

Threat from Nepal's Instability

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Nepal shares a 1751 Km land boundary with India and 1414 Km with China (Tibet). Although landlocked and surrounded by these two Asian giants, Nepal's geographic, economic and cultural orientation is exclusively intertwined with India. Given the liberal India-Nepal border regime and ethnic similarities between the two countries; political developments in Nepal and internal and external posturing of the country's dispensation impinge overwhelmingly on India's security. In a speech before Parliament in 1950, the Indian Prime Minister Pt Jawahar Lal Nehru had stated:

“From time immemorial the Himalayas have provided us with magnificent frontiers. We cannot allow that barrier to penetrate because it is also the principal barrier to India. Therefore, much as we appreciate the independence of Nepal, we cannot allow anything to go wrong in Nepal or permit that barrier to be crossed or weakened, because that would be a risk to our own security”.

In 1950, India's security concerns vis-à-vis Nepal got accentuated after annexation of Tibet by China. India had always regarded Tibet as a buffer against China, but Tibet's annexation forced India to reassess its strategic requirements. Consequently, a 'Treaty of Peace and Friendship' was signed with Nepal in 1950 which enjoined upon the two countries to consult and devise effective counter measures, when confronted with external threat of

any kind. To assuage Nepalese fears of Indian domination, the treaty also stipulated that Indian forces could be deployed in the country only at the invitation of the Nepalese government. The treaty included bilateral trade and transit arrangements and permitted trans-shipment of Nepalese goods through India. In effect, Nepal was to be the buffer between India and China. The danger now is that China and pro-China elements within the current Nepalese dispensation are seeking to destroy this buffer. In 2008, Prachanda, the then Prime Minister was on the verge of signing a 'Treaty of Peace and Friendship' with China, which would have destroyed the very edifice of Indo-Nepal relations. The Government however fell before this could be accomplished. Now with the Maoists coming back to power under the premiership of Baburam Bhattarai, India needs to be watchful on this score.

Till very recently, when the monarchy in Nepal was the glue for Nepalese nationhood, the institutional and diplomatic linkages between India and Nepal had endured because of strong historical, geographical, political and social moorings. These linkages, evolved over more than two centuries continue to give Nepal the semblance of a nation-state in the prevailing political anarchy and are resisting the complete takeover of Nepal by the Maoists. These moorings are now the target of attack by the Maoists of Nepal.

Nepal has always been a mirror image of India. More than geographical, Nepal served as an ideological barrier between India and China till very recently. This barrier too is being weakened by Nepalese Maoists through the influx of Chinese ideology and technology. China has been carrying out track laying work from Lhasa to Xigaze. Nepal has been keen for the extension of the Tibet Railway Network into the country right up to Kathmandu. Xigaze is located about 280 km south west of Lhasa. Reportedly, China has been carrying out a feasibility study to lay new tracks at a stretch of about 400 km from Xigaze to Nyalam. The distance from Nyalam to Kathmandu is only 120 km. The Tibet railway network, if extended up to Kathmandu would provide an alternative to complete dependence on India with regard to logistic corridor for critical supplies like petroleum products.

Nepal is one of the 46 landlocked countries in the world. Most of these, barring some European countries and a few Central Asian Republics, are in throes of political flux, fundamental in nature, having serious internal and external security ramifications. The total absence of sea in their entire surround has not only made these countries economically dependent on others, but has also given many of them an insular and inward bent of mind that shuns the very

notion of modernisation, greatly hampering the development process. Economic vulnerability and insularity of Nepal is also being exploited by the Maoists with support from China and some Church organisations belonging to Scandinavian countries which enjoy the full patronage of the state. It has been alleged that these organisations also funded the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

Political flux and internal disorder renders developing countries conducive to proselytising. In Nepal, during the monarchy, proselytising was a criminal offence. The first major step by the Maoists in their bid to redefine Nepal, when they assumed power in 2008, was to officially disown the 'Hindu-State' status of Nepal, intriguingly even as there was no demand for it from any quarters. Since then proselytising in Nepal, particularly in the higher reaches, has been rampant. The role of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) was seen as partisan and suspect in favour of Maoist agenda. It was therefore unceremoniously sent back from Nepal without any further extension in Jan 2011. Yuvraj Ghimre, a very authentic and respected political commentator wrote in *Indian Express* (dt 03 Sep 2011): "Bhattarai also maintained a close link with his school establishment and the UNMIN or allied churches that currently enjoy enough clout in Nepal's politics. During the past few years, he has also been able to convince the EU, Scandinavian countries and the US that he is actually pro-human rights....".

The neighbouring maritime nations that control the lifeline of the landlocked countries enjoy critical leverages. But India has never exploited these leverages vis-à-vis Nepal. In fact India, given the inextricable societal, cultural and psychological linkages has, infallibly been benign. Throughout history, the oceans have not only served as a medium for trade of goods but also of ideas and innovations. In the case of Nepal most ideas and innovations, including the concept of parliamentary democracy have been transmitted by India. Some of the landlocked countries have access to ports through more than one country, but for Nepal, the most economically pragmatic access is to the Indian ports. The ports on China's eastern coasts, besides being more than 5,000 kilometers away, can be reached only by traversing through an extremely forbidding mountainous terrain, resulting in the manifold escalation in the transport costs. The Tibet Railway, if extended to Nepal, would only somewhat abate this problem, but can never be an attractive option to trading through Indian ports. Nevertheless, the fact cannot be denied that the growing expertise of China in mega-technology projects is annihilating many economic and technological beliefs.

Till the Maoists first came to power in 2008, after the end of decade long insurgency which cost 14,000 lives, China's strategic interface with Nepal was

overwhelmingly concerned with the issue of the political activities, or in the lexicon of Chinese authorities 'anti-China activities' of Tibetan refugees in Nepal. However, ever since the Constituent Assembly of Nepal came into being in 2008, the Chinese have been an active proxy player in the politics of the country. The fact that there have been four prime ministers in last three years even before a Constitution has been in what appears to be an infinite 'labour period' reflects the dysfunctional status of Nepal. More importantly, it also indicates the growing political influence being exercised by China. At least three out of four prime ministers, i.e. Prachanda, Madhav Kumar Nepal and Baburam Bhattarai are supposedly close to the Chinese establishment.

Another significant factor is the Chinese attempt to make inroads into the Terai region by its proposal to develop Lumbini, the birth place of Buddha. Lumbini is located close to the Indo-Nepal border. It was reported that a deal to develop the region at a cost of \$ 3 billion was signed in June 2011 between Asia Pacific Exchange Cooperation Foundation (APEC), an NGO front of China and United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). Prachanda is one of the vice chairpersons of APEC. The project envisaged a tourist inflow of up to five million people in five years, the construction of an international airport, five star hotels etc. It was only after some deft diplomatic moves by India that the Chinese move was staved. As part of its attempts to embed itself in Nepal, China is running ten China Study Centers (CSC), five of which are located on Indo-Nepal border. There is one CSC at Lumbini as well.

The China-Maoist link in Nepal needs to be taken note off. It may be recalled that when the Maoists had captured about 30 to 40 per cent (40 out of 75 districts) of the rural areas in Nepal, they stepped up their militant activities in the capital Kathmandu. In India too, the Maoists in concert with many other unsuspecting organisations, are making sophisticated assaults on the very edifice of the constitutional framework in the garb of pro-people agitations which are apparently non-violent but have unabashed implied violence. In Nepal, the agitation against monarchy in 2005 was started by the 'civil society'. This struck a deep chord with the people because the politicians had discredited themselves. The Maoists used this opportunity to gain legitimacy and joined the movement, but while professing to adhere to non-violence, they did not demobilise their armed cadres. They have still not done so despite coming to power following the Constituent Assembly elections. The analogy on India cannot be lost when viewed in the context of the Maoist violence which has engulfed many districts of India.

With the democratic political parties of Nepal in disarray and the demolition of the monarchy, the Maoists in Nepal are aiming to subvert the Nepalese Army which stands as a buffer between them in their bid to capture absolute power based on one-party rule. The new Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai has declared his intention to integrate 7,000 Maoist combatants and recruit 10,000 Madhesis in the Nepal Army, which is a devious move to demoralise, subvert and finally destroy the Nepal Army. The decision to recruit Madhesis is a part of political deal between the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF) and the Unified Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (UCPN-Maoist), which has propelled Bhattarai to the post of Prime Minister. It also bears mention that in the last meeting of Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA), the Maoist ideologues were of the view that the future of the Maoist movement in Asia hinged much on Nepal, where it has arrived at the decisive phase. India needs to be watchful on this score.

Today, landlocked Nepal is in a highly vulnerable situation – primarily because of the machinations of the Maoists. India is being relentlessly buffeted by the same forces to create similar vulnerabilities. To preserve Indian democracy and its liberal framework, we cannot ignore what is happening in Nepal. A drastic reassessment of threat impinging on India owing to the internal dynamics in Nepal, heavily influenced by external forces is in order.

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