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## **India's role in Nepal's political transition and the peace process: help or hindrance?**

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### **Abstract**

The election of Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai as Nepal's Prime Minister on August 29, 2011 marked a clear deviation from India's recent policy of rallying anti Maoist forces to keep Nepal's Maoists from returning to power. Bhattarai was elected with the support of the Terai or plain region parties which represent Nepal's Madhesi population. Most Madhesi parties, since their rise into national prominence in 2007, were known to have calibrated their moves with India. The formation of Mr. Bhattarai's government raises many questions. Does the return of Maoist led government in Kathmandu signal a real shift in New Delhi's policy towards Nepal's major political actors? Is the formation of Maoist-Madhesi coalition a sign of India's waning influence on the principals of Nepali politics? Have Nepal's traditional political parties, the Nepali Congress (NC), and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-UML), lost India's confidence in their ability to achieve a breakthrough with the Maoists in completing the peace process or to effectively encounter the Maoist challenge? This paper examines these questions in order to understand if recent developments in Nepal signal a fundamental recalibration of India-Nepal relations and how India's policies in Nepal have helped or hindered Nepal's peace process.

### **India-Nepal Relations and Nepal's peace process**

India's support to Nepal's current peace process, which began with a 12 point agreement signed in New Delhi in November 2005 between Nepal's democratic political parties and the Maoists, has been critical. Yet, New Delhi failed to anticipate the swift and sweeping trajectory of political avalanche that struck Kathmandu, challenging key premises of India's Nepal policy. In April 2006, King Gyanendra's regime confronted its worst street challenge with Kathmandu's streets filled with hundreds of thousands of protestors demanding an end to monarchy. India's crisis envoy to the Kingdom sought to work out a compromise between the King and opposition with a view to save Nepal's monarchy in keeping with its twin pillar policy; it was too late. The King was forced to reinstate the dissolved parliament and hand over power to Nepal's Seven Party

Alliance (SPA). By May 2008, Nepal's monarchy was gone; the palace now has become a national museum.

On November 21, 2006 the SPA government and the Maoists signed a Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) formally ending over a decade old Maoist insurgency. The agreement was a bold initiative to bring the Maoists into the mainstream of democratic politics. The implementation of this peace process has been severely punctuated by differences between the Maoists and other political parties reducing Nepal's politics from crisis to crisis.

New Delhi's resolve to support this peace process was never very strong. Confronting a growing menace of a violent Maoist insurgency at home, many in India's security and foreign policy establishment were deeply cynical of the prospects for a negotiated settlement between Nepal's political parties and the Maoists. Instead, they favored continuing support to the Nepali army and the King to dismantle the Maoist forces. Nepal's discordant and despairing political parties also had deep suspicions of the Maoist's intentions. Thus, for both New Delhi and Nepal's political party, reconciliation with King Gyanendra and a united front against the Maoists had remained a preferred course. However, King Gyanendra's uncompromising stance coupled with the failure of his security forces to control the insurgency threw a spanner in this course and drove Nepal's political parties to explore peace with the Maoists.

For the mandarins in New Delhi, the King's rigid stance was troublesome but not enough to favor power sharing with the Nepali Maoists. Suddenly, the dynamics changed after the 2004 elections. The BJP led coalition was replaced by a Congress Party led coalition which depended for its support on India's left front parties. The leaders of the left front, especially the CPI (M), viewed the prospects for reaching peace with Nepal's Maoists as an opportunity to delink Nepali Maoists from their Indian counterparts and to show a pathway also for the Indian Maoists. It was thus the logic of India's coalitional politics rather than a studied shift on the part of India's foreign policy and security experts that reoriented India's Nepal policy; the policy was experimental and half-hearted. The following quotation by a noted Indian commentator highlights the nature of this dilemma:

New Delhi does not want a scenario where the Maoists are lionized. It can visualize the effect this can have on the Naxelite (Maoist guerrillas) in its own backyard. The problem has assumed such proportions that it is already causing concern. According to official sources, the Naxelite have an upper hand in large areas of India's countryside, in one fourth of 600 districts in 13 out of 28 states. The Naxalites in India and the Maoists in

Nepal have also constituted a SAARC-like organization: Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organizations of South Asia (COMPOSA). They want to establish a socialist South Asia through an armed struggle.<sup>23</sup>

The progress of Nepal's peace process has been episodic at best. The Constituent Assembly elected in April 2008 for a two-year term has repeatedly failed to complete its mission; it has given itself several extensions. Nepal's non-Maoist political parties have realized significant cooperation to withstand the Maoist moves to force their policies, integration of thousands of Maoist combatants into the Nepal army being the most controversial. However, deep rivalries among the leaders of each parties and unending tug of war between and within parties over the selection of government leaders have rendered governance a nightmare for these leaders, and more so for the people of Nepal.

#### **India's policy help or hindrance?**

Opinion in Kathmandu is sharply divided over India's role in Nepal's peace process. During my conversations with cross sections of Nepali people in summer 2010, most people resented if not outright opposed the Indian policies. Criticisms centered mainly over India's frequent use of its "veto" power in Nepal's internal affairs which made the Nepali leaders too dependent on India's signals. A well known commentator in Kathmandu thought that India's interference had become so excessive that it was bound to boomerang on New Delhi. A member of Nepal's National Human Rights Commission expressed dismay at India's indifference to the human rights situation in Nepal; he described India's stand at odds with that of other international organizations. The leader of a plain based party complained that India was driven by one point agenda of keeping the Maoists, the largest party in parliament, from returning to power and was using all its economic and political muscle to this end. The Maoist leader, P. K. Dahal, frustrated with India's objection over the Maoist's stance on Katuwal controversy, declared that he did not see much point in talking to Nepali leaders over civilian supremacy as they toed Indian line and would rather talk to India on the issue.

While one could argue over the calculus of gains and losses for India's objectives in Nepal, New Delhi's role in the management of Nepal's crisis ridden political milieu has steadily been rising. Four factors have driven

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<sup>23</sup> Kuldip Nayar, "India's Nepal Non-Policy," *The Asian Age* (Internet Version) Tuesday, May 9, 2006 T00:50:54Z

the dynamics of internal as well as external forces in Nepal's slow transition: constant wrangling among Nepal's political parties over compliance with the CPA; the rise of the Madhesi parties as an important factor on the national scene; the surprisingly impressive performance of the Nepali Maoists in the 2008 CA elections debunking Indian observer Ashok Mehta's assertion that the Maoists would not rise to power in Kathmandu <sup>24</sup>; and the emergence of a new ruling coalition in New Delhi following 2009 elections. India's aversion to the Maoists reached a new height after 2009 elections which ended the UPA's dependence on the left front that had supported the mainstreaming of Nepali Maoists.

Nepal's what I would call a hyper-pluralized political landscape has too many players with veto powers which has made its political actors less cooperative and more confrontational. The biggest rupture between the Maoists and Nepal's other political parties occurred in 2009 over the extension of Army Chief of Staff Rukumgar Katuwal's term. The Maoist Prime Minister ignoring his coalition partners refused to extend his term and appointed his replacement. In what the Maoist described as a "coup," Nepal's President, with explicit support from India, immediately restored Mr. Katuwal to his position resulting in Prime Minister's resignation in May. The Maoist's ouster from power saw a series of short term governments resulting from power sharing arrangements between Nepali political parties. India saw the Maoists intransigence over Katuwal issue as too uncompromising a stand to facilitate the peace process. Hence, preventing the Maoists' return to power became the principal objective of India's policy.

For those supporting Nepal's democratic peace process, India's support to democratic forces remains a bulwark shielding Nepal's transition from being overrun by the Maoists. Without the Indian backing, Nepal's weak political parties lacked confidence to keep the Maoists from attempting a violent takeover. India's maneuverings to block the Maoists return to power also strengthened those more committed to the peace process in the Maoist camp. The formation of Bhattarai's government has followed deep debate and dissension within the ranks of Nepali Maoists which now have effectively divided the parties in three wings; the factions led by Prachanda and Bhattarai have spearheaded the formation of the latest coalition and reaffirmed their commitment to the peace process and a

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<sup>24</sup> Staff reporter: "Maoists Can Only Bleed Nepal, Says Author," *The Pioneer* (Internet Version) Thursday, November 17, 2005. Retrieved from World News Connection compiled and distributed by NTIS, US Dept. of Commerce.

more accommodative stance towards India. Following a breakthrough on the number of Maoist combatants to be incorporated into the Nepal Army, the new government has entered into a Seven Point deal with other political parties to expedite the peace process. With greater commitment on the part of Maoists to the peace process, Nepal's fledgling transition has raised new hopes for revival.

India's blatant intervention and dictates has its downsides. As India plays its switch and bait tactic with ever growing number of Nepal's political stakeholders, the risks of failure, as seen above, become greater. For example, in the midst of maneuverings leading to the formation of the Bhattarai led coalition, many Madhesi leaders had pleaded with India that entering into a coalition with the Maoists offered them the best chance to advance their demands for regional autonomy as Nepal's other mainstream parties were much more hostile to those demands. Moreover, India's indifference or ambivalence to the Madhesi demands has also alienated the Madhesi leaders, who had to repeatedly resort to disruptive streets protests to get their way. Interestingly, all of Nepal's major political parties, including the Maoists, have blamed India for mobilization and protests in the plain region.