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In old ties, a hopeful turn

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Nepal PM's visit showed that the political and psychological barriers that have long hampered cooperation between Delhi and Kathmandu have been diminished



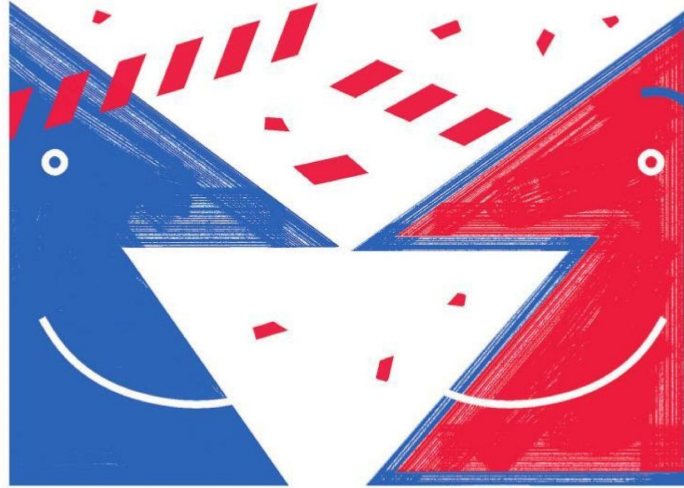
SHYAM SARAN

IN THE GAME of musical chairs, which is the defining hallmark of Nepali politics, Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda", the Maoist leader, is in his fourth innings as prime minister since 2008. His recent visit to India from May 31 to June 3 was also his fourth as PM and arguably his most successful. Part of the reason may lie in the evolution of Prachanda himself from a revolutionary leader to a seasoned politician, more nuanced and supple in his approach. What he said about the change in his outlook in 2016 was much more in evidence during his current visit to India. Referring to the strained relations with India during his first term as PM in 2008-9, he had said in 2016: "At that point, the impact of the revolution and war was very strong on my mind. I needed more time to understand the nuances of politics. After the ups and downs of the past decade, I think I will be able to strengthen relations between our two countries with more maturity."

The personal transformation was also evident in his donning of the traditional Nepali national dress, *daura suruwal*, for formal occasions on the visit. Earlier he would only wear western dress to emphasise the revolutionary break with feudal tradition. Another first was his visit to the Mahakaleshwar temple in Ujjain to offer prayers. This would have laid to rest any residual misgivings in the BJP government about having to deal with an unreformed, and possibly dangerous, communist.

Prachanda was justifiably satisfied with the results of his visit. He dispensed with the raising of contentious issues which would detract attention from the opportunities for substantive progress. The revision of the India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 was not raised, perhaps for the first time in recent years. The report of the Eminent Persons' Group, available since 2018, which has recommendations the Indian government is not enthusiastic about, such as turning the existing open border into a regulated one, was not pursued though pressed on by other Nepali politicians in advance of the visit. The inconvenient issue of the recruitment of Nepali Gurkha soldiers by the Indian Army, in the wake of the Agnipath scheme adopted by India, was apparently not part of the talks. The Nepali demand is that the Gurkha recruits from Nepal be exempted from the four-year tenure laid down under the scheme.

In the three one-to-one meetings that Prachanda reportedly had with PM Modi, several significant outcomes were achieved. These include a long-term agreement which is targeted at 10,000 MW of power supply to India in a 10-year time frame against the current 450 MW. Nepal will be able to supply initially about 40 MW of power from India to Bangladesh, which is an important breakthrough. The ambitious Pancheshwar 5,000 MW hydro-project, which has been on the cards since 1996, is to be fast-tracked but, given the record so far, one should not hold one's breath. The Transit Treaty between the two countries has been renewed



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and Nepal has now been given access to India's inland water transport network which will enhance its connectivity with India and presumably to Bangladesh, though this has not been specifically stated. The existing Motihari (India)-Amlekhganj (Nepal) petroleum products pipeline will now be extended to Chitwan and a second pipeline from Siliguri (India) to Jhapa (Nepal) has been agreed upon. These will greatly enhance Nepal's energy security and provide it with efficient, safe, and secure supplies.

Several cross-border rail connectivity projects which have been completed or are under construction and the existing and proposed border Integrated Checkpoints (ICP) will ease travel and cargo movement between the two countries. The overall sense one gets is that the political and psychological barriers that have long hampered cooperation between the two countries have diminished. PM Modi reflected this new, more positive mood when he said that borders should not become barriers to cooperation.

Prachanda could not but bring up the border issue between the two countries, particularly the extravagant and unilateral claim suddenly made in May 2020 for nearly 350 sq km of territory in the Lipulekh area. This greatly enlarged the original 35 sq km of disputed territory in the upper reaches of the Kali River. There is no way India can concede on this issue. It also involves a sensitive stretch of border with China. Nepal has locked itself into a rigid position by incorporating the additional claim into its constitution and issuing new maps. Prachanda must know this. In agreeing to address all outstanding issues including the border issue in bilateral deliberations, PM Modi has been sensitive to Prachanda's political compulsions.

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India has been deeply concerned about China's increasing presence and political intervention in Nepal's domestic politics. Though this has not been acknowledged, China did figure in the talks Prachanda had with India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval soon after he arrived in Delhi and later with PM Modi himself. India has not hesitated to use its leverage over Nepal to dissuade it from getting locked into major Chinese-assisted infrastructure projects. There has been a persistent refusal to purchase power from Chinese-assisted power projects or even those which have been set up with Chinese machinery and equipment. It is difficult to see how this may be enforced since once power enters the grid it is fungible. It may require direct and dedicated transmission lines from non-Chinese aided or Chinese-built power projects to India, but this is not an efficient or cost-effective way to manage cross-border transmission. It appears that India did not concede on this issue.

Chinese plans for infrastructure development in Nepal, such as the proposed Shigatse (Tibet)-Kathmandu rail link, have stalled mainly because Nepal wants these to be financed through grants rather than loans. The example of Sri Lanka and now Pakistan, which have fallen into a debt trap allegedly through over-exposure to expensive Chinese financing, has introduced a degree of caution not only in Nepal but among other South Asian countries as well. This has created space for India to expand its profile once again in its neighbourhood and Nepal is no exception.

Prachanda's visit marks a more positive and hopeful turn in India-Nepal relations and he deserves credit for that.

The writer is a former Foreign Secretary and a former ambassador to Nepal