

Indian government steps into Nepalese political crisis

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The visit last week by Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran to Kathmandu highlights New Delhi's growing concern over political instability in Nepal and its impact on Indian interests. Saran put pressure on King Gyanendra to restore parliamentary democracy and to begin negotiations to end the civil war with Maoist guerrillas.

Gyanendra arbitrarily seized executive power in February, dismissing the nominal government and imposing a state of emergency. He banned all political protests, imposed strict censorship on the press and rounded up the leaders of the main political parties. Parliament had already been dissolved.

The king's pretext for seizing power was the inability of the political parties to end the civil war. Since February, however, the fighting has intensified and, despite the repressive measures, there have been growing protests over the lack of democracy.

Concerned at the danger of a political implosion in Nepal, India, the US and Britain called for a return for parliamentary rule. All three countries, which had been supplying the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) with arms and training, ended their military assistance.

Gyanendra, however, has turned to China and Pakistan for aid. Last month China reportedly supplied 18 trucks loads of military material, including 4.2 million rounds of ammunition, 80,000 grenades and 12,000 automatic rifles. Following Saran's visit, RNA chief General Pyar Jung Thapa left for Islamabad to meet with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

New Delhi is deeply concerned at the involvement of China and regional rival Pakistan in what it regards as its backyard. India had already resumed limited assistance to the Nepalese military, in April in a bid to maintain Indian influence and encourage Gyanendra to soften his stance.

During his four-day visit last week, Saran met with the king and military chiefs as well as opposition leaders from the Nepali Congress and the Nepal Communist Party-Unified Marxist Leninist (NCP-UML). Following talks, he told the media: "I have conveyed in all my meetings that restoration of peace, stability and economic recovery of Nepal is not only in its interest but also in India's interest."

Saran remained tight-lipped over the content of the talks with the king, but he undoubtedly used a mixture of threats and inducements to encourage the monarch to modify his policies. After noting that "the international community has taken a certain position in order to foster the process of reconciliation," he pointedly referred to Beijing, saying "we hope that not only China but other countries would also join in that position."

Indian involvement in Nepal dates back to 1950. When China annexed Tibet, India guaranteed Nepal's security by signing a Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Other agreements were subsequently reached on economic cooperation and transit through India.

When Katmandu bought arms from Beijing in 1988, New Delhi reacted by imposing a transit blockade on the land-locked Nepal, provoking a deep political and economic crisis. All but two of the 15 transit points for goods and people between India and Nepal were closed down in 1989.

While relations between India and China have thawed in the past few years, New Delhi is not about to allow Beijing to gain a foothold in what it regards as an important buffer state on its northern border. Moreover, the US, which has been forging closer ties with India as a counterweight against China, is also concerned to counter any Chinese influence in Nepal.

An editorial in the *Indian Express* last month

expressed the alarm in ruling circles. “[The] Chinese arms supply to Kathmandu is more than a tactical threat to India’s attempt at promoting democracy and stability in Nepal. It is about a real and present danger that threatens Delhi’s primacy in the subcontinent.” Branding China “a political free rider focused entirely expanding its profile”, the editorial warned: “If India does not quickly trump King Gyanendra’s China card, its standing in the region would rapidly diminish.”

As in the late 1980s, India is brandishing the threat to restrict transit through India. The transit treaty is not due to run out until 2007, but New Delhi has insisted on “a review” of the agreement. The latest round of talks took place in early December.

New Delhi is also playing a direct role in Nepalese politics. In late November, seven opposition parties announced that they had reached a 12-point agreement with the Maoist Nepal Communist Party (NCP-M) to wage a joint campaign against the monarchy. While the deal leaves key points of difference unresolved, it has further isolated the king who rests primarily on the army and state bureaucracy.

The agreement was the outcome of top-level talks between the parties in New Delhi on November 17. The Indian government has officially denied supporting the negotiations, in part because Washington has publicly opposed such a deal. But it is clear that, at the very least, New Delhi gave tacit approval for the meeting to go ahead. Without a guarantee of safe passage, Maoist leader Prachanda would not have risked entering India.

India’s willingness to host such a meeting represents a significant shift. Since the Maoist insurgency first began in 1996, New Delhi has backed the efforts of the Nepali military to crush it, fearing that any success will only encourage similar rebels in India. The Nepal Communist Party (NCP-M) has maintained contact with armed Maoist groups operating in several parts of India.

As part of the 12-point agreement, Prachanda agreed for the first time to accept “a competitive multiparty system of governance”, to join the political mainstream and to eventually disarm under “United Nations or any other reliable international supervision”. In what amounts to an abandonment of previous anti-imperialist rhetoric, he also agreed “to maintain friendly relationship with all countries of the world based on the principal of peaceful co-existence.”

The willingness of the Maoist leadership to sign such an agreement, which was tentatively welcomed by the UN, indicates a crisis in their own ranks. A lengthy report produced last month by the Brussels-based the International Crisis Group pointed to the failure of the NCP-M to develop any significant support beyond its rural bases into the cities and main towns. India is clearly seeking to exploit the opportunity for its own purposes.

The behind-the-scenes machinations of India, China and other powers, each seeking to advance their own position in this strategically-placed country, have only intensified tensions. King Gyanendra and the military have denounced the deal with the Maoists and shown no signs of compromise. On Saturday, tens of thousands of people took part in three opposition rallies in Katmandu, following the killing of 12 civilians last week, apparently by a soldier who ran amok.



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