

# With eye on China, India and US to conduct 'high altitude training in Uttarakhand'

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Printed from  
TIMESOFINDIA.COM | Aug 11, 2022, 08.08 PM  
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THE TIMES OF INDIA



NEW DELHI: In a move that is sure to ring alarm bells in Beijing, India and US have decided to conduct high-altitude combat training in Uttarakhand near the border with China this October, according to a report by Nikkei Asia.

The annual joint exercise Yudh Abhyas (War Practice) will be held from October 18 to 31, the US Army Pacific confirmed to Nikkei Asia.

## Taiwan president says China's military threat has not decreased

While the joint exercises are not new, the location, nature and timing all have geopolitical significance, especially coming after China's unprecedented drills surrounding Taiwan over the past week.

US Army Pacific's Maj. Jonathan Lewis, who handles public affairs, told Nikkei Asia that the plan for this year's exercise focuses on cold-weather operations, and at high altitude -- an environment that poses distinct challenges.

### **100km from Line of Actual Control**

Media reports said that the drills will take place in Uttarakhand's Auli region at an altitude of over 3,000 meters. The training will be held less than 100 kilometers from the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Jeff Smith, a research fellow for South Asia at the Heritage Foundation's Asian Studies Center, said that Yudh Abhyas was held in Uttarakhand in 2014, 2016 and 2018. But the training was conducted in the foothills, over 300 km from the LAC.

Last year's exercise also focused on high-altitude, cold-climate training, but was conducted in Alaska.

### **A new front**

Pankaj Jha, a professor of defense and strategic studies at O.P. Jindal Global University, said China will likely be concerned as the US could be trying to showcase that "they may be looking at another front for [tackling] China" if it increases pressure on Taiwan.

### **China's first white paper on Taiwan since Xi came to power**

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More than the exercise itself, "it is the US involvement [in the drill] that should be a matter of concern for China," he said.

### **Timing of exercise**

The exercise will be held just before Chinese President Xi Jinping enters the quinquennial Chinese Communist Party National Congress, where he is widely expected to seek a third term as the party's general secretary.

Similar to the visit to Taiwan by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the drills come in a politically sensitive season for the Chinese leader.

### **Closer India-US ties**

Both Smith and Jha noted that had the exercise been planned in Ladakh or Arunachal Pradesh, then it could have drawn even greater attention from Beijing.

Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said the drills seem to be a signal from Delhi that it is not setting aside concerns about China or shying away from cooperating with the US as a concession to Beijing.

"The exercise and its location are a reflection of the progress and growing comfort level in US-India relations over the last few years," Madan said, noting that the drills come on the 60th anniversary of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, one in which the US aided India.

US Army Pacific's Lewis told Nikkei Asia that the exercise will consist of a command post exercise and a field training exercise which will involve "training on critical skills and combat tasks, leading up to a validation exercise".

### **Indian expertise**

"The location chosen for the training offers the right combination of altitude and climate for the objectives of the exercise," he said, adding the exercise will bring together "the tough, realistic training needed to ensure readiness, the partnership and shared experience necessary for interoperability that enhances relations between nations".

N. C. Bipindra, a defense and strategic affairs expert who is editor of news portal Defence.Capital, said the Indian Army has a global reputation for being skilled in counter-

insurgency operations and high-altitude warfare. "Even Russian troops have previously trained with India in Uttarakhand in similar operations."

### **Elite Special Forces from India & US kick off combat exercise in Himachal**

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Ahead of the October drills, elite special forces from the US and India commenced another joint exercise in Himachal Pradesh.

The three-week exercise, whose 13th edition commenced on Monday, "aims to share best practices and experiences in areas such as joint mission planning and operational tactics as also to improve interoperability between the special forces of both the nations," the Indian Defense Ministry said in a statement.