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Nepal: Western Views of the Maoist Insurgency And the Royal Takeover

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NEPAL:

Western Views of the Maoist Insurgency And the Royal Takeover

--since the launching of the Maoist revolt in Nepal in 1996, there have been a variety of reactions from Western countries.

--because of this variety, I would like from the start to propose that we look at two sets of Western countries – the U.S./UK, on the one hand, and the European Union (with its various members) on the other.

--the third element I will briefly review is the role of the United Nations in the Nepal crisis.

--there appear to be two fundamental goals in both the U.S. and UK policies: (a) help Nepal become a peaceful, more prosperous, and democratic nation and (b) in the process, prevent the Maoists from attaining victory.

--by and large, the U.S./UK reaction has been multi-faceted, and has thus included both increasing development assistance to the government, especially since 2001, and increasing military assistance, both equipment and training.

--the U.S./UK, while sensitive to and acknowledging, human rights abuses on the part of the Nepali police and the Royal Nepalese Army, has nonetheless been providing enhanced military assistance.

--such assistance has included hardware and training; the training has included extensive class-work in the necessity of the protection of civilians and education in the international norms relating to the rights of non-combatants under international conventions and laws.

--as for the U.S., starting especially after the events of 9/11, there has been a worldwide agenda, which the U.S. Administration calls the "war on terrorism".

--while not formally designating the Maoists as a terrorist group, the U.S. has come very close to that appellation;

--and the U.S. and Nepal signed a formal agreement to cooperate on counter-terrorism in 2002.

--while the U.S. has repeatedly commented on, and criticized, the human rights practices of the government, as reflected in the police and army, it has been less

harsh and public in such condemnation – certainly in comparison to the UK and the rest of the European Union.

--since 2001 the U.S. has also taken an unusually prominent role in focusing development assistance donors on the needs of Nepal – and using its influence with others to dramatically increase such assistance, at the same time that its own levels of assistance continued to grow – even with the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq exerting more and more claim on U.S. resources.

--the U.K. also has substantially increased its military and development support for Nepal, though not at the same level as the U.S.; the British, of course, also have a much longer history of intimate relations with Nepal than the U.S.

--these steps by the U.S. and UK have distinguished those countries from the European Union and the bilateral assistance programs from some of its members, including importantly Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland.

--that EU assistance, by and large, has been focused on traditional developmental aid, though its scope has been reduced substantially since 2002 because of security concerns reflecting the continuing conflict, and the spreading effectiveness of Maoist attacks countrywide.

--some specific EU projects have been targeted by the Maoists, apparently in the expectation that such focused attacks would cause a diminution in such projects. This expectation has proven accurate.

--in general too, it should be pointed out that the EU and its constituent units have publicly and privately focused substantial concern on the human rights abuses rampant in Nepal.

--while most of the public statements on such abuses also cover criticism of the Maoists, there is a general perception in Nepal that the EU has been more critical of the government than of the insurgents.

--throughout the period since 2001, there has also been a very active, and largely effective, effort to coordinate policy approaches to Nepal between India, the UK and the U.S.

--both the British and U.S. Governments, in practice though seldom publicly, recognize the primary role India plays with regard to Nepal.

--the recent statement by the U.S. Ambassador in Delhi that the U.S. was expecting India to take the lead with regard to Nepal is unusual only in that he

said it publicly. Privately that has been the prevailing U.S. and UK view for years.

--what this coordination has meant in practice is regular and intensive consultations in Kathmandu, New Delhi, London, and Washington among the three countries. The Indian ambassador in Kathmandu confirmed this in his February 25th press statement: "I think the international community, certainly those that are seen as being involved in Nepal's development, have shown an impressive unity in their response to developments here and there has certainly been frequent coordination. We've had consultations with China also on this situation".

--and while it would be inaccurate to say that India holds an absolute veto power over U.S. and UK assistance to Nepal, it would be unusual for either country to proceed in its bilateral relationship with Nepal into areas in which the Indian authorities objected.

--because of this triangular consultative and coordinating relationship, it is of fundamental importance to understand India's views of, and policies toward, Nepal in any effort to understand the U.S. and UK roles.

--fortunately we have had a thorough review of the Indian view and I need not go into it further except to point out with the return of a Congress Party government in Delhi – and the return of Natwar Singh as Foreign Minister – some of the understanding between Nepal and India which had developed during a more forthcoming BJP government may be changing.

--after all, without exaggerating this inordinately, Nepal is the last Hindu kingdom and the political ideologies of the BJP and Nepalese monarchy are, in principle at least, much closer than those of the Congress and the monarch.

--there is also the awkward reality that India's relations with all its neighbors (except Bhutan) have often included a willingness to sponsor and/or turn a blind eye to dissident movements which cause the neighbor to be weakened and thus, in the Indian view, less likely to buck Indian orientation and advice.

--this has occurred many times in Indo-Nepal relations and the classic example is the initial Indian support for the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.

--some U.S. officials believe that Indian attitudes today are more pragmatic and that India earnestly seeks to help blunt, if not defeat, the Maoist threat to the constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy.

--but, let's get back to the U.S.

--at base, I think it is fair to say that the U.S. saw, and sees, the Maoist violence as being fundamentally illegitimate, despite all the reasons which may motivate Nepalis to join, and/or support, the insurgency.

--the violence directed by the Maoists against civilians and noncombatants, the Maoists' ideological compatibility with the Sendero Luminoso in Peru and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and, closer to home, the various Maoist/revolutionary groups in central and northern India, and the general intention to radically restructure Nepali society and even culture, are anathema to the U.S. (and the UK and India, I might add).

--the Maoists, for their part, have made clear their intention to impose a one-party "people's republic", collectivize agriculture, "re-educate class enemies, and export their revolution to neighboring countries (read: especially India).

--having said all that, however, it has also been the consistent view of the U.S. and UK that there cannot be a military solution to the Maoist insurgency.

--both publicly and privately the U.S. (and UK) have strongly advised the Government of Nepal that there has to be a political solution to the Maoist challenge; a solution that would include the Maoists, the democratic political parties, and the king.

--it is in that context, that is of strengthening the hand of the government in its future political negotiations with the Maoists, that the U.S., and UK, military assistance has been internally justified.

--the thinking has gone that a more effective government security force would be more likely to convince the Maoist leadership that they cannot win militarily and should strike a deal, and somehow or other, move into the peaceful political mainstream of Nepal.

REACTING TO THE KING'S COUP

--all things considered I think that King Gyanendra has made a colossal blunder in taking over direct control of the Government of Nepal on February 1st.

--it is conventional, but accurate, to note that by doing so he has eliminated the protective barrier which the elected governments have provided him since his ascension to the throne after the palace massacre in 2001.

--more than his brother, King Birendra, or his father or grandfather, Gyanendra has needed that protection because his legitimacy has been in question as theirs was not.

--although this is now a work in progress, I believe that Gyanendra has also wrongly assessed how the major traditional democratic friends of Nepal (UK, US and India) would react to his coup.

--while it is impossible for us to know his innermost calculations, it appears that he assessed that the three democracies would have no choice but to continue to support him – and, through him, the Royal Nepalese Army, the armed police, and the regular police, lest the Maoists gain further ground.

--presumably he calculated that even if the Western countries, and India, were unhappy with his seizure of power, that they would gradually come to realize that they had no option but to support him, since reacting with pressure against his move would benefit the Maoists, which none of them wishes to strengthen. In other words, he may have thought that he had outmaneuvered the democracies and left them no choice but to continue their support.

--however, in this he may have miscalculated.

--as of today, however, both the British and the Indians have implemented a freeze in military cooperation.

--the U.S. has made no such public announcement, but appears to have given the King a short timeframe in which to undo most of his Feb. 1st proclamation, importantly freeing political leaders, the press, and allowing the legal political parties to function openly again. Meanwhile, there is reportedly “nothing” in the military pipeline.

--at least in these first five weeks after the Feb. 1st action, Gyanendra has had to depend on support from China and Pakistan. His Defense Secretary implied as much February 25, when he suggested that an arms cutoff from the West and India would force Nepal to turn north and west.

--Presumably Gyanendra and his advisors have calculated that there is leverage to be gained with India by threatening closer association with either or both of these countries. And also presumably, he may have calculated that through India, both the UK and US would reduce their opposition to his move, for

reasons I have noted earlier regarding the trilateral cooperation, with India in the lead on Nepal.

--my judgment is that this is another very serious miscalculation by the king: I don't think that India is likely to capitulate; rather, it is more likely to increase pressure on Nepal, which it can do in so many ways.

--the classic Indian method, of course, is to say nothing publicly, but to dramatically reduce the volume of goods transiting India to Nepal. Until very recently, ironically, the Maoists have been doing this anyway, with their major highway blockade, so that India hasn't had to take action in order to create the same effect.

--further, I don't believe that China is interested in playing a substantial anti-Indian game in Nepal under current circumstances. The Chinese are already embarrassed by their "Maoist" problem in Nepal.

--the Pakistanis, through their military intelligence agency, may be inclined to seek additional ways to cause internal problems in India, and Nepal has always had that potential.

--but this is an extremely dangerous game for Nepal to be playing and I would guess that, even if the King is so inclined, he will desist shortly from this path.

--any such Nepal-Pakistan effort would also be anathema to the U.S and UK and, if anything, would harden their positions vis a vis the King. Both would also seek to use their influence on Pakistan.

WHAT ABOUT THE UNITED NATIONS? Or other 3rd Party Negotiators?

--outsiders have wondered for years why the United Nations or an interested, but "neutral" Scandinavian country like Norway couldn't play a useful role as a mediator or, at least, facilitator of political negotiations between the Government of Nepal and the Maoists.

--the short answer to the question is: India.

--when the Indian ambassador in Kathmandu was asked about UN mediation February 25th, this was his reply: "A 3rd party brings in more complications, my government does not see at the moment the need to muddy the water further".

--the slightly longer answer is: the King

--they have different, but in some areas overlapping, rationales: India wants to continue to be the major outside influence on developments in Nepal and a 3rd party mediator risks, from the Indian perspective, getting out of control – and heading off in a direction which India does not support.

--further, it will surprise some listeners, but India has a consistent record of opposing United Nations involvement in South Asia. Presumably because of its international legitimacy, the U.N. is considered a wild card – and one which might go public in areas where India would prefer secrecy or, at least, plausible deniability. The UN might take substantive positions inimical to Indian interests, as seen from Delhi at least.

--as for the King, any mediation setting which would appear to equate his standing, as monarch and now head of government, with the Maoist leaders would be unacceptable.

--the only exception to this general rule I can imagine, is if there were secret negotiations which resulted in some sort of Monarch/Maoist agreement to jointly rule, and to exclude the democratic political parties.

--the only overlapping political interests I see between the Maoists and the king, is the shared desire to exclude the democratic political parties from power.

--but it is very hard to conceive of such an arrangement.

--just briefly, as for another 3rd party, like Norway or Sweden, I think the same problems would be foreseen by the Indians. While they have agreed to such a role for Norway in Sri Lanka, that situation while important to India is not of the same degree of immediate national security interest as Nepal.

--and, unless he were truly desperate, I think the king would have the same sort of problem with such a mediation as mentioned above.