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Nepal's Position Towards the Special Military Operation in Ukraine as a Factor of Nepalese-Russian Relations

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Abstract. The beginning of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine was a pivotal event in modern history, the consequences of which affected the whole world, including South Asia. This shift could not fail to attract the attention of a wide range of researchers specializing in this region. However, their focus is primarily on the impact of new global realities on Russia's interactions with India. Meanwhile, the small countries of the Himalayan region of South Asia remain “in the shadow.” Nepal is the main object of research in the present article. Special attention is paid to the evolution of the Himalayan state's ties with Russia. The authors tried to explain the reasons for the low level of bilateral relations and Nepal's critical approach to Russia's actions in Ukraine. A special subject of the study was the participation of a significant number of Nepalese citizens in the SMO. India and China are the natural main exogenous actors in Nepal. The reasons why they have no effect on Nepal's foreign policy in relation to the Special Military Operation are of particular interest, and their disclosure is of the most serious importance for a more complete understanding of Russia's geopolitical potential. Some recommendations were made to improve the level of bilateral relations and to prompt a potential change in Nepal's approach to Russia's actions in Ukraine. The conclusions of the study are based on materials from various sources. First of all, it is a regulatory framework that includes both general documents and special ones (contracts, protocols, declarations and other acts). Furthermore, the work uses statistical data (obtained from both national databases and databases of international institutions). The article uses the method of identifying the interconnections and mutual influences between different facets of foreign policy, bilateral and international relations; as well as interpretation of the complex interaction of socio-economic, political and cultural development.

Key words: South Asia, Nepal's foreign policy, Russia, China, India, Gurkhas

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Позиция Непала по специальной военной операции на Украине как фактор непальско-российских отношений

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Аннотация. Специальная военная операция (СВО) на Украине стала поворотным событием современной истории, ее последствия затронули весь мир, в том числе Южную Азию. СВО привлекла внимание достаточно широкого круга исследователей, специализирующихся на данном регионе. Однако ученые рассматривают в первую очередь влияние новых мировых реалий на взаимодействие России с Индией, при этом «в тени» остаются малые страны пригималайского региона Южной Азии. Объект исследования — Непал. Особое внимание уделено эволюции связей гималайского государства с Россией. Объяснены причины невысокого уровня двусторонних отношений и критического подхода Непала к действиям России на Украине. Специальным предметом исследования стало участие значительного количества непальских граждан в СВО. Индия и Китай являются естественными главными экзогенными акторами в Непале, всегда воздействовавшими на внешнеполитический курс этого государства. Выявление причин, почему эти страны не реагируют на отход Непала от политики неприсоединения в пользу более прозападного курса, позволит более глубоко исследовать геополитический потенциал России на южноазиатском направлении. Приведены рекомендации по повышению уровня двусторонних отношений и возможного изменения подхода Непала к действиям России на Украине. Выводы исследования основаны на различных источниках. В первую очередь, детально изучена нормативно-правовая база российско-непальских взаимосвязей, включающая в себя договоры, протоколы, декларации и иные акты. Использованы статистические данные (полученные как из национальных баз данных, так и из баз данных международных институтов). Кроме того, применен метод выявления взаимосвязи и взаимовлияния между разными гранями внешней политики, двусторонних и международных отношений.

Ключевые слова: Южная Азия, внешняя политика Непала, Россия, Китай, Индия, гуркхи

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Лунев С.И.: научное руководство исследованием, разработка методологии исследования, редактирование рукописи. Новинский Э.Э.: подбор и анализ источников и литературы, подготовка черновика рукописи. Оба автора ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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Introduction

The relevance and novelty of the present study stem from the fact that Nepal represents a relatively neutral country for Russia, being a typical small state¹ with few resources. Its behavior and stance on the events in Ukraine could reveal the way how Moscow's relations with

countries in the Global South are being affected by the ongoing conflict in Eastern Europe and the unprecedented Western sanctions.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating historical and political science methods, and is based on the theories of neorealism and neoclassical realism

¹ Based on its population size of 30 million people, Nepal is often considered a “small” state, but this classification could also be applied to all European countries except Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain.

in international relations. A range of scientific methods were employed, including inductive-deductive, system-structural, logical, and typological methods, as well as evaluative and discourse analysis. Along with the fundamental principle of historicism, emphasis was placed on historical-genetic and comparative historical methods, which were applied during the analysis of the bipolar period. This interdisciplinary approach enabled a comprehensive study of Nepal's position on the Special Military Operation (SMO) and the impact of the new geopolitical reality on Russia's relations with that country, as well as ensuring the representativeness of the study's main provisions and conclusions.

A number of works on India's perception of the SMO have already been published by Russian (Kashin, 2023) and foreign scholars (Patnaik, 2023). This is unsurprising, given the growing power of this South Asian country and the "specially privileged" status of relations between Moscow and New Delhi. In Nepal, however, research on this topic is lacking (Rana, 2024, p. 100).

A literature review reveals that the geopolitical and economic consequences of the events in Eastern Europe have even reached the farthest corners of the Himalayas, thereby prompting active debate in academic circles in India's neighbouring countries. Judging by publications posted on the Nepalese research database *Nepal Journals Online*, the question of the influence of events in Ukraine on the geopolitical position of the mountainous country and its foreign policy strategy is extremely relevant for researchers, a number of whom have already offered their analyses (Bhattarai & Pulami, 2022; Lamsal, 2023; Shrestha, 2024), with the SMO being considered in conjunction with other international conflicts in recent years,

primarily with the escalation of the Palestine-Israel conflict after October 7, 2023 (Rana, 2024, p. 100).

Russia — Nepal Relations before the SMO

In the first decade after World War II, the USSR did not pursue an active foreign policy in South Asia, developing ties only with India. The initial stage of Soviet-Indian relations was rather "cool" (see: (Lunev, 2024)). As the ties between Moscow and Delhi strengthened, the USSR began to more actively engage with other countries in the region (Lunev, 2017, p. 26).

Nepal was also interested in developing contacts with Moscow as part of King Mahendra's policy of diversifying the country's international relations and strengthening its position on the global stage. He viewed the USSR and the United States as balancers against India and China. On July 20, 1956, diplomatic relations between the USSR and Nepal were established. In 1958, the Nepalese royal couple visited the Soviet Union.

In terms of economic aid to Nepal in the 1960s — 1980s, the USSR was among the four leading donor countries (Ledkov & Lunev, 2011, p. 246), and in the mid-1960s, it was even the second largest donor (Yakovlev, 1970, p. 127). Until 1972, Soviet aid to Nepal was gratuitous and was directed towards the construction of large state-owned enterprises.

It's worth remembering that, unlike its neighbours, in the international organisations Nepal demonstrated behaviour, that was inconsistent with its bilateral declarations. Back in 1956, one of Nepal's first steps at the UN was supporting the Hungarian uprising, which the kingdom's representative called "a symbol of the struggle of a small country against a big and powerful country" (Bhattarai & Pulami, 2022, p. 157).

A notable result of the USSR's reorientation in South Asia after 1971 was King Birendra's initiative to declare Nepal a "zone of peace," which was supported by all major powers except India and the USSR. Indira Gandhi's government considered Nepal's policy to be anti-Indian, while Moscow preferred to follow its partner's interests on this issue (Koirala A., 2024, pp. 70–71). In the 1990s, Russia's presence in Nepal was reduced to a minimum.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a gradual improvement in political interaction between the two countries, which is particularly evident in the activities of their foreign ministries. In 2008, during the 63rd session of the UN General Assembly (GA), Sergey Lavrov met with the then Nepalese Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal. In 2019, the Nepalese Foreign Minister, Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, visited Moscow. Despite the modest levels of bilateral trade observed at the beginning of the 21st century, Russia enjoyed a very large trade surplus. After the inception of the SMO, mutual trade volumes fell to historical lows — USD 5 million in 2022 and USD 2.3 million in 2023.²

Nepal's Approach to the Ukrainian Conflict

The events of 2014 in Ukraine had no impact on Russia — Nepal bilateral relations, as Kathmandu maintained a strictly neutral stance. Despite the local press drawing parallels

between Crimea's reunification with Russia and Sikkim's annexation by India,³ officials remained silent and, on the sidelines of the UN, abstained during the vote on draft resolution A/RES/68/262, "Territorial Integrity of Ukraine."⁴ Kathmandu's relations with Kiev remained politically far less developed than those with Moscow, as Nepal and Ukraine did not even exchange embassies. Nepal's interests in Ukraine are represented by its diplomatic mission in Berlin, while Ukraine's interests in Nepal are represented by its embassy in India. Meanwhile, trade between the two countries significantly exceeded Nepal's trade with Russia, reaching USD 40 million in 2019.⁵

A close examination of the mountainous country's position on the Ukrainian conflict reveals a certain duality. On the one hand, in conceptual documents and at the bilateral level, it declares its adherence to the principles of non-alignment and neutrality and a desire to develop friendly relations with everyone.⁶ On the other hand, within the UN, Nepal shows solidarity with small states in the event of their conflict with regional and global leaders. In this regard, Maurice East noted that small states are much more active in international organizations, within which they can act not individually, but collectively (East, 1973, p. 576). For example, during the Cuban missile crisis, Nepal's position was similar to that of the Soviet Union, while on the Afghan and Kampuchean crises, Kathmandu criticized the USSR and supported US initiatives. This pattern of behaviour is known

² Nepal. Bilateral Relations // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/np/1908023/> (accessed: 10.05.2024).

³ Kamalakaran A. Crimean Accession Has Parallels to Sikkim Joining India // Russia Beyond. March 18, 2014. URL: https://www.rbth.com/blogs/2014/03/18/crimean_accession_has_parallels_to_sikkim_joining_india_33823?ysclid=mhuqbbs4y4211208183 (accessed: 09.11.2024).

⁴ Yusin M. Third World Remained with Russia // Kommersant. March 27, 2014. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2439463> (дата обращения: 09.04.2024).

⁵ Nepal — Ukraine Relations // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250421081717/https://old.mofa.gov.np/nepal-ukraine-relations/> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

⁶ Nepalko parashra niti, 2077 [Foreign Policy of Nepal, 2077 B.S.] // Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal. (In Nepalese). URL: <https://mofa.gov.np/pages/foreign-policy-of-nepal-1/> (accessed: 06.04.2025).

as “small state syndrome” (Bhattarai & Pulami, 2022, p. 157).

Countries in similar situations tend to be friendly towards each other, and Ukraine and Nepal are both important buffer states. Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has found itself between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic bloc, represented by the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Nepal is sandwiched between two Asian giants — India and China, and has historically attempted to balance between them (Tiutin & Kushkhov, 2022, p. 89). In the event of a major conflict, India fears that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) would attempt to seize the Siliguri Corridor, which links the northeastern states with other parts of India, through Nepal (or Bhutan) (Nikolaev, 2014, p. 127).

As India and China gain increasing influence on the global stage, and amidst the regularly escalating border dispute between them, Nepal’s regional role as a buffer state pursuing a non-aligned policy is increasing (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 11). Similarly, the militarisation and expansion of NATO military infrastructure in Ukraine poses a fundamental threat to Russia’s security,⁷ the ignoring of which was one of the reasons for the SMO.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the Nepalese elite perceived the SMO as a geopolitical challenge (Bhattarai & Pulami 2022, p. 149). Nepal’s initial reaction to the launch of the SMO

was condemnatory. In an official press release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 24, 2022, Kathmandu called on the parties to the conflict to exercise restraint, but at the same time criticized the recognition of the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics (referred to in the document as “oblasts of Ukraine”) and called “any use of force against a sovereign state” unacceptable.⁸ During a telephone conversation with the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, on March 1, 2022, the Nepalese Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, expressed his support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine.⁹

Meanwhile, on the sidelines of the UN Human Rights Council, Nepal supported Kiev’s initiative to hold a special meeting on Ukraine.¹⁰ The following day, on March 2, during the UN General Assembly vote, Kathmandu supported the anti-Russian draft resolution A/ES-11/L.1, “Aggression against Ukraine,” which condemned the SMO and called for the immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops.¹¹

The decision of Kathmandu to condemn the SMO and side with the West was perceived by some forces within the country as a departure from the fundamental principles of Nepalese foreign policy, which is expressed by the formula: “Amity with all and enmity with none.” Critical reactions to the government’s actions were even voiced by the Nepali Congress’s coalition

⁷ Address of the President of the Russian Federation // President of Russia. February 24, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/67843> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

⁸ Statement on the Recent Developments in Ukraine // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal. February 24, 2022. URL: <https://mofa.gov.np/content/303/statement-on-the-recent-developments-in-ukraine/> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

⁹ Blinken Calls Deuba to Discuss Ukraine Crisis Ahead of Crucial UN Vote // MyRepublica. March 2, 2022. URL: <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/blinken-calls-deuba-to-discuss-ukraine-crisis-ahead-of-crucial-un-vote/> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

¹⁰ Nepal Votes in Favour of Ukraine Call at UN for Urgent Debate on Russian Invasion // The Kathmandu Post. March 1, 2022. URL: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/03/01/nepal-votes-in-favour-of-ukraine-call-at-un-for-urgently-debate-on-russian-invasion> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

¹¹ Draft UNGA Resolution “Aggression against Ukraine” // United Nations. March 2, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://docs.un.org/ru/A/ES-11/L.1> (accessed: 31.03.2025).

partners.¹² Jan Nath Khanal, former Prime Minister, called them “hasty” and demanded that Deuba clarify, whether this signified Nepal’s turn towards the US.¹³ Rajan Bhattarai, head of the external relations department of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), the main opposition force, wrote on *Twitter* (now *X*)¹⁴: “Our foreign policy is based on the principles of non-alignment and non-interference... Deviation from these principles means failure of our foreign policy. The government’s decisions on the Russian-Ukrainian issue are worrisome.”¹⁵

The Ukrainian conflict was the subject of a press conference held by Foreign Minister Narayan Khadka on March 7, 2022. Clarifying the country’s position, he stated that the vote in support of Ukraine does not mean that Nepal has taken sides in the conflict, and assured that Kathmandu continues to adhere to the policy of non-alignment, “integral parts of which are... respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty.”¹⁶

Nepal subsequently continued to vote in favour of pro-Ukrainian resolutions, abstaining only on the most Russophobic documents, such as resolutions A/ES-11/L.3 of April 7,

2022 (which suspended Russia’s membership in the UN Human Rights Council following the publication of fake news about the events in Bucha) and A/ES-11/L.5 of November 14, 2022 (which demanded reparations for Ukraine). Based on these criteria, experts from the Institute for International Studies at MGIMO University (IIS MGIMO) define Nepal’s position on the SMO as “neutral,”¹⁷ although it could more accurately be described as negative.

Interestingly, the critical perceptions of Russia’s actions in Ukraine are expressed exclusively by small South Asian countries. The stance most closely aligned with that of Nepal was taken by another Himalayan state, Bhutan. While generally following a similar voting strategy to Nepal on Russophobic resolutions at the UN,¹⁸ at the same time the kingdom stated that it “cannot condone the unilateral redrawing of international borders.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, Bhutan, which has consistently voted in favour of anti-Russian resolutions since 2014, adopts the most pro-Western position of all South Asian states.

Nepal’s position on the SMO is noticeably different from that of its neighbours. New

¹² E.g., see the statement of the Prime Minister of Nepal K.P. Sharma Oli: Statement by Prime Minister and the Leader of Nepali Delegation Right Honorable Mr. K P Sharma Oli at the General Debate of the 75th Session of United Nations General Assembly // The Permanent Mission of Nepal to the United Nations. September 25, 2020. URL: https://www.un.int/nepal/statements_speeches/statement-prime-minister-and-leader-nepali-delegation%C2%A0right-honorable-mr-k-p (accessed: 31.03.2024).

¹³ Yukren mamilama Nepal hatarama bolyo: Jhalanath Khanal [Nepal Hurried with Statements on Ukrainian Issue: Jalnath Khanal] // Onlinekhabar. March 2, 2022. (In Nepalese). URL: <https://www.onlinekhabar.com/2022/03/1088014> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

¹⁴ Access to *Twitter* is blocked in the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

¹⁵ Rajan Bhattarai // *Twitter*. March 3, 2022. URL: <https://twitter.com/rajancbhl/status/1499371132990144512> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

¹⁶ Giri A. On Ukraine, Nepal Has Not Taken Sides, Foreign Minister Says // *The Kathmandu Post*. March 8, 2022. URL: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/03/08/on-ukraine-nepal-has-not-taken-sides-foreign-minister-says> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

¹⁷ Safranchuk I.A., Chernov D.N., Nesmashnyi A.D., Zhornist V.M. A World Divided: The Ukrainian Crisis in a Regional and Global Context. Moscow : Institute for International Studies, 2022. P. 5. URL: <https://mgimo.ru/upload/iblock/bef/hgt2r447uqdlbqurb7wdxjcx1slk0519/world-divided-ukrainian-crisis.pdf> (accessed: 12.03.2024).

¹⁸ Shivamurthy A.G. Assessing South Asia’s Responses to the Ukraine Crisis // *Observer Research Foundation*. March 10, 2022. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/assessing-south-asias-responses-to-the-ukraine-crisis> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

¹⁹ Doma Tshering’s Statement in UNGA // *Twitter*. March 2, 2022. URL: <https://twitter.com/Lhatseri/status/1499109334516572162> (accessed: 01.04.2024).

Delhi, Nepal's main regional partner, maintains a strictly neutral position, neither condemning nor supporting Moscow's actions in Eastern Europe (Zakharov & Rabey, 2023, p. 62). This is unsurprising, as India has never taken any steps in the post-Soviet space that Moscow could perceive as anti-Russian, and has refused to become involved in Russia's disputes with the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including Ukraine, since the first years after the collapse of the USSR (Lunev, 2022, 134).

As for Beijing, it adopted a position of "friendly neutrality" (Kashin, 2022, p. 206), yet at the same time voted against the most Russophobic draft resolutions at the UN.²⁰ It is possible that this was one of the factors that influenced Kathmandu's decision to abstain during the voting on several anti-Russian resolutions: by 2022, the PRC had become negative about US activities in Nepal (Raj, 2023, p. 451), but overall, India and China have minimal influence on Nepal's approaches to the Ukrainian conflict. This indicates that India and China are partners, but not allies, of Russia. It is interesting to note the contrast that Beijing and New Delhi's actions on the Ukrainian conflict present with the policy of the USSR, which in the 1950s sought to influence the entire world to soften attitudes towards the PRC, or comprehensively defended India from external threats in the 1970s. The approaches adopted by China and India also demonstrate that alliances are more characteristic of Western organizations, such as NATO

and the EU, than of non-Western institutions, including BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

As subsequent events demonstrated, Kathmandu's actions in international organizations did not significantly impact bilateral relations. For example, in April 2023, a delegation of Nepalese parliamentary leaders visited Moscow in a friendly atmosphere, and trade volumes in 2023 and 2024 showed signs of recovery.²¹ The Prime Minister of Nepal, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, has been open to interviews with Russian news agencies and has asserted that there are no problems in the bilateral relations.²² Russia has also reacted calmly to the mountainous country's approach to the Ukrainian conflict.

This behaviour may be a consequence of the weakness of Nepal's political system. Since 2008, there have been 14 changes of prime minister. Politicians are essentially devoid of a sense of responsibility to the people, preoccupied with personal problems, and unfriendly (which is untypical of ordinary Nepalese, see: (Bell, 2024)). There is a high level of corruption, which is carefully concealed by decision-makers (Gupta, Adhikari & Shrestha, 2018).

The Problem of Nepalese Soldiers' Participation in the SMO

Six months after the start of the SMO, Nepal's leadership has virtually ceased to comment on the issue, except for the obligatory references to the deteriorating international situation globally due

²⁰ Safranchuk I.A., Chernov D.N., Nesmashnyi A.D., Zhornist V.M. A World Divided: The Ukrainian Crisis in a Regional and Global Context. Moscow : Institute for International Studies, 2022. P. 8. URL: <https://mgimo.ru/upload/iblock/bef/hgt2r447uqdlbqurb7wdxjcx1slk0519/world-divided-ukrainian-crisis.pdf> (accessed: 12.03.2024).

²¹ See: Nepal Foreign Trade Statistics: Based on Annual Data (Shrawan-Asar) of FY 2079/80 (Mid July 2022 to Mid July 2023) // Department of Customs, Ministry of Finance, Government of Nepal. 2023. URL: <https://customs.gov.np/content/56/a-v-2089-060/> (accessed: 15.06.2024); Nepal Foreign Trade Statistics: Based on Annual Data (Shrawan-Asar) of FY 2080/81 (Mid July 2023 to Mid July 2024) // Department of Customs, Ministry of Finance, Government of Nepal. 2024. URL: <https://customs.gov.np/content/45/a-v-2080-041/> (accessed: 15.06.2025).

²² Pakhomov E. Prime Minister of Nepal: It's Time for a Summit Meeting Between Our Countries // TASS. November 30, 2023. URL: <https://tass.ru/interviews/19398359> (accessed: 10.04.2024).

to the situation in Ukraine and the escalation in Gaza. However, since mid-2023, evidence has emerged in the media of Nepalese volunteers participating in the conflict in Ukraine on the Russian side.

It's worth noting that soldiers have always been a source of pride for Nepal, which has a two-century-old tradition of sending Himalayan warriors abroad. After World War II, the Nepalese government officially authorized the recruitment of Gurkhas only for the Indian and British armies, as well as the Singapore police.²³ These are elite units, and candidates must pass a rigorous and complex selection process. Those, who fail it, often end up serving in other countries. Until 2021, Afghanistan was a popular destination, where Nepali military personnel guarded Western embassies. 1,500 Nepalis have received official patents to work in the security sector in that country alone (Koirala T., 2024, p. 323). In total, according to various estimates, over 35,000 Nepalese served in Afghanistan over 20 years (2001–2021), and often in the most dangerous positions (e.g., in the outer perimeter of the embassy).²⁴

Due to the lack of prospects in the domestic market, up to 20 % of young Nepalis (aged 15 to 29) are unemployed, and many seek

a military career. Many work in the informal sector of economy, without decent working conditions and pay.²⁵ Military service is a highly paid occupation, and in some countries, it leads to citizenship.

Apparently, the catalyst for young Nepalis' interest in serving in the Russian army was the Russian President's decree dated May 15, 2023, which simplified the process of obtaining Russian citizenship for foreigners, who had signed a contract with the Russian Armed Forces. The first reports of mass trips of Nepalis to Russia for military service appeared in the local press in the second decade of June, 2023.²⁶ On June 17, a relatively neutral article about the reasons for this interest was published on the American portal *The Diplomat*, from which the story apparently reached the wider Western media.

On June 23, 2023, responding to questions from parliamentarians, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal stated that the government was "closely monitoring the recruitment process and activities of Nepalese youth in the Russian army."²⁷ On August 1, 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement urging Nepalese citizens not to seek security jobs in "war-torn" countries.²⁸

²³ Anupam B. Why Nepalis Are Fighting on Both Sides of the Russia — Ukraine War // *The Diplomat*. June 17, 2023. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/why-nepalis-are-fighting-on-both-sides-of-the-russia-ukraine-war/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

²⁴ Babst A. Who Will Help the Gurkhas Now? Thousands of Nepalese Came to Afghanistan to Work for Westerners — and Were Forgotten There // *NZZ*. December 15, 2021. URL: <https://www.nzz.ch/english/german-canadian-kabul-embassies-trafficked-gurkha-guards-ld.1660213> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

²⁵ Employment Promotion in Nepal // International Labour Organisation. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240222154949/https://www.ilo.org/kathmandu/areasofwork/employment-promotion/lang--en/index.htm> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

²⁶ Anupam V. Yukren yuddhasangai sainika bhartibare Putinko tyo nirnaya — yasri pravesha gardaichan Rusi phaujma Nepali yuva (bhidio) [Putin's Decision on Army Recruitment during the War in Ukraine: How Nepali Youth Join the Russian Army (video)] // *Nepali Times*. June 11, 2023. (In Nepalese). URL: <https://www.nepalpress.com/2023/06/11/336502/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

²⁷ Govt's Attention Has Been Drawn Toward Recruitment of Nepali Youth in Russian Army: PM Dahal // *MyRepublica*. June 23, 2023. URL: <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/govt-s-attention-has-been-drawn-toward-recruitment-of-nepali-youth-in-russian-army-pm-dahal/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

²⁸ Ministry Urges Nepalis Not to Go for Security-Related Work in War-Torn Countries // *Kathmandu Post*. August 1, 2023. URL: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/08/01/ministry-urges-nepalis-not-to-go-for-security-related-work-in-war-torn-countries> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

In January 2024, the American television channel *CNN*, citing its own sources, reported that 15,000 Nepalese were fighting in the Russian army.²⁹ However, it seems that this figure was exaggerated for propaganda purposes. In a *Daily Storm* article, a recruitment centre volunteer estimated that 1,200–1,500 Nepalis passed through the centre in a month.³⁰ In the fall of 2023, Nepal's Ambassador to Russia, Milan Raj Tuladhar, estimated that 150–200 of his fellow citizens were participating in the SMO.³¹

According to publicly available statistics from Russia's Federal Security Service Border Service, 1,952 Nepalese arrived in the country in all of 2023, more than half of whom (1,165 people) arrived in the fourth quarter.³²

In December 2023, the Nepalese Prime Minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, acknowledged that some Nepalese citizens were fighting on the side of Kiev, although the exact numbers could not be determined. On January 4, 2024, the Nepalese Ministry of Labor announced it was indefinitely suspending the issuance of work permits to citizens in Russia and Ukraine, citing the fact that a number of Nepalese had become victims of the ongoing conflict.³³ However, the effectiveness of this measure is questionable, as monitoring citizens traveling to Russia

is difficult due to the lack of direct air travel between the two countries.

Young Nepalese are generally unconcerned with ideological issues and are willing to join any armed forces for purely mercenary reasons.³⁴ Simplified procedures have only made service in the Russian army more attractive to them, and the media, trying to spin another anti-Russian sensation out of it, only spread the information among the most interested segments of the population.

Conclusion

The SMO did not result in any fundamental changes to Nepal's foreign policy. Throughout its history, the Himalayan republic has sought to demonstrate solidarity with small and medium-sized states³⁵ on the international stage, and Nepal's support for Western-drafted resolutions on Ukraine at the UN seems a logical continuation of this policy. It is also noteworthy that in recent years, the mountainous country has attracted increased attention from the US and the UK, becoming the recipient of major Western aid packages, which also influences the policy of the South Asian republic. Despite criticism, the ruling circles in Kathmandu do not consider their

²⁹ Previously there were claims that hundreds of Nepalis were fighting in the Wagner PMC. See: Nepali Gurkhas Are Joining Wagner: The Lure of the Private Military Companies // *The Economic Times* (Delhi). June 23, 2023. URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/nepali-gurkhas-are-joining-wagner-the-lure-of-the-private-military-companies/articleshow/101276410.cms?from=mdr> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

³⁰ Chesnokov V. A Volunteer at the Recruitment Centre Explained Why Gurkhas from Nepal Are Coming *en masse* to Fight for Russia in the SMO // *Daily Storm*. February 13, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://dailystorm.ru/obschestvo/volonter-punkta-otbora-dobrovolcev-rasskazal-pochemu-gurkhi-iz-nepala-massovo-priezhayut-voevat-za-rossiyu-na-svo> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

³¹ Nepal Appealed to Russia after the Death of Six Citizens // *RBK*. December 5, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/05/12/2023/656f0fcb9a79477cda44a840> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

³² Entry of Foreign Citizens to the Russian Federation // *EMISS: State Statistics*. URL: <https://www.fedstat.ru/indicator/38479> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

³³ Government Halts Labour Permits for Russia and Ukraine // *The Kathmandu Post*. January 4, 2024. URL: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2024/01/04/government-halts-labour-permits-for-russia-and-ukraine> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

³⁴ Anupam B. Why Nepalis Are Fighting on Both Sides of the Russia — Ukraine War // *The Diplomat*. June 17, 2023. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/why-nepalis-are-fighting-on-both-sides-of-the-russia-ukraine-war/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

³⁵ For a description of a middle power, see: (Britova, 2022).

actions a violation of the non-alignment principle and are prepared to continue cooperation with all parties to the conflict. Therefore, despite all the contradictions arising between Moscow and Kathmandu, there is still optimism regarding the future of bilateral relations, and discussions on strengthening ties at all levels of interaction are ongoing.

For over half a century, Nepal has not figured significantly in Russia's foreign policy priorities, although the Himalayan country's aspirations to join the SCO could increase Moscow's interest in elevating bilateral relations. Nepal's potential accession to the organisation offers Russia an opportunity to influence changes in the SCO's

approach to global issues, including the SMO. Engaging with the Nepalese media will also lead to a shift in the local public opinion. Establishing relations with the Nepal's political elite is much more difficult due to its focus on achieving its own selfish aspirations.

An analysis of the situation in Nepal reveals the illusory nature of any hopes for Russia to maintain truly strategic relations with the Asian giants, who are solely guided by their own national interests and are not taking concrete steps to significantly reduce global pressure on Russia. At the very least, China and India have no influence on Nepal's foreign policy position.

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