



SUSHMA SWARAJ'S VISIT TO KATHMANDU: RENEWED HOPES OF CEMENTING NEW ALLIANCES

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Indian Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj's paid an unexpected visit to Kathmandu from February 1-2, 2018.¹ Swaraj's visit took place at a time when there are reports that New Delhi is upset over the Left Alliance's victory and the formation of a new government under Khadga Prasad Oli (Head of the Communist Party - CPN-UML).

In a one-on-one meeting between Swaraj and Khadga Prasad Oli both sides shared their respective concerns about bilateral relations.² Swaraj also conveyed a message dispatched by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Mr. Oli. According to CPN-UML leaders, Swaraj assured Oli that India is ready to support and work with the new government in Kathmandu. Oli, whose relationship with India hit a low point during his previous tenure as prime minister in 2015, conveyed the message to New Delhi that he is ready to maintain cordial relations.³

It is an open secret that Nepal is heavily dependent on India for majority of its trade and for daily needs and has been looking at ways to reduce its reliance on the latter. Hence, India finds it

¹ "Sushma Swaraj arrives in Nepal," *The Hindu*, February 01, 2018. Accessed February 16, 2018, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sushma-swaraj-arrives-in-nepal/article22622231.ece>

² "Sushma Swaraj to visit Nepal today as alliance of Communist parties prepares to form new government," *Firstpost*, February 01, 2018. Accessed February 16, 2018, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/sushma-swaraj-to-visit-nepal-today-as-alliance-of-communist-parties-prepares-to-form-new-government-4330303.html>

³ Gurubacharya, Binaj, "Sushma Swaraj visits Nepal before Communist alliance takes power", <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/4KC9Nem3vCKJFkuJMRcw7M/Sushma-Swaraj-visits-Nepal-before-Communist-alliance-takes-p.html>

imperative to build cordial relations with the newly elected government in Nepal to counter or to minimize the growing Chinese influence in the Himalayan nation. There are fears in India that the new government in Kathmandu will be instrumental for China to further increase the latter's influence in Nepal. Furthermore, the timing of the visit is unerring given that this is the first high level foreign visit to Nepal after the successful conclusion of elections. The visit assumes heightened significance, especially given the poor relationship that the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-UML) has had with India ever since the time of the last Oli-led government.⁴

Swaraj also held a one-on-one meeting with Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center) Chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (commonly known as Prachanda), who will serve as coalition partner with the CPN-UML-led government. She assured Indian support for the new government.⁵

It seems that the Indian political leadership seems to have realized that engagement with Oli and the Left Alliance is a must to secure its interests in Nepal simply because the Left Alliance is not going anywhere in the near future. After two rounds of telephone conversations with Oli, Modi decided to send Swaraj to Kathmandu with a message that New Delhi respects the verdict of Nepali people and is willing to work closely with the new government.⁶ As the largest democracy in the world, India might have decided that it needs to welcome the successful democratic exercise in Nepal by sending a high-level dignitary.

Amid speculations that the Left Alliance government led by Oli will now tilt toward China, Oli tried to assure New Delhi that his new government will maintain cordial relations with India and address its genuine security concerns. Sending a letter to Modi on India's Republic Day, Oli assured Modi that he is keen to work with his Indian counterpart on bilateral issues, and stated that, "As one of the recently elected people's representatives and leader of largest party in federal parliament, I am eager to work with Excellency and your government for the betterment of our two countries."⁷

By sending its foreign minister to Nepal, India also provided a symbolic message to China that despite the victory of the Left Alliance, New Delhi still enjoys cordial relation with Nepal. After the

⁴ "Sushma Swaraj arrives in Nepal," *The Hindu*, February 01, 2018. Accessed February 16, 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sushma-swaraj-arrives-in-nepal/article22622231.ece>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Left Alliance Leader Of Nepal K P Sharma Oli Calls on Sushma Swaraj, *NewIndianXpress*, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2018/feb/01/left-alliance-leader-of-nepal-k-p-sharma-oli-calls-on-sushma-swaraj-1766849.html>

⁷ Ibid.

federal elections, Beijing was upbeat, believing that the results would be helpful to advance its influence in Nepal.⁸

India-Nepal relations hit a low in 2015 under Oli's government, when India voiced concerns over Nepal's then newly promulgated constitution and instituted an unofficial blockade that prevented crucial supplies from entering the country. Oli, who was then leading the government, vehemently criticized the blockade and there was huge support in Nepal for his stance. Oli also signed a trade and transit agreement with China with the goal of ending India's monopoly over Nepal's supply of daily essentials. After this, the Indian establishment always blamed Oli for playing the "China card" and creating anti-Indian sentiments in Nepal.⁹

With Swaraj's visit, there are renewed hopes of establishing a relationship at the top political level. Swaraj's trip signals that both sides have realized their past mistakes and are ready to build cordial relations. Despite this, India's desire to minimize Chinese influence in Nepal after the formation of the Left Alliance is unlikely to be fulfilled because Oli seems determined to implement past agreements signed with China and sign new projects under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Political pragmatism should drive the Oli government's neighbourhood policy: early indications are encouraging, but it is vital he stay on this track. Already, Oli has made strong overtures: sending out a letter of congratulations to the Indian Prime Minister on India's Republic Day. There are also signs that his core team of leaders and advisors are making the right kind of noise in their informal meetings with members of the larger international community.¹⁰ Modi has now reciprocated Oli's goodwill by sending his External Affairs Minister, who was also the first senior foreign official to visit Nepal after Modi took office in 2014.

Analyzing the past history of bilateral relations between India and Nepal, it is clear that India seems to have lost the goodwill of the people of Nepal due to its overbearing attitude. Also, despite the fact that India is providing foreign aid and assistance to Nepal, a number of the Indian projects are still not finished, like the long-awaited Pancheshwar hydropower project on the Mahakali river, the

⁸ "Sushma Swaraj to visit Nepal today as alliance of Communist parties prepares to form new government", *Firstpost*. February 01, 2018. Accessed February 16, 2018. <http://www.firstpost.com/world/sushma-swaraj-to-visit-nepal-today-as-alliance-of-communist-parties-prepares-to-form-new-government-4330303.html>

⁹ Gurubacharya, Binaj. "Sushma Swaraj visits Nepal before Communist alliance takes power." <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/4KC9Nem3vCKJFkuJMRcw7M/Sushma-Swaraj-visits-Nepal-before-Communist-alliance-takes-p.html>

¹⁰ "Modi, Swaraj congratulate PM Oli", *My Republica*. Accessed February 18, 2018. <http://www.myrepublica.com/news/36450/>

proposal for which was floated almost two decades ago.¹¹ One would have to wait and see how this new "update" between India and Nepal under Khadga Prasad Oli would work out now that his government has indicated that it will restart a Chinese-led \$2.5 billion hydropower project that had been put in limbo by the previous government in an effort to increase infrastructure connectivity with Beijing in order to ease Nepal's over reliance on New Delhi.

¹¹ "Mahakali River." *The Himalayan Times*. Accessed February 20, 2018.
<https://thehimalayantimes.com/tag/mahakali-river/>