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Issue Brief

Sino-Nepali Military Drills 2017: Challenging Indian influence in South Asia?

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May 09, 2017

A ten-day joint military exercises, code-named “Sagarmatha friendship 2017” (Nepali name for Mount Everest), commenced in Nepal from April 16-25 in Nepal Army’s Maharajgunj-based Training School in Kathmandu.¹ The basic aim of this military drill was to prepare to



counter the threat of terrorism which is looming at an ever increasing rate all around the region.

According to officials from the Nepali Army, this was a: “Military drill organized by two countries as a part of their preparedness against terrorism that has posed a serious threat globally.”² The most interesting aspect of this military drill codenamed “Pratikar-1” was that it focused more on training Nepali soldiers in dealing with hostage scenarios involving international terror groups.³ This was the first time that China offered a joint military exercise which was accepted by Nepal. Before this, the Nepali army has long been conducting military exercises with both the American and Indian Army.

The two countries initially planned to hold battalion scale military exercises. After facing strong opposition from the Indian side, Nepal scaled down the size of the military exercise and changed the venue to a military school.

There is a sense of disquiet in India over the growing proximity between Nepal and China, but primarily over the military exercises. Growing influence of China in Nepal have sent alarm bells ringing in the Indian establishment which would never want any sort of increase in Chinese influence in the Himalayan nation. This would be a direct threat to India’s long-held South Asian hegemonic mentality and its quest for regional supremacy.

¹ “Nepal, China Hold First-Ever joint Military Exercises”, *April 16, 2017*, The Economic Times

² “Sino-Nepali military drill from Sunday: NA”, *April 14, 2017*. Kathmandu Post.

³ Anu Kusuma, “China, Nepal to hold first ever joint military drill in 2017”, *April 19, 2017*, wcalifornia.com

Therefore, these military drills were closely monitored by India, as it is playing the role of “big brother” to its tiny neighbour. Throughout history, Nepal has been dependent on India for its major imports. However, the previous administration of Khadga Prasad Oli aggressively courted China as part of a nationalist drive to decrease the country’s reliance on New Delhi. But the current government of Pushpa Kamal Dahal in Nepal is trying to repair muddled ties with Delhi while continuing to accept cash from its powerful northern neighbour. China has made lavish and grandiose infrastructure promises to Nepal, including recently pledging \$8.3 billion in investment equivalent to nearly 40 percent of its entire GDP.⁴

It is crystal clear that since the last decade China has been making significant strides in terms of extending its influence into South Asia, largely through loans and infrastructure projects. One such project is the proposed Kerung-Kathmandu-Pokhara-Lumbini railway, a connecting cross-border railway line. This is of some importance for both China and Nepal, as it will be an integral link in Xi Jinping’s “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative, while also providing a potentially lucrative trade route for land-locked Nepal.⁵ India has already conveyed to Beijing its strong opposition to CPEC on grounds that it runs through Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK).⁶

The Nepali PM’s decision to support China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative to link Asia with Europe, Middle East and Africa is unlikely to please India, since the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a part of that initiative.

It is quite clear that China's continued attempts to reach out to Nepal in recent years have sent alerts across the Indian establishment which has been desperately trying to minimize Beijing’s role in the Himalayan nation. A guess can be hazarded that China’s main purpose was to send a message to India that it will continue to engage with Nepal and nothing will deter it from expanding its influence. This will indeed put India in a paranoid spin because any advances by China in Nepal are a direct threat for Indian ambitions for regional supremacy.

⁴ “Nepal, China begin first-ever joint military exercises”, *April 16, 2017*, Defense and Diplomacy

⁵ Cal Wong, “Nepal and China Conclude Military Drills”, *May 02, 2017*, The Diplomat

⁶ “China invites India to join OBOR CPEC” , *April 08, 2017*, The Times of Islamabad.