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CHINA'S EXTENDED TIES WITH NEPAL

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The year 2014 ended on a positive note for Chinese diplomacy. Foreign minister of the Peoples Republic of China, Wang Yi was on a three-day visit to Kathmandu starting December 25, 2014. The visit which included a seven member delegation along with Wang Yi, was aimed at strengthening the bilateral ties and is considered to have set the stage for the Chinese President Xi Jinping's upcoming visit to Kathmandu. Expressing China's resolve to strengthen its relations with Nepal on the basis of "comprehensive partnership of cooperation featuring ever-lasting friendship", Wang Yi proposed that Nepal can serve as a bridge between China and South Asia.¹Cooperation in the field of agriculture, connectivity, infrastructure, investment, people-to-people contact, security and law enforcement, science and technology, tourism and trade were explored during Wang Yi's talks with his Nepalese counterpart, Mahendra Bahadur Pandey. Notably, China has also extended invitation to Nepal to be a part of its ambitious plan of reviving the ancient Silk Road. Nepal has already inked a four-point document to assure its commitment towards Silk Road Economic Belt initiative.

Wang's visit, which took place just after a month of 2014 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit held in Kathmandu, indicated the Chinese keenness to foster closer relations with Nepal and other South Asian countries. Significant reasons which can be looked into the burgeoning China-Nepal relationship are as follows:

Firstly, the presence of Tibetans in Nepal makes it crucial for China to reach out to Nepal. Currently, approximately 20,000 Tibetans live in Nepal. Importantly, China's foothold in Nepal is crucial not only for its control over Tibet, but also to keep a check on Tibetan refugees in Nepal. It is only due to the cross-border cooperation from the Nepalese government that the number of



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Tibetans crossing border every year has come down from 2000 in 2008 to 200 in 2013. During Wang Yi's visit, there has been a proposal to set up police academy for training officers of Nepal's Armed Police Force. The main task of the trained force would be to guard the regions bordering Tibet. Secondly, China is aware of the fact that for forestalling India's rise as a major Asian power, improving relations with other South Asian countries is a prerequisite. Thirdly, Modi's visit to Japan in September 2014 and, the US President Barack Obama's forthcoming visit to New Delhi is an indication of the fact that India is inching closer to these countries which might have added to the discomfort of China.

India-China Competition in Nepal

The attempt to expand the sphere of influence by India and China in Nepal is an old anecdote. In fact, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has visited Nepal twice last year in August 2014, and again in November 2014, has become the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Nepal in the last seventeen years. To reaffirm India's commitment towards Nepal, India has extended a credit line of US\$ 1 billion for infrastructure building and hydro-power projects in Nepal. So far as China is concerned, Nepal has always occupied an important place in China's foreign policy endeavours. High-level official exchanges of visits between China and Nepal in the last few years testify China's increasing influence in Nepal.ⁱⁱ For instance, Nepal's vice-president Parmanand Jha paid an official visit to Lhasa in September 2014, while Beijing and Lhasa received Nepal's deputy Prime Minister Bam Dev Gautam in October. What is worth mentioning is the high-profile visit of Lobsang Gyaltsen who is the Chairman of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) to Kathmandu in October.

India is concerned about Nepal's increasing overdependence on China, and what could be discomfoting is the Nepalese perception of a rising China which continues to be favourable and friendly.ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, to mould Nepalese perception about China, during the visit, the Chinese Foreign Minister announced that the official aid to Nepal will increase five-fold in the current fiscal year which is aimed at the development of the infrastructure in the landlocked Himalayan state. Additionally, under its 13th five year plan, China intends to extend Qighai-Tibet railway line to



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Kyirong in Nepal by 2020. Interestingly, the railway line was extended from Lhasa to Shigatse in August 2014 and Kyirong land port between Tibet and Nepal was already open in October 2014. This extension will bring Chinese troops closer to the Indian border and is certainly seen as a serious security concern to India.

Conclusion

For China, Wang Yi's visit was crucial and also the forthcoming visit of Xi Jinping would be significant. Enhancing ties with Nepal has been a long-term strategic goal for China and in such a situation; South Asia needs to be a top priority for India. While there are no two views that China is reinforcing its position in the South Asian region, with the new leadership in India, China is also endeavouring to explore new prospects for cooperation with India in the South Asian region. It may be argued that given India's growing stature at the international fora, none of the South Asian countries, except Pakistan, would give preference to China over India. Nepal and other South Asian countries are aware of the fact that prosperity lies in cooperating with India. China seems to have realised that without India's support and willingness, it would be a futile exercise to get into South Asia. Therefore, proposing India-China-Nepal trilateral mechanism could be a step in this direction. India-China-Nepal triangle certainly has the potential to shape the evolving security and economic architecture of the region. To what extent this triangle materialises remains to be seen, and would depend on China's balanced and prudent diplomacy and relations with India and Nepal's sustained interest and domestic peace and tranquillity.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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ⁱ "Nepal can Bridge China, South Asia", at <http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2014/12/26/top-stories/nepal-can-bridge-china-sasia/271278.html>, 26 December 2014, accessed on 2 January 2014.



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ⁱⁱSana Hashmi, "China's Footprint in South Asia: A Concern for India", *Defence and Diplomacy*, vol. 2, no. 2, January-March 2013, p. 63.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shambhu Ram Simkhada, "Nepal: A Benign Neighbourhood Power" in S.D. Muni and Tan Tai Yong, eds., *A Resurgent China: South Asian Perspectives* (India: Routledge, 2012), pp. 145-175.

