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## India and China's Tug of War Over Nepal

By Kamal Dev Bhattarai  
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In the last week of December, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) announced that it is planning to hold its first-ever joint military exercise with Nepal. Though Chinese military assistance to Nepal has significantly increased in recent years, this is the first time that China has proposed a joint military exercise — and Nepal accepted.

The development came as Nepal is proposing to change some provisions of the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty with India. The treaty states that Nepal needs to inform or receive consent from India when it purchases military hardware from third countries.

By amending the treaty, Nepal wants to change such provisions and make independent decisions on security issues, including the purchase of military equipment. However, India is still the largest supplier of military hardware to the Nepali Army and the two armies enjoy an excellent relationship. Since 1950, it has been a custom for the two countries to confer honors on each other's army chiefs, which signifies their close military-to-military ties.

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Despite that closeness, in recent years it has become clear that Nepal is willing to change its military relationship with India. When China's announced its joint military exercise with Nepal, which will take place in February, there were reports that India expressed unhappiness over the decision. Though there has been no official announcement from the Indian government

expressing displeasure, reports from Indian media and experts indicate that New Delhi is not happy.

There is no reason that India should worry about a Nepal-China military exercise. China is far from the only country with the distinction of conducting such drills with Nepal. In fact, Nepal and India have their own annual military exercise already in place. Similarly, there is an annual Nepal-U.S. military drill. India has no right to say that Nepal cannot conduct military exercises with another partner — in this case, China. Nepal has the sovereign right to make that decision.

In addition, India has its own joint military exercise with China. Even though relations between India and China soured in 2016, due (among other factors) to China's reluctance to support India in its bid to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group, both countries conducted a 13-day joint military exercise in November 2016. This was the sixth iteration of the India-China joint military exercise. India's own experience with China should reassure it that joint exercises are not an indicator of converging strategic interests.

Despite this, Indian experts remain concerned. A China expert in New Delhi, Jayadeva Ranade, told [Voice of America](#) recently that India would be watching carefully to see what the Nepal-China military exercise signifies: "Is it a trend for introducing military-to-military relations on an expanding scale or is it a one-off?"

Indian analysts predict the drill will cause concern in New Delhi, which sees China encroaching in India's backyard. "We [India] look at Nepal as part of our strategic space, so there is a bit of contest taking place there," Ranade told [VOA](#).

India wants to maintain Nepal as its "sphere of influence," while China wants to increase its clout. India sees China's growing influence in Nepal as not only related to trade and commerce, but a part of China's larger strategy to encircle it in South Asia.

Indeed, recent moves offer a clear indication that there is increasing competition between India and China in Nepal. For the long time, India enjoyed almost exclusive influence in Nepal. However, in the last decade, mainly after the abolition of monarchy in 2008, other international players, especially China, have increased their influence in Nepal, mainly on political matters.

At the same time, Chinese diplomacy in Nepal has shifted from "quiet diplomacy" to vocal diplomacy. There are reports that China has increasingly been airing its concerns over the internal political affairs of Nepal, as India has long done. In the past year, China has also been dragged into the game of government changes in Nepal.

After Nepal promulgated its constitution in 2015, and amid the subsequently strained relations with India, interaction and exchanges between Nepal and China substantially improved. After accusations of a blockade (which India denied) at the Nepal-India border, Nepal had to rely on China to meet its everyday essential needs — though its trade with China was not sufficient.

The tensions between Nepal and India provided room for China to increase its influence in all areas of Nepal, including in politics. The Nepali government at the time, led by Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) or CPN-UML Chairman KP Oli, signed a trade and transit agreement with China, ending India's monopoly on Nepal's external trade.

Similarly, several joint Nepal-China infrastructure development projects, including the expansion of railways and road connectivity, gained momentum. The Chinese government was quite happy with Oli, which was evident in the reports carried by Chinese media, including *The Global Times*. After the collapse of Oli-led government, and the formation of a new government led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also called Prachanda, Chinese media published reports and opinion pieces raising questions about the implementation of agreements reached under Oli.

Meanwhile, India hoped that new government under Prachanda would be more favorable to it. Similarly, India expected that China's influence in Nepal would decrease, allowing India would retain its previous position of influence.

Upon taking office, Prachanda announced that he would maintain a balanced approach with regards to both India and China. As a first step, Prachanda sent special envoys to both Delhi and Beijing to brief officials about the priorities of his government as well as the desire keep a balanced relationship with both countries.

But despite the rhetoric, in practice, the Prachanda-led government has faced accusations of tilting toward India. A month after the formation of his new government, Prachanda paid a state visit to India. Soon after Prachanda's visit, Indian President Pranab Mukherjee visited Nepal, this first Indian president to do so in 18 years.

There have been no such high-level visits between Nepal and China since the formation of the new government in Nepal. Plans for both Prachanda's visit to China and Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal are in limbo.

There are reports that Xi, who was supposed to visit Nepal in 2016, canceled his trip due to a lack of preparations to implement China's Belt and Road initiative in the Himalayan country. Of late, China has been pressing Nepal to sign some agreements linked to the Belt and Road, a mega Chinese connectivity project spanning from East Asia to Europe. India's response, however, is not positive.

The problem is not unique to Prachanda. Every recent prime minister in Nepal has faced a tough challenge to balance between the two neighboring countries. It is unfortunate that Nepal's prime ministers and other political leaders are quickly labeled as either pro-Indian or pro-Chinese. Nepal should build a cordial relationship with both of its neighbors to glean the maximum economic benefits for the prosperity of the country.