partnerships across many domains (Shrestha & Hachhethu, 2020).

Therefore, people-to-people diplomacy functions as an essential instrument for improving U.S.-Nepal ties. Ordinary folks foster mutual trust and understanding through volunteer efforts, tourism, and joint research. By cultivating grassroots relationships, people-to-people diplomacy adheres to the tenets of Liberalism and Constructivism, establishing a basis for enhanced cooperation and collaboration across diverse sectors. As both nations confront global issues, enhancing these interpersonal connections will be crucial for cultivating a more robust and collaborative cooperation.

V. Soft Power as a Strategic Tool for U.S.-Nepal Relations: Future Pathways

Soft power has been a strategic asset in strengthening U.S.-Nepal relations, especially in the post-monarchy period. This strategy prioritises influence via attraction over coercion, enabling both nations to develop a partnership highlighting shared interests and cultural ties. Utilising the frameworks of Liberalism and Constructivism allows for an understanding of the evolution of these relations and the identification of prospective avenues for further advancement.

Liberalism and Cooperation

From a Liberal standpoint, educational exchanges, cultural diplomacy, and diaspora participation are crucial for promoting collaboration between the two countries. The rise of Nepali students seeking higher education in the U.S. has enhanced American colleges and facilitated cultural exchange. The Fulbright Programme of the U.S. government exhibits this by fostering academic collaborations that promote innovation and the exchange of knowledge (Institute of International Education, 2020). As more Nepali students attain quality education, they return home, possessing skills that enhance Nepal's growth and strengthen bilateral relations.

Cultural diplomacy is also crucial. Events coordinated by the Nepali diaspora, including festivals and cultural exhibitions, commemorate shared ideals and traditions, thereby fortifying cultural connections. Annual festivals of Nepal's heritage in cities such as New York and San Francisco foster cross-cultural interaction and appreciation among American audiences (Ghimire, 2021).

Constructivism and Shared Norms

From a Constructivist perspective, collective norms and identities are essential for comprehending the dynamics of U.S.-Nepal interactions. Historical connections founded on shared principles like democracy, human rights, and social justice have been strengthened via engagements at both governmental and grassroots levels. Wendt (1999) asserts that collective identities influence states' perceptions and interactions on the international stage.

Collaborations on climate change efforts illustrate how common identities can foster fruitful partnerships. Both countries encounter substantial effects from climate change, necessitating cooperative initiatives in sustainable energy and environmental conservation. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has collaborated with Nepali organisations to execute climate adaptation initiatives, demonstrating a commitment to tackling common global concerns (USAID, 2021).

Future Pathways for Strengthening Relations

The U.S. and Nepal can strengthen their bilateral relations in the future through diverse soft power strategies that promote mutual understanding and collaboration. The following are critical domains for enhanced collaboration between the two nations: education, cultural exchange, sustainable development, tourism, and technology communication.

1. Expansion of Educational Programs

Joint degree programmes and research projects are essential instruments for enhancing U.S.-Nepal ties. Expanding educational connections, particularly in emerging disciplines like information technology, environmental science, and public health, would yield mutual benefits for both nations. Collaborating with American colleges can assist Nepal in modernising its educational infrastructure, providing students with access to advanced research and knowledge. Collaboration with Nepal would yield significant insights into South Asian dynamics for the United States, particularly as this region ascends in global geopolitics.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID, 2023) has facilitated various educational initiatives in Nepal, emphasising fundamental education, workforce development, and collaborations in higher education. Additional initiatives, like collaborative IT programmes, could leverage Nepal's burgeoning digital economy and the increasing youth demographic aspiring to technology employment. Moreover, collaborations in public health research could tackle prevalent global issues such as pandemics and inequities in healthcare access (USAID, 2023). This would promote healthcare in Nepal and augment American institutions' proficiency in resolving health crises in varied contexts.

2. Cultural Exchange Initiatives

Cultural diplomacy is essential for strengthening interpersonal links between countries. Cultural exchange programmes can cultivate grassroots relationships that surpass political and economic agreements. Augmenting financial support for these initiatives can foster enduring connections between the United States and Nepal. Programmes like the Fulbright Programme have fostered substantial contact between American and Nepali researchers, fostering mutual understanding (Fulbright Programme, 2022).

A significant expansion may entail the establishment of more scholarships for American students to pursue studies in Nepal. The present trade is frequently imbalanced, with more Nepali students pursuing education in the U.S. than American students studying in Nepal. By promoting U.S. students' engagement with Nepalese culture, history, and social institutions, the U.S. may develop a generation of leaders with a profound respect for South Asia, thereby strengthening diplomatic and cultural relations. Ultimately, this may result in improved collaboration in diplomacy, humanitarian initiatives, and commerce (Fulbright Programme, 2022).

3. Sustainable Development Projects

Nepal's vast potential in renewable energy, especially in hydropower, presents a distinctive opportunity for collaboration with the U.S. Nepal possesses the capacity to produce up to 83,000 MW of power from its rivers. However, it presently utilises less than 2% of this potential (Nepal Power Authority, 2023). The United States' endorsement of hydropower development may encompass financial investment and technical support. This would

correspond with global climate objectives and Nepal's aspirations to become a net exporter of clean energy.

Advancements in agriculture offer a potential for collaboration in addition to hydropower. Nepal's economy predominantly depends on agriculture; nevertheless, the sector experiences low production due to antiquated practices. The United States' proficiency in sustainable agriculture might modernise this sector by using technology such as precision farming, drought-resistant crops, and efficient water utilisation systems. These measures would enhance Nepal's food security and create new markets for American agricultural technologies (International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2023).

4. Tourism Promotion

Tourism significantly influences Nepal's economy, accounting for around 7.9% of the country's GDP (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2022). The United States can significantly contribute to positioning Nepal as a leading destination for eco-tourism and adventure tourism. Nepal's distinctive topography, featuring the Himalayas and other UNESCO World Heritage sites, already draws a global audience. Nonetheless, enhanced marketing initiatives aimed at American tourists might substantially elevate visits from the United States.

Both nations could gain from collaborative efforts to enhance infrastructure in Nepal's tourist destinations while promoting sustainable tourism practices. Eco-tourism initiatives aimed at conserving Nepal's biodiversity could draw environmentally aware American tourists and generate employment possibilities in Nepal. Additionally, post-COVID recovery strategies may encompass cooperative initiatives to instil confidence in travellers regarding Nepal as a secure and attractive destination (Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation of Nepal, 2022).

5. Leveraging Technology for Communication

Virtual exchange initiatives can significantly augment soft power diplomacy in the digital era. These programmes can function as economical substitutes for actual exchanges, especially during travel limitations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital platforms can provide virtual classes, seminars, and cultural exchanges, enabling individuals from both nations to sustain effective communication despite travel restrictions.

The United States and Nepal could partner to develop virtual education platforms for distance learning in disciplines such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and the humanities. These platforms can facilitate ongoing interaction among students, instructors, and cultural representatives from both countries. These virtual projects can enhance educational access in distant regions of Nepal, where physical infrastructure may be deficient, broadening U.S. educational diplomacy's scope (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2022).

VI. Conclusion

In summary, soft power has been crucial in enhancing U.S.-Nepal relations since Nepal's transition to a republic in 2008. Both countries have cultivated mutual respect and similar principles through diaspora participation, educational exchanges, and people-to-people diplomacy. The Nepali diaspora's contributions via remittances, which account for over 25% of Nepal's GDP, have strengthened economic connections. Furthermore, educational efforts such as the Fulbright Programme have established a

network of scholars and professionals committed to tackling shared concerns, thereby enhancing cultural and academic diplomacy.

Future investment in soft power will be crucial for fostering stability, economic development, and enduring cooperation between the U.S. and Nepal. By enhancing collaboration in education, culture, sustainability, tourism, and technology, both nations may forge enduring partnerships that surpass political and geographical limitations. This strategy will enhance bilateral relations and promote global stability and collective development objectives in an increasingly interconnected world.

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