Geopolitics of security and surveillance in Nepal and Afghanistan: A comparative analysis

Rupak Shrestha and **Jennifer L Fluri**
Department of Geography, University of Colorado-Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA

Abstract

This article examines the geopolitics and geo-economics of security and surveillance. We comparatively focus on the effects of geopolitically powerful states – China and the United States – and their influence over the use of surveillance technologies in the name of spatial security in relatively weaker states – Nepal and Afghanistan. We use these two areas of comparison to address the similarities in security logics across disparate spaces and to highlight the everyday experiences and responses to both outside influence from powerful states and national security regimes. Through interview data from our respective qualitative research in Afghanistan and Nepal, we show how the logics of security situates particular racialized and gendered bodies as suspicious and examine how individuals living in these spaces experience, understand, and challenge these security regimes. We conclude by arguing for more comparative studies of security technologies and surveillance regimes. Additionally, we view these spaces of heightened security as potential sites for increased violence, rather than security.

Keywords

Surveillance, geopolitics, security, everyday life, violence

Introduction

This article examines the geopolitical and geo-economic influences of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States (US) through a ground-level analysis of state surveillance and security in Nepal and Afghanistan. We use these comparisons to illustrate how security logics influenced by geopolitically powerful states onto relatively weaker states incorporate panoptical technologies that unevenly and disparately disrupt and discipline residents' movement and mobility. The vast majority of research participants in the authors' respective case-studies directed criticism toward their own state's authority, ability, and acumen to provide security. Simultaneously, the

Corresponding author:
Jennifer L Fluri, Geography Department, University of Colorado-Boulder, 110 Guggenheim, UCB 260, Boulder, CO 80303, USA.
Email: Jennifer.Fluri@colorado.edu

geopolitical influences from states with more political and economic power are viewed as competent but unwilling to provide security through surveillance. The empirical data from Nepal is based on interviews conducted with Tibetans and non-Tibetans in Kathmandu between 2016 and 2018. The Afghanistan data is drawn from interviews and surveys conducted in Afghanistan between 2016 and 2019. In the first section of this article we provide a geo-historical overview of both Chinese influences in Nepal, and United States (US) influences in Afghanistan. This is followed by an overview of the literature on surveillance and the ways in which surveillance operates and has an impact on everyday life in Kathmandu, Nepal and Kabul, Afghanistan respectively.

Geopolitical influences: security and surveillance

Nepal

China and Nepal have a long geopolitical and economic history. Historically, Nepal signed multiple treaties on trade and border relations with Tibet. First, Nepal became a tribute paying state to China as a result of the Nepali war with Tibet (and the Qing empire) from 1788 to1792. Later, the Treaty of Thapathali as a result of the Nepal-Tibet war of 1855–1856 conditioned new terms on customs, trade, and extradition between Nepal and Tibet (Uprety, 1998). After the Chinese invasion and annexation of Tibet in 1951, the PRC then became the northern neighbor to Nepal as a result of which all of the aforementioned treaties were annulled. Part and parcel of the Cold War, the Nepali state initially was wary of Chinese expansion close to the Nepali state's territorial border. But with the 1960 Sino-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, both Nepal and China recognized and supported each states' territorial integrity assuaging Nepal's fears of communism from across the northern border (Shakya, 1999). Nepal and China in the same year signed the "Agreement Between the Government of the People's Republic of China and His Majesty's Government of Nepal on the Question of the Boundary Between the Two Countries" that delineated the border between Nepal and China, and subsequently recognizing the annexation of Tibet into Chinese state territory.

For decades since then, the PRC has financially supported Nepal's economic development. As the treaty notes, and as politicians from both states reiterate, "territorial integrity" remains a key framework on which assistance and mutual support is fundamentally based. For the Nepali state, an adherence to China's territorial integrity meant curtailing Tibetan resistance activities against China that were taking place in Nepal's territory in the 1960s and 1970s (Shakya, 1999). For example, China requested the Nepali government to restrict Tibetan nationalism and Tibetan refugees' political actions in Nepal. As Nepal relies on China for economic and geopolitical support, Nepal has obliged and controlled Tibetan political activities within its territory.

Recently, at a macro-scale, Nepal seeks to integrate into the extensive networks of capital and resources made possible through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Inclusion in China's BRI provides the landlocked state of Nepal an opportunity to move away from its previous geopolitical and economic dependence on India (Murton et al., 2016; Murton and Lord, 2020; Paudel, 2016). The BRI provides additional access to capital and import goods from China, which Nepal needs to balance trade deficits. However, when shifting scales to understand how these geo-economic and geopolitical dynamics play out locally, we argue that Nepal's integration into the BRI network has come at the cost of suppressing and surveilling Tibetan refugees living in Nepal.

The 2015 earthquakes in Nepal became a catalyst for precipitating new development desires in Nepal. Historically, Nepali trade and import of materials has been monopolized by the Indian state. Following the 2015 earthquakes, in response to and in support of the Madhesi opposition to the Nepali constitution, India blockaded its border with Nepal. Nepal was locked in from the south, east, and west where it shares borders with India. Kathmandu looked towards China to relax shortages even though the earthquake damaged the only two roadways that led to the northern border. Many

government officials identified this time period as a key turning point for Nepal's geopolitical and geo-economic future.

The Nepali Prime Minister, officials from the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Nepali Army publicly endorsed the One China Policy. Chinese economic aid and investment in Nepal comes with the caveat that the Nepali state must support the One-China Policy. In September 2019, the Chinese Embassy in Nepal issued four press releases of the Chinese Foreign Minister meeting four Nepali political leaders, each of whom stated their allegiance to the One-China policy. Through this allegiance, Nepal opened up its borders for Chinese trade and investment to flow in through a number of boundaries and corridors

Adherence to the One China Policy has multiple facets in both global and local affairs. At the global scale, this adherence requires Nepal to refrain from recognizing the sovereignty of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet. Locally, the state of Nepal is expected to follow the guidelines set by the Embassy of China. While Nepali authorities have not clearly identified what constitutes anti-China activities, one of the ways this has manifested in the Kathmandu valley, includes viewing Tibetan events and activities as potentially threatening to state security (Shrestha and Fluri, 2021). As a result, Tibetan social and cultural practices have become increasingly politicized. For example, the celebration of the Dalai Lama's birthday–an important day for Tibetans and Himalayan indigenous communities–has become a site of state intervention. This intervention manifests through extensive security of public sites of Tibetan worship by way of policing and surveillance, including the removal of "unwanted" bodies from these spaces.

Surveillance of public spaces presumed to be linked to Tibetan political action, protest, and Tibetan Buddhist public worship, have become methods for the Nepali state to illustrate its adherence to the One China Policy. Nepali state policing and surveillance over public and visible expressions of Tibetan society and culture has become a method for the state to illustrate its commitment to China, which subsequently ensures a steady flow of economic assistance and development. Prior to our analysis of surveillance and policing in Nepal, we provide an overview of US occupation and influence in Afghanistan as a comparative case study.

Afghanistan

US geopolitical engagements with Afghanistan began as part of its cold war era efforts to compete with the former Soviet Union for influence in Central and South Asia. The US economic development programs in Afghanistan included several infrastructural projects, such as road construction and dam building in the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly the Soviet Union constructed roads, dams, and other infrastructure projects as well as influencing political thought among the emerging intellectual class at major universities and through radio programs. Soviet influence combined with socialist and communist ideologies among two major political factions led to the Saur Revolution, a bloody coup, and the rise to power of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978. The PDPA's government was plagued by infighting and resistance to reforms, particularly those focused on gender and land tenure reforms. In response, the Soviet Union working with pro-Soviet factions inside Afghanistan, invaded/aided the country in 1979, militarily occupying the country until 1989 and politically and financially supporting the communist government until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

During the 1980s the US covertly (and later overtly) supported several different Islamic-based resistance factions, known as the mujahideen. After the fall of the Soviet Union, both the central government and the mujahideen resistance lost their main sources of funding and geopolitical support (i.e. Soviet Union and US respectively). This led to the fall of the central government and ensuing civil war between the disparate mujahideen resistance groups. The US directed its geopolitical attention elsewhere, while initially supporting the Taliban, an extremist group of

Wahabi-Islamic fundamentalists, who took over the majority of the country by 1996. Afghanistan became a mostly distant geopolitical memory in the US, until the identification of Al Qaeda as responsible for the 9/11/2001 attacks. While none of the 9/11 hijackers were Afghan, the use of Afghanistan as a training ground or "safe haven" for Al Qaeda prompted the US and the so-called coalition of the willing to militarily invade Afghanistan.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan was complemented by trillions of dollars spent from the US military, US Department of State, and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to secure and rebuild Afghanistan. The US presence in Afghanistan has included training the Afghanistan National Army and National Police, including the use of surveillance and biometric technologies (Fluri et al., 2015). Surveillance technologies, such as the one's discussed in this article are prevalent in major cities, with a specific focus on Kabul, the capital city as de facto green zone, and site from many international governmental, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and supranational organizations such as the United Nations. We focus on surveillance in Kabul city to illustrate and analyze the ways everyday citizens experience, understand, and evaluate the effectiveness of the US and its influence on the Afghanistan government to provide security through surveillance technologies.

There are many ways in which both China and the US have influenced the countries of Nepal and Afghanistan respectively. Based on our separate research sites, we focus on surveillance and security as a lens through which to compare and contrast these influences. We argue that these comparisons provide a useful method for understanding the commonalities and differences between divergent approaches to internal processes and people within countries that pose a security risk to countries (such as China and the US) with more geopolitical and geo-economic power. The technologies of surveillance have increased in urban areas, which have been significantly influenced by the geopolitical interests of China in Nepal and the US in Afghanistan. In the next section we provided an overview of the literature on contemporary and technological surveillance followed by our case-study analysis of surveillance systems in the Boudha neighborhood in Kathmandu, Nepal, and Kabul, Afghanistan.

Surveillance

As a technology of state power, surveillance is generally implemented as an expression of spatial security. It further legitimizes the authority of the state to secure and control public spaces, including the removal of unwanted or undesirable bodies from a particular place by collecting and coding visual knowledge (Hannah, 2006; Koskela, 2000). The sorting of individuals is integral to the separation of the wanted from the unwanted other. New forms of technology include risk profiling as part of enumeration systems such as biometric technologies (Amoore 2006). These technologies have become increasingly used to track mobility across international borders from a variety of governmental and non-governmental agencies (Cobarrubias, 2020).

Panoptical surveillance as discussed by Foucault (1977) exemplifies the state's ability to view spaces as a method of security. The physical presence of the panopticon, such as the conventional prison tower, and now the video surveillance camera, operates as a visual marker of the state's ability to watch over spaces along with its subsequent power to remove individuals—the state identifies as harmful—from those spaces. Foucault argued that the panopticon's presence ultimately leads to individuals (citizens, civilians, residents) internalization and subsequent docility and obedience to state authority. Foucault's analysis of the panopticon remains a key fixture in carceral spaces. However, spaces, such as portions of cities or entire neighborhoods under intensive surveillance and policing have become quasi-carceral locations, where bodies and their movements are heavily monitored based on the presumption of potential violence (Speer, 2018).

As we discuss in the case-studies of Boudha in Kathmandu, Nepal and Kabul City, Afghanistan, this quasi-carceral space does not extend to all bodies equally in these spaces. Certain bodies based on racialized and gendered calculations are viewed as suspicious and others as acceptable. Similar to Dongol and Neumann (2021) examination of the territorialization of nature in Nepal through technologies of governance that produced "self-disciplining subjects" and "governable spaces", surveillance technologies in Boudha seek a similar result. In many respects the use of surveillance technologies has accomplished its desired effect as Tibetan protests have not occurred in this site since the onset of video surveillance and increased police presence during Tibetan Buddhist festivals, holy days, and days of commemoration

Conversely, in Kabul, surveillance operates in ways that are more akin to vertical geopolitics and volumetric analyses of conflict spaces (Elden, 2013; Graham, 2004). Aerial surveillance has become part of a security assemblage in many contexts that includes new technologies and methods for managing and controlling activities and mobilities in specific places (Massé, 2018). However, surveillance is not always a top-down, volumetric, and vertical view from on high. Inverted panoptical surveillance has also been used to document the atrocities of state governments (Fluri, 2009). Video-evidence continues to be used to identify perpetrators of violence (including the state), such as bystander videos and in some cases to hail the actions of perpetrators when their actions are believed to be justified by bystanders (Fluri and Lehr, 2019). Additionally, certain geographies are not conducive to aerial surveillance. The terrain itself can pose limitations that make it impossible for video surveillance to operate effectively. For example, mountainous areas with steep valleys in Afghanistan where locals have more knowledge and experience in what Gordillo (2018) refers to as the "opaque terrain" stymies the effectiveness of US military technologies (61).

Surveillance as a technique of visibility through the presence of the surveillance camera in a public place reminds people "of their own visibility" (Koskela, 2000: 253). In this sense, surveillance techniques are panoptic strategies of territorialization that aim to manage threats in a place (de Certeau, 1984; Hannah, 2006). However, increased surveillance does not necessitate the increase of state power. Rather, state and local authorities have little control over how surveillance is operationalized and realized, as we later show in this article. We argue that geopolitical influence from China (in Nepal) and the United States (in Afghanistan) have ensured the use of these technologies to determine how bodies are identified and whether or not they are treated with suspicion or marginalized from certain spaces. We then discuss how surveillance technologies are perceived and experienced by individuals who regularly traverse these spaces.

Nepal

During the 2008 Tibetan Uprising, there were widespread Tibetan protests and unrest in the Tibetan regions within China. Tibetans commemorated the 1959 Tibetan Uprising Day and protested against contemporary persecution of Tibetans under Chinese occupation. During and after the protests, Tibetans in China witnessed violent persecution, increased surveillance, and police threats (Yeh, 2013). Drawing on these cartographic anxieties (Painter, 2008) of the 2008 protests in Tibet, the Chinese state increasingly became anxious of the Tibetan refugee population protesting against the Chinese state from Nepal. Boudha, where a large population of Tibetan refugees resided, became a geopolitical microcosm of Nepal-China politics. This manifested through the intensification of Nepali surveillance and security in the area to control and restrict any Tibetan political action to appease the Chinese state.

Since then, two reports by the Berkeley-based Tibet Justice Center (Sloane and Brundige, 2002) and Human Rights Watch (Richardson, 2014) have provided formative information regarding the political conditions of Tibetan refugees in Nepal from the beginning of the 21st century. The reports highlight the increasing Chinese influence in dictating Nepali security narratives and policing to

control pro-Tibetan activities in Nepal. Further, interviews with local tradespeople and police officers note the involvement of Chinese funding to securitize Boudha to avert risks.

Boudha in the Kathmandu valley lies at the interconnected spatial peripheries of Chinese and Nepali geopolitics and geo-economics. Peter Moran (2004) notes that Boudha is a transnational space because of the mobility of people from multiple ethnicities, diffusion of culture, the presence of a large Tibetan exile population, and the Western fetishization of Buddhist practices. It is a UNESCO world heritage site because of its cultural and historical significance to multiple indigenous communities in Nepal. However, Boudha, among other locations in Nepal, is also one of the major places where Tibetans in exile re-settled in Kathmandu after fleeing from the Chinese invasion in Tibet. China is anxious about the Tibetan population within China and has spent incredible surveillance and policing resources through policy implementations to control individual and collective Tibetan activities in China, and in so doing has negated Tibetan histories, ways of life, and cultural being (Woeser, 2016).

China shares similar anxieties over the Tibetan refugee population in Nepal. Therefore, to recognize and support Chinese *territorial integrity*, Nepal categorizes particular Tibetan cultural and political activities in Boudha as anti-Chinese. Boudha then exemplifies Nepal's attempts to control Tibetan activities in an effort to placate China. Additionally, Boudha represents Nepali state surveillance and policing under the banner of providing security for the many tourists that frequent this place. Therefore, the Nepali state actions at this site, situate Tibetan refugees as potential threats to both state security and China's continued economic assistance, while ensuring a robust tourist economy. Boudha has therefore become a space where Nepal's geopolitical and geo-economic engagements with the One-China Policy are enacted and articulated.

After a Tibetan man burned himself in Boudha in November 2011, some mid-level police officers at the local police station were trained to identify individuals identified as security risks in this space, as illustrated in the following quote from a police officer:

> We were trained in keeping an eye out for Tibetan flags - especially monks with large Tibetan flags, Free Tibet signs, large Dalai Lama posters, and so on. As soon as we see something like this, we take action (Police Officer from Boudha Police Station)

At the scale of the body, the Nepali police use visible markers such as clothing and attire to code deviance. The body becomes a geopolitical site and "battleground onto which violence is orchestrated" (Fluri, 2011: 291). In recent memory, this form of policing was heavily practiced during the Maoist civil war when camouflage trousers and Gold Star shoes were visual markers of Maoist insurgents. Putting these visual tactics of surveillance in place exemplifies Nepali state compliance with directives from the Chinese Embassy that seeks to limit and control Tibetan activities in Boudha.

However, much of the public discourse in Nepal about surveillance remains uncritical. For example, during a Nepali television talk show, *Good Morning Nepal*, one of the hosts casually and uncritically claimed that surveillance cameras are now "part of our *lifestyle* [in urban Nepal]" (emphasis added by author). The hosts went on to discuss the benefits of surveillance technologies in providing security and assistance for solving crimes (Sharma, 1997). The hosts further argued that surveillance cameras provide disciplinary aid in schools to monitor students and teachers irrespective of who is watching on the other side of the cameras. This warm acceptance of surveillance cameras on a popular national TV program is parallel to the absence of critical discussions about surveillance at the national scale. However, the Jan-Feb 2020 edition of *Himal,* a widely read Nepali language fortnightly magazine, initiated conversations that criticized surveillance technologies (Sapkota, 2020). The cover (see below) shows a surveillance-cyborg clad in Nepali government service attire - *Daura Suruwal* - surveilling the urban citizens of Nepal whose identities are darkened

and seemingly illegible. However, we argue that surveillance technology does exactly the opposite - it makes public and private lives hyper-visible and susceptible to the continuous, but not always consistent, gaze of the state Figure 1.

The cover story notes that most surveillance cameras are illegally and informally placed. If these cameras are placed to prevent illicit activities, they are considered illegal under the *Procedure for CCTV/Camera Installation and Operation Procedural, 2015* issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Such "illegal" cameras are present throughout the urban landscape of Kathmandu. The story notes that in 2018–2019, approximately two hundred and 60 thousand video surveillance cameras were imported from China (Sapkota, 2020). Interestingly, the report identified above does not address the prevalence of surveillance cameras that are Chinese funded and supported in Kathmandu. There are about 3000 surveillance cameras that the Nepali police operate in Nepal (Mulmi, 2019), many of which are donated by the Chinese government as a form of security aid (Shahi, 2019). We find implications of cloud-based storage and algorithmic surveillance are topics of concern
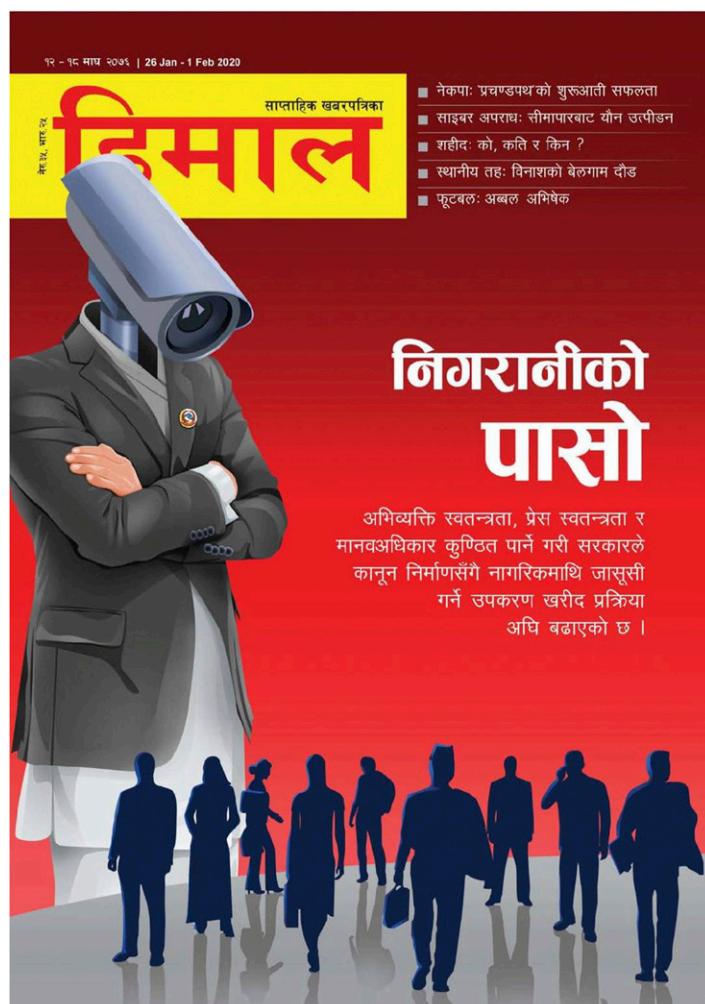
Figure 1. Cover of Himal with the headline "the trap of surveillance".

(Graham, 2005), but we do not have either primary or secondary evidence to investigate this matter further. However, interviews with Tibetan activists as well as police officers in Boudha, note that the increased Chinese interest in surveillance technology has been done in an effort to curtail anti-Chinese activities in this UNESCO World Heritage Site, which remains a frequented tourist hub.

Further, implications of cloud-based storage and algorithmic surveillance are topics of concern that have been discussed by other scholars (see Graham, 2005). A New York Times report explicates the wide use of surveillance cameras - the technology for which is developed and tested in China (Mozur et al., 2019). Similar cameras are seen in Boudha (see the top-left surveillance camera in Figure 2). Other reports (Weber, 2019) indicate that China and Russia can gain access to surveillance data from the devices that they manufacture through cloud computing. Through the use of these technologies, Chinese authorities then might be capable of surveilling individuals in Nepal. In this section, we discuss the ways in which these surveillance technologies specifically target the Tibetan refugee population.

In Nepal, surveillance technologies were introduced in the mid-2000s. Boudha, was one of the initial public places to receive this "gift of security" from China. Boudha in the northeastern section of Kathmandu is predominantly inhabited by Himalayan indigenous people and Tibetans in exile. The mobility of practicing Buddhists in the central space of Boudha is circular - a clockwise circumambulation around the sacred stupa (*kora* in Tibetan). Following this mobility pattern, numerous surveillance cameras are placed in this space to *see* people practicing *kora*. Surveillance cameras are placed at angles so that the assemblage of cameras is a security apparatus that is hyper-visible to the people who traverse this place. Awareness of surveillance technology ensures people behave in disciplined ways around the stupa. The use of this technology is a powerful way to define who is legible and what acts are illegible in this space. Because of repeated pressures from the Chinese state and the Chinese Embassy, the Nepali state categorizes Tibetan acts of politics as suspect, illegal, or profane.

In Boudha, the local police office works closely with the Boudha-Melamchi Ghyang Guthi for Boudha's *protection*. Boudha-Melamchi Ghyang Guthi traces its authoritative claims over Boudha
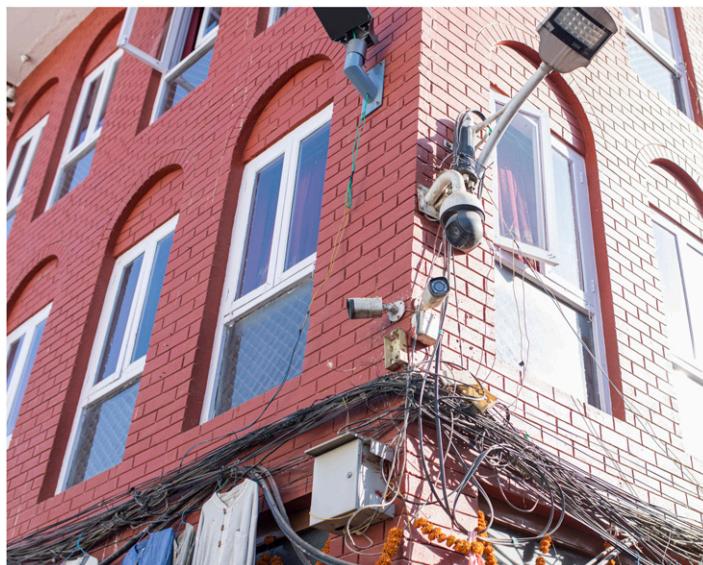
Figure 2. surveillance cameras at the eastern gate of Boudha. Photo by author A.

back to the Rana regime (1846–1951) when the rulers granted the ancestors of the current *Chiniya Lama* (literally translates as "monk from China") as caretakers of the space. Research participants noted that the Guthi has tapped into the police's virtual and on-the-ground surveillance network to use it to their own benefit. Both the Guthi and the police work closely to curtail Tibetan political action in the space by arguing that Boudha is not a space of politics but that of religion and worship. However, to do so, the Guthi partakes in a politics of spatial exclusion by determining which people and activities can occur in this space. Tibetans and non-Tibetans in Boudha question which bodies this security is intended to protect and which bodies are treated with suspicion. This type of categorizing and sorting has the effect of further marginalizing Tibetans, who by virtue of their corporeality and Tibetan-ness are viewed as potential threats to the Chinese state.

The security and surveillance practices in Nepal have included attempts to isolate this space as sacred, and therefore apolitical. The common language used by the Guthi administrators and monks against those who practice Tibetan politics in Boudha has been: "Is this your house? This is no place for your drama. This is a public space for all, and not your private space. This is not a place for you to protest". The Guthi, and increasingly non-Tibetan residents of Boudha, mark Tibetan politics as a private affair—and therefore as something that should not be performed publicly in this sacred space. Subsequently, Tibetan politics are deemed as profane and therefore must be excluded from this sacred space. Conversely, tourist activities are not viewed as profane and therefore integrated into rather than separated from this space. The police are regularly deployed in large numbers to provide "security" during special Tibetan religious, cultural, and political celebrations to ensure that Tibetan politics does not seep into public expression of worship. The police mark Tibetan bodies as inherent security risks. Therefore, known Tibetan activists have been jailed to prevent imminent threat during sacred events at the request of the Chinese Embassy. In response, many Tibetans choose to worship in private to avoid interactions with police.

On an early August morning in 2017, a vigil was taking place at a *gonpa* (monastery) in Kathmandu. It was an observance in the memory of Passang Dhondup, whose body was left discolored and charred by self-immolation 6 days earlier. The vigil was an event to mark death, claim remembrance, and a pledge not to forget. 1500 km away, in Dharamsala, India - the political and religious center for Tibetans in exile - Passang had self-immolated along the kora around the Dalai Lama's main temple. The materiality of the *gonpa* wall separated the normalized every-dayness - where Tibetanness was subject to state surveillance and policing - from the rituals that were hidden. The wall rendered events within the *gonpa* into realms of the intimate, of secret spatialities and sovereignties. These spatialities of remembrance and vigil were not just secretive micro-events for Tibetan refugees in the community but they linked to, and were conditioned by, broader narratives of power and policing. Such collective acts of remembrance were relegated to the space of the private since the Nepali state - acting as China's policing proxy - marked such acts as suspect and therefore requiring extensive policing and surveillance.

In Boudha, a few Tibetans directly and confidently linked the cameras to the Boudha police station and the Boudha-Melamchi Ghyang Guthi office. Whereas, others—such as shopkeepers who operate shops in Boudha—remain unaware of who is actually on the other side of the camera. Nevertheless, Tibetans and non-Tibetans are wary of this technology and its ability to ensure security. The quote below illustrates these anxieties:

> Who knows if this [surveillance cameras] even works at all! I see them everywhere when I'm doing kora. Is there someone watching me when I go around the stupa in circles? I don't think this impacts how I am in this place".

A male Tibetan resident explained his daily kora circumambulations and the confusions over the purpose of the surveillance cameras. In a space where the police, a semi-government agency, and a

monastery all claim power over this place, surveillance cameras have rendered the space as a site of liminality because it is difficult to decipher who is in control of, or responsible for, the cameras. "Like the inmate of the panoptic prison, the public in urban space are often unaware of who is responsible for the surveillance" rendering the specific actors behind the surveillance anonymous (Koskela, 2000: 253).

In Boudha, video surveillance complements rather than replaces surveillance on the ground. Shrestha repeatedly saw and verified through local residents the presence of civil clothed police personnel and hired security contractors by the Guthi to patrol Boudha. Additionally, Shrestha recorded Chinese civil clothed security officials meeting Guthi officials at the Guthi office premises, which are guarded by clothed security officials and monks. Securitization in Boudha heightened after the 2008 protests and more so after three incidents of self-immolations by Tibetans in Boudha in 2011 and 2013 against the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The Chinese Embassy started working very closely with the Boudha police station to stop these "threats" and "risks" from occurring again in Boudha.

Boudha is a pertinent space for surveillance and the main stupa in Boudha has become a symbol of surveillance for advertisements like the one shown in Figure 3. The "all seeing eyes" are well pronounced in the stupa on all four sides of the lantern. Video surveillance camera companies tap into this "god-like" ability and market their products as able to continuously see and surveil to maintain security. The advert reads "WiCamFi CCTV cameras to keep peace in this beautiful nation". The advert speaks to the aesthetic securitization at acutely local scales for the protection of the "beautiful nation". In doing so, it erases how the Nepali state makes particular political actions hyper-visible and at times illegal in this space.

Afghanistan

Similar surveillance logics influenced by China in Boudha, Nepal were put in place as part of the US occupation in Kabul, Afghanistan. As the capital city, Kabul has been the center of US-led geopolitical and economic development interventions in Afghanistan since 2001. Most government buildings (such as ministries and parliament) are enclosed by fortified barriers and walls along with
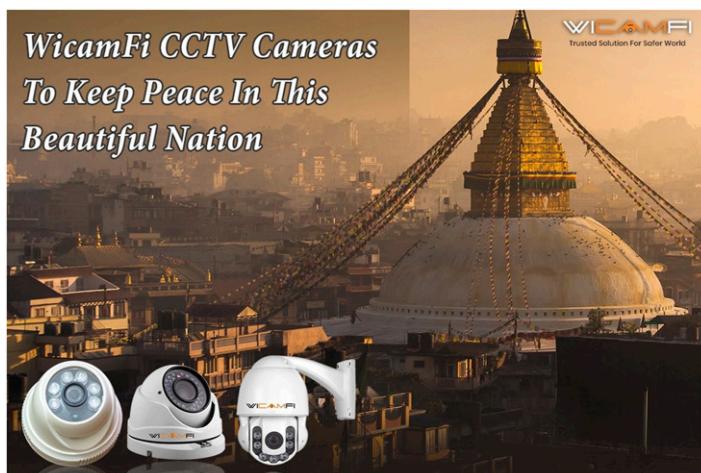
Figure 3. Advertisement for surveillance cameras with Boudha serving as a backdrop and as a metaphor of all-seeing security.

extensive surveillance and armed security guards. Most international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are also located in heavily secured compounds with multiple levels and layers of security required prior to allowing anyone entry into these facilities. Private security companies are regularly hired by INGOs to further protect these compounds. While we argue that it is incorrect to identify the city as a green zone of protection due to increased violence, there are spaces within the city that operate as de facto green zones due to these compounds with fortified security technology and armed guards. Therefore, while the city grew in population and expanded geographically since 2001, the securitized sections of the city are limited to both Afghanistan and international government buildings, INGOs and international security and military (both private and governmental).

In Kabul, spatial securitization through surveillance technologies has been influenced by the US military occupation, intervention, and training of the Afghanistan National Police and Army. US-led geopolitical interventions have included increased use of biometrics (fingerprinting, retinal scans), security cameras, and several US military sponsored Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) systems. The US has increased its use of surveillance and combat drones in various parts of Afghanistan and has provided ISR technologies to the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) (i.e. ScanEagle Unmanned Aircraft System, and Wolfhound, a low-level voice intercept system). Additionally, the implementation ISR includes what the US military refers to as Persistent Surveillance Systems, which have some mobility but are largely stationary systems (Walters and Traugutt, 2017). This includes aerostat balloons and Rapid Aerostat Initial Development (RAID) towers (see Figure 4). "These systems provide persistent ISR coverage for force protection, intelligence generations, patrol overwatch, countering improvised explosive devices, and countering indirect fire" (Walters and Traugutt, 2017: 67). A recent report indicates that the Taliban forces have seized US military biometric devices, which they can now use to identify Afghans who assisted the coalition forces before the 2021 Taliban takeover of Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan (Klippenstein and Sirota, 2021).

In this section we focus on the aerostat balloons in Afghanistan's capital city, Kabul. These balloons have been criticized by Kabul citizens as ineffective and unable to provide security because of continuous on-the-ground violence largely in the form of suicide and car bombings. These security technologies differ somewhat from other forms of aerial surveillance, because they are highly visible, they are tethered to the ground, and therefore relatively stationary when compared

Figure 4. Example of Aerostat balloon used by the US military in Afghanistan.[1]

with aerial drones. Similar to Boudha, the visibility of the aerostat balloons exemplifies the disciplinary power of the panopticon. The perception of these balloons by residents further illustrate internalized understandings (from acceptance to rejection) of aerial surveillance as providing security.

The following analysis of aerostat balloon security in Kabul, Afghanistan is based on interviews with 133 residents in Kabul, Afghanistan between 2016 and 2017. The interview questions focused on individual perceptions of the aerostat balloons that hover over different parts of the city. The vast majority of participants viewed these balloons as ineffective and a waste of money. The majority (91%) of respondents were critical of the security balloons' ability to provide security, particularly their inability to stop suicide bombings in the city. However, 24% of the respondents identified feeling more secure when they see the balloons over the city, and 20% identified some feeling of security. For those that felt a modicum of security they regularly qualified it by stating that they felt a bit more secure while remaining skeptical. Some of the participants identified feeling partially secure while others stated feeling secure when the blimp shaped balloons first came into use (in 2015), but over time they felt less secure because of continued attacks, and civilian casualties in the city.

While the aerostat balloons surveillance is generally limited to public spaces they can encroach on residential privacy. For example, residential roof-tops where family activities (and occasionally intimate interactions) occur, produced anxieties about private activities being captured by surveillance cameras. The privacy of domestic/family spaces continues to be of utmost importance to most individuals and families in Afghanistan. Therefore, while desire for better and improved security is exceptionally important, many respondents were unwilling or hesitant about sacrificing domestic privacy. Additionally, many expressed a tension between their desire for security technologies and the profound lack of security they feel on a daily basis. While many viewed security technologies as important and potentially effective, they simultaneously questioned the effective use of these technologies by the government, because of increased and at times unrelenting violence. Interestingly, all respondents expected the state to provide security, while the majority of respondents also questioned the state's effectiveness and ability to adequately use these technologies to *actually* provide civilian security.

While civilian critiques of technological security focused on the Afghanistan government, they correspondingly made reference to US military presence and influence in the country. The majority of research participants knew that the technology was provided by the United States. Those who viewed the aerostat balloon surveillance as somewhat effective (18%) further qualified the types of security they perceived it provided. For example, they stated that the US (through the use of this technology and other forms of security such as fortified compounds) provided security for international NGO workers and government officials rather than for "everyday" or "ordinary" civilians of Afghanistan. The US was identified as bringing in these technologies of security. Generally, the power and authority of the US government and military was expected and therefore the technology was assumed to have the ability to complete its intended task (i.e. provide security). However, the enactment and use of the technology by the Afghanistan government was questioned.

Research participants when asked about their ideas for improving security and creating peace provided a variety of solutions. Increasing surveillance was generally accepted as a viable option if not a solution for improving security. Foreign countries and organizations, with a focus on the US, were identified as a part of the problem of devolving security and increased violence, rather than an effective arbiter of security. Critiques of the US centered largely around its inability to accurately and adequately make good on promises and labeling the US government as dishonest and questioning its legitimacy as a military power in Afghanistan.

Generally, the US was viewed as having the ability and acumen to provide security while simultaneously lacking the willingness to do so. The capability rather than legitimacy of the

Afghanistan state was questioned, while the legitimacy of the US as an intervening power was also questioned along with their alacrity and honesty, their capabilities were not. Most respondents identified the US as capable but unwilling to provide security. Conversely, the Afghanistan state was viewed as simply incapable or ineffective. Thus, the US was criticized more for its lack of desire to bring peace, security and stability than for its ineffectiveness or inability to do so. The US was described as having the power to bring security and peace to Afghanistan, but willfully choose not to do so.

> If America wants to bring peace they can make peace in a week and no enemy will exist, and if America wants they can stop the interference from our neighbor country Pakistan… and stop their very negative activities here. (Male Kabul Resident).

> [While] America is here, I swear, you will not see security, till America is here killing will be going on, bloodshed will be going on. The Taliban belong to America and all of what is going on is from America. (Male Kabul Resident).

> If America leaves our country, then suicide [bombings] will be finished and security will come (Male Kabul Resident).

The above quotes illustrate skepticism and anger about the US military occupation of Afghanistan. These sentiments were common among research participants, but they did not correspond with a desire for Taliban leadership or control. Rather, they desired a central government that was neither bound to the US as an occupying power, nor to the Taliban. They link the US to the creation and continued growth of insurgent groups and violence and regional geopolitical instability. These interviewees underscore both the lived experiences of individuals in Kabul and how it translates into sophisticated critical analyses of US-interventions in Afghanistan and regionally. Other critiques of the US and its coalition partners centered on honesty. Many criticized the US and its coalition partners for their lack of honesty, meaning that they did not provide adequate, fair, and transparent support both militarily and by way of humanitarian aid and development assistance.

Others argued that the US and other foreign governments will not bring peace to Afghanistan stating that it is up to the Afghanistan government and its people to bring and ensure security and peace. Most respondents identified the US as having the technological ability, along with the authority and power to provide security, while subsequently viewing them as unwilling to do so. For example, several participants highlighted that local-Afghan operators were not given proper training to effectively use these security/surveillance technologies.

In addition research participants identified the US as a major catalyst in both perpetuating violence and having possessing the ability (if not the willingness) to bring peace. Most of these respondents focused on improving the training of those operating the technology, rather than questioning the existence or ability of the technology itself. While there was some concern and criticism about the government viewing private domestic spaces, the idea of surveillance technology as a method of catching insurgents prior to the enactment of violence was generally accepted as a valid use of the aerostat balloons.

Other forms of surveillance such as collecting and sorting biometric data are also done with the intention of sorting out populations. This sorting attempts to separate the "good" from "bad" in an effort to find, locate, immobilize, or kill existing and potential threats. It is also important to underscore the limitations of documentation technologies with the simultaneous growth of counterfeit documentation (Sadiq 2009). The growth of state surveillance and documentation technologies occur in tandem with informal economies and mechanisms for "gaming" the system, therefore leading to a continual "cat and mouse" events of attempting to improve technology to stay ahead of attempts to imitate or hack these technologies.

In both Nepal and Afghanistan, influences from China and the US can be seen through the implementation of technological surveillance. Interestingly, in both case-studies, citizens/residents viewed China and the US respectively, as more competent and capable than the Nepali or Afghanistan states. The belief in the competency of China and the US was occurred alongside concerns about the effectiveness of surveillance technology and questioning who is actually watching. Thus, security failures and inconsistencies were blamed on one's own government rather than state geopolitically influencing, financing and assisting with the implementation of security-surveillance technologies.

Summary and conclusion

This article has compared Chinese and US geopolitical influences on security technologies in Nepal and Afghanistan. In the case of Nepal, China's influences are evident in the ways in which technological surveillance is managed and maintained in certain parts of Nepal in an effort to calculate, control, and monitor the Tibetan population. Similarly, in Afghanistan, US influence is evidenced by the provisioning of aerial surveillance balloons, particularly in Kabul, the capital city. The implementation of surveillance technologies and techniques in both case-studies are inextricably linked to foreign economic and military assistance and their own geo-strategic calculations. Additionally, in both the case of Nepal and Afghanistan, civilian responses to these influences with regard to security and economic development position the external power as more competent and capable than the national government. Both China and the US were identified by research respondents as having the ability to provide security and economic development, while simultaneously being critiqued for their unwillingness to do so.

In both case studies, more powerful countries (China and the US) influenced the ways in which the Nepali and Afghanistan states monitor, control, and surveil their respective populations. China's influence in Nepal is linked to maintaining the legitimacy and integrity of its own sovereignty through the One-China Policy. Therefore, heightened surveillance of Tibetan bodies and spaces of worship to remove visual representation of Tibetan politics from public space exemplifies one (of many) manifestations of Chinese influence in Nepal. In Afghanistan, the US has been an occupying power with tremendous influence over the government and its security apparatus. The technologies of surveillance provided to Afghanistan from the US reflect the US military's own increased use of these technologies. The actual ability of these technologies to provide security remains questionable as violence has continued to pervade the capital city. With the recent US withdrawal, fall of the Afghanistan government, and Taliban take over, state surveillance and how it will be used remains a source of fear and anxiety among Kabul residents.

Additionally in the lead-up to the US military withdrawal of Afghanistan, a suicide bomber attacked the Kabul airport killing 183 people (170 Afghan civilians and 13 US service members). The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility for the attack.

In retaliation the US exercised a drone strike, which mistakenly mistook Zemari Ahmadi (a worker for a California-based aid organization) as a member of ISIS-K. This US drone strike killed Ahmadi and nine civilians including seven children (Aikins, 2021). While the US eventually acknowledged that the airstrike killed Afghan allies and civilians, the US-Pentagon did not view this as rising to level of personal accountability and therefore none of the soldiers and officers involved in this strike were punished (Schmitt, 2021). Further illustrating the ineffectiveness of US surveillance technologies to provide adequate or accurate security, and the power to kill without reprimand (Gregory, 2018). Violence also continues from ISIS and other factions, potentially illustrating the Taliban's inability to effectively ensure security, despite the absence of US forces. Thus, current security regimes in Afghanistan remain uncertain.

Ordinary, banal, and everyday movements of civilians—in the spaces of our two case studies—have become politicized as security risks, as determined the intervening power (i.e. China and the US), and

therefore prime targets of surveillance technologies. The security logics of these interventionist countries are more concerned with their own geopolitical security, sovereignty, or supremacy than the actual security needs of Tibetans in Boudha, Nepal, or Afghan civilians in Afghanistan. Through these two different case-studies, we have shown that the geopolitics of security from China and the US through their respective interventions in Nepal and Afghanistan, have relied on surveillance technologies to meet their own geo-strategic security logics and calculations.

Furthermore, China's economic assistance, particularly after the 2015 earthquakes includes security contingencies employed by the Nepali state to ensure the future of both the BRI and One-China Policy. Similarly, the US was motivated by protecting its own geo-strategic interests in the region through its occupation and interventions in Afghanistan. In Nepal, surveillance is considered to be a successful program because self-immolations and protests have not occurred since the installation of surveillance cameras, etc. However, in Kabul Afghanistan surveillance technologies are viewed with hope and skepticism because of continued violence and lack of security, particularly for civilians. The surveillance systems discussed in this article illustrate similar security logics from geopolitical interlopers and state security measures discussed in the extant literature. These case studies further add to this literature by illustrating the ways in which security logics from geopolitical occupiers and influencers rely on technologies and visual representations of surveillance as security.

Moreover, the belief in surveillance as an effective tool for security continues, despite the failures and inadequacies of these technologies including questions and concerns from residents in the spaces under surveillance about the effectiveness of these security technologies. Residents' questions about the effectiveness of security technologies further highlight the weakness of their own states. We conclude by arguing for more comparative studies of security technologies and surveillance regimes. Additionally, we view these spaces of heightened security as potential sites for necropolitical that perpetuates the state's ability to use various strategies of exclusion, including violence, under the auspices of maintaining security.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Rupak Shrestha   https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6665-1779

Note

1. Spc. Jennifer Spradlin. 16th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d2/Aerostat_balloon_provides_eyes_in_the_sky_for_enhanced_security_in_Uruzgan_province_DVIDS348137.jpg.

References

Aikins Matthieu 2021 Times investigation: in U.S. Drone strike, evidence suggests no ISIS bomb. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/world/asia/us-air-strike-drone-kabul-afghanistan-isis.html. (accessed 10 September 2021).

Amoore Louise 2006 Biometric Borders: Governing Mobilities in the War on Terror. *Political Geography* 25(3): 336–51. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.02.001

CCTV/Camera Installation and Operation Procedural, 2072 2015 Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Nepal.

Cobarrubias Sebastian 2020 Scale in motion? Rethinking scalar production and border externalization. *Political Geography* 80: 102184.

de Certeau Michel 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press.

Dongol Yogesh and Neumann Roderick P 2021 State making through conservation: the case of post-conflict Nepal. *Political Geography* 85: 102327.

Elden Stuart 2013 Secure the volume: vertical geopolitics and the depth of power. *Political Geography* 34: 35–51.

Fluri Jennifer 2011 Armored peacocks and proxy bodies: gender geopolitics in aid/development spaces of Afghanistan. *Gender, Place & Culture* 18(4): 519–536.

Fluri Jennifer L 2009 Geopolitics of gender and violence 'from below'. *Political Geography* 28(4): 259–265.

Fluri Jennifer L, Jackson Paul SB and Dinesh Paudel et al. 2015 A new development technology? South Asian biometrics and the promise of state security and economic opportunity. *Geography Compass* 9(10): 539–549.

Fluri Jennifer L and Lehr Rachel 2019 'We Are Farkhunda': geographies of violence, protest, and performance. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45(1): 149–173.

Foucault Michel 1977 *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.

Gordillo Gastón 2018 Terrain as insurgent weapon: an affective geometry of warfare in the mountains of Afghanistan. *Political Geography* 64: 53–62.

Graham Stephen 2004 Vertical geopolitics: Baghdad and after. *Antipode* 36(1): 12–23.

Graham Stephen DN 2005 Software-sorted geographies. *Public Health Genomics* 29(5): 562–580.

Gregory Derek 2018 Eyes in the sky–bodies on the ground. *Critical Studies on Security* 6(3): 347–358.

Hannah Matthew 2006 Torture and the ticking bomb: the war on terrorism as a geographical imagination of power/knowledge. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96(3): 622–640.

Klippenstein, Ken and Sara Sirota 2021 "The Taliban Have Seized U.S. Military Biometrics Devices." *The Intercept*, August 17, 2021. https://theintercept.com/2021/08/17/afghanistan-taliban-military-biometrics/.

Koskela Hille 2000 'The gaze without eyes': video-surveillance and the changing nature of Urban space. *Public Health Genomics* 24(2): 243–265.

Massé, Francis 2018 Topographies of Security and the Multiple Spatialities of (Conservation) Power: Verticality Surveillance, and Space-Time Compression in the Bush. *Political Geography* 67 (November): 56–64. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.10.001

Moran, Peter 2004 *Buddhism Observed: Travelers, Exiles and Tibetan Dharma in Kathmandu*. Anthropology of Asia Series. London; New York: Routledge Curzon.

Mulmi, Amish Raj 2019 "Smile! You're on Camera." *The Kathmandu Post*, November 29, 2019. https://kathmandupost.com/16/2019/11/29/smile-you-re-on-camera

Mozur Paul, Kessel Jonah M and Chan Melissa 2019 Made in China, Exported to the World: The Surveillance State. The New York Times, April 24, 2019.

Murton Galen, Lord Austin and Beazley Robert, et al. 2016 'A handshake across the Himalayas:' Chinese investment, hydropower development, and state formation in Nepal. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57(3): 403–432.

Murton Galen and Lord Austin 2020 Trans-Himalayan power corridors: infrastructural politics and China's Belt and road initiative in Nepal. *Political Geography* 77: 102100.

Painter Joe 2008 Cartographic anxiety and the search for regionality. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 40(2): 342–361. DOI: 10.1068/a38255.

Paudel Dinesh 2016 Ethnic identity politics in Nepal: liberation from, or restoration of, elite interest? *Asian Ethnicity* 17(4): 548–565.

Richardson Sophie 2014 Under China's Shadow: Mistreatment of Tibetans in Nepal. Human Rights Watch. http://www.hrw.org/node/123804.

Sadiq K. 2009 *Paper Citizens: How Illegal Immigrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sapkota Ramu 2020 निगरानीको पासो. HIMAL Weekly Magazine, 2020.

Shahi, Ishita 2019 "Kathmandu's All-Seeing Eyes." *The Record*, November 22, 2019. https://www.recordnepal.com/kathmandus-all-seeing-eyes.

Schmitt Eric 2021 No U.S. Troops will be punished for deadly Kabul Strike, Pentagon chief decides New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/us/politics/afghanistan-drone-strike.html. (accessed 13 December 2021).

Shakya Tsering 1999 *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sharma Prayag Raj 1997 Nation-building, multi-ethnicity, and the Hindu state. In: Gellner David N, Pfaff-Czarnecka Joanna and Whelpton John (eds) *Nationalism and Ethnicity in Nepal*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Vajra Books, 471–494. Reprinted in 2016.

Shrestha Rupak and Fluri Jennifer 2021 Geopolitics of humour and development in Nepal and Afghanistan. In: Vanderheiden Elisabeth and Mayer Claude-Hélène. *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour Research*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 189–203.

Sloane Robert and Elizabeth Brundige 2002 Tibet's Stateless Nationals: Tibetan Refugees in Nepal. Berkeley: Tibet Justice Center. http://www.tibetjustice.org/reports/nepal.pdf.

Speer Jessie 2018 The rise of the tent ward: homeless camps in the era of mass incarceration. *Political Geography* 62: 160–169.

Uprety Prem R 1998 *Nepal-Tibet Relations 1850-1930: Years of Hopes, Challenges and Frustrations*. 2nd Edition. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

Walters Maj Gen Robert P, Jr and Traugutt Col Loren G 2017 *The State of Afghanistan's Intelligence Enterprise*. Military Review May-June: 64–71.

Weber Valentin 2019 *The Worldwide Web of Chinese and Russian Information Controls*. Working Paper Series – No. 1. Oxford: Centre for Technology and Global Affairs, University of Oxford. https://www.ctga.ox.ac.uk/files/theworldwidewebofchineseandrussianinformationcontrolspdf.

Woeser Tsering 2016 *Tibet on Fire: Self-Immolations against Chinese Rule*. Translated by Kevin Carrico. London; NY: Verso.

Yeh Emily T 2013 *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*. Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Dr. **Rupak Shrestha**, received his PhD from the University of Colorado Boulder in 2022. His dissertation project focused on China's economic development and geopolitical influence in Nepal focusing the spatial disruptions to the everyday lives of Tibetan refugees and Indigenous Himalayan communities. He is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Macalester College.

Dr. **Jennifer L. Fluri**, Professor in Geography at the University of Colorado-Boulder, examines gender and the geopolitics of security, conflict, and development in Afghanistan. She is currently focused on the resurgence of the Taliban, and Afghan refugee resettlement.