

Nepal—Troubled Present and Uncertain Future

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Nepal is passing through difficult times with an uncertain future. The King has taken control with total powers and 85,000 strong Royal Nepal Army (RNA) troops are battling the Maoists, while the political parties, press and the civil society are under severe restrictions. Though the Maoists are perceived as the common threat, the nation is divided in its efforts to counter them. The major aid donors to Nepal, i.e. India, the USA and the UK while supporting the efforts to combat the Maoists, are not happy with the King having seized power. They have emphasised restoration of democracy and the freedom of the press at the earliest while supporting the elimination of the Maoist threat.

On 9th September 2004, India agreed to upgrade its security assistance to Nepal (100 crores per year), with the promise to help fight Maoist insurgency in the form of military equipments, training facilities and intelligence sharing. India, however, emphasised engagement and political process in combating the Maoist rebellion alongwith military operations. However, on 01 February 2005, King Gyanendra seized power effectively ending Nepal's fourteen years experiment with democracy, arresting students, journalists, human right workers and political leaders. The RNA was given all powers to restore order. The King, however, did not take India, Nepal's special friend into confidence prior to taking this step. India on its part while regretting the King's extreme step, stated that it would continue to give Nepal military assistance. Subsequently, India, co-ordinating its approach with the USA and the UK and besides restraining Pakistan, emphasised that military assistance would be reviewed but the democratic process should be resumed.

The King on his part, even attempted to play the China card. The Chinese, interestingly, remained non-committal without taking any stand on the King's action but declined military aid. As far as Nepal's internal governance is concerned, of the 75 districts in it,

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there is reportedly domination of the Maoists in 50 of them, with no deployment of the army in some, whereas the police is largely confined to the district headquarters. Roads are non-existent in many parts making far flung areas almost unapproachable. Most of the districts in western Nepal and a few in mid-western and eastern Nepal are reportedly under the Maoists. The Maoists' aims are a "people's regime", overthrow of Monarchy and establishing a New Nepal following Stalinist principles. They, under "Prachanda" have control of the rural areas with so-called "Free Zones", a separate capital at 'Thabang', district committees and people's court. Poorly armed with captured weapons of all types, little maintenance and training, they resort to taxation, extortion and kidnapping to raise funds. Indian Army soldiers are not directly touched. However the families are asked to pay for peace. Some soldiers while on leave are asked to train the cadres. The Maoists have links with MCC (Maoist Communist Centre) and PWG (People's War Group) in India and cross over through the porous border to avoid capture by the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) or for meetings on the Indian side.

Present Situation

The political parties in Nepal during the past fourteen years have made a total mess of governance in the country, thus providing the Maoist leadership a readymade ground to exploit the dissatisfaction of the people. However, the economic conditions in Nepal have become worse with the suspension of aid by the donor countries and NGO's; the tourism industry has been considerably disturbed, down by 45 per cent. There is a large exodus of the Nepalese population to India and to the cities in Nepal from the rural areas. Seven million Nepalese out of twenty seven million live abroad mostly in India. Long porous border with India (1700Kms) with just 80 border posts help in free movement across to Maoist sympathisers in India. The situation, therefore, continues to remain uncertain and fluid.

The King publicly states that he would ultimately restore democracy, but he has not committed to a time frame. The Indian Prime Minister Shri Manmohan Singh when meeting the King at the Jakarta Conference prevailed upon him to commence the democratic process by releasing political leaders and restoring the freedom of the press. In return he promised the resumption of Indian military aid. However, the King has gone back on his promise

and India has, therefore, clarified that the military aid will be reviewed rather than resumed immediately. The overall Indian policy appears to be disjointed without any clear direction. Reactive rather than proactive, the Indians give contradictory and wavering signals. It is felt that India, should fully support the King in combating the Maoists, who alongwith the RNA has the legitimate authority to do so, while being firm about the basic human and democratic rights of the Nepalese people. The Government of India should also recognise that the exodus of the Nepalese into India is a long-term problem, both politically and economically, and, therefore, take all necessary steps for normalcy in Nepal. It is estimated that over 4,00,000 Nepalese have left their homes due to terror, notwithstanding Maoists claims of being a people's movement. Human rights violations are being committed both by the Maoists and the RNA. Bomb blasts and targeting of traffic on the roads, have caused considerable disruption. The reach and capabilities of the Maoists appear formidable. The ability of the RNA to militarily subdue the rebels appears suspect. Indian Army has well established District Soldier's Boards and large numbers of Ex-servicemen, can be mobilised alongwith RNA's efforts provided there is trust between the two for civic action programmes in the remote areas of Nepal.

The Uncertain Future

Insurgencies, have never been resolved by military action alone anywhere in the world, as the American led alliance in Iraq is currently realising. We have to address the cause of unrest; at the political, ideological and economic level. The military can only create conducive environment for the commencement of other steps. The King needs to learn from successful conflict-resolution of similar cases. He has to take the political parties and his overseas friends along. India is willing to extend all assistance at the economic, political, for intelligence build up and military levels, but the King needs to trust the Government of India and the Nepalese political leaders. Perhaps, friends of Nepal ie the USA, the UK and China need to convey this to Nepal; as any Indian initiative invariably invites suspicions, because of the big brother syndrome. The civil society in Nepal must generate pressure on the King, that with the economic collapse and poor governance, it would result in further chaos and hardships. The country needs to unite to combat the Maoist movement and learn from the Indian

experience. The Indian Government needs to do business with the "King" and not insist for the political process for the present, like the way the USA is dealing with Pakistan and others, irrespective of the form of governments in these countries.

Major 'Issues to be Addressed'

Political Agenda. Maoists seek a 'new constitution' by a new constituent assembly, elected afresh, but do not wish to lay down arms. The government wants as a first step for Maoists to give up arms, before talks. There is a need to create a common meeting ground and address the issues by constructive engagement rather than only military operations. Political parties need to unite and bring the "Maoists" in the mainstream for negotiations, with the constitutional authority.

Good Governance. Lack of good governance, 'corruption' and politicisation of the police have allowed the movement to spread extensively. Development and people friendly projects have to be undertaken by mobilising aid, from the NGOs and friends. The King should use "media" as a force multiplier and take corrective steps progressively, for effective economic development, employment generation and establishing good administration in a fair and firm manner.

Lack of coordination between Nepal and bordering Indian states.

(a) Five Indian states with partly hilly terrain and an open border, besides Tibet in the North, surround Nepal. It is not practical to seal the borders even with massive resources, which would never be available. Adequate policing and need for regulating border traffic movement, is a necessity alongwith good communications and cooperation between the adjoining states. There is a need for periodic consultation and joint patrolling between India and Nepal at the ground level.

(b) Ethnic similarity with the border population of Kumaonis in Uttarakhand, Madhesis in the terai area and Gorkhas in Sikkim and West Bengal provides easy sanctuaries for the rebels, as the border population have co-existed with cross border linkages. As a long term goal alongwith better policing, issue of Identity cards or work permits will have to be evolved.

(c) There are some reports of nexus between MCC, PWG and the ULFA for arms transfer, and training. Though 'Maoists' are more pro-China than pro-India, the reports of nexus appear highly exaggerated. Exchange of information and mutual cooperation would generate confidence, as the Nepalese perceive that India is not doing enough to prevent flow of arms and resources.

Effective Military Operations. The RNA by themselves are not capable of defeating the Maoists, who have popular support in almost 50 districts and a well developed cadre. There is a need for a realistic appraisal of the military capabilities. Some of the areas that need priority attention are as follows:-

- (a) Inculcation of professionalism by the RNA with positive approach, and systematic military operations based on good intelligence and swift reaction to fleeting situations.
- (b) The RNA should adopt 'tactics' and 'techniques' by learning from the Indian experience, which India is willing to share, rather than undertake conventional actions.
- (c) The Nepalese administration should develop better synergy between Police, RNA, District Administration and the media for coordinated conduct of military operations.
- (d) The military should reduce Human Rights violations and conduct people friendly activities/ civic action programmes. This would help in winning over the populace away from the rebels.

Conclusion

The King as an institution is still respected by the Nepalese people who are basically simple and law abiding but the politicians have not performed and hence do not enjoy popular support which the Maoists cultivate. However, the King needs to take along the Nepalese people, media and the political parties to combat Maoists rather than exclusive reliance on the military. He should seek India's cooperation rather than remain isolated, accept that a military defeat of Maoists is unlikely and a confrontation with them would only lead to further economic collapse and hardships to the

common public; hence he must engage them in talks, with pragmatism. India cannot be a passive spectator because of the economic fallout and large scale Nepalese migration that is taking place to India. The political parties in Nepal lack leadership and organisation and hence insistence on democratic governance, though a long term goal needs to be relegated to doing business with the King and the RNA. The King needs to be influenced to show moderation and engagement as Maoists have large dominance and need to be brought to the negotiating table. At the same time, India cannot suggest appeasement of the Maoists, as they have taken up arms against the constitutional authority. Maoists are likely to be as unfriendly to India as the King or the political parties, due to the peculiar situation and mindset of a small land locked country. India has to learn to live with this uncomfortable reality and continue to provide assistance to Nepal, both military and economic. We have almost 50,000 soldiers serving in the Indian Army and in the Assam Rifles, besides nearly 1.5 lakh ex-servicemen from Nepal. We should encourage the democratic process and respect for Human Rights without interfering in the internal affairs of Nepal. India is an important player in the region and must coordinate the efforts of other players involved. Recent initiatives by the USA and the UN to engage the King for moderation and negotiated solution with the concerned parties are welcome developments. The Maoists have significant reach and dominance in major parts of Nepal, infact even more than the government. Therefore, they cannot be ignored or marginalised. Constructive engagement, meaningful accommodation and a pragmatic understanding need to be displayed by the leaders in resolving this complex problem.

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