

Mounting tensions between India and Nepal over blockade

Vijith Samarasinghe
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The standoff between India and Nepal intensified yesterday after the Nepalese Armed Police Force detained 13 Indian border guards for allegedly crossing the border. They were released several hours later by Nepalese authorities, who accused them of carrying weapons without permission in civilian areas.

The incident is the latest in the mounting tensions between the two countries over what Nepal claims is an “undeclared blockade” of the landlocked country by India. Ethnic Madhesi protesters have blocked imports from India over the country’s new constitution, which was passed in September. Madhesi political parties, with India’s tacit backing, are demanding amendments to grant greater regional autonomy.

Police opened fire on November 21 on Madhesi protesters blocking the main highway from India in southern Nepal’s Saptari district. Two demonstrators were killed in the clashes and at least 28 people were injured, including police officers. The following day, police shot dead another person after angry protesters set fire to a police van. At least 40 people have been killed in confrontations with police since August.

Last Wednesday, the Nepalese government summoned the Indian envoy in Kathmandu to lodge a complaint after Indian border security forces fired on and injured four Nepalese in a southern border village. The envoy claimed that the Indian personnel fired in self-defence after being shot at by Nepalese smugglers.

Last Friday, thousands of students took to the streets in Kathmandu to protest against the blockade. Fuel shortages have forced schools to extend holidays and cut the number of classes. Students chanted: “Stop the blockade. Education is our right.”

The Indian government denies imposing a blockade but is clearly using the Madhesi protests as the pretext for doing just that. New Delhi keeps close ties with

Madhesi parties to use them as a lever to influence policies in strategically important Nepal.

In a televised speech on November 15, Nepal’s Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli openly criticised India for continuing a blockade of cross-border trade. “It is unthinkable that a sovereign nation faces such an inhumane and severe pain, misery and blockade in the 21st century,” he declared. “Imposing a blockade to a landlocked nation is a breach of international treaties, norms and values.”

Nepal depends heavily on India for 60 percent of its imports and all its fuel supplies. Fuel has been rationed for private vehicles. Daily commuters are compelled to buy black-market fuel for as much as 250 Nepali rupees (\$US2.40) a litre. Domestic flights from Kathmandu airport are routinely cancelled. Many Kathmandu households have reverted to cooking with firewood, due to the lack of bottled gas.

Hospitals are running low of essential medicines and other supplies such as medical gases. Doctor Swayam Prakash Pandit of Bir Hospital in Kathmandu told CNN: “We are running critically low on drugs used in the emergency, ICU and operation theatre.”

To ease the fuel shortage, the Nepal Oil Corporation signed an agreement in October to source fuel from China, ending the longstanding monopoly of Indian Oil Corporation as Nepal’s sole fuel supplier. Nepalese authorities also announced on November 16 that discussions were underway to source liquid petroleum gas from China.

Nepal is increasingly becoming a focus for geo-political rivalry. India, backed by the US, is intent on maintaining its dominance in Nepal, which it has long regarded as part of its sphere of influence in South Asia. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has taken an even more aggressive stance in order to

counter China.

In 1989, the Indian government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi imposed a trade blockade that lasted for more than a year, using disputes over the renewal of a bilateral trade pact as the pretext. New Delhi's main concern was that the Nepalese government was negotiating with China to develop northern trade routes and buying Chinese weapons.

As a result of that confrontation, Nepal's King Birendra was forced to back down from his economic demands. He also had to make concessions to the Nepali Congress Party, which, with India's backing, mounted protests calling for the lifting of political restrictions. Birendra agreed to reforms, allowing the election of a Nepali Congress government.

Central to India-Nepal relations has been the Peace and Friendship Treaty signed in 1950, granting substantial concessions to New Delhi. However, India's considerable control over the largely rural economy of Nepal has withered with economic globalisation and China's rise in recent decades. Kathmandu has increasingly turned for investment to China, which in 2013 surpassed India as the country's main investor.

In response, New Delhi is trying to exploit close ties with communalist Madhesi parties to boost India's influence in Nepal. The Madhesi parties, which have expanded from six in 2006 to 13, form an amorphous grouping that emerged from various non-government organisations and breakaway factions of the country's Maoist guerilla movement.

These parties do not in any way represent the interests of Madhesi workers and peasants, but rather the grasping local ruling elites who calculate that their relations with India and greater regional autonomy will enhance their political and economic position.



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