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China's Military Diplomacy in Nepal: Soft Balancing Against India and Attendant Complications

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China's Military Diplomacy in Nepal: Soft Balancing Against India and Attendant Complications

Atul Kumar

ABSTRACT: Bilateral relations between Nepal and China have made significant strides across a range of sectors in recent years. Their military cooperation, however, has lagged behind. Historically, the strong ties Nepal's armed forces have with the Indian Armed Forces have limited engagement with China. Nepalese monarchs though did maintain connections with China, serving as a conduit for addressing Chinese military interests. Following the protests in Tibet in 2008 and Nepal's transition to a republic the same year, China has expanded its political and military collaboration with Nepal. It has strategically engaged with senior Nepalese military officials through visits, higher command training programmes in China, joint exercises, and regular military aid. Such Chinese efforts aim to bolster Nepal's stance of equidistance from both China and India. Nevertheless, India's longstanding military relations with Nepal and established mechanisms for deeper cooperation often overshadow China's initiatives. Consequently, while Nepal engages in regular military diplomacy with China, it refrains from formal security agreements to maintain a delicate balance between the two regional powers.

KEYWORDS: Nepal-China military relations, Tibet, military diplomacy, India-Nepal ties, Agnipath recruitment scheme

In May 2023, Nepal's major newspapers reported that the Nepal Army (NA) had initiated financial procedures to procure 26 Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), 72 Tactical Vehicles, 10,000 Close Quarter 5.56 mm Rifles, and corresponding ammunition from NORINCO, a Chinese manufacturer specializing in armaments (Giri 2023a; Karki 2023). The substantial NPRs 6 billion (equivalent to US\$45 million) agreement was formalized during the tenure of Nepal's Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, with the specific objective of enhancing the military capabilities of its United Nations (UN) peacekeeping contingent (Bhandari 2023).

A controversy ensued on two accounts: one, the NA chose to accept a bid from a Chinese entity, marked by a poor reputation and at a value of NPRs 77 million per APC, thereby rejecting seemingly more economical and competitive proposals from various Indian companies, which were priced at NPRs 40 million (*Khabarhub.com* 2019). Two, NORINCO's status on the United States Government's sanctioned entity list (US OFAC

2021), also increased apprehensions. Accordingly, the Nepal Army's persistent endorsement of Chinese procurement provoked widespread criticism within both national and international contexts (*Khabarhub.com* 2023a).

Eventually, the Pushpa Kumar Dahal 'Prachanda' led government opted to freeze the NA's Letter of Credit (LC) at the Himalayan Bank, leading to the temporary suspension of the deal. However, the NA leadership remains undeterred in its pursuit of the contract (*Khabarhub.com* 2023b).

This episode provides insight into China's deep engagement with Nepal's senior military echelons and underscores the efficacy of its expanded military diplomacy. This paper endeavours to scrutinize the dimensions and extent of this bilateral military diplomacy. The paper argues that in recent years, China has systematically courted senior military figures in Nepal.

This strategy involves numerous visits, training seats in military leadership courses in China and consistent military assistance to the NA. Such engagement endeavours to strengthen Nepal's inclination toward maintaining equidistance in its relations with both China and India. This development significantly impacts New Delhi, which has traditionally fostered strong military connections with the Nepalese armed forces. In essence, these entrenched affiliations also pose a challenge to China's objectives of soft balancing in Nepal.

Nepal-China Relations: Economic, Cultural, and Social Dimensions

Over the past few decades, China has witnessed a substantial expansion of its overall bilateral relationship. China's economic engagement with Nepal, has made it a prominent destination for Nepal's foreign direct investment (FDI) (Hong and Wan 2014). This economic entwining extends notably into the technology sector, infrastructure development, and the broader business landscape. The tourism sector in Nepal has also reaped benefits from a significant influx of Chinese tourists.

At the civil society level, China's influence has been manifested through the establishment of numerous Confucius Institutes and the incorporation of Mandarin classes in Nepalese schools, with China assuming responsibility for funding teachers' salaries (*Xinhua* 2010; Dhakal 2019). Moreover, China has actively endeavoured to shape the decision-making landscape of Nepal's elite by providing educational and business opportunities to their

offspring (*Xinhua* 2019; Upadhyaya 2023). Chinese diplomats in Nepal have expanded their roles, engaging in negotiations on behalf of Nepal's Communist Party factions and openly advocating Chinese interests at various levels (Giri 2020). Additionally, Nepal's civil society's discontent with perceived missteps by India has provided China with an opportunity to foster deeper connections within Nepal's social, media, and political spheres (*Kantipur* 2014).

Despite these advancements in the economic, social, and cultural spheres, the military relationship between Nepal and China remains an underdeveloped domain. In light of deteriorating relations with India, China has intensified efforts to bolster its security relationships with smaller South Asian states, maintaining substantial ties with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Only Bhutan and Nepal remain outliers, and China aims to rectify this situation.

Nepal-China Military Relations: Three Phases of Military Diplomacy

China has evolved its military diplomacy with Nepal through three discernible phases. The first phase, spanning from 1950 to 2005, witnessed a rudimentary nature in their military relationship. The second phase, occurring between 2005 and 2015, demonstrated a cautious yet evolving dynamic. The current and third phase, commencing in 2015, manifests a determined and continuously strengthening relationship, with visible growth in ties each year.

Initial Phase

The initial phase, extending until 2005, saw a period characterized by a rudimentary military diplomatic relationship. During this interval, Nepal's military engagements with China were constrained, partly due to its historic belligerent role in Tibet, intricate and extensive military ties with India and a prevailing apprehension of China's expansionist ambitions. Concurrently, the Chinese polity underwent multiple upheavals, ranging from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution, interlaced with regular internal leadership struggles. In addition, China's reduced focus on its southwest periphery, owing to multiple economic, political and infrastructure related factors, kept its attention limited to Tibet's security. Therefore, a modest military connection with Nepal served the Chinese purpose and did not raise unnecessary heckles with India.

Two noteworthy events during this phase merit attention. First, in 1974, the Nepalese Army (NA) conducted a military operation against Tibetan Khampa Rebels, aiming to disarm and repatriate them to China (Balestracci 1991). The Khampa Insurgency, running since the late 1950s with the Indian and American support (Wise 1973: 239-262, 557-559), became untenable for Nepal after the US-China rapprochement in 1971. The India-Pakistan War in 1971 and creation of Bangladesh further provided an impetus for Nepal to clamp down on the Khampas and create goodwill in the Chinese camp (Mcgranahan 2006).

As expected, this action helped Nepal garner positive attention from the People's Liberation Army (PLA). China responded by criticizing India for supporting forces opposed to Nepal with arms and training, causing unrest in the Himalayan kingdom (Gokhale 2021). Nepal's Khampa clampdown also led to the second notable event. In 1987-88, Nepal's King Birendra Vikram Shah procured a substantial quantity of military materiel, including anti-aircraft guns and AK-47 rifles, from China (Sengupta 1989). These arms purchases, especially the anti-aircraft guns became a bone of contention between Nepal and India. The issue became a significant factor contributing to the expiration of the 1989 Nepal-India treaty, precipitating a trade and transit crisis (Singh 1989).

During this period, China kept its focus in Nepal on firm support to the reigning king while extracting maximum leverage on the Tibet issue. China's links with the Palace and its steadfast support proved enough as the King, in his role as Commander-in-Chief of Nepal Armed Forces, was the competent authority to deliver on military matters. The bilateral military ties between Nepal and China therefore, remained underdeveloped.

Second Phase

The second phase, spanning from 2005 to 2015, witnessed an improved but cautious military relationship. It picked up momentum when King Gyanendra turned to China for weapons against the domestic insurgency (*BBC* 2005; Lall 2005). Due to the king's clampdown on democratic forces, Nepal's traditional arms suppliers namely, India, the US and the UK refrained from arms sales, linking their support to the restoration of democracy in Nepal. Therefore, Nepal sought China's military support, leading to progress in military ties and enhanced cooperation in multiple other bilateral domains.

However, the Chinese side followed a soft approach in developing their linkages with the NA. The PLA began offering seats in their training institutions to NA military officers,

including in their higher command courses at the PLA's National Defense University (NDU) (Chalise 2016). China focused its special attention to the cooperation in medical sector and assistance to enhance NA's disaster management capabilities (Pradhan 2011). The NA's capacity buildup for its UN Peacekeeping Operations emerged as the third area of major cooperation (Yao 2018). However, as evident from most China-funded projects globally, these contracts were invariably won by Chinese firms (Haqqani and Ahmad 2022). Thereafter, these Chinese companies brought their machinery, capital goods and majority of its labour from China, reducing in effect, Nepal's economic benefit from these projects (Wakabayashi, Sharma and Fu 2023).

Starting from 2005, Nepal consistently received a subdued but continuous flow of military supplies and grants from China. Following the transition to democracy in Nepal, China quickly realised that its relationship with the palace was not enough to ensure its military objectives in Nepal (Jaiswal 2014). Furthermore, during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Nepal's Tibetan Community mobilized massive anti-China demonstrations (*AFP* 2008). The resultant apprehension within the Chinese government compelled a reassessment of its stance towards Nepal's political dynamics, necessitating a strategic alignment.

Historically, China had adopted a cautious approach towards engaging with Nepal's Communist Parties, particularly those against the monarchy (Jaiswal 2014). However, Nepal's transition to a republic in 2008 precipitated a shift in geopolitical dynamics, prompting China to reevaluate its diplomatic strategies. Amidst the pro-Indian Nepali Congress and the pro-China Maoists, China had little choice but to cultivate proximity with the Maoist faction. Consequently, as the Maoists surged in influence during the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections, China solidified its alliances with them and strategically positioned itself within Nepal's evolving political landscape.

The Maoists reciprocated eagerly, and the newly-elected Prime Minister, Prachanda, departed from tradition by making Beijing his inaugural destination for a state visit. Thereafter, China's military relationship with Nepal received an upswing.

Military officers of the two sides began visiting each other frequently. In 2008, Nepal's Defence Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa signed a military assistance agreement with China amounting to US\$2.6 million for the modernization of the NA (Bhattarai 2019). Subsequently, in 2009, China announced military aid worth US\$3 million to the NA, a

figure that grew to US\$7.7 million in 2011 during the visit of PLA Army Chief Gen. Chen Bingde (*Xinhua* 2012). In June 2013, China's State Councillor Yang Jiechi signed an agreement to construct the National Armed Police Force Academy, solidifying the military ties between the two nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 2013).

This soft approach and a cautious engagement with Nepal while an eye towards Indian reaction, marked this phase of China's military diplomacy. The objectives remained firmly to develop bilateral military ties, enhance capabilities of NA's crucial operational edge and through seats in its training institutions, influence the future generations of NA officers and develop leverage over the NA's future top leadership.

Post-2015: Military Ties Focused on Soft Balancing

The India-Nepal dispute over Nepal's Constitution and the subsequent Madhesi trade blockade in 2015-16 marked the onset of the third and ongoing phase in Nepal-China military relations (Majumder 2015; Dixit 2015). During this period, a multiparty consensus emerged within Nepal to enhance its military ties with China, reinforcing its traditional equidistance strategy vis-à-vis both neighbouring major powers (Anderson 2014; Ghimire 2015; Iyengar 2016).

For China, the event offered a multidimensional opportunity to develop its relationship with Nepal's various institutions. Nepal's political and economic eagerness to balance India led to its agreements with China in logistics, infrastructure, port access and other domains (*myRepublica* 2018a). China deemed it as an appropriate moment to nudge Nepal in its soft balancing efforts vis-à-vis India.

Moreover, in 2017, Nepal officially joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's flagship international development programme. Therefore, China significantly advanced its diplomatic manoeuvres to court proximity with Nepal and especially with its armed forces. Then Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan's visit to Nepal in March culminated in the conclusion of a substantial US\$32.3 million grant assistance agreement (Ghimire 2017). This funding aimed to bolster Nepal's disaster handling capabilities and provide equipment for its UN peacekeeping forces. Furthermore, China completed the construction of the National Armed Police Force Academy, which it handed over to Nepal in June (Embassy of China in Nepal 2017). The year also witnessed the inaugural joint military drill named 'Sagarmatha Friendship 1 Counter-Terror Exercise,' conducted at the NA's Maharajgunj Training School (*PTI* 2018).

Further in 2018, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, during his visit to China, formalized several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) aimed at strengthening military cooperation (*Xinhua* 2018). These agreements covered areas such as training, hardware acquisition for humanitarian and disaster management, and the provision of medical and other equipment for peacekeeping forces. China also increased the number of seats in its military academies for training NA officers. Additionally, Nepal sought Chinese support in the establishment of a defence university (Giri 2022; *myRepublica* 2018b).

Simultaneously, the Oli government made the decision to curtail its military cooperation with India in 2018 (Lo 2018). This shift was underscored by Nepal's refusal to participate in the inaugural Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) military exercise in October. Instead, Nepal sent an army contingent to participate in the Sagarmatha 2 Exercise in Chengdu, China, during the same month (Subedi 2018). Although the Nepal-China exercise was confined to the platoon level in a paratrooper training school, in contrast to India's annual battalion-level field exercises, it suggested a notable progression toward China diminishing India's monopoly over Nepal's military ties (Liu Z. 2017).

The Interregnum

A new NA chief, General Purna Chandra Thapa arrived with a comprehensive house cleaning agenda in 2019. He concentrated on eliminating corruption in the army, reforming civil-military relations and ensuring a fine balance between India and China in NA's military ties (*The Kathmandu Post* 2018). Therefore, the envisioned Sagarmatha 3 Exercise, slated to take place in Nuwakot, Nepal, in 2019, experienced a downgrade. The initial concept of a "joint military exercise" focused on counterterrorism, high-altitude warfare, and disaster response capabilities was restricted to merely "enhancing mutual capabilities". Ultimately, the exercise was cancelled at the last hour, indicating intense Indian lobbying and a rethink in Nepal over limits to its hedging strategy in the evolving regional security dynamics (Giri 2023b).

Thereafter, Nepal-China bilateral military ties remained subdued during the entire COVID period, spanning from 2020-22. China did send medical supplies and vaccines to Nepal (*The Himalayan* 2020). However, due to China's own restrictive regulations during this period, hardly any military interaction of note took place. Nepal on its part, also sealed its borders with China to avoid the COVID from spreading (Upadhyaya 2020).

It was only in 2023, that borders reopened and ties resumed. In August 2023, during the visit of Major General Yue Ande of the PLA's Tibet Military Command to Nepal, both armies agreed to resume the Sagarmatha exercise series (Giri 2023b). Furthermore, China extended invitations to numerous seats in its training institutions for officers from the NA. Initially, the PLA's NDU allocated six seats, later adjusted to four. Despite the reduction, Nepal chose to utilize only two seats in 2023, confirming its commitment to send officers for training.¹ As a result, the military relations between the two nations are gradually entering the resumption phase in 2024.

Major Issues Affecting Nepal-China Military Relations

Among all South Asian nations, China's military diplomacy with Nepal is the weakest. A multitude of factors has limited the military interactions between Nepal and China. A larger role in this phenomenon is played by Nepal's military relations with India and its traditional reliance on its southern neighbour.

Indian Role

Ties between Nepal and the Indian Army have historically been strong. Since 1950, both armies have conferred a honorary rank of General of their respective Armies to each other's Chiefs of Staff. This bond is further reinforced by the substantial presence of approximately 36,000 Gorkha personnel within the Gorkha Regiments of the Indian Army (Ethirajan 2023). In addition, a sizable population of about 140,000 retired Gorkha personnel from the Indian Army, receive pensions totalling around US\$600 million from India (Jha 2023). These retirees maintain robust social, cultural, and institutional connections with their former regiments, including through access to medical and other facilities.

Consequently, Nepal's military affiliations with India surpass its engagements with China (Guo and Zhuo 2022). An illustrative example highlighting the predominant nature of this association is the resolution of the 2015-16 Madhesi Blockade during the visit of the Nepalese Army's Chief of Staff to India (Ghimire 2016). The enduring institutional bonds and linkages between the two nations have proven resilient over time, often serving as crucial mechanisms for navigating complex issues. This interdependence

¹ Author's interview with Nepalese strategic affairs experts, December 2023.

strategically plays a role in mitigating Chinese influence within Nepal's security establishment.

Even in the APC controversy, the NA Officials argue that the Indian bids contained APCs which even Indian Army did not induct in its service. Therefore, for Nepal, it could have become a potential headache in the long run. Any future incidents with these vehicles would have given a field day to anti-Indian elements in Nepal. Instead, Nepal has offered to induct different vehicles from Indian companies. Moreover, Nepali officials argue that China's NORINCO has previously supplied armoured vehicles to Nepal (SIPRI Arms Trade Register 2005). NORINCO not only supplies their military materiel in the field, but also provides spare parts and services in the field to the NA peacekeeping forces in Africa.² Therefore, it is convenient for the NA to purchase these goods from the Chinese company. This explains the NA's decision to stick with the Chinese APCs.

As expected, there is a palpable apprehension in China concerning perceived Indian influence (*The Paper* 2018), reinforced by suspicions surrounding the cancellation of the 2019 edition of the Sagarmatha Joint Military Exercise. This underscores the geopolitical complexities inherent in Nepal's security dynamics and the delicate balance maintained by invoking longstanding ties to address regional pressures. However, certain actions by India have compelled Nepal to balance its relationship with China and diminish India's monopolistic dominance over trade, transit, economic, and social ties.

India's new Agnipath recruitment scheme for its soldiers has also generated controversy with Nepal. The latter has prevented Gorkha recruitments in the Indian Army since 2021, and this change in traditional military ties could also shape the wider relationship (Deshpande 2023). Nepal's political, economic and even socio-cultural relations with India have undergone multiple pleasant and unpleasant phases. In contrast, Nepal's Gurkha linkage with the Indian Army has stayed as the solid rock providing a comfortable foundation to the relationship. As explained above, during most difficult phases, the military-to-military links have played behind the scenes to minimise the impact and resolve the situation. However, these ties are currently at risk.

Since 2022, as the Agnipath Plan came into fruition, Nepal Government has consistently refused to send Gurkha candidates in the recruitment rounds for the Indian Army. Nepal

² Author's interview with Nepalese military experts, December 2023.

considers it as the violation of the tripartite treaty between India, the UK and Nepal on Gurkha troops (Giri 2023d). Moreover, Nepal remains concerned that a sizeable number of military trained youth will come back without jobs after four years and may destabilise the society.

As the Indian recruitment option dries up, numerous Gurkha soldiers have begun looking abroad for soldiering opportunities. There is a brigade of Gurkhas (6,000 troops) fighting on the Russian side and some are even present on the Ukrainian side (Sharma 2023; Giri 2023c).³ Nearly 300 Gurkha soldiers have died in the conflict (Pradhan 2023). The French Foreign Legion has become the second such avenue (Fan 2017; Anupam 2023). In the last few years, Gurkhas have constituted the largest recruited group in the French Foreign Legion. And finally, there are rumours of a possible Chinese attempt to recruit Gurkhas in future (Giri 2023d). Since Hong Kong has a history of employing Gurkha troops, it will not be difficult to recruit Gurkhas in large number through this route (Gurung 2017).

If Gurkha recruitment remains on the freeze in the Indian Army, within next decade and half, the India's military linkages with Nepal will suffer irrevocably. There will be collateral impact on socio-cultural, political and other ties as well. Then, China's sustained push in Nepal to reduce Indian leverage will gain further momentum.

Institutional Suspicion in Nepal

In South Asia, China's territorial claims in Nepal have been relatively minimal compared to its claims vis-à-vis Bhutan, India, and other neighbouring states (Liu L. 2017; Bristow 2022; Anupam 2021).⁴ During the visit of Communist Party of China (CPC) General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping to Nepal in 2019, both even proposed to facilitate joint border management and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the issue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal 2019).

³ Author's interview with Nepalese military experts and scholars, November 2023.

⁴ Nepal and China have minor territorial disputes. The first dispute over Mount Everest was settled in 1960 when China agreed that the mountain belonged to Nepal. However, a dispute over its exact height and the name remained. Both Nepal and China agreed on the height of 8848.86 meters in 2020 (*Xinhua* 2020). However, the name Mount Everest has remained a point of contention as China claims it to be a colonial hangover. The second dispute is over the location of border pillar no. 57 in Nepal's Dolakha district involving six hectares of land. This issue has kept the China-Nepal Fourth Border Protocol on hold and halted all border negotiations. (Shrestha 2013: 59-74) The third dispute is over nine buildings in Limi of Humla which Kathmandu has accused China of constructing illegally on Nepal's land. Some media reports also claim minor encroachments in most of Nepal's border districts facing China (*Online Khabar* 2020).

Since the 1950s, China has pursued a strategic objective of fostering stronger relations with Nepal to achieve multiple objectives. The first and foremost Chinese objective has been to prevent the strengthening of anti-China elements within Nepal (Ren 2014). This remains a perennial concern even today and dictates Chinese actions on the Nepal border consistently. Securing Tibetan borders, stopping fleeing Tibetans from reaching India and eliminating Tibetan activism in Nepal are China's main objectives. It expects Nepal to help through all of its forces, including the NA, to help achieve it.

Nepal has often met China's expectation. The disarmament and repatriation of Khampa rebels to China in 1974 was the earliest one (Balestracci 1991). In later years, Nepal has clamped down on Tibetan protests against China in Nepal (Arrouas 2014). It has also deported hundreds of Tibetans to China, even at the cost of condemnation by Western states and international institutions (*UN News* 2003; Pan 2003; Sharma 2016).

China's second main objective is encouraging Nepal to cultivate a balanced military relationship between China and India. This objective has become prominent during the democratic period, after the abolition of monarchy. China has encouraged this recalibration through consistent military grants, the provision of officer training positions, joint military exercises, and numerous high-level military leadership visits, strategically orchestrated to position China as a credible alternative to India.

Notably, China portrayed the 2015-16 crisis as a potential instance of ethnic separatist unrest, allegedly influenced and abetted by India (Liu Z. 2017). Consequently, Chinese military diplomacy presented itself as a tool, to counteract India's perceived hegemonic control over Nepal's affairs and to forestall Nepal's domestic ethnic separatism.

A salient illustration of China's assertiveness is evident in the construction of the National Armed Police Force Academy. A parallel Indian pledge to construct the Nepal Police Academy has remained unfulfilled since 1995 (Chowdhury 2018; *myRepublica* 2022). In stark contrast, China initiated construction in 2015 and efficiently completed the Armed Police Force Academy project by 2017, underscoring its expeditious approach (*Xinhua* 2017).

Nevertheless, Nepal's institutional level of trust in China remains low. Bilateral engagements with China appear transactional, predominantly motivated by individual gains for Nepalese elite. For instance, the procurement of the APCs has raised concerns about price inflation and corruption among senior Nepalese Army officials

(*Khabarhub.com* 2023b). Comparable trajectories in Chinese arms sales to other South Asian and African nations, such as the submarine sale to Bangladesh, projects in Sri Lanka, Zambia and the Maldives, and mega projects in Pakistan, have also been marred by corruption allegations (Zheng 2023; Lionel 2020; Sirilal and Aneez 2015). Nepal's experience in this regard aligns with the broader Chinese patterns of dishonest practices observed in the region.

Complications in Nepal-China Bilateral Relations

Bilateral relations between Nepal and China have also experienced complications over the years. In terms of the economy, Nepal, has recognized latent risks in China's economic and strategic approaches toward smaller nations. China's performance in Nepal's infrastructure development has not been free of disputes. Numerous major infrastructure projects contracted to Chinese companies in Nepal have remained incomplete (Giri 2023e). Progress on investment projects under the BRI, announced by Chinese President Xi and officials in 2019 and subsequent years, has been notably absent in Nepal. Road and rail connectivity projects envisioned under the BRI have seen limited advancement. As a result, Nepalese officials have exercised caution in engaging with China's commercial loans, opting to accept only grants.

In addition, Nepal's communist politicians over the years have reverted to the equidistance strategy between China and India in their political and developmental orientation, especially after the 'unofficial Chinese blockade' during 2020-21 of Nepal (Prasain 2021). Nepal has realised that despite the difficulties, it is far more profitable to trade through India than China in the long run (Shrestha 2021).

As expected, during Prime Minister Dahal's 2023 visit to Beijing, Nepal declined to endorse China's Global Security Initiative (Pandey 2023). Additionally, objections were raised when China sought to incorporate the Pokhara Airport Project under the BRI, with Nepalese officials arguing that the airport project's agreement predated Nepal's formal endorsement of the BRI program (Khatiwada 2023).

This nuanced and cautious stance on both sides of Nepal's political spectrum has constrained China's potential to deepen military links with Nepal's armed forces. While Nepal's decision-makers remain amenable to the Nepalese Army's regular military diplomacy with China, the latter's leverage and efforts to soft balance India remain limited.

Additionally, subdued military interactions with China enable Nepal to garner support from Western powers for both economic and military assistance (Wang 2022).

Future Trends

Ties between Nepal and China have seen significant advancements across various sectors over the years. However, their military ties have remained relatively underdeveloped. Initially, Nepal's armed forces were small and closely tied to the Indian establishment, resulting in minimal engagement with China. Nevertheless, shifts in the international security landscape and China's growing concern for Tibet's security prompted the Chinese political leadership to foster positive relations with Nepalese monarchs. The Nepalese king, as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, served as a focal point for addressing Chinese military interests.

Following Nepal's transition to a republic in 2008 and facing Tibetan protests ahead of the Beijing Olympics, China opted to expand its political and military cooperation with Nepal comprehensively. Subsequently, military collaboration between the two countries has increased steadily, benefiting Nepal in disaster management, capacity-building for UN Peacekeeping Forces, and military equipment procurement. Joint military exercises, such as "Sagarmatha," and training opportunities for Nepalese armed forces personnel in Chinese military institutions have also been undertaken. However, the military relationship experienced a setback during 2020-23 due to the COVID pandemic, with activities resuming only after borders reopened in 2023.

Moreover, China's efforts to influence Nepal's political landscape and societal fabric through elite capture, narrative-shaping, and various connections have been notable. These endeavours aim to pressure the Nepalese government into achieving a more balanced military relationship between China and India. Despite this, India's longstanding ties with the Nepalese armed forces and formal mechanisms for deeper collaboration often overshadow Chinese initiatives against India.

The cultural, religious, and linguistic affinity shared between the Indian and Nepalese militaries and populations further solidifies the bond, presenting a challenge for China. Additionally, institutional suspicions and the lacklustre performance of Chinese companies in Nepal's major infrastructure projects diminish China's influence and push for parity with India.

Consequently, while Nepal maintains a comfort level with regular military diplomacy with China, it refrains from formalizing security agreements to preserve a delicate equilibrium between the two regional powers. Nepal's aspiration to benefit economically from both India and China while upholding an equidistant policy underscores its strategic stance. Despite China's determination to alter this dynamic, its efforts have yet to yield significant results.

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