

India Steps Up Pressure on Nepal

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A continued Indian-backed blockade of supplies to Nepal, a small landlocked country wedged between India and China, has escalated tensions between Kathmandu and New Delhi.

Nepali Prime Minister K. P. Oli has threatened to withdraw his acceptance of an invitation from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to visit India this month. Oli told journalists on January 26: "It would not be appropriate for me to visit India unless the situation returns to normal."

On Monday, the deputy chief of the publicity committee of the Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-UML), Surya Thapa, declared: "If the embargo is not lifted, the Prime Minister [Oli] may visit China first, instead of India."

India denies any involvement in the blockade, maintained since last September, insisting that it is a result of agitation by Madhesi parties from Nepal's flat southern Madhesh region for amendments to Nepal's constitution, adopted in August. The United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF) has conducted a protest campaign demanding that Madhesh (or Terai) be given greater representation in parliament.

Nepali police have killed at least 55 people since September in suppressing the Madhesi protests. On January 21, police shot down three protesters who allegedly tried to disrupt a CPN-UML meeting in Terai that Oli was to address.

Due to the blockade, essential supplies such as fuel have been substantially limited, severely affecting hospitals, transport and power generation. Many schools have closed down due to lack of transport.

India is tacitly supporting the Madhesi demands, encouraging their agitation and asking the Kathmandu ruling elite to amend the constitution to address the "legitimate aspirations" of all sections of the country's population.

Under immense pressure from India, the Nepali government agreed to three basic Madhesi demands for a re-demarcation of provinces, the fixing of electoral constituencies on the basis of population and proportional representation. Parliament passed those amendments last week but Madhesi parties rejected them, saying they had loopholes that Kathmandu could manipulate.

The Madhesi parties, which represent the regional elite, are pressing for greater privileges, backed by New Delhi's continued insistence on "suitable amendments" to the constitution.

The Nepali government's conflicting signals regarding what would be Oli's first overseas visit expresses a political crisis exacerbated by India's intervention, which has been encouraged by the US. New Delhi's concern is not to uphold the democratic rights of Madhesi people but to firmly establish its geo-political foothold over Nepal. India's government is using the communal politics of the Madhesi parties to scuttle China's growing influence in the country.

Sections of the Indian ruling elite have expressed concerns that the government has not intervened "fast enough" in Nepal and is now pushing it more toward China. On December 29, India's parliamentary standing committee on external affairs questioned foreign secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar about the government's policy in Nepal.

One committee member told the *Hindu*: "Nepal was fast emerging as vehicle for China's growing influence in south Asia and souring India's ties with Nepal." This "would send out a negative message to other members of the South Asian region."

Kathmandu signed an agreement with a Chinese company in October to import petroleum, even though delivering supplies from China is difficult through the mountainous terrain. The agreement demonstrated that Kathmandu was seeking to counter New Delhi's pressure and that China was taking the opportunity to bolster its relations.

Strategic rivalry with China dominates the Indian political and defence establishment's discussions and calculations. Nihar R Nayak, an analyst from India's defence ministry-sponsored thinktank IDSA, recently warned: "At a time when India is confronted with growing negative sentiments in Nepal, China has been reaping a good harvest of positive perceptions."

At issue is not just India's drive to incorporate Nepal into its perceived South Asian sphere of influence. Washington, which has embarked on aggressive military encirclement of China, has a strategic partnership with India. Both India and the US consider Nepal to be a critically-situated underbelly of China, a base from which to undermine Beijing.

The Obama administration is seeking to entangle all the countries across the region in its "pivot to Asia" to confront China. Echoing India's stance, US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken telephoned Oli on January 22, urging him to "represent the interests of all Nepalis and take concrete steps to resolve the political impasse."

China is taking steps to counter this line-up. The Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Wu Chuntai, called on Oli on the same day last December that Oli announced India's invitation. Wu extended a counter-invitation to visit Beijing.

In 2014, China overtook India as Nepal's largest foreign investor. A report by Nepal's Department of Industry said Chinese investments reached \$174 million between July and December 2014, accounting for over 60 percent of the total foreign direct investment committed. This was a three-fold rise from the \$55 million investment in the corresponding months of 2011, when India was the biggest source of investment in Nepal.

The *South China Morning Post* quoted a Nepalese writer, Kanak Mani Dixit, saying: "Nepal cannot afford to loosen its ties with India as it's impossible to replace India with China given our geography ... But Nepal's China tilt has never been this pronounced and it's entirely the result of New Delhi's policy."

Dixit added: "Nepal's situation vis-à-vis India means Nepal will not overnight convert itself into a pro-China holdout. But this still is a significant shift in South Asian geopolitics."

The Nepal crisis is another expression of the aggressive US moves against China, and the harnessing of India as Washington's partner. This drive is deepening geo-political tensions and increasing political instability throughout South Asia, including in mountainous Nepal.

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