

# Unending Crisis in Nepal

## The Options Before India

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Any Indian visitor to Nepal these days would be aghast to note the depth and intensity of Nepalese resentment against India, seemingly cutting across party lines, and encompassing vast sections of the media and civil society elite.

In Kathmandu, India is widely accused today of being patronising, arrogant, insensitive, inconsistent and insincere. The most recent episode of the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's special envoy ran into a controversy despite the fact that all sections of Nepalese society, including the Maoists, were agreed that his credentials for the job were impeccable and that India's concern at the prolonged political stalemate in Nepal was justified. If eyebrows were raised, it was because of the timing, of the fact that for some reason the host government was not consulted on the visit, and due to insinuations that the Madhesi parties were urged by India to be "united" — meaning against the Maoists in their bid to form a new government.

The Indian Embassy has also become a special target for criticism; but this is by no means a rare occurrence. Every Indian Ambassador to Kathmandu — the present writer not excepted — at one time or another has been accused of harbouring pro-Consular aspirations. The seriousness of the charge at any given time is usually in inverse proportion to the degree of political stability in Kathmandu.

If Nepal's "psyche" is one side of the coin, India's policy is the other. India's "two-pillar" policy towards Nepal-of strengthening multiparty democracy while supporting the monarchy — implemented with inconsistency for over a decade, became part of history with the arrival of the Maoists and abolition of the monarchy in 2006, a development towards which India incidentally contributed by helping to bring the Maoists and mainstream parties together against the Palace. When the Maoists actually emerged in the Constituent Assembly elections

in 2008 as the single largest party, India was stunned, but feigned satisfaction, much as did Mark Twain after being bashed up badly by a bully in school (Young Twain is supposed to have said proudly: “I did it! I put my nose firmly between his teeth, and brought him down heavily on the ground on top of me.”)

Unfortunately, deep down, India could not digest the prospect of the Maoists becoming a decisive force in the evolution of “New Nepal”. It, therefore, (at least in Nepal’s perception) supported the successful bid to replace the Prachanda government last year with a rather unwieldy coalition under Mr Madhav Kumar Nepal of the mainstream CPN (UML). It has stood by this coalition until the resignation by Prime Minister Nepal recently, as part of the UML deal with the Maoists to extend the life of the Constituent Assembly for one more year beyond May 28, when it would have expired without completing the task of writing the Constitution.

In the absence of a coherent long-term policy suited to the evolving situation in Nepal, India’s recent actions, as Nepal moved from one unsuccessful election for a new Prime Minister to another, appeared to many to have been guided by the need to prevent the Maoists from returning to power, rather than by any steadfast vision of how it could assist Nepal as a nation to overcome its challenges and achieve sustainable peace.

Ironically, even as India is criticised for interference in Nepal’s internal affairs, most political leaders, including the Maoists—indeed most sections of society—seem to acknowledge the need for India to use its leverage in facilitating a freely arrived at, Nepalese-owned, end to the present crisis.

Should the Maoists be given a second opportunity on the basis of their verbal assurances? Should India seriously explore the possibility of creating an environment of what one could term “strategic trust” with the Maoists, in which Indian sensitivities on core issues of security concern would be respected, while giving the Maoists space in which they adjust to the needs of being a progressively more responsible and moderate democratic force? Or should it throw its weight behind the mainstream parties, which insist that they are not against the Maoists coming back to power, but would like to see some evidence that this time around, they are serious about disarming and fulfilling their other commitments under the peace agreement? This is the dilemma India faces.

In a sense, both sides are right: the Maoists in pleading that they should not be cornered, that it would be difficult for them to give up their only trump card—an armed militia—without first coming to power; and the traditional parties, in asking for a prior time-bound Maoist road-map towards transformation into a

normal civilian party, before letting them in. Some middle ground will have to be found.

The main task now is to save the prevailing peace and proceed with the task of constitution building. There may be no alternative to allowing the Maoists as the single largest party to be accommodated in the power structure on terms the Maoists consider to be acceptable, but on the basis of credible commitments of cooperation in the peace process. India should persevere in making whatever contribution it can towards this end, without being unduly distracted by the anti-Indianism currently polluting the bilateral atmosphere. It may need to adjust its diplomatic style, but should be clear about the real priorities.

Even as the political situation is being tackled, India needs to think innovatively about bilateral cooperation. The experience of the Mahakali Treaty has shown that political instability need not come in the way of developing cooperation on the basis of transparency and cross-party consensus, Nepalese ownership and interest, and shared perceptions of a stable mutually beneficial relationship based on trust and interdependence. A massive programme for accelerating inclusive development in Nepal, in which the Maoists as well as other parties would have a stake and shared ownership, and for which Nepal's voters would eventually give all of them credit, would also help address the problem of anti-Indianism that erupts every now and then, like Old Faithful at Yellowstone.

An Indian effort that is aimed at improving the economic prospects of the Nepalese, irrespective of the political situation, should go some way in removing the perception that political expediency is the sole basis for Indian policy. It would also stem the increasing exodus of people from Nepal by offering them the hope of a better future in their own country.

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Mr. KV Rajan was India's Ambassador to Nepal from 1995 to 2000.