

Few Political Alternatives for Nepal: India's Economic Blockade

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Global Research, December 02, 2015

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

A blockade on indispensable fuel and other essentials imported from India now enters a third month. The crisis reached a new low last week when [Indian troops reportedly crossed illegally](#) into Nepal and shot at least four people.

Nepal's diplomatic overtures towards India have proved ineffective in overcoming the standoff at their shared border. Indian authorities continue to insist that Nepal revise its constitution to accommodate Madhesi demands. This population claims the [new constitution](#) marginalizes them and insist on a more prominent place in the constitution.

The two neighbors have peacefully resolved differences (usually to India's advantage) in the past. One leading voice in Nepal, publisher Kunda Dixit argues that [Nepal has no choice](#) but to concede. No choice, arguably because Nepal has unwisely grown over-dependent on the South Asian giant for necessary commodities like fuel. Small wonder the interruption of fuel supplies has brought life for the four million inhabitants of the capital and residents of other cities to a standstill. Schools and businesses are closing; there is a [critical shortage](#) of medicines and tourists are cancelling visits at the height of the trekking season.

A steadily flow of aid and political patronage from India had become the norm in Nepal. Every political party and leader, monarch or prime minister, bears some responsibility for this dependence and for Nepal's lopsided relation with India. Nepal never made a serious attempt, even after the Maoist revolutionary success (The People's War) in 2006, to develop a self-sustainable economic model or seek an alternative to Indian dominance beyond another kind of dependence, namely western charity (including Australian, New Zealand and Japanese). Nepal's NGO industry never challenges the traditional model; rather it reinforces Nepal's consumer economy and lack of self confidence. This is furthered by a new reliance on remittances (used to purchase yet more imported goods) from the hundreds of thousands of unskilled men, former farmers, who flock to Malaysia and the Arab Gulf states seeking work.

During the past decade, China, Nepal's equally giant and wealthy neighbor, has increased its presence in Nepal. One finds more Chinese products in the market every year; Chinese-made carpets have displaced Nepal's once thriving carpet industry established by refugee Tibetans. Increasing numbers of Chinese tourists join Europeans on Himalayan trails while other Chinese visitors invest in businesses in the capital. ("Chinatown" is a new quarter in Kathmandu's city center.)

The Tibetan Buddhist presence is thriving in Kathmandu Valley, but today that influence is being directed from India, not Tibet, with substantial financial support coming from Europe. The mountain peoples of Nepal such as the Sherpa and Mustangi who once had significant

exchange with Tibet, are now south-oriented, their communication with Tibet having almost disappeared over the 60 years since China established its rule there.

The Chinese government hasn't ignored Nepal. It was a major presence after last spring's earthquake and might have been stronger had the tremors themselves not interrupted northern access routes. Because those roads cut through the highest passes in the world Chinese assistance and influence is limited in normal times.

No one views China as an alternative to India, although in today's fuel crisis Nepal is negotiating emergency shipments of gas and petrol from China to Kathmandu. What is needed is not a temporary solution however. Nepalese people and their leadership have taken the easiest economic route, charity and big brother support—a flawed strategy that now manifests itself in this unprecedented crisis. Long term options are available, but is there the leadership to pursue them?

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