

Chinese defence minister visits Nepal to boost political and military ties

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Last week's visit to Nepal by Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe was aimed at strengthening political and military ties between Kathmandu and Beijing. The landlocked and poverty-stricken Himalayan country has become another focal point in the geo-political rivalry between India and the US on one side, and China on the other.

Wei's high-level trip, which occurred as tensions increased between Nepal and its southern neighbour India, is a part of Beijing's efforts to counter Washington's economic-strategic offensive. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has effectively transformed his country into a front line state in the US war-drive against China.

During his 10-hour visit, Wei, who is a serving People's Liberation Army (PLA) general and a state councillor, met with Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, President Bidya Devi Bhandari and Army Chief Purna Chandra Thapa, before flying to Pakistan.

Oli reiterated Nepal's commitment to a "One-China policy" and that Nepalese land will never be allowed to be used against China. He also said that his government was committed to recent agreements reached between the two countries and that Kathmandu wanted to learn from China's "steadfast progress on socio-economic fronts."

Wei is the most senior Chinese official to visit Nepal since Chinese President Xi Jinping's trip last year and only the second defence minister to visit in the past two decades. The visit, he declared, was aimed at "enhancing mutual military assistance" and further strengthening relations. The general promised to safeguard Nepal's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. While India was not named, Wei's remarks were clearly related to Kathmandu's border dispute with New Delhi.

Kathmandu Post reported on November 24 the "major takeaway" of Wei's visit "is an understanding on resuming Chinese supplies of various non-lethal military aid to Nepal, which had been halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic." It noted that the "resumption of training and student exchange programs, and following up on defence assistance" were also discussed.

On arriving in Nepal, Wei went first to the Nepalese Army headquarters where he was received with a guard of honour. He spent two hours there before meeting Oli.

An official Nepalese Army statement said: "Wei and the delegation viewed both the proposals positively and affirmed that bilateral cooperation should resume as soon as possible, including the exchange of high-level visits. Wei also pledged to provide additional assistance to the Nepal Army in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic."

A three-member Chinese delegation arrived in Nepal several days prior to Wei's visit and raised various "concerns" with Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who are co-chairmen of the Stalinist Nepal Communist Party (NCP) and Bahadur Deuba, leader of the main opposition Nepali Congress.

While the delegation's "concerns" have not been revealed, they probably discussed an ongoing factional dispute between Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal, and allegations by the Nepal Congress that China was grabbing land which belonged to Nepal.

Beijing is heavily involved in efforts to patch up factional differences inside the NCP between Oli and Dahal over the control of the state and party apparatus. Dahal wants Oli to resign as either prime minister or party chair. Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Hao Yankee, is reportedly mediating between the factions to

keep the current government in power.

Relations between Nepal and China were greatly enhanced after the current Oli administration came to power in May 2018 on an anti-Indian platform. Beijing fears that any collapse of the NCP-led government due to factional conflict between Oli and Dahal could reverse its ties with Nepal.

Although India remains Nepal's largest trading partner, Kathmandu is a member of China's \$US1.4 trillion Road and Belt Initiative and hopes to open up trade and investment opportunities. Kathmandu has also signed a transit treaty with Beijing to use Chinese ports for its foreign trade and reduce its dependence on Indian ports. Nepal has already joined China's internet service, ending India's previous monopoly on cyber connectivity in the country.

While Nepal is landlocked and squeezed between India and China, its access to the outside world is mainly through India, a geographical factor exploited by New Delhi to pressure Kathmandu. Nepal's relationship with India, however, has been strained since 2015 when New Delhi imposed an economically damaging five-month fuel blockade on Nepal, prompting an agreement with Beijing for emergency fuel supplies.

Nepal has also blamed a number of Indian-built dike-like structures along the Indo-Nepal border for the flood damaging of thousands of hectares of land. Relations hit another low in November 2019 when India published a map showing a disputed area in northwest Nepal as Indian territory.

Wei's visit occurred as India is increasing its efforts to bring Nepal into its geopolitical orbit. Indian army chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane visited Nepal for three days in early November following a trip by Samant Kumar Goel, head of India's Research & Analysis Wing (RAW)—the country's external intelligence agency, and a two-day visit later in November by Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shring.

India has traditionally considered Nepal, which is strategically located on the Chinese border, within its sphere of influence and is determined to prevent losing Kathmandu to China. In its efforts to woo Nepal, New Delhi is not just defending its own geo-political interests but also functioning as a key military-strategic partner of Washington and its economic and military

aggression against China.

India is also a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or QUAD, which includes the US, Japan and Australia, and is aimed against China. This de facto anti-China military alliance has hardened in recent times as indicated by the participation of all four countries in recent Malabar war games sponsored by India.

Washington's belligerent actions against China are politically destabilising the whole region and greatly enhanced the danger of a major military conflict in Asia-Pacific.



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