

Nepal accuses India of attempting regime change in Kathmandu

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A diplomatic rift between Nepal and India has deepened after Kathmandu alleged that New Delhi backed a failed political move to topple the government by the opposition Nepal Congress Party (NCP), with the help of the Maoist United Communist Party of Nepal (UCNPM). The Indian government has denied any involvement.

In retaliation on May 6, Kathmandu recalled its envoy to New Delhi—Deep Kumar Upadhyay, a former NCP leader. Nepali Defense Minister Bhim Rawal said that “Upadhyay seemed to play an internal role in the exercise to change the current government [and] that was the main reason on his recall.”

Nepali President Bidhya Devi Bhandari’s also cancelled a five-day visit to India scheduled from May 9. India reacted by calling off a planned visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Nepal on May 21 to participate in a Buddhist conference.

The latest sharp tensions between New Delhi and Kathmandu are a direct result of intensifying geopolitical rivalry between India and China for influence in Nepal. Encouraged by its strategic partnership with the US against China, New Delhi is putting pressure on Kathmandu to break its growing ties with Beijing and toe India’s line.

The Nepali and international press have suggested that the “road map” for regime-change was drawn up last month during a “private visit” by pro-Indian NCP leader Sher Bahadur Deuba to see his wife who was receiving treatment in an Indian hospital. Deuba met with Indian leaders including External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, but did not disclose the issues discussed. He was followed by Maoist party General Secretary Krishna Bahdur Mahara who also met Indian leaders.

The media has reported that UCNPM leader Pushpa

Kamal Dahal agreed to a proposal by Deuba on May 4 to withdraw its support for the ruling coalition led by Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and his Nepal Communist Party (UML). A “unity government” was to be established with Dahal as prime minister. With 83 seats, the UCNPM holds the balance of power in the parliament.

The Maoist leader reportedly changed his mind after Oli offered concessions, including an amnesty for UCNPM guerrilla fighters facing charges for their role in the country’s 10-year civil war. In 2006, the UCNPM abandoned its military struggle and played a critical role in defusing the political crisis produced by mass protests against the monarchy. Oli has also promised to “expedite reconstruction efforts” for victims of the 2015 earthquake and to help form a future government headed by Dahal.

Although India has denied any involvement in a regime-change plot, an editorial in the *Hindu* on May 10 noted: “Behind the scenes, Foreign Ministry and PMO [prime minister’s office] officials have expressed their discomfort with Mr. Oli’s leadership and his overtures to China.”

India has intensified its pressure on Nepal over the past year in a bid to pressure Kathmandu to distance itself from Beijing. Land-locked Nepal is heavily dependent on Indian ports for trade. Sections of the Nepali ruling elite regard China as a means of lessening the country’s dependence on India.

India, however, contemptuously regards Nepal as its backyard. The Modi government has backed the demands of the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF) in southern Nepal, which borders India, for greater autonomy within a federal set-up. The UDMF launched a lengthy protest in September that blocked essential supplies from India, including fuel, and

caused severe hardships. Despite its denials, New Delhi effectively backed the blockade by supporting the UDMF's political demands.

Oli initially threatened to make his first trip as prime minister to China but under intense pressure changed his plan and instead visited India in February. Prior to the trip, the UDMF ended its blockade. The Modi government signed several agreements during Oli's visit but demanded constitutional reforms to satisfy UDMF demands. India is not concerned about the democratic rights of the Madhesi people but rather is using the UDMF opposition to pressure Kathmandu to align with New Delhi.

Oli visited Beijing in March and signed a raft of deals, including to open up more transit routes through China and to allow the use of Chinese ports for trade. Construction projects included a new pipeline, an international airport for the city of Pokhara and a new bridge from the Chinese border town of Hilsa into Nepal.

China is seeking to consolidate relations with Nepal to counter India and the US. As part of its "pivot to Asia" to maintain regional supremacy, the US is engaged in far-reaching efforts, which include Nepal, to encircle China diplomatically and militarily. Washington is seeking to harness India as a frontline state in its preparations for war against China.

India has its own regional and global ambitions but is increasingly developing its strategic partnership with the US. India and the US are determined to keep Nepal, which is located in the underbelly of China, within their sphere of influence. US Secretary of State John Kerry announced plans in April to visit Nepal in November.

Last week, during remarks to the Senate on the 2017 budget, US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Nisha Desai Biswal backed Indian demands that Nepal should "ensure that the new constitution—as well as any implementing law—is inclusive and has the broadest possible support in every part of the country." It was an obvious signal of support for the UDMF.

Last weekend the Madhesi organisations and other minority groups organised in a "Federal Alliance" began a new round of protests in Kathmandu. They are demanding a "re-demarcation of [the] seven-province model of federal structure, inclusiveness and proportionate representation of marginalised groups and ethnic minorities including the Madhesis,

indigenous groups and Dalits in all the state bodies."

All of these organisations and groups represent layers of the various elites that are seeking to exploit the oppression of the minorities to advance their own economic and political interests within a federal framework. They have certainly been encouraged by political support from the US and India as well as the opposition NCP.

NCP General Secretary Shashanka Koirala told the media last week that he sympathised with the protesters and declared "their genuine demands should be addressed through peaceful means of dialogue." The protestors clashed with riot police after they began demonstrating in the administrative districts of Kathmandu near the prime minister's office.

The political turmoil is certain to continue. Reflecting the aims of the Indian government, the *Hindu* editorial cited above declared: "While the attempt has been stalled for the moment, it may be only a matter of time before the number-crunchers get to work to forge an alternative coalition in the 601-member Parliament [in Nepal]."



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