

Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), Media and Security Implication in Nepal

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United States now has partnerships on Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) in more than 46 countries along with Nepal, but the MCC compact has not easily accepted in Nepal. In this research I have explained the role of media to make discourse on MCC and security implication to amend the compact. The media took the MCC debate to the grassroots level and were debated from the streets to the parliament. As a result in February, 2022, the Parliament of Nepal has passed the MCC with a descriptive declaration. The MCC, which was signed in 2017, took four years to accept by parliament of Nepal. The controversies in the Compact arose when the U.S. Embassy in Nepal revealed MCC is one of the branches of Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). Specifically, during his visit in Nepal when David J Ranz, assistant secretary of South Asia at the U.S. State Department, mentioned that the Compact is an important project within the Indo-Pacific Strategy (Himalayan Times, May 15 2019). The speculation of the Compact began with that very statement. Since then, many politicians, analysts, and activists have been giving their views on the Compact to different media outlets. Based on my

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**CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES, Vol. 31, No. 4 (October-December), 2022
Peer Reviewed, Indexed & Refereed International Research Journal**

qualitative research methods, particularly interview and media content analysis focusing on MCC, media and security implication, this study has attempted to provide a new perspective, idea and fact on the role of domestic media in national interest while doing bilateral agreements. Through liberalist lens I argue that Nepal's domestic media have had a great impact for the descriptive declaration from the parliament regarding the MCC compact.

[**Keywords** : Media effect, Debate on MCC, Security implication, Bilateralism, International relations]

1. Introduction

The Millennium Challenge Compact (MCC) between Nepal and US sets forth the general terms on which MCC will provide assistance of up to US\$ 500,000,000 to the Government of Nepal and to which the Government will contribute up to US\$ 130,000,00 for a program to reduce poverty through economic growth in Nepal (MCA Nepal, 2017). The MCC compact consists of two major projects in the electricity and transportation sectors in Nepal (MCA Nepal, 2017).

The main dispute of MCC compact is Nepal's national security issues. The MCC project and Nepal's national security challenges are still being debatable. The media took the MCC debate to the grassroots level. The results were debated from the streets to the parliament and in 2022, the Parliament of Nepal has passed the MCC in a modified form with a descriptive declaration. However, this seems to be one-sided on the part of Nepal. The United States has not given a clear answer. Also, there is still confusion as to when and how its implementation will move forward. The debate on MCC arose when it is linked with Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). Specifically, during the visit in Nepal when David J Ranz, assistant secretary of South Asia at the U.S. State Department, mentioned that the Compact is an important project within the Indo-Pacific Strategy (Himalayan Times, May 15 2019). Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) made the committee on debate on MCC (CPN- 2019). Democratic Party Nepali Congress had been raising voice for the MCC ratification from parliament. The dialogue and discourse of the agreement began with different statement. Since then, many politicians, analysts, and activists have been giving their views on the Compact to different media channel. Due to faster and easily accessible information within the media raised the security issues of the compact and created public debates on different dimensions.

I found this bilateral agreement between the Government of Nepal and MCC, the United States of America and its ongoing

phenomenon very interesting to examine and analyze them from security approaches of International relations. Specifically, I believe it is interesting to explore the roles of media in a bilateral agreement and national security concern, particularly how domestic media have the power to impact bilateralism and international relation.

2. Methodology

This article is based on formal and informal interviews, media content analysis and descriptive approach which has interpreted the MCC, media and security implication in the contest of Nepal from 2019-2022. During these 3 years I have conducted more than 150 episodes weekly television program related to politics and current affairs and able to interviewed with 32 stakeholders about MCC and its implication in Nepal (HOT SEAT, Image Channel Television 2019-2022). I have interviewed with high profile politicians including four Prime-Ministers of different time, Mr. KP Oli, Mr. Puspa Kamal Dahal, Mr. Madhab Kumar Nepal and Mr. Jhalanath Khanal. I also conducted interview with the first president of Nepal Dr. Ramaran Yadav, Speaker of House of Representative Mr. Agni Sapkota and the Chairperson of the National Assembly Mr. Ganesh Timilsina. Likewise I have also talked formally and informally with the 10 ministers of different time like finance, defense, foreign affairs, information and communication and so on. I talked with the 7 prominent leaders of different political party like Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (UML), Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Janata Samaj Party (JSP), Communist Party of Nepal (Revolutionary) and others. My weekly program, Hot Seat has also covered the interview of the former Nepal Army Chief, Mr. Rajendra Bahadur Kshetri and other security experts. MCC, media and security concern is interpreted by other 7 expert of economic, international relation, security, media, civil society and others in weekly show of Hot Seat on Image Channel Television.

I have also observed the trend of the news broadcasting of news media, more specifically television news related to MCC and the security concern in Nepal during the time of Prime-Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba for 7 months from Aug.2021- March 2022 until the MCC were passed with 12 points descriptive declaration from the parliament. Specifically, I have observed three national broadcasting

channel, Nepal Television, Image Channel Television and Kantipur Television and their media contents regarding the MCC.

The power of social media is being significant even in the grassroots level in Nepal. Therefore, I have also observed Face Book, You Tube, Twitter, Tik-Tok by focusing how they produced, disseminated, consumed and discussed the issues of the MCC. I have also chosen 3 YouTube Channel “Nepal Times”, “Khabar Bulletin News TV” and “Inside Nepal TV” to observe the debate and discussion on MCC and security implication in Nepal (You Tube, 2021-2022).

I have also talked with more than 50 general people in Kathmandu valley with unstructured, opened ended questions to capture their opinions on the MCC and how did they learned about it.

During this 3 years I have conducted meeting with the related stakeholders of Ministry of Finance, ministry of foreign affairs, financial committee/international relation committee of parliaments, MCA Nepal, Nepal Army, and Federation of Nepalese Journalist Association and other stakeholders. I have collected the documents, bilateral agreement of 2017 and 2019 between USA and Nepal regarding MCC. I have also collected the documents of high level political committee led by Jhalanath Khanal, Former Prime-Minister to solve the debate of MCC. Likewise documents Finance Ministry, Ministry of Law, 12 points descriptive declaration from house of representative has been gathered. The documentation and follow-up of different facts, figure, evidences, publication and broadcasted materials since 2017 till date has been collected to interpret the research topic.

3. Theoretical Framework

Many scholars have contributed to the development of and promoted more extensive use of the concept of “Media Effect” and “National Security” in international relations studies over the years. In liberal world the term “media” in my research deals with “media effect, more specifically “domestic media effect”, emphasizing how the Nepali media influenced the bilateral Compact, how they have transformed national and international power struggle and relationships. As Lambeth (1998) mentioned, the media as a tool of communication throws light on the issues of public interest and helps people understand the problems from different perspectives.

Generally, media has a significant role in informing, educating, entertaining, and pursuing the audience through news and programs. According to Bernard Cohen (1963), it is the media that draws political maps of the world in the modern times. He commented on the role of media, "the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but they are "stunningly successful in telling people what to think about."

In the International Relations perspective, there are two models of media; Pluralistic and Elite. In the pluralistic model, media are free professional and independent. No interference from Government and the other stakeholders. Mainly in democratic countries, media enjoy the freedom to broadcast or publish the contents. In the elite model, media are controlled, influenced and inspired by the state and stakeholders. They are not free and independent, and media power is concentrated within the elite group. In this model, media work as a government mouthpiece.

Agenda setting, framing the public opinion, being watchdog/pressure group and the strong tolls of the state is the significance of media in international relations and foreign policy. Media communicate, interpret and advocate the issues to the audience. Media influence foreign policy of a country in agenda-setting. If the media raise any question regarding other countries continuously, that becomes the agenda. Create/framing a public opinion; the public primary source of information is the media. After listening/watching/reading the news/information from the media public make the opinion on issues. In the article "The Role of the Media in International Relations: From the CNN effect to the Al- Jazeera Effect" by Filiz Coban states about the media effect and agenda building;

"The role of media discourse is crucial in the expression of ideas regarding how people think about themselves and other nations. The media select, organize and emphasize particularly news in order to decide what a significant subject for public discussion is. The media cannot force us what to think; but they certainly influence what we think about and how we think about it by their function of agenda building" (Coban, 2016).

The United States and Malaysia had done the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2006 while the dissatisfaction reflected to the civil society in some section of FTA specifically from intellectual

property rights to food sovereignty to government procurement procedures. But the domestic media only raised awareness rather than critical and professional regarding the trade campaign negotiation. While challenges to a Malaysia-United States FTA may appear muted - especially if compared with the outpouring of dissent witnessed on the streets of Thailand and South Korea against similar deals with the United States (Smeltzer, 2009). This citation also explicitly express the role of (Free and Controlled) media in international relations and national interest.

Scholars Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen in the book "The Evolution of the International Security Studies" explain about the significance of national security for US. More specifically authors in chapter eight explained "Responding to 9/11: a return to National Security" linking with the ISS.

"In a general sense we use 9/11 as a temporal benchmark in the same way as we used the ending of the Cold War. In a more specific sense, we ask whether 9/11 and the subsequent unfolding 'Global War on Terrorism' (GWOt) have been taken as an 'event' of sufficient importance to reshape the agenda of ISS in some ways" (p. 226).

After the Cold War, America became the most unilateral in the world. After 1990, the United States dominated the world. United States had easily managed the Gulf War and the war with Serbia and felt invulnerable. No state could challenge them. Joseph s. Nye, in his book, 'The paradox of American power' stated;

"Americans were largely indifferent and uncertain about how to shape a foreign policy to guide this power. Pools showed the American public focused on domestic affairs and paying little attention to the rest of the world. Between 1989 and 2000, the television networks closed foreign bureaus and cut their foreign news content by two thirds" (Nye, 2002).

There were significant change and revolutions in information, communication and technology which has been spreading power to all the factors and the people. The power was not only limited with the government. Individuals, groups and institutions have become more dominant in international relations. The world has been changing from the Cold War era to the global information age. CNN, Hollywood, and the Internet has influenced and embraced freedom, the individual, and change. Joseph Nye insists;

“Globalization - the growth of networks of worldwide interdependence - is putting new items on our national and international agenda whether we like it or not. Many of these issues we cannot resolve by ourselves. International financial stability is vital to the prosperity of Americans, but we need the cooperation of others to ensure it” (Nye, 2002).

The United States has been insisting for international relations through soft power instead of hard power. Through culture, civilization, democracy, economic and social development US is intending to enhance its national interest concerning with national security. More over, the United States is now expanding IPS and it is claimed that MCC is also a part of IPS. For the democratization and development objectives with the implementation of the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) program. The MCA began implementation in 2004, and subsequently the State Department utilized those effectiveness measures developed for the MCA program to assess progress towards the democratization and development objectives described in the 2002 NSS (Stolberg- 2012). The MCC agreement with Nepal is also a part of that which can also be seen in my research liberalist lens.

Millennium Challenge Compact is a bilateral agreement between Nepal and United States. In this context, my research deals with three major theoretical concepts: Bilateralism, the Media effect and Security Implications. The term “Bilateralism” in my study deals with the Compact between Nepal’s Government and MCC, the United States of America. Bilateralism is the conduct of political, economic, or cultural relations between two sovereign states. Generally, states with bilateral ties and relationships will exchange diplomatic agents such as ambassadors to facilitate dialogues and cooperation (Thompson, 2013). Utilizing the concept of media effect and bilateralism, I aim to explore not only the political and economic relations concerning the Compact but more the concealed security concern of US through MCC through liberal perspective.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Media Effect : Debate on MCC and Security Implication in Nepal

The controversies in the Compact arose when the U.S. Embassy in Nepal revealed MCC is one of the branches of Indo-Pacific

Strategy (IPS). Specifically, during his visit in Nepal when David J Ranz, assistant secretary of South Asia at the U.S. State Department, mentioned that the Compact is an important project within the Indo-Pacific Strategy (Himalayan Times, May 15 2019). Before that only handful people in Nepal knew about the MCC. The speculation of the Compact began with that very statement. Since then, many politicians, analysts, and activists have been giving their views on the Compact to different media outlets.

Although the agreements was done in 2017, the debate on MCC begun from 2019 via print media. Almost all the media began to publish and broadcast the debate about the MCC agreement related to national security. Investigative news started coming. The relationship between the MCC and US security strategy began to be reviewed through the media. The media started questioning the concerned political leaders and government representatives of Nepal. Leaders and activists of political parties started to inquire about this matter. And the MCC agreement became a matter of public interest and debate. Almost all the media in Nepal made it a matter of public debate with priority. During that time, I have also focused my weekly TV program on the issues of MCC. The main controversy of the MCC agreement was related to Nepal's national security. On the one hand, the liberal political parties like the Congress were in favor of accepting it as it is only an economic partnership. But the communist parties were divided. CPN revolutionaries, communist parties like CPN and conservative parties like RPP also opposed the MCC agreement. They argued that it should not be accepted as it is linked to the IPS of the United States and would pose a threat to Nepal's national security. But CPN-UML and CPN-Maoist Center were in favor of amending it and accepting it. The media brought this debate to the ground level. The country was mainly divided into 3 parts. MCC acceptance, rejection and acceptance with amendments.

Demonstrations started on the streets, slogans were raised. Political parties were divided. Accusations began to circulate among the leaders. The people were also against each other. The politics of the country was affected by the MCC debate. Despite the agreement, MCC could not be implemented in Nepal. At that time, the government led by KP Oli and the ruling party CPN fell into crisis. The CPN itself was divided into parties and opposition. As a result, a 3-member study committee was formed under the coordination of

former Prime Minister Jhalnath Khanal. In which former Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Bhim Rawal and former Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali were members. This committee prepared a report of 128 pages and analyzed that if this agreement is accepted as it is, it will be a challenge to Nepal's national security. Suggested that MCC can be adopted with amendments. Pradeep Gyawali had a different opinion in favor of MCC. The government changed amid these disputes (MCC task force, 2019). A new government was formed under the leadership of Sher Bahadur Deuba. During this time, various dialogues and visits were held between Nepal and America. Finally, the US gave time until February 2022 to accept or reject the MCC. In Nepal, there was an intense debate. Finally, amid various controversies and debates, on February 24, the Parliament of Nepal approved the implementation of the MCC Agreement. The MCC Agreement was passed by the Parliament with 12 points descriptive declaration not to consider MCC as a part of IPS and not to agree on any point related to security that is against the national interest, only as a purely economic partnership (House of Representative Nepal, 20 Feb. 2022).

As I explained above, there is a wide range of studies on the role of Media in international relations. However, there is still lacking research on the "domestic media effect, national security concern and international relations". Moreover, there is still limited research to seek interconnection to MCC compact, National security and realist perspective as well as the role of media and liberal perspective of international relations.

4.2 Effect of Television Discourse

Hot Seat is a weekly television talk show of Image Channel Television related to political and current affairs. This show has been broadcasting every Thursday 8 pm, Friday 3 pm and on Facebook/YouTube also. It has the viewership of 1 million on television, 100 thousand on face book and 50 thousand on YouTube in average. As already mention, more than 32 episodes were focused on debate on MCC in 3 years. I have interviewed with the 32 different guest including Prime- Minister, former prime-ministers, ministers, political leader, parliamentarian, speaker, authorities, experts and stakeholders (Hot Seat, Image Channel Television, 2019-2022).

My informal and formal interview data shows that, more than 80% politician knew about MCC agreement and its implication after

it was published and broadcasted from the media. Among 32, 19 interviewees were in against of MCC. Former Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal said that MCC should not be accepted as it is not in the interest of Nepal. Likewise, the leader of the CPN-Maoist Center and former foreign Minister Narayankaji Shrestha claimed that since IPS is connected with MCC, if it is accepted, the sovereignty of Nepal will be in threat. CPN Revolutionary General Secretary Mohan Baidya Kiran and leader CP Gajurel said that since the MCC is an extension of American imperialism, the US can land troops in Nepal at any time. RPP Chairman Rajendra Linden also opposed the MCC. Professor Dr. Yuvraj Sangraula said that MCC is not in the interest of Nepal. Most of those who opposed the MCC claimed that it would pose a threat to Nepal's national security. 7 political leaders were in favor of MCC to pass from the parliament. The then Prime Minister KP Oli was in favor of passing the MCC as it was a purely financial partnership. Also, the then Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali was also in the position of passing the MCC. Former Minister of Finance and External Affairs Dr. Ram Sharan Mahat advocated in favor of MCC. There were critical view from 6 different top political leaders. Former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda and Madhav Kumar Nepal said that the MCC can be accepted only as an economic partnership by removing the provisions related to security. Speaker of House of Representative Agni Sapkota also stood in favor of passing it from parliament with amendments. Their main concern was national security. Over 80% leader made idea about MCC set by the media discourse (Hot Seat, 2019-2022).

4.3 Effect of Print and Online Daily Newspapers

The print and online newspapers are very influential in terms accuracy, balance and credibility. Nepali language based newspaper more popular the newspaper in English. But English language based newspapers are also being popular in recent days. For this study I have chosen the popular English language based newspaper with online version "The Kathmandu Post", "The Rising Nepal" and "The Himalaya Times".

"The Kathmandu Post" is the popular and largest selling daily English newspaper in Nepal established in 1993. There are 80 news and views coverage related to MCC from July 2021- June 2022 in one year. 5 news are against of MCC whereas 24 are in favor and 51 are critical. Likewise 7 news are based on speech, 30 based on events and

43 based on analysis/investigation. Among those 80 news sources, more than 70% news raised the issues of national security concern link with the MCC compact (The Kathmandu Post, July 2021- June, 2022).

The Rising Nepal is a Nepalese government-owned daily newspaper published by the Gorkhapatra Sansthan. It is a sister publication of Gorkhapatra, oldest national daily newspaper of Nepal. There are only 9 news and views coverage related to MCC from July 2021- June 2022 in one year. No news are against of MCC whereas 7 are in favor and 2 are soft critical. Likewise 3 news are based on speech, 5 based on events and 1 news based on analytical. 30% news raised the issues of national security related to the MCC compact (The Rising Nepal, July 2021- June, 2022).

The Himalayan Times is an English-language broadsheet newspaper published and distributed daily in Nepal established in 2001. In the annual newspaper classification report published by Press Council Nepal, it was placed in the A+ category, the highest possible rank. There are 35 news and views coverage related to MCC from July 2021- June 2022 in one year. 3 news are against of MCC whereas 21 are in favor and 11 are critical. Likewise 5 news are based on speech, 20 based on events and 6 based on analysis/investigation. More than 65% news raised the issues of national security concern link with the MCC compact (The Himalaya Times, July 2021- June, 2022).

4.4 Effect of Social Media

Social media are being popular in recent world and Nepal is the state which is highly is being influenced by Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok and others. In this study I have chosen the 3 popular YouTube Channel "Nepal Times", "Khabar Bulletin TV" and "Inside Nepal TV" to analyze the trend of the news and views regarding MCC and Security implication from July,2021 to June, 2022.

Nepal Times is an online media that envisions itself an online television established in 2017 with voice for the voiceless as its slogan. We aim to reach out the unprivileged groups' unreported news, and make them available for the nation as well as world to watch (Nepal Times- 2017). It has more than 517k subscription. There are 97 news and views coverage related to MCC from July 2021- June 2022 in one year. 34 news are against of MCC whereas 24 are in favor and 39 are critical. Likewise 35 news are based on speech, 11 based on events and 51 based on analysis /investigation. More than 90% news

and views raised the issues of national security concern link with the MCC compact (Nepal Times, July 2021- June, 2022).

Khabar Bulletin TV is one of the biggest libraries of exclusive Nepali different kinds of fields such as politics, crime, corruption, social issues and some others Interesting content as well. With the hottest entertainment news, events report, celebrity interviews and reviews. Khabar Bulletin TV is a channel of choice for millions around the world (Khabar bulletin TV-2012). It has more than 771k subscription. There are 56 news and views coverage related to MCC from July 2021- June 2022 in one year. 41 news are against of MCC whereas 4 are in favor and 11 are critical. Likewise 20 news are based on speech, 19 based on events and 17 based on analysis/ investigation. More than 85% news raised the issues of national security concern link with the MCC compact Khabar Buletin TV, July 2021- June, 2022).

Inside Nepal News TV is YouTube Channel established in 2016. It has more than 446k subscription. There are 10 news and views coverage related to MCC from July 2021- June 2022 in one year. 6 news are against of MCC whereas 1is in favor and 3 are critical. Likewise 2 news are based on speech, 3 based on events and 5 based on analysis/investigation. More than 75% news raised the issues of national security concern link with the MCC compact (Inside Nepal News TV, July 2021- June, 2022).

5. Conclusion

While reviewing the impact of print/online media, television discourses and social media such as YouTube, Yin has forced the political leadership to pass the MCC agreement with the amendment through the parliament of Nepal. The most effective social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are seen in this. Regarding MCC, the news and views that have come on social media are more critical and against MCC. It seems that social media are very lacking in truth, facts and reliability. But the effect of Yin was comparatively greater. This study shows that the mainstream media are more responsible and reliable. However, the influence of such media was found to be somewhat weaker than that of social media. Even in the mainstream media, the media owned by the government was seen as the mouthpiece of the government, while the media operated by the private sector was seen as more professional. On the whole,

regarding the MCC agreement, it was seen that the media included more critical aspects than positive ones. News and opinions have come without deep and realistic research. Even after becoming independent, it seems that it will take time for Nepali media to become professional.

The role of media as a soft power in international relations is imperative. But sometimes media also can be an actor. Media has vital role on agenda setting, framing the public opinion, making and being the pressure group and sometimes strong tool of the nation. Regarding the dispute of MCC and security implication media has been playing the substantial role on creating the opinion of the public and politician and other stakeholders. The conclusion of this study is that the media can be strong and powerful in a democratic country with press freedom. Therefore, we cannot neglect the role of media to make substantial discourse on bilateral agreement, security implication and strengthening the international relations.

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