



The Crisis in Nepal: Implications for India

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Sandwiched between China and India, Nepal occupies a strategic location in South Asia astride the high Himalayan ranges. It has had little contact with China in the past. With India its ties have been intimate and long, developed over centuries of common history, culture, religion and commerce. Since 1815 when General Amar Singh Thapa's unvanquished army marched out with arms from the Majaun Fort in Himachal, the two countries have remained intertwined through their military connection. Possibly about eighty thousand soldiers serve in the Indian security forces (about half in the Army) and in the numerous para-military and police organizations. Approximately Rupees nine hundred crores (US \$ 200 million) are transferred from India every year for pay and pension of Nepalese citizens working in the government of India. Other non-official sectors too would be contributing a large amount.

Relations between India and Nepal are unique, closer and less formal than between any two sovereign nations anywhere in the world. Destinies of both nations and their people are irrevocably linked together. Yet, over the last fifty years there have arisen misunderstandings affecting mutual relations. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal today presents an entirely new set of challenges, which we need to take note as well as initiate measures to counter effectively.

Recent Developments

Nepal entered an era of democratic governance in 1990 with high expectations but little preparation. Over the next dozen years, ten governments, led by one political party after another and several combinations among them, ruled the country with equal incompetence.

Ministers fought over power and pelf and the spoils of office, for government contracts and outright bribes, further impoverishing the land and its people. These rulers discredited themselves and undermined the democratic process, particularly in the countryside where all possibilities of economic development or governance vanished. Burgeoning population and absence of employment opportunities at home, combined in an explosive mix which inevitably led to the Maoist insurgency.

Leftist forces have long existed on the fringe in Nepal. In 1994 a more extremist group withdrew from electoral politics and from Feb 13, 1996 launched a Maoist uprising. Led by Pushpa Kumar Dahal (Prachanda) and the ideologue Dr Baburam Bhattarai they first put out a forty point demand. The first five of these are set against India giving expression to all the traditional anti-Indian polemics. Remainder are an agenda for a revolutionary Marxist revolution. While the uprising developed in the countryside, politics of opportunism continued as usual in Kathmandu. In these turbulent conditions a regicide occurred in which the entire Royal family was assassinated by the young prince in June 2001. The late King's less popular younger brother assumed the mantle of kingship, an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu, amidst rumours of conspiracy and worse.

Political instability continued and a new Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba assumed office leading a faction of the Nepali Congress. Elections were to follow, but conditions in the country precluded holding it. In October 2002 the King dismissed the Prime Minister and in a constitutional coup installed a new government under a favourable Prime Minister, in effect assuming direct political rule.

The Insurgency

Insurgency in the early years was countered entirely by the civil police. Later a force of 15,000 armed police were specially raised. Both forces are untrained, under equipped and ineffective. When the Maoists struck at the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) in November 2001 killing a large numbers of soldiers in Dang, the Army was compelled to intervene. In the last two years of insurgency alone about 7000 persons have lost their lives, with about 75 per cent, according to the RNA, belonging to the Maoist cadre. Yet, a rough estimate of the current cadre strength of the Maoists is said to be 5,500 combatants of which about one third may be armed, 8,000 militias, 4,500 unarmed cadres and 33,000 hardcore followers.

The Maoists control much of the countryside. While it is true that no place has been 'liberated' and the RNA can go anywhere at will, it is only by flying in by Indian or US supplied helicopters. All of the countryside except the District headquarters belongs to the insurgents by day and especially at night. They remain capable of mounting coordinated attacks with up to 1,500 soldiers in most parts of the country. The Maoists suffer from two severe weaknesses; lack of external support and absence of a sanctuary.

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The RNA strength is under sixty thousand with plans to increase it to 75,000 soldiers. It is now better equipped with Indian and US arms. The RNA has high exposure to UN peacekeeping operations over the last decade and is receiving good training particularly from

India. Yet, its ability to successfully counter the Maoist insurgents in the large and difficult terrain of Nepal, will remain in doubt.

The Current Environment

The political situation remains murky. The King

compares his role to a stand-by generator; required in an emergency and which will switch off the moment electricity returns. But, there seems little real chance of an early return of democracy. Political parties continue to squabble among themselves and are unable to shed their petty differences to come together even in national interest. Though any realistic counter insurgency strategy would require an early return to democratic rule, its prospects in the near term seem poor. Resolute political leadership is a necessity particularly in the early stages of counter-insurgency and the King is attempting to play this role, though not entirely with success. Yet, continued rule by the King is powerful ammunition to Maoist propaganda.

India, the US and Great Britain would all like to see an early return of multi-party democracy and a monarchy restricted to its constitutional role. The essence is in the timing. It appears that India would prefer an earlier return of parliamentary democracy. The US appears to support the King for now. Britain and the EU support stronger human rights measures by the security forces. Whatever may be the prevailing conditions or the overall view, the principle must remain one of an early resumption of the democratic process.

India's policy on Nepal currently is absolutely on track and is based on a mature understanding of the situation. It has promptly responded to the request to supply Nepal with necessary battle tested military equipment ideally suited for local conditions. This is a response that others cannot hope to match. Wherever I went there was praise for Indian understanding and support, which comes without publicity, but is reliable, timely and appropriate. Recent seizure of key Maoist leaders in India and their handing over to Nepal has been appreciated in the Kingdom. The rise of communist insurgents in Asia concerns Washington deeply and it is prepared to support Nepal with money, equipment and training. This should be welcomed as long as it comes after suitable consultation with India. External weapons in a region is always destabilising as recent conflicts in Africa has shown years after the Cold War ended. With Maoists having already established contacts with their counterparts in eastern India, such weapons will inevitably be passed around creating potentially huge problems in the region. US troop presence in Nepal is neither required nor

necessary. It will only yield greater hostility towards Washington and provide ammunition to Maoist propaganda.

Policy Options for India

India should continue to assure the Royal Government that it remains committed to help it root out insurgency through support and assistance. That the Maoists will not receive any support in India. Instead both sides will cooperate in nabbing and dealing with terrorists operating against each other's interests as agreed in SAARC resolutions. At the same time, there will never be any occasion for Indian forces to enter Nepal for any conceivable reason. Internally it is a Nepalese problem and must be handled and managed entirely by the Royal Government and the RNA. This view needs to be repeated periodically as there will never be a shortage of views in Nepal that will articulate contrary views ascribing all manner of motives to India for every action taken or not taken.

India should welcome US and British support in counter-insurgency as long as this is in consultation with India. New Delhi's involvement in Nepal will always be more and commitments higher. Its expertise and arms too will be more appropriate to the situation and therefore is in the best interest of all sides. Other interested countries may also support this endeavour appropriately. Resources required overall cannot be provided by a select few on a sustained basis and will necessarily involve larger participation. Yet, none of these should ideally come with conditions, particularly on human rights questions. A state of civil war exists presently and will need appropriate responses.

A larger concern for India is in ensuring that disturbances within Nepal remains limited to that country and there are no overflows in to India. Given the current situation in adjoining parts of India, the effects of this can be potentially devastating. Following measures need to be adopted earliest:-

- The overall situation should be handled directly by the Secretary, Border Management in the Home Ministry with suitable subordinate operational headquarters under him. This is no longer a law and order problem to be managed separately by state administrations.

- A more effective intelligence apparatus has to be set up especially for this purpose.
- Forces allotted for this border are apparently from the Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau. They will need to be augmented and totally restructured and reoriented for a new role. This is likely to take a few years and other arrangements may be considered for the interim period.
- It is neither possible nor necessary at this stage to attempt to seal the border. Instead better arrangements should be put in place to effectively manage commerce as well as movement of people.
- Regrettably, Indian districts bordering Nepal are even worse in terms of human development. A crash programme needs to be undertaken to address developmental concerns of the area.

These are but initial measures and ones that are most urgent. Indian states around Nepal are not among the better governed in the country. Besides, Bihar, eastern UP and north-west Bengal are usually ruled by parties other than the one ruling at the Centre and have all a high communist insurgent presence. Any meaningful link-up between these forces cannot but affect the entire region in a manner that may have terrible consequences for the future.

Conclusion

The battle against Maoist insurgency will be long and tenuous. But, this insurgency must end and sooner the better. Strong and effective counter measures will be required and for several years in to the future. At the same time it should be remembered that this insurgency more than any other, will have to be fought as much with development, economic revival and effective governance as with military force.



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