

Interview with Prachanda on forging closer ties with Indian and Chinese regimes



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"We want to turn over a new leaf in our relationship with India"

Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) – UCPN(M) – has had a difficult relationship with India and other political parties in Nepal after the fall of Maoist-led government in May 2009. The party's several attempts to regain power have been scuttled by its widening trust gap with various political forces. As a consequence the peace process has been stalled and Nepal has been without a functioning government for over four months. Against this backdrop, Prachanda (Pushpa Kamal Dahal), Chairman of the UCPN (M), recently visited China where he proposed to the Chinese leadership a tripartite agreement between Nepal, China, and India. Prachanda spoke to Akhilesh Upadhyay and Sudheer Sharma on Saturday morning about his visit, his party's upcoming plenum, its relationship with India, the peace process and his fall from grace.

You and your party men have been to China frequently. Some reading it as tilting towards China.

It is not as it appears in the media. At an ideological level, we are naturally interested in studying developments in China. But my visits have been circumstantial. The first time I went to the Olympics. The second time I was there

to study Chinese development. This time I was there to attend the Shanghai Expo. Which is not just about China for the expo is, in a sense, a world expo.

It is true that while in China I had meetings with Chinese leaders. But upon my return I divulged the content of those meetings. Chinese leaders have always underlined the need to ensure peace and development (in Nepal). As the largest party, they have advised us to improve ties with India. There is no truth in the rumours about our party's preference of China over India.

What were China's concerns?

It is not that difficult to understand China's concern. If there is peace and stability in Nepal, their security concerns related to Tibet will be addressed. They also reiterate the issue of non-interference.

You have spoken about a tripartite strategic alliance between China, India and Nepal. Can you elaborate?

It's not an abstract concept. Both China and India have been on the path of rapid economic development. Both are large countries. Nepal should ideally benefit from them. If Nepal lags behind in development, it may affect both countries' interests negatively. For that reason, there needs to be a common understanding about development.

If that can happen it will set an example for the world. There is a global trend of regional partnerships like the EU and ASEAN and we can certainly emulate them.

Are you trying to redefine the traditional power balance in the region?

We have tried to clarify this issue repeatedly. We have spoken out in favour of adding new dynamics to the relationships in the region. Traditional relationships have not represented the interest of the people in the region. It hasn't represented the wave of regional changes. It only represents the interests of a small circle. In view of the needs of the 21st century, the changed global context, the change in the power balance, and the shift in consciousness of the people, we have said that there is a need to redefine traditional relationships.

Regarding our policy, we are in favour of good relations with China, India and the rest of the world. But there is no denying that we have issues with India. Some are about treaties and agreements. During the Rana regime, the ruling elite made decisions that only served them. We have disputes about borders, trade and the transit facilities that we are entitled to as a landlocked country. In all these issues, we need a redefinition of our relationship, not to weaken the bilateral relations but to further strengthen them.

How are you going to improve ties with India?

We are clear that we need to engage with Indian leaders, the government, intellectuals and the media to clarify ourselves. And we have been making efforts. On the sidelines of the Nepali Congress General Convention, I had

discussions with different leaders representing Congress (I), BJP, Janata Dal and other parties. I think the environment is improving for me to go to Delhi, I have had the desire to do so. We have to clear the confusions about our party. When we say we have problems with India, we also want to make it clear that we want to positively and constructively engage with India to address these problems. We want to turn over a new leaf in our relationship and strengthen it. It's not that we are only talking with China, we are also talking with India.

The Chinese advice for us to improve our ties with India has its own background. The Chinese have publicly been saying that they too want to improve ties with India. Their bilateral trade has been growing and has exceeded over US \$60 billion; trade also affects their bilateral relationship. But the Chinese advice is not an instruction, and that is the way other bilateral relations should be as well.

You have raised three points about the tripartite agreement. Development, Peace and Stability. There can be no dispute on the first one, but on the latter two points, do you think that they will invite more external interference?

That is not the case. In fact it is the reverse. Historically, all three (countries) have respective security concerns. If only one country opts out from a common agreement, none of the countries' security concerns will be properly addressed. The thinking I am putting forward aims to address concerns of all three at once, and strategically would allow all three to focus on development peacefully, while at the same time assisting each other. How does that invite more interference? In fact it will end the security dilemma of China and India, and result in activities to preserve their interests.

China may agree to your proposal, but what about India?

I have been forwarding my idea to India as well for last five or six months. We should focus our attention on creating an understanding among three countries in the coming days.

Our party has emerged as an agent of change. People have entrusted us with some responsibilities as the biggest party, which obligates us to reach an understanding with our neighbors that is in the interest of all three countries. India has not publicly reacted to our proposal. There is no reason for India to oppose it. And it is my understanding that India will take it as a positive idea.

When are you going to Delhi, before or after the plenum?

I don't think it will be possible before the plenum. Perhaps after the plenum. I had talked with some people about the visit (to India) and they believed that around Nov. 15 would be the right time. Given the time constraints around the plenum, I have told them that it would be best if an arrangement can be made after the plenum. I won't go now for two reasons. One, the time constraints won't allow it. Two, regardless of whatever policy decisions we make during the plenum, it will be seen as caving in to New Delhi.

When you launched a movement of national independence, there were bitter feelings between India and your party. How has that changed?

Our concerns on the issue of national independence are still there. Until now we have been taking our concerns before the people. But we would like to sort them out at the political level. If the problems are still not solved, we might go to the people in a different way. We haven't let go of the issues related to national sovereignty or the other issues related to India. Nor are we taking them lightly. It's just that sometimes we try to settle the issue through the streets and sometimes at the table. Right now, we want to solve the issue at the table.

We will continue to raise these issues until the needs and the interests of the people of two countries are solved according to the needs of the 21st century. This is not an issue we can easily let go of. As this issue relates directly with our sovereignty, peace, stability and development, we hold it dear.

Nepal's relationship with India seems to have gone on a bureaucratic plane of late. Don't you believe solutions to outstanding problems are unlikely unless you engage with Indian political actors at the political level?

You have raised a valid point.

One of the reasons why things haven't moved with the pace and direction we wanted is perhaps because these issues are being taken up at the bureaucratic level or through agencies. That is why I referred to my intention to visit Delhi and of my engagements with intellectuals in India. Now the process is upside down. During my visit I want to try to correct the approach by taking them to a political level.

Let's turn to the question of budget now. The Maoists have been saying that they won't allow the budget to pass in its current form.

We are clear on this issue. Nowhere in the world does a caretaker government bring a full budget. That is against democratic norms. If this government brings a full budget, it will cast the whole country as a laughing stock.

But don't we need a budget even if there can be no new government in the near future?

We believe it is important to form a new government at the earliest. There is no reason we cannot come up with one within a couple of days if there is political consensus to do it. But that is not happening. Therefore we have been emphasizing the need for immediate government formation to bring a complete budget. If that is not possible, we can amend the constitution to avail the money for the government's general expenditure. If we go for a constitutional amendment to avail the money needed for government expenditures, it would give the message that parties are serious about the issue and it will also inspire the political parties to form a government at the earliest.

We are not for bringing the whole government machinery to a grinding halt. If the political parties can sit together to bring a new budget, that will set the right precedence of decisions being reached through a proper political process.

What about the formation of a new government?

It is unfortunate. It seems parties are ready for a consensus approach on some issues. We are still engaged in talks. I hope such a situation (of no legitimate government) will end soon.

I think politics will head in the direction of consensus and a majority government can be avoided. For consensus, it would be natural to form a government under Maoist leadership. However, we are not dead-set that the government should be formed under our leadership. We are open to alternatives.

It seems that the issue of former Maoist combatants is a major stumbling block. Other parties seem to believe that unless this issue is settled, a Maoist-led government is not possible. Why is there no progress on this issue?

This issue is a sensitive issue. Nepali Congress and a section of the CPN-UML feel that unless the cantonments are vacated, there would be no Maoist-led government. This attitude, I think, is the biggest stumbling block for the peace process. When people made us the largest party, they did not want us to proceed by surrendering our army. Even when the coalition was formed under my leadership, the issue of integration never came up as a condition. Then why is it being presented as a condition today?

We are ready for integration. And I have also presented a timeframe for the same. But if NC and some UML leaders present this as a condition for government formation under our leadership, that is unacceptable to us.

NC questions whether the Maoists are a civilian party. But who are they to ask this question? As the people have voted to make us the largest party in the CA, I think the question of a civilian party does not arise. So, I doubt if this is not an attempt to derail the peace process, I have been saying it time and again that other parties seem to feel that if the peace process is completed on time along with the writing of the constitution, then the Maoists would be popular and in the next election they would secure a two-thirds majority.

Do you believe that the number of combatants to be integrated and rehabilitated have to be fixed beforehand?

Not necessarily. Which of the documents – the Comprehensive Peace Accord, the Interim Constitution – talks of fixing the numbers first. The combatants can be asked about their will. Why is the issue of fixing the number so important? It seems that the parties want to portray us as the major hurdle in the process.

What then is the way out?

We are ready for integration. We plan to bring the combatants under the Special Committee and then regroup them. By January an environment for the integration and rehabilitation should be created. If this does not happen, it is the Maoists who stand to lose as the party's credibility will be questioned. But when we are asked to fix the numbers in advance, we suspect that the parties do not want to proceed with the integration as per the past understanding. Therefore I have told NC and UML leaders that if they place new conditions on integration, we will not be able to proceed. But I would like to make it clear that our party is committed to completing the process of integration and rehabilitation with tangible output by Jan. 15.

How do you see the situation evolving if the process is not completed by the time UNMIN leaves on Jan. 15?

I am hopeful that the parties will arrive at consensus and the process will be completed by the time UNMIN leaves. But if that is not the case then as far as our party is concerned, we will not walk out of the peace process. We will continue to fight for peace and the constitution. However, if the process is not completed on time, we fear that the other side would take the country towards confrontation by trying to impose president's rule. That would be unfortunate.

We have been hearing from different quarters including your party and New Delhi that on the need for a new agreement like the 12 point accord of 2005. What is your position on this?

We are positive on this. In fact I have been stressing the need for a new agreement among all political forces. The 12 point agreement has outlived its purpose. Now we need new agreements to address the present situation.

What could be the framework of such an agreement.?

First of all, the new framework should be based on the results of the CA elections. Leaders of NC have been making their arguments on the basis of pre-CA elections arrangement. Also the issue of federalism, secularism and republic and ill-defined. We need to have a clear definition of these issues. In other words, we have to be clear on the path that we would like to embark on for social and economic transformation.

What is the purpose of your plenum?

Given the current political situation, we communists believe that crisis seen in society is reflected in the party too. So, it is important to hold discussions to sort them out. Hence this plenum.

But it seems there are different schools of thought even within the Maoists. As a result there appears to be some kind of dispute among leaders.

This is not the case. We had our differences even during the period of war. When then-king Gyanendra took direct control, there was difference of opinion in the party on whether we should initiate peace talks. And we had made those differences public. But we all came together during the Chungbang meet. So we have a healthy process of dialogue. Although it is natural for the debate to be heated at times. But as the Chairman of the party, I ensure that the debates occur in a dignified manner. Some of us in the party have been working together for the last two decades, so we understand each other very well. And we will come together. The reactionary forces have always dreamt of splitting our party. But they will not be successful.

In the last year or so, particularly after you stepped down as the prime minister, your personality seems to have taken a hit. You seem to have lost the middle ground.

I agree that my leadership has taken a hit as people had a lot of expectations from my leadership – and it has not been possible to meet them. But no leader in the world can be at the peak forever. The charm is bound to climb down. A leader in his life sees lots of ups and downs. I am committed to our cause. As long as the leader is committed to his cause, he can always bounce back. As far as loosing the charm among the middle class is concerned, it can go up as abruptly as it has come down.