

US establishes closer military ties with Nepal

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Using the country's ongoing civil war as a convenient pretext, the US administration has, in the course of the last two years, been quietly securing close military and political ties with Nepal. Since President Bush was installed, there have been three high-level visits to the country—the latest by US Assistant Secretary of State Christine Rocca.

Rocca made a three-day trip to Kathmandu last December 13-15 and held talks with King Gayanendra, his Prime Minister Lokendra Bahdur Chand, political party leaders and the heads of the security forces. One of the main issues discussed was the conflict with Maoist guerrillas, which has claimed hundreds of lives in the past year alone and led to deepening political instability. In all, an estimated 7,200 people have died in fighting since the revolt broke out in 1996.

After the meetings, Rocca publicly warned the guerrillas, saying: "Although the Maoists have not been put internationally on any terrorist list, this step may be taken into consideration if their violence continues unabated... [W]e are committed to help Nepal combat the insurgency by providing security assistance to the Nepalese government." She pledged \$US24-38 million to Nepal in development funds for next year plus additional military aid.

US Ambassador to Nepal, Michael E. Malinowski, underscored Rocca's message by declaring in early January: "The Maoists have to be bent towards negotiations, and that is where security assistance comes in. My argument is to get this fixed now, before it gets any worse. Otherwise there will be a much bigger bill."

The Bush administration has agreed to provide \$17 million in military equipment to the Nepali army. The first consignment of 3,000 M-16 rifles was delivered earlier this month and another 2,000 are due to follow. A US military team from the Pacific Command is currently in Nepal for a month-long joint training

exercise with the country's military.

Washington is concerned about the impact of political instability in Nepal on the Indian subcontinent. More fundamentally, however, the war against the Maoists provides the Bush administration with an excuse for establishing a higher profile in a country that is strategically located on the border of China. During the 2000 US election campaign, Bush declared Beijing a "strategic competitor", and, over the past two years, his administration has established or strengthened military bases and strategic alliances with countries surrounding China.

On the Indian subcontinent, Washington has been developing close co-operation with India, which has traditionally regarded China as a regional rival. The Indian government has also been providing military assistance to Nepal and has taken measures to seal its border with Nepal to prevent Maoist rebels from seeking sanctuary.

Several European powers, including close US ally Britain, are bolstering the Nepalese military. British Foreign Office official, Sir Michael Jay, commented last month: "The armed forces are ill-equipped, under-resourced and under-trained to deal with this type of problems." The UK is providing more than \$10 million to buy military hardware, while Belgium has delivered 500 machine guns to the Nepalese army.

Those providing military assistance have completely ignored the anti-democratic character of the Nepalese regime. King Gayanendra used his sweeping constitutional powers last October to dismiss the elected government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and install his own administration headed by Chand. According to the *Hindu*, the king informed Washington and Beijing at the time and neither issued any protest.

During her visit, Rocca warned the Maoists not to take advantage of the country's political uncertainty

and called on all political parties and the monarchy to “come together and take a united stand” against “political violence”. But there are sharp political divisions between and within the parties over how to deal with the Maoist insurgency—to negotiate or step up the war.

Deuba’s own Nepal Congress (NC) party is deeply divided. Deuba ousted rival NC leader Girija Prasad Koirala last year and proposed negotiations with the Maoists, only to launch a military offensive several months later with the backing of the king. When the Koirala faction refused to support an extension of the country’s state of emergency, Deuba dissolved parliament in May and scheduled November elections. Koirala responded by attempting to sack Deuba as party leader.

Amid the growing political turmoil, the king, with the backing of the military, used his wide powers under the constitution to dismiss the government, impose his own rightwing administration, and postpone elections indefinitely. Just weeks before, the Maoist guerrillas had killed more than 100 police and soldiers in the Sindhuli and Arghakanchi districts. Government control over a number of regions is tenuous.

The Chand administration lacks any significant popular support. The Nepal Congress and the Nepal Student’s Union have held a number of protests calling on the king to reinstate parliament. But their demands are very tentative. NC leader Koirala told a demonstration in November: “[A]ll I want is the well being of the king.” A number of other parliamentary parties have also called protests.

In late December, Katmandu was shut down for two days after the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M), which heads the insurgency, called a strike in opposition to the king’s administration. The CPN-M lacks a significant base among workers and has used intimidation to enforce its dictates. In this case, however, the Maoists were also able to count on public hostility to the king and his prime minister.

Within days of the strike, the government called for talks with the Maoists. While indicating their opposition to discussion with Chand, the rebel group has not ruled out negotiations. In early December, CPN-M leader Prachanda indicated that he had formed a team to negotiate with the government and pledged not to attack rival groups or government infrastructure.

The CPN-M demands have nothing to do with socialism. Prachanda has appealed for the formation an interim government in alliance with bourgeois parties and the convening of a constituent assembly to sweep away the monarchy. Despite its nominal references to socialism, the CPN-M represents the interests of layers of business, big and small, that regard the monarchy and its apparatus as an obstacle to their economic ambitions.

Despite the calls for negotiations, fighting continues. In early December, the security forces reported killing 18 guerrillas in seven districts including Bhojpur and Kanchanpur. On December 5, rebel fighters raided the Lahan police station killing three policemen. The media reported the killing of eight Maoists in the week to January 12, in several districts including Palpa, Jumla and Dhading.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in world. An estimated 42 percent of the population is living below the poverty line. The average per capita income is only \$US220. The unemployment rate is around 52 percent. Two weeks ago, when the government increased the prices of petrol and cooking gas by between 13 and 18 percent, angry protests erupted in Katmandu.

It is these conditions of deep social polarisation that have enabled the Maoists to win a following among the rural poor. Far from ameliorating the appalling poverty facing the Nepalese population, the Bush administration, along with the king, his administration and the political parties, all support the IMF’s restructuring program that will make conditions worse. If attempts to reach a deal with the Maoists fail, the preparations are being made to intensify the war.



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