

The Foreign Policy of Nepal in the Changed Political Context

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Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the Israel Council on Foreign Relations for providing me with an opportunity to address such an august gathering. I am delighted to be able to present the highlights of our foreign policy in the changed context of Nepal.

This is the first time an incumbent foreign minister of Nepal is addressing the Israel Council on Foreign Relations. I feel it is a privilege and an honor to present some thoughts on Nepal's foreign policy. I fully understand that the members of the international community, including our friends in Israel, have a keen interest in Nepal's foreign policy priorities against the backdrop of the far-reaching political changes brought about by the People's Movement in April 2006.

As you are aware, Nepal went through a most difficult period in its history due to the decade-long insurgency. During that time we suffered a great deal, both in terms of human and material losses. Now Nepal is marching ahead with determination on the path of a peace process which belongs to, and is being guided by the Nepalese people, themselves. With the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accords between the then Seven-Party Alliance government and the Communist Party of Nepal (the Maoist CPN) on November 21, 2006, the former rebel group was brought into the mainstream of competitive democratic polity. The Maoists have already cantoned their armies and weapons as per the provisions of the peace agreement. We have received support and cooperation from the international community through UNMIN [United Nations Mission in Nepal]. The UN, at the request of the government, has been mandated to monitor the arms and armies of the CPN Maoists and the Nepalese army and also to support and provide logistical assistance for the Constituent Assembly elections. So far we are satisfied with what UNMIN has been doing in accordance with its mandate.

The road map to peace in Nepal has been agreed upon by all parties. Progress in connection with this is visible in the promulgation of an interim constitution, and the formation of a legislative Parliament, followed by an interim government that assumed power on April 1, 2007. Hence, the Eight-Party Alliance government is

committed to proceeding with the agreed upon road map, the most fundamental part of which is to hold elections for the Constituent Assembly in a free and fair manner. Despite our sincere desire to hold those elections last June, we had to reschedule for November 22, 2007. This was agreed upon unanimously by the Eight-Party Alliance. The objective of the Constituent Assembly will be to draft a new constitution that deals with issues raised by different groups of people, including the question of federalism. It will also aim to address the concerns expressed by people in Terai and the Mid-hill region, and indigenous and marginalized groups. Grievances concerning discrimination and inequality put forth by all who feel disadvantaged will be addressed.

Let me now turn to some of the fundamental principles that guide Nepal's foreign policy in the changed context of the political landscape. These principles will remain immutable despite the political change the country has seen. In the changed political context, however, the country's foreign policy cannot but reflect its domestic policy, with due focus on people's daily lives. Foreign policy also needs to be the mirror of people's desires. Unlike what was prevalent during the Cold War, when ideological issues superseded others, in today's world of globalization, economic considerations are more dominant than political ones. Last year's successful People's Movement has prompted us to ensure that Nepal's foreign policy represents the people's aspirations.

Nepal underwent a difficult period in 2002, when King Gyanendra sacked the democratically elected government of Sher Bahadur Deuba on October 4 and started assuming most of the executive powers himself. The situation became worse when he staged a royal coup on February 1, 2005, suspending all civil liberties and fundamental rights of the Nepalese people. In protest, most donors stopped their cooperation with Nepal, and the country was thrown into a state of international isolation. Consequently, Nepal suffered great damage to its international image. Fortunately, the situation changed for the better following events in April 2006 which empowered the Nepalese people. The international community appreciated this move and has again started providing support and assistance to the present coalition government. Nepal's reputation in the outside world was enhanced.

The current interim constitution, promulgated since mid-January 2007, clearly states that the Principles and Purposes of the UN Charter, the non-Aligned Movement principles, the Panchsheel, international laws and the norms of global peace are the salient features of Nepal's foreign policy. The objectives of Nepal's foreign policy can be summed up as follows:

- Safeguard the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence;
- Maintain all-around peace, security and reconciliation;
- Promote sustainable development and social progress based on people's welfare, equity and justice;
- Strengthen democracy, human rights, civil liberty and inclusiveness;
- Enhance Nepal's image before the world as a country that attaches importance to world peace, security, democracy, human rights and the emancipation of colonialism; and
- Continue to attain the above objectives by cultivating and promoting good relations with all countries of the world, and Nepal's neighbors in particular.

Nepal's relations with its immediate neighbors, India and China, have always been friendly. Nepal cannot afford to cultivate bilateral relations with India at the expense of China or vice versa. In the changed context of rapid economic progress by both China and India, followed by their increased economic interaction and ever growing bilateral trade, which is now in the billions of dollars per annum, Nepal is faced with both opportunities and challenges. Nepal should endeavor to develop its infrastructure to become an attractive and viable transit point for its two large neighbors by taking advantage of its favorable geographic location. It is hoped that Nepal can reap the benefits of the high economic growth in China and India. Hence, Nepal's relations with its immediate neighbors are very important. Nepal seeks to cultivate and promote relations with all countries of the world, harboring enmity toward none. With this policy very much under consideration, Nepal has thus far maintained diplomatic relations with as many as 126 countries. However, financial constraints have not permitted us to establish residential diplomatic representation in many of them. Since we have to prioritize the opening of residential embassies abroad, I am delighted to mention here that the government of Nepal has now decided to open our embassy in Tel Aviv. I can assure you that the embassy of Nepal will be functional shortly.

Nepal-Israel relations have been characterized by friendship and mutual trust since 1960, when we established our diplomatic ties during the time of the late prime minister B. P. Koirala. Nepal is one of the few countries to have established diplomatic relations with Israel so early in the sixties, at a time when the State of Israel had not been able to cultivate relations with many countries. Being a true and trusted friend of Israel, Nepal has always endeavored to promote and develop deeper relations with it. With regard to peace in the Middle East, Nepal has consistently taken the position that it abides by UN Security Council Resolutions

242 and 338. Nepal believes that Israel should have the legitimate right to exist within internationally recognized boundaries. Nepal expressed reservation with regard to the Arab-sponsored UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, adopted in 1975, that equated Zionism with racism. During the forty-sixth session of the UN General Assembly in 1991, Nepal supported Israel by voting in favor of the resolution that sought to repeal Resolution 3379. Nepal has continuously welcomed all peace initiatives, including the 1978 Camp David accords that led to a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1979. We very much look forward to seeing durable and comprehensive peace in the troubled region of the Middle East. We appreciate Israeli efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East along with other key regional players.

Israel has traditionally been one of our development partners. Nepal has received Israeli assistance in the fields of agriculture, education, rural development, water resources, tourism, etc. While Nepal wishes to express its appreciation to Israel for the cooperation extended so far, it is our expectation that areas of future assistance will be further expanded. Nepal-Israel relations have recently intensified and diversified, mostly due to the presence of a significant number of Nepalese workers in Israel. Our female workers, in particular, find the Israeli labor market especially attractive, because it presents them with a variety of opportunities. The open and liberal economy prevalent in Israel, backed by a strong and effective rule of law, provides added inducements to our female workers. However, the issuance of visas to Nepalese workers has been suspended at the moment; but with the good will of the Israeli government towards Nepal, we are very hopeful that the problem will be resolved soon. Scattered in different branches of the economy, Nepalese workers have, indeed, made useful contributions to Israel's economic development. We, in Nepal, as a source of human resources for the Israeli labor market, are keen to foster our bilateral relations. This would make it congenial for our people to be able to continue utilizing their skills and expertise in the relevant sectors of the Israeli economy. Their presence in a developed country like Israel can offer us more opportunities, not only in terms of the remittance of earnings, but also in acquiring new technology and expertise.

Nepal, as a host to SAARC [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation], has been an ardent supporter of regional cooperation. Nepal's association with SAARC has been influenced by the common desire of the countries in the region to reap the economic benefits of regional efforts. Similarly, Nepal attaches great importance to the UN, which is the only international organization committed to global peace, harmony and the economic, social and cultural development of the world. Nepal placed its trust in the principles of the UN Charter. It is Nepal's belief that only through UN efforts can the global community tackle common problems like international security, poverty, environmental degradation and

more serious scourges like terrorism. In trying to deal with such global problems, the UN needs to be reformed both in structure and in division of responsibilities. Nepal has always joined fellow member states in their continuing efforts to have a better and reformed United Nations. Our long participation in UN peacekeeping operations is motivated by our commitment to world peace. I am happy to note here that about 4,000 members of our security forces are currently serving in different parts of the world, under United Nations auspices, and committed to ensuring global peace.

The road map for peace in Nepal is not as smooth as it seems to be. There is a bumpy road ahead with a lot of challenges. Notwithstanding, we have decided to move ahead, trying to overcome the obstacles which are common in a transitional phase like the one we are in at the moment. We have been trying our best to shorten the transitional period. What inspires us to pursue our efforts to advance the peace process is the people's mandate, which stems from last year's peaceful movement directed toward creating a new Nepal. This Nepal will have a full-fledged democracy based on federalism, which will address issues of discrimination and inequality. For hundreds of years, the Nepalese people have suffered at the hands of a feudal system which ruled the country without providing equal opportunities to all segments of the society, be they women, Dalits, Madhesie or indigenous and other ethnic groups. The elections for the Constituent Assembly in November 2007 will be an historic milestone, but not necessarily the logical conclusion of a comprehensive peace process. The real test begins after the elections, which we are determined to hold in a free and fair manner. The people need prompt delivery of services. They need relief, along with programs to improve their daily lives. In the aftermath of insurgency, Nepal faces daunting challenges of reconstruction and rehabilitation, among others. In order to meet such challenges and help us solidify peace and full democracy in Nepal, we very much look forward to receiving greater support and understanding from the international community, including our friends in Israel.