

India and the Nepal quagmire

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NEW DELHI - As the chaos caused by Maoist insurgency in rural Nepal and demand for the restoration of democracy in urban areas continues to plague the county, and as attacks on Indian properties and interests continue, political and diplomatic observers in Delhi have begun debating earnestly whether India should assert itself more forcefully and even consider military intervention as it did in what was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971 and Sri Lanka in 1987. This is an alarmist scenario for some, but many think it should not be ruled out in the eventuality of the situation further deteriorating and particularly if refugees start streaming across Nepal's borders into Indian territory.

Although Sher Bahadur Deuba, fired by King Gyanendra nearly two years ago, was reappointed on Wednesday as Nepal's 14th prime minister in as many years and is already attempting to defuse the political crisis and end a bloody Maoist revolt, replacing royalist Surya Bahadur Thapa who quit last month after weeks of street protests, the situation remains unstable and provides India with legitimate security concerns. Nepalese Maoists have developed close ties with Maoists and other extreme communist groups called Naxalites in India. Their ties with People's War Group of Andhra Pradesh, Maoist Communist Center of Bihar and Jharkhand, and the Communist Party of India [Marxist-Leninist] are said to be particularly strong. These extremists have been running virtually parallel administrations in the rural hinterland in Indian states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, etc in the same way as their Nepalese counterparts are practically ruling almost half of Nepal. The Indo-Nepalese Maoist insurgent nexus provides these groups in both countries with important sanctuaries and support in a variety of ways.

According to a recent intelligence report, Nepalese Maoists plan to take hostage Indian bureaucrats, particularly from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) that shares a large border with Nepal, to exert pressure on the Indian government. Alarmed, the state government has issued confidential orders advising its bureaucrats not to venture into the Himalayan kingdom. Confirming the report to a newspaper, a senior police officer of a zone bordering Nepal said, "As it is, bureaucrats are not expected to go for holidays to Nepal without prior permission of designated authorities."

Intelligence reports have identified the latest epicenter of Maoist activities to be in Nepalese localities adjoining Pilibhit, Kheri, Behraich, Balrampur and Maharajganj districts of UP. Well-equipped training camps are believed to have come up in Banke, Bardia, Dang and Kailali districts of Nepal. Some of the specific leads, which now have developed into a comprehensive Maoist threat, were extracted from one of the top Maoist leaders, Ashok Comrade, who was arrested in India recently.

Ashok Comrade, who heads the Maoist Jan Morcha suicide wing, is said to have confessed to a fresh strategy to "exert pressure on the Nepal government through activities directed against India". The leads provided by Ashok enabled the Indian intelligence agencies to give a definite direction to their operations. This further led to the revelation of threats looming over bureaucrats going on a short visit to Nepal. The recent attack on 22 Indian oil tankers in Nepal is also being seen in the light of the new Maoist strategy. Intelligence agencies now believe that the arson attack was sort of a "dry run" to gauge the reaction of the Indian government in case of future attacks.

Keeping these new threats in mind, a high-level meeting of forest officials, central and state intelligence agencies, UP-Nepal border police, civil police and officials of the Revenue Department convened to chalk out a strategy for a multi-pronged consolidated drive against Maoists threatening to disrupt peace in India in general and UP in particular.

Several insurgency-affected areas of Nepal, particularly Kanchanpur, Kailali and Bardia, are very close to Delhi, making Nepalese Maoists a greater threat for the Indian state than even Indian Maoists, who would find it more difficult to reach Delhi on their own. The possibility of a spillover inside Indian territory, particularly close to the capital city Delhi, is thus quite real.

Even more worrisome for India is the possibility of Nepalese insurgents helping India's northeastern secessionists cut off what is called India's "chicken neck" near Siliguri in West Bengal. A narrow strip of land at this point links the northeast with the Indian mainland. This fear has heightened since

Nepalese Maoists developed ties with separatists such as the "Khumbuwan Liberation Front" in the far eastern hills of Nepal, quite close to the Indian border in that extremely sensitive area. This merely underlines comments from Indian Ambassador to Nepal Shyam Saran: "The Maoist insurgency is a threat not only to the security of Nepal but also to the security of India."

India has often been accused of not doing enough to control the cross-border Maoist linkage. Several leaders, including former prime minister and Nepali Congress leader Girja Prasad Koirala, have complained that Maoists are finding sanctuary in India. Former leader of opposition and Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) leader Madhav Kumar Nepal is also on record as having complained of a linkage between India and Nepalese Maoists. Even President General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, under pressure to stop cross-border terrorism on the India-Pakistan line of control in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, has tried to make political capital out of the situation taunting India to stop the "cross-border terrorism" on the India-Nepal border. Former Indian Ambassador to Nepal K V Rajan has also chastised India for being a passive spectator for too long when Maoist leaders were roaming freely across the open border.

India has also been accused of promoting dictatorship in Nepal to encourage the monarch to root out militancy in the country. Only last month (May 8) Saran denied allegations that India supports autocracy in Nepal for its own selfish interests. According to Kanak Mani Dixit, editor of Kathmandu-based Himal South-Asian magazine, in the past three years New Delhi has supplied more than Rs3 billion (US\$66 million) worth of rifles, trucks, uniforms, helmets, helicopters, ammunition, ordnance and mine-protected vehicles. Plus there's been counter-insurgency training.

A state of near-anarchy seems to prevail in Nepal now, which is particularly detrimental to Indian interests. Even though the Maoists have not been able to take any of the 75 district headquarters, according to Dixit, they have the run of much of the countryside. They have now extended themselves over the Terai plains bordering India, killing political opponents, extorting from the rich and poor alike, abducting students and teachers for indoctrination and training, torching vehicles and blasting infrastructure.

Development and government activity have ground to a halt, constitutional functions have been suspended and whole swaths of territory are now blockaded and inaccessible. "Those who laughed earlier at Maoist bombast," said Dixit, "are silent now as the rebels subdue civilian police with extreme brutality and make spectacular hit-and-run attacks on army garrisons."

That the Indian government is greatly concerned with the crisis in Nepal became apparent when Saran became the first among all Indian ambassadors to South Asian countries to be called back to Delhi for consultations with the new dispensation that has just started the process of policy formulation. As the new foreign-policy and security establishment discusses its options, so do the media try to fathom the alternatives before the country.

Arguing the case for military intervention, India's largest-circulated newspaper The Times of India wrote last Friday: "Increasingly, Nepal seems to be spinning out of control. In many parts of the country, the Maoists' writ runs freely and in fact it is these insurgents who run local governance. Even Kathmandu city is not safe from the Maoists as many bomb blasts and other attacks have testified. Sooner, rather than later, someone will have to intervene in Nepal. The question is, who and when? ... India can ill afford to let this state of dangerous drift continue. Apart from its strategic concerns, New Delhi also has to take into account the interests of the large Indian community living and doing business in Nepal."

In its original view, however, the newspaper editorial had advised the government to walk the tightrope between persuasion and intervention. It said: "Is Nepal a 'failed state'? At first shy it would seem so ... Nevertheless it would be a mistake to brand Nepal as a failed state, a tag that big powers use for small nations, often as a prelude to direct intervention. India must resist that temptation. The history of intervention is a sorry sight, from France's adventures in Indochina, America's Vietnam quagmire, Russia's botched Afghan campaign, India's own blunder in Sri Lanka and now, the fix that the US finds itself in in Iraq. It's a roll-call of failure that should cool down the most impulsive hotheads in New Delhi."

What is giving strength to this debate is the fact that Indian foreign-policy strategists who occupied important positions at the time of previous interventions are back in power in even more important positions. India's ambassador to Sri Lanka in 1987, who retired as foreign secretary, J N Dixit, is back in the government as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's national security adviser. So is his former

boss and retired foreign secretary Kunwar (Prince) Natwar Singh, now in the all-powerful position of external affairs minister. Their colleague and retired chief of the Intelligence Bureau M K Narayanan is the internal security adviser with the rank of a minister of state.

It is usually difficult to gauge the mind of Indian mandarins but both Dixit and Narayanan were writing newspapers columns until last week. One can get an idea of how they would view the situation and how they would like to cope with it in some of their recent columns. Just a couple of days before the results of recent general elections came out, Dixit wrote in the Indian Express: "In Nepal, terrorist violence by the Maoist groups continues unabated. The political leadership is becoming progressively irrelevant. King Gyanendra has failed to establish a meaningful understanding with political parties to move back to democracy through elections. It is interesting that he emphasizes stability rather than achieving stability through democratic processes. The Maoists are gunning for him as well as the political parties. The army is getting incrementally involved in giving security to the king, moving away from its institutional role of ensuring national defense. The police forces are no match for the Maoists."

How would this impact India? Dixit continues: "The political situation in Nepal could have a fallout in [such India regions as] north Bengal, Bihar and northeastern UP. It could also have ramifications in Bhutan, which still has a large Nepalese population. Bhutan itself is subject to domestic political pressures. The problem of Nepalese exiled from Bhutan still remains unresolved and is a cause for tension with Nepal. Separatist terrorist elements from the northeast had established bases in Bhutan. While the king took decisive action last winter, the Bhutanese government has to remain alert to possible trouble from these groups ... Whatever the results of the general elections, whichever government comes to power in New Delhi will have to cope with a very complex and tense neighborhood."

M K Narayanan wrote a column on "How to contain the extreme left" in the prestigious newspaper Asian Age recently. Commenting on a Maoist strike in Andhra Pradesh, he wrote: "Unwillingness to acknowledge the gravity of this event is incomprehensible. Somewhat similar tactics - of simultaneously attacking several targets - had previously been adopted by the Maoists in Nepal and these became the precursors for the bloody pogroms that followed, which earned Nepal the sobriquet of 'killing fields'. By 2003, the Maoists had come to have sway over almost half of the state."

Political factors

Apart from the foreign-policy and security establishment, the Singh government has to also take into account the view of its communist supporters on whom it is critically dependent. The Left Front comprises various mainstream communist formations such as the Communist Party of India (CPI) and CPI-Marxist or CPIM that have old fraternal ties with Maoist forces. But it has itself tackled them in bloody encounters and virtually rooted them out of West Bengal state, which it has ruled for 27 years. It should not therefore have any problem with the Indian state taking a hardline stance dealing with Maoist violence either within India or in Nepal. Indeed, tackling Nepalese Maoists is also related to tackling communist extremism in India too.

The Left Front, however, believes that the state that is dealing with Maoist violence should be doing so from a position of moral strength as it has done in West Bengal. While putting down Maoist insurgency with a strong hand, it has also tried to tackle the roots of social discontent. Having provided for land reforms and rural employment, etc, it was able to deal with the situation with a moral strength that would have otherwise been lacking. After all, nothing happens without a reason. If both of India's main political formations, the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party, have failed to tackle the situation in any of the states, it is not for want of trying hardline methods.

What is true of India is also true of Nepal. The United Nations Development Program's resident representative in Nepal, Henning Karcher, analyzed the situation last year and said: "While the conflict in Nepal has no doubt a political, ideological and even geopolitical dimension, its main root causes are social and economic, related to frustrated expectation that came with the advent of democracy, related to abject poverty that persists for a large percentage of the population, related to poor and inefficient delivery of social services in areas such as education and health and related to inequality, exclusion and discrimination. A large percentage of the population of Nepal, in particular Dalits [disadvantaged lower castes considered untouchable] and members of ethnic groups, feel that they are politically and economically excluded, unable to contribute to decisions that affect their lives and unable to benefit from the economic advancement of the nation."

The left is therefore going to demand that the government first try to induce Kathmandu to show some inclination to tackle the roots of the Maoist problem in Nepal. Also, the left believes it was able to tackle the Maoist problem in its own state because of its firm commitment to democratic politics. It would therefore demand that India insist that the Nepalese king first restore democracy and let the democratic forces deal with the situation. Even if the politicians proved inefficient and corrupt, it is for the democratic system itself to correct that anomaly. The failure of the political parties to live up to their promise does not give the king the license to abolish democracy itself.

It is thus difficult to see India intervening in the Nepalese crisis, particularly with a military force, in the immediate future. But neither will the present establishment show the kind of benign indifference that was the hallmark of the previous administration. As the insurgency was gathering pace in 2001-02, India had failed even to appoint an ambassador for Nepal for nine months.

It is clear that in the past three years insurgents have taken advantage of the disarray caused by the lack of political processes. They have merely tried to fill the political vacuum that was created by King Gyanendra's suspension of the democratic process, no matter how inefficient. While parliament and local government units had been disbanded earlier, the king's attempt to rule through appointed prime ministers over the past 19 months has brought political parties and other sundry groups and concerned individuals to the streets in a wave of continuous protest. A rapprochement between the king and the political parties and the start of the democratic process is thus the immediate need of the hour. It may render the present perilous debate in India redundant.

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