

Nepal's Status-Seeking Endeavors: Between Normative Convergence and Geopolitical Interests

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Abstract

Due to limited material and geopolitical factors, the agency of small states is limited in international politics. As such, these states may seek to mitigate such weaknesses through status-seeking, adopting peculiar foreign policy approaches or international commitments to signal to more powerful actors about specific political or normative affinities. In this article, the conceptual framework of social identity theory, specifically social mobility, is used to assess Nepal's foreign policy choices. It is argued that Nepal pursues the identity management strategy of social mobility in the form of normative conformance with more powerful actors to reinforce its status in the international community but not necessarily to rise up in the hierarchy of states. Social mobility through normative conformance not only allows Nepal to elevate its status with higher-status groups like the EU, the UN, and the US (which are the country's primary development partners), but it also reinforces Nepal's interest in maintaining (and if possible, expanding) its agency as a sovereign state which is constrained due to its geopolitical location in between much larger neighbors, India and China. Nepal's normative convergence efforts are broadly categorized into two specific types of commitments: (a) multilateralism, and (b) normative congruence with development partners. Both of these normative conformance approaches seek to emulate the values and practices of the higher-status group—the US, the UN, and the EU.

Keywords

China; European Union; India; Nepal; small states; status

1. Introduction

Small states are particularly vulnerable in the international system given their limited capabilities to affect change. Interestingly, small states may have limits to their capabilities in shaping the system of which they

are a part, but the very system also accords security in the form of international norms such as sovereignty and non-interference (Maass, 2017, p. 220). Nevertheless, the agency of small states is limited given their limited material capabilities which could be further constrained by geopolitical factors. So, how do such states navigate a system wherein their agency is constrained? The notion of “status-seeking” is used as a means to “punch above their weight” by small states which allows them to expand their agency while also pursuing their national interests. Numerous case studies have been assessed within the context of this conceptual framework. In this article, I use the case study of Nepal and assess its status-seeking efforts. I argue that Nepal’s extensive normative commitments in intergovernmental frameworks are tied to its commitments to multilateralism and affirmation of its state sovereignty. As a small state located between India and China, I argue that Nepal partakes in status-seeking in international politics by promoting its identity as an independent state capable of exercising its agency (through the pursuit of an independent foreign policy). Furthermore, such commitments also ensure normative convergence with Nepal’s close development partners, including the EU and its constituent member states.

2. Theoretical Discussion and Framework

2.1. *Small States and Status-Seeking in International Relations*

As the academic interest in the study of small states has grown, so has the interest in the approaches they take in international relations. However, status-seeking must be contextualized within the broader conversations on status within the discipline of international relations. Renshon (2017, pp. 33–37) puts forth the idea that status in international politics is essentially a state’s standing relative to others wherein positionality is critical; the addition of members also lessens the value of a particular status. This notion of status is tied to the rationalist-instrumental perspective which emphasizes relative power and positionality in international hierarchy. Status enables states to acquire more agency in the conduct of their foreign policies and pursuit of national interests. However, not all agree with this notion of status. Offering a broader concept, Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth emphasize status as a state’s standing based on globally valued attributes (Larson et al., 2014). Constructivist scholars have also extensively written on the topic of status in international politics. For example, Murray (2019) offers an approach focused on recognized identity claims wherein a country’s status is assessed through self-identification with a particular status. These national status aspirations are also tied into ontological security considerations of that state allowing it to form a coherent set of interests and act on them through their foreign policymaking mechanisms. Schulz (2019) discusses status as estimations of honor and esteem, casting it as being inherently social. Nevertheless, the literature on status-seeking emphasizes the importance of status in international politics, especially for states that are higher up in the hierarchy of states. As such, extensive emphasis is dedicated to the power that is linked to status.

However, the status-seeking of small states is a peculiar phenomenon. As such states are limited in agency and have varying levels of tangible capabilities, their status-seeking approaches may differ from those deployed by more powerful actors in the international system. Small states’ status-seeking does not tie into power calculations in the same manner it does for more powerful states. Neumann and de Carvalho (2015) made this distinction for small states’ status-seeking through three approaches: small states seek and achieve status through making themselves useful to greater powers; second, small states seek to be

noticed by greater powers in matters of international peace and security; and third, small states seek “to be acknowledged as a good power”—having both moral authority and being a reliable partner to a great power.

Scholars have also used case studies to assess small states’ status-seeking. Baxter et al. (2018) argue that small states acquire status by acting as mediators in international conflicts, demonstrating their relevance and importance in the international system. Park and Jakstaite-Confortola (2021) analyze the case of Lithuania to illustrate that the country, despite its material weakness, used social creativity strategies (based on the social identity theory [SIT]) to be recognized as a net contributor to the problems faced by the EU. Lithuania utilized enhanced engagements in regional issues pertaining to Ukraine and Georgia as well as active involvement as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe chair to “punch above its weight” through extensive diplomatic engagements. Chong (2010) studies the cases of the Vatican City and Singapore wherein their state strategies are discussed within the context of “soft power.” Singapore promotes itself as a model of good governance to foster a reputation as a successful and stable state to be emulated; on the other hand, Vatican City promotes the notion of good governance emphasizing religious morality and ethics (Chong, 2010, p. 402). Chong argues that these two states promote the notion of good governance as a soft power; while his research does not directly discuss status-seeking, it is evident that these pursuits of soft power are tied to elevating Singapore and Vatican City’s status in the international system and expanding their influence and goodwill with other states. Theys and Rietig (2020, pp. 1621–1622) study the case of Bhutan and argue that the country was able to successfully center happiness as a part of development and influence the international discourses surrounding it. They do not necessarily place the argument within the context of status, but it is obvious that the Global Happiness Index pioneered by Bhutan put it on the world map and elevated its status as a “mover and shaker” in global development discourses, allowing it to “punch above its weight.”

In a different take regarding status in international relations, Ennis (2018, p. 575) explores the cases of Qatar and the UAE within the context of what the author refers to as “entrepreneurial power,” which she defined as the extent to which states, regardless of size or position in regional and global hierarchies, “benefit from a collection of conventional and non-conventional sources of power, and galvanize aid power to pursue status, secure legitimacy, and influence outcomes in regional and global affairs” (Ennis, 2018, p. 575). Thus, the emphasis is on the two countries’ efforts to translate their economic wealth to status-building at home and abroad. This approach offers alternative understandings on how states pursue different forms of power and outcomes (Ennis, 2018, p. 595). Mohammadzadeh (2017) uses the case of Qatar as well to pinpoint that the country has used its economic prowess to pursue an activist and energetic foreign policy by refusing to assimilate into the security orbit of the region’s powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

2.2. *SIT and Normative Conformance*

The literature on status-seeking by small states remains underexplored (Aguas & Pampinella, 2022, p. 2). There is a particular dearth of such studies on small non-Western states. Thus, the case of Nepal adds to this body of literature. The conceptual framework for this article rests on SIT. Larson and Shevchenko (2019b, p. 32) argue that the international status of a state depends on ranking on prized attributes, such as military power, economic development, cultural achievements, diplomatic skill, and technological innovation. SIT entails that states may seek three approaches when it comes to their status. First is social mobility wherein states may adopt the political and economic norms of dominant powers to be admitted to more prestigious institutions

or clubs (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 71). When lower-status states perceive that they cannot “break into” the higher-status states’ groups, they may turn to the second approach—competition against the dominant states. Third, states may seek to pursue social creativity by promoting new norms or development models that include unique policies that make them stand out (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). States employ “identity management strategies” based on their perceptions of their place in international status orders defined by collective beliefs about what is valued in society (Larson et al., 2014; Renshon, 2017).

There are critiques of utilizing SIT in international relations. For example, Ward (2017, pp. 825–826) claims that Larson and Shevchenko (2010) do not adequately offer distinctions between social mobility and social competition. He contends that impermeable group boundaries in groups do not play a role in SIT due to the denial of individuals to join a higher-status group (Ward, 2017, pp. 822–823). Larson and Shevchenko (2019a, p. 1190) offer their rebuttals by arguing that within social competition, there is an intrinsic characteristic of zero-sum game and no acquisition of consensually valued attributes, as pointed out by Ward (2017). For the second point, they argue that according to SIT, impermeable boundaries between states/groups in different statuses lead to more in-group identification (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019a, p. 1190). Overall, SIT’s development within the discipline of international relations is characterized by a lively academic discourse on its scope within it. Nevertheless, SIT does offer a valuable analytical approach to explain the behavior of small states, especially when it comes to the pursuit of status.

SIT, as discussed by Larson and Shevchenko (2010), offers a flexible approach to analyzing status-seeking approaches of small states. They posit that status does not have to be understood as a zero-sum game; status can be evaluated based on multiple traits and they need not be in competition with each other (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 69). As small states are constrained already, they may seek non-conflictual or non-competitive approaches to status-seeking. The social mobility approach of SIT highlights that states in a lower-status group may conform to the norms of a higher-status group to be admitted to more prestigious institutions or clubs (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 71). Overall, this approach utilizes norms conformation, including emulating the values and practices of established powers, to garner higher status with dominant states through their acceptance. The study of social mobility allows in-depth analysis of a variety of approaches taken up by small states, which are materially constrained. Normative conformation is a cost-effective and unconflictual approach to gaining status in the international system, which includes foreign policy orientations bound to be attractive for small states.

The conceptual framework of SIT, specifically social mobility, is used in this article to assess Nepal’s foreign policy choices. It is argued that Nepal pursues social mobility as a form of identity management strategy. Specifically, Nepal’s foreign policy choices reflect normative conformance with more powerful actors to reinforce its status in the international community. Social mobility through normative conformance allows Nepal to elevate its status with higher-status groups which are also the country’s close development partners. Such higher-status groups include actors such as the EU, the UN, and the US. Concurrently, normative conformance reinforces Nepal’s interest in maintaining and, possibly, expanding its agency as a small sovereign state between much larger neighbors, India and China. Nepal’s normative convergence efforts are categorized into two specific types of commitments: (a) multilateralism, and (b) normative congruence with development partners. Nepal’s normative conformance efforts seek to emulate the values and practices of the higher-status group, namely the US, the UN, and the EU.

3. Seeking Status: Nepal's Normative Convergence Efforts

Nepal is a small landlocked state surrounded by India and China, whose relations are fraught with contentions over territory and other security aspirations in Asia. As such, Nepal's foreign affairs have been historically defined by its efforts to navigate the tense relations between its neighbors. It is also materially constrained as it is still categorized as a "least developed country" by the UN and has economic issues stemming from a lack of foreign direct investment and a brain drain of skilled workforce. Nevertheless, Nepal's foreign policy showcases peculiar approaches that are focused on specific normative commitments internationally. Thus, Nepal pursues status-seeking measures to ensure normative conformance with its close development partners and emphasizes the importance of its sovereignty and agency given its precarious geopolitical location. To streamline the argument of this article, these status-seeking measures are categorized into two subsections: "Nepal's Multilateralism: Pursuit of Status Internationally" and "Nepal and Its International Norm Commitments: Pursuit of Normative Congruence."

3.1. *Nepal's Multilateralism: Pursuit of Status Internationally*

Nepal's modern efforts in multilateralism can be tied back to its admission to the UN in 1955. As a small state, the country had relentlessly pursued admission to the UN to affirm its sovereign status at a time when regional politics were marred with turbulence. As illustrated by the gradual incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China and Sikkim into India, there is no doubt that Nepali foreign policymakers were keen on ensuring international affirmation of its existence as a sovereign entity.

The internationalization efforts of Nepal's diplomatic status were further spearheaded by King Mahendra who ascended to the throne on March 13, 1955. Before King Mahendra's absolute reign, which began when he dismissed Nepal's democratically elected government in 1960, India played an extensively important role in Nepal including heavily influencing its foreign policy. However, King Mahendra spearheaded a foreign policy rooted in reducing Nepal's reliance on India and putting the country "on the global map." When King Mahendra ascended to the throne as king of Nepal, the country had diplomatic ties with five states; by the time of his death in 1972, that number had risen to 33 (Rose & Dial, 1969, p. 96). In 1961, King Mahendra also agreed to the construction of a highway linking Nepal and China for the first time; named the Araniko Highway, the 104-kilometer highway would link Nepal's capital Kathmandu with the town of Kodari on China's border (Adhikari, 2012). The same year, Nepal joined the Non-Aligned Movement reaffirming non-commitment to either the US or USSR in the Cold War (Khanal, 2019, p. 99). Overall, King Mahendra fostered a very active diplomatic approach by establishing diplomatic ties with numerous powers such as France and West Germany, while also pursuing an active agenda in the UN (Chand, 2023; Rose, 1971, p. 284). In fact, King Mahendra had once proclaimed that "the only alternative to the United Nations is a stronger United Nations" (Acharya, 2021, p. 210). This emphasis on the importance of the UN highlights Nepal's commitments to multilateralism—a norm conformation in line with the growing importance of multilateralism in international politics and as a means of emulating the values and practices of the great powers to ensure normative conformation. The higher-status group in this case was the UN itself and the great powers of the time, a majority of which were also members of the UN. Extending diplomatic ties to a wide range of states, commitment to the Non-Aligned Movement, and active membership in the UN are norms associated with multilateralism. The Non-Aligned Movement did not represent the norms of the dominant groups (the US- and USSR-led blocs), but, as SIT posits, status can be

evaluated based on multiple traits and they need not be in competition with each other (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 69).

King Mahendra's son, King Birendra, ascended to the throne on January 31, 1972, following his father's death. Similar to his father's efforts at asserting Nepal's agency internationally, King Birendra sought to do the same but through a different strategy. At his coronation, he declared that "we need peace for our security, we need peace for our independence, and we need peace for our development" (Anand, 1977, p. 6). He stated that Nepal should be declared a "Zone of Peace" (ZoP) which connects back to the social creativity approach discussed within SIT wherein states may seek to pursue social creativity by promoting new norms or development models which include unique policies that make them stand out. The ZoP pursued the idea that Nepal could not host any foreign bases, and no foreign military could operate within the country; the proposal would affirm Nepal's neutrality as it would not join any alliances (Scholz, 1977, p. 203). The ZoP was an attempt by King Birendra to use a peculiar affirmation of identity for Nepal which also centered on the country as the birthplace of the Buddha, and, as such, sought to stand out globally through a unique concept for a state. By 1986, 70 countries including the US, the UK, France, and China had endorsed the proposal with the notable exception of India (Baral, 1986, p. 1213). There was speculation that the ZoP would undermine the "special relationship" between Nepal and India which was affirmed by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which also stated that Nepal had to consult India if the former wanted to purchase weapons from third parties and import them using transit routes through India. Overall, the ZoP as a form of social creativity under SIT failed to bear fruit and Nepal returned to multilateral efforts to pursue its goal of international status. As noted in both Kings Birendra and Mahendra's reigns, the notion of "independence" was emphasized and is closely linked to the foreign policy approaches the monarchs pursued.

To further bolster its normative conformance, Nepal's efforts in committing to multilateralism are enshrined in its official foreign policy. The ministry of foreign affairs of the government of Nepal explicitly states that the fundamental objective of the country's foreign policy "is to enhance the dignity of the nation by safeguarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and promoting [the] economic wellbeing and prosperity of Nepal" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Foreign policy principles include mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, respect for mutual equality, and most importantly, abiding faith in the Charter of the UN. In fact, Article 51 of the Constitution of Nepal of 2015 states that Nepal is to uphold the following:

To conduct an independent foreign policy based on the Charter of the United Nations, non-alignment, principles of Panchasheel, international law and the norms of world peace, taking into consideration of [sic] the overall interest of the nation, while remaining active in safeguarding the sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence and national interest of Nepal. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023)

Overall, the emphasis on Nepal's agency is clear given its status as a small state, but its explicit mention of the UN Charter is telling and emphasizes the importance of multilateralism in pursuit of Nepal's foreign policy goals. The Constitution's explicit mention of the UN Charter places importance on the values of the organization—a higher-status actor—for Nepal and it emulates the values of the UN such as multilateralism, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. While Nepal is already a member of the UN (since 1955), this explicit normative commitment reinforces its membership and legitimacy to the UN and its members, which strongly ties back to its interest in status maintenance. Furthermore, values such as multilateralism, sovereignty,

and territorial integrity are precarious for smaller states, and highlighting them sheds light on their continued importance.

Furthermore, the mention of the UN Charter in the Nepali constitution is no accident. Multilateralism offers Nepal the opportunity to maintain its status as an independent actor with its own agency in international politics (Chand, 2022). To affirm its role as a state with its own agency, Nepal has sought active participation in a wide variety of international organizations. Its involvement with the UN is obvious as the UN Charter is explicitly mentioned in its official foreign policy stance and its constitution. However, Nepal has also sought to elevate its status within the UN as a net provider to multilateral efforts through participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Since joining the UN in 1955, the country has participated in 44 UN missions across the world in which over 144,969 military personnel were involved (Nepali Army, 2024). As of July 2024, Nepal is currently contributing 6,119 soldiers in 13 missions, making it the largest contributor of troops and police personnel to UN peacekeeping in the world (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024). Upholding UN values and practices by volunteering troops for UN missions further cements Nepal's normative commitments. It affirms Nepal's extensive participation in a space dominated by bigger powers and strengthens its legitimacy and status amongst them.

Nepal is also very forthcoming when it comes to participation in international organizations. Currently, around 26 UN agencies are active in Nepal (United Nations, 2024). Additionally, Nepal is also a part of the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO. It has also partaken in regional international organizations including the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, and newer institutions such as the Belt and Road Forum and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank established by China. Currently, the country has diplomatic ties with 178 states. Overall, Nepal has maintained a very active participation in international organizations, both at the global and regional levels. These pursuits allow Nepal to promote its status as an active player in multilateralism, specifically through its participation in various international and regional organizations as well as its commitments to international peace through its active participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Such efforts promote Nepal as a supporter of international peace, multilateralism, and cooperation despite being a small state constrained by material capabilities. These efforts also allow Nepal to pursue a peculiar foreign policy that is not constrained by its geopolitical context as a small state between larger powers. Multilateralism affirms its autonomy and agency as its status is tied to its international participation and not to its geopolitical location. Concurrently, it allows Nepal to maintain legitimacy by ascribing to the UN's values and practices an identity management strategy that affirms Nepal's normative conformance.

3.2. Nepal and Its International Norm Commitments: Pursuit of Normative Congruence

Apart from multilateralism, Nepal has also sought to forge closer normative ties with its international partners. Despite the fact that India and China are Nepal's largest economic partners, Nepal has attempted to internationalize its status through normative conformance with extra-regional actors such as the EU and the UN. Nepal was the first country in South Asia to abolish the death penalty through its 1990 constitution, largely in congruence with the UN's international efforts on the matter (Amnesty International, 1991). The UN system as a whole "opposes the use of the death penalty in all circumstances" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). As such, Nepal has sought to normatively align with the UN on this matter. In fact, it is also the only country in South Asia to ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty, standing out as an exception in the region (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989).

Nepal has also aligned closely with the UN and the EU on norms related to human rights. Currently, Nepal has ratified 13 out of the 18 major international treaties tied to human rights, which is the highest of any country in South Asia (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024). Additionally, Nepal was also the first country in the region to decriminalize same-sex activities in 2007. In 2010, the Election Commission of Nepal began issuing voter registration forms with “other” as a gender category; passport forms followed suit (Knight, 2017). Subsequently, in 2015, Nepal’s new constitution explicitly protected LGBTQI people, making it the 10th country in the world to do so. Nepal is also time and again the only country from South Asia to support resolutions or declarations tied to LGBTQI rights in the UN. This included its support in the 2008 statement in the UN General Assembly which condemned human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity (“UN: General Assembly statement,” 2008), and the 2011 Joint Statement on Ending Acts of Violence and Related Human Rights Violations Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity at the Human Rights Council (“Over 80 nations support statement,” 2011). Since November 2023, several same-sex marriages have been conducted in Nepal but the status of such marriages as a definite state policy is unclear (Knight, 2023). Not all these efforts in the realm of LGBTQI rights can be cast as efforts by Nepali policymakers to conform to UN and EU norms in this issue area; domestic rights groups have been very active in pushing the Nepali government to expand rights to sexual and gender minorities. Nevertheless, such policies also offer Nepal a chance to conform to values and practices that are considered important for the UN and the EU.

Coincidentally, these norms at the UN that Nepal has largely been supportive of are also those that the EU and its member states champion internationally. As per Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union, the organization’s principles include democracy, rule of law, universality and indivisibility of human rights, and fundamental freedoms including the respect of the UN Charter of 1945 and international law (European Parliament, 2024). Thus, there is normative convergence on certain aspects of the Treaty on European Union and the Nepali constitution of 2015, including commitments to the UN Charter. The government of Nepal and the EU have forged close ties, specifically since Nepal’s transition to a representative democracy in 2008. In the 14th Joint Commission between the EU and Nepal in 2023, the two parties “reiterated their support for a rules-based international order with the UN at its core, as well as their commitment to safeguard the principles of the UN Charter” (European Union External Action, 2023). The two sides also agreed to collaborate on promoting and protecting human rights and “to constructively engage in the Human Rights Council on the matters of common interest.” The ministry of foreign affairs of Nepal considers the EU a “valuable development partner of Nepal since 1973” and “relations have remained friendly, cordial and cooperative based on mutual understanding, support and cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, humanitarian and development issues” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). The Delegation of the European Union in Nepal states that “The EU and Nepal share a deep commitment to multilateralism, rules based international order, and climate action” (Delegation of the European Union to Nepal, 2021). Thus, the EU and Nepal have normative convergence in their overall principles towards each other as well as international commitments, particularly within the context of the UN.

This normative convergence can be assessed as an identity management technique to emulate values and practices of the EU, which is a major development partner to Nepal. The EU committed €209 million for its

Multiannual Indicative Programme for development cooperation (2021–2024; European Union External Action, 2023). Nepal also has access to the EU common market through the preferential trading regime which allows tariff-free access for Nepali exports (Delegation of the European Union to Nepal, 2021). This preferential trading regime has led to the EU accounting for 9.4% of Nepal's exports in 2019. Overall, the EU is a major development and trade partner of Nepal, which further makes normative convergence an important aspect of bilateral relations. Such norms conformance also allow Nepal to gain access to material concessions from the EU. The EU's role as a normative power makes the social mobility approach to status a fruitful option to gain admission as a normatively congruent partner while also garnering material benefits for Nepal.

Overall, Nepal has sought to internationalize its norm commitments, particularly in the field of human rights given the low economic costs of doing so. As a developing state with limited material capabilities, such norm commitments allow Nepal to promote its status as a champion of multilateralism and global norms that are promoted by major international institutions like the UN and EU. Normative convergence with such actors allows Nepal to have an international status as a small state that stands out as an exception in its particular region (in this case, South Asia) and elevates its status internationally. It is also strategically important for Nepal's interests as such normative conformance has also worked to foster close ties with the EU, which is a major development partner. Normative convergence with such global actors also affirms Nepal's foreign policy as being independent of its neighboring states; it emphasizes Nepal's status as an exception in the region, as showcased by the number of human rights treaties it has signed and its positions on matters of LGBTQI rights. Recently, Nepal also voted with the majority of the world's states to condemn Russia for its aggression in Ukraine, affirming its commitment to sovereignty and not following the decisions taken by its neighbors India and China; this is specifically pertinent given its small-state status (Pandey, 2022).

4. Discussion and Conclusion: Employing the Conceptual Framework

As discussed earlier, the article utilizes SIT, particularly social mobility as an identity management strategy to assess Nepal's foreign policy choices. The framework is focused on the notion that states pursue normative conformance with dominant powers or more prestigious institutions to gain access to elite clubs; while Nepal's actions are not largely focused on gaining access to such elite clubs, its normative commitments have been focused on emulating values and practices of dominant actors (in this article's case, the EU and the UN). While social mobility as an identity management strategy allows the country to be presented favorably to its important development partners, it also offers Nepal the chance to reinforce its agency as a sovereign state. Its legitimacy offers it the chance to maintain autonomy and agency, and perhaps, promote its role as an independent player in international politics.

As illustrated in the sections on multilateralism and normative convergence, Nepal's case showcases that the country uses these two identity management strategies to promote its status internationally. These identity management strategies highlight Nepal's role as a multilateral player by partaking in international institutions and espousing their values. This enables Nepal to maintain an international presence and, through peacekeeping missions, be a valuable contributor to international peace as it is the largest contributor of troops to such endeavors. These are inexpensive approaches for a materially limited small state like Nepal and allow the country to "punch above its weight." Furthermore, multilateralism and emphasis on international rules and norms also allow Nepal to maintain its agency as a small state given its precarious

context as a landlocked state between two large contending states. Normative conformance complements Nepal's multilateral commitments, allowing Nepal to reinforce its international commitments while also opening up avenues to foster close ties with development partners such as the EU and the UN, which are tied to material gains for Nepal in the form of development aid.

Overall, multilateralism and normative convergence offer Nepal opportunities to maintain an international status. Maintenance of its status as an active player in international politics is affirmed through these efforts. Thus, adopting the norms of dominant players such as the UN and the EU allows Nepal to appear as a normatively convergent player to these actors, which is specifically important as participation in expansive human rights treaties/conventions affirms that Nepal is usually an exception in the region. Its willingness to adopt international human rights norms including LGBTQI protections is largely exceptional in South Asia, further elevating its status within international institutions. Such status affirms Nepal's willingness to chart a foreign policy that is not tied to regional norms but rather international ones and that it is capable of charting its own political trajectory. This could be discussed as an attempt at maintaining its agency in foreign policy specifically given its material limitations. While affirming its status as an independent state with agency through multilateralism and normative convergence, Nepal is also signaling to its major development partners that its norms are aligned with theirs—gaining access to the “club” of dominant actors. This is pertinent given that Nepal receives extensive development aid from the EU and the UN. Furthermore, it also allows Nepal to not be limited to its neighbors when it comes to development aid. Partnerships with extra-regional actors such as the EU and international players like the UN maintain its status outside of the region and may open avenues for closer relationships with other actors. Such efforts point to Nepal's aspirations to maintain its agency in a precarious geopolitical context through normative stances that not only affirm its peculiarity in the region but also may help it pursue foreign policy goals with extra-regional players to prevent overreliance on neighboring states.

The case of Nepal illustrates that it partakes in the “identity management strategies” of SIT to pursue greater agency and autonomy. Status-seeking is a tool that puts Nepal on the international map and in good terms with its development partners, namely the EU. The pursuit of status as a concept tied to social standing in international relations can also be utilized to reap material benefits, as Nepal has sought to do through normative convergence and commitments to multilateralism to forge closer ties with its major development partners. Thus, Nepal's case showcases that its identity management strategy through social mobility works to cast itself as a legitimate member of the UN and a normative partner of the EU. Concurrently, such a strategy also serves Nepal's interests in maintaining its agency in a precarious geopolitical landscape. Closer normative conformance with dominant groups may offer legitimacy and greater visibility for a small state like Nepal, which may aid in overcoming other shortcomings that define small states including limited material capabilities.

While Nepal's normative conformance has largely been positive in its relations with the UN and the EU, its material realities have to be considered. The country is still heavily dependent on trade and foreign direct investment from its neighbors, India and China. Given its landlocked status, Nepal is heavily reliant on its neighbors for direct physical networks with other states. India and China do continue to play very crucial roles in Nepal and it would not be an exaggeration to state that they dominate the discourses surrounding the country's foreign policy. Nevertheless, Nepal's extra-regional ties and its emphasis on international norms offer a nuanced perspective on its foreign policy. Small states have to navigate their smallness by addressing

their limited capabilities, but SIT offers a perspective beyond material analyses and highlights the importance of social identities in the process of foreign policymaking.

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