

Will Nepal choose India over China?

It seems China and India may cohabit in Nepal with the advantage slowly returning to New Delhi provided it acts to mitigate excesses of the blockade

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The mood of optimism in Nepal is palpable. The grand old party, Nepali Congress has been severely marginalised after its election debacle. The Leftists/Communists are in an unassailable majority at local, provincial and federal tiers which is unprecedented in terms of political superiority and stability. With India and China both welcoming this development, it was difficult to locate anyone but the intrepid pessimist to predict any man-made adverse contingency. Goodbye to uncertainty and instability. Welcome to development, happiness and prosperity of the New Nepal which is reflected by the deluge of tourists, mainly Indians and Chinese inundating five star hotel and casinos. Here is my Nepal June diary.

Political stability is assured with the wily Upendra Yadav-led Federal Socialist Forum (Nepal) joining the Government — and also grabbing the deputy Prime Minister's post — giving the ruling Nepali Communist Party a two-thirds majority with 190 of 275 seats. There is a tripartite agreement between Prime Minister KP Oli, co-chairman of Communist Party of Nepal (NCP) and Maoist supremo Prachanda and Yadav to positively address Madhesi and indigenous community demands of citizenship, language, inclusiveness and boundaries, but without any timeline. The Rashtriya Janata Party (Nepal) another Madhesi party with 17 lawmakers may also join the Government shortly though its General Secretary Chanda Chaudhary says the Government is not serious about Constitutional amendments. That leaves the leadership-deficient and the fractured NC out in the cold.

Power-sharing and merger of NCP: There are souls in former United Marxist Leninist and Maoist parties unhappy with their merge. The Left Alliance is now the NCP minus Karl Marx, Lenin and Mao on the common letterhead. Karl Marx's 100th birthday was jointly celebrated with creative wordology like scientific socialism etc. The NCP (Revolutionary) led by Mohan Baidya has said the present NCP are pseudo Communists. The underground Netra Bikram Chand faction which indulged in violence during elections and the recent Modi visit has forced its former Maoist comrade Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa to launch police action against their armed wing. Another breakaway Maoist, former Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, famous for broadening roads in Kathmandu is the only lawmaker of his Naya Shakti Party. An integrated and comprehensive NCP manifesto which has a few lines on Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) mentor Madan Bhandari's slogan people's democracy recognises more promi-



nently Prachanda's line and agenda of federalism, secularism, inclusion and republicanism achieved through the combination of bullet and ballot ie people's war and the peace process brokered by India. The unwritten power sharing agreement between Oli and Prachanda of two and a half years each as Prime Minister is not in the public domain. At present, Prachanda and Oli are co-chairmen of the party though Prachanda is urging Oli to focus on running the Government while he takes care of the party. Oli is reluctant to oblige. NCP's general convention is to be held in two years after which this issue will be resolved. Asked what could go wrong with the new party, a top Maoist leader quipped: "We just got married and you are already talking of divorce. We will complete our term of five years and many more."

Budget: The ₹1,315 billion budget has set an ambitious target of eight per cent economic growth with focus on the development of physical infrastructure, energy, tourism and agriculture and resources provided for newly created provincial Governments which are facing enormous teething troubles. It plans to raise the power generation from the present 830 MW to 15,000 MW by 2035. Despite the political stability targets of growth, prosperity and happiness will not be easy to achieve in a country where imports are 85 per cent and exports 15 per cent and 1500 youth leave the country every day due to joblessness.

India: A pro-China Oli not breaking the traditional 'first India visit' by a Prime Minister is regarded as an Indian diplomat-

ic coup with a well-stitched operation starting with the Koshiyari mission to Thailand to meet Oli, Sushma Swaraj's swoop on Kathmandu and Modi's energetic working the phone lines. Modi's return visit, his third to Nepal, was seen as a politically motivated pilgrimage to benefit his party's election prospects in Karnataka. Anti-India sentiments prevails. Protests and black balloons were prevented but social media was very active: #blockade was crime: Welcome to Nepal but we have not forgotten the blockade. Modi, the master orator should have creatively expressed regret and won over millions of Nepalese but he has not learnt to say sorry even at home. People said the perception is that India is not as serious as China about its development agenda in Nepal. Delivery is erratic and qualitatively deficient. The new monitoring mechanism (first report by September 19) will allay these fears.

Military relations: The Nepal Army Chief General Rajendra Chhetri, who is an honorary General of the Indian Army was in India to review the Passing Out Parade in Indian Military Academy (IMA) Dehradun on June 9. Nepal owes India more than two billion rupees for arms and equipment purchased. It wants India to write off the amount, change the arms supply mechanism from 60:40 grant and payment to annual military aid. The bonding between the two armies is the strategic umbilical cord of bilateral relations.

China: To the question why Oli was not invited for a state visit to Beijing first, when it played a major role in the forma-

tion of the Left alliance, the answer one got was that China believed that Nepal is still in India's sphere of influence. Consequently it has repeatedly advised Nepal to have good relations with India (the Wuhan effect?). Nepali leaders still talk about unique relations with India — geography to language to open border and so on. Oli's China visit started yesterday is mainly to ensure implementation of the Ten Point Agreement he signed with China in 2016 after the blockade.

China has not opened the Tatopani route — old Kodari-Kathmandu road — after the earthquake. It is being pushed by Nepal to concretised Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) and connectivity. The Chinese appear to be interested in a South Asia corridor like China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan through Nepal to India where the markets lie. They are also keen to promote Buddhism, making Lumbini its Mecca. This will generate strategic and cultural gains for Beijing.

Post script: India's recalibration of the Nepal policy is designed to make amends and ensure its red lines are not breached. Politics is unpredictable. It seems China and India may cohabit in Nepal with the advantage slowly returning to New Delhi provided it performs to delete excesses from the blockade including the anti-India feeling.

(The writer is a retired Major General of the Indian Army and founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the revamped Integrated Defence Staff)