
Future Perspectives on the Nepal Army

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The Past

The recorded history of Nepal begins after 350 BC. Documented evidence, apart from the scriptures, is not available for periods before that. Different kings of different dynasties like Gopal, Mahishpal, Kirat and Lichchabi had ruled over this country during the Pauranic (ancient) Age. Capturing other principalities and invading territories through armed might was common practice. Records show that the institution of the army was initiated just after 350 AD. In those days, the neighbouring countries, including China, Tibet and the Southern States, known as India today, had armies of their own. Nepal also maintained her military strength, according to documents of the reigns of the prominent Lichchavi kings, including Mandev, Shiva Dev, Narendra Dev and Anshuvarma. King Narendra Dev's Nepal had extended the cooperation of 7,000 cavalry and 3,500 infantry troops in the year 647 AD at the request of China to attack a Southern Kingdom.

The armed forces used to be centrally located during the ancient times, whereas in the Middle Age, they were deployed in vital locations like fortresses in strategically important places of the country. The commanders of the fortresses were called *kwantha nayaks* and they were very powerful. The Malla dynasties ruled Nepal in the Middle Age. Newar Malla kings ruled over Kathmandu valley and the surrounding areas while the Karnali region was ruled by Khas Malla kings, who maintained powerful armies. King Jitari Malla had attacked Kathmandu

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valley but the Khas Malla forces were ignobly defeated by the Newari Malla soldiers.

During this period, Nepal was divided into fifty different principalities which meant that military strength remained dispersed. Soldiers were maintained by the kings, princes, chiefs of army, *mulmi*, *kwantha nayaks* and *umraos*. These traditional ranks were prestigious positions in the army. Since some of the principalities were stronger than the others, there were continuous clashes. In Kathmandu valley, and also in Doti, it is now known that Indian mercenaries had also been used. The significance of military might derived from the Pauranic Age was well understood and used liberally.

Modern Nepal began its evolution in the 16th century with the founding of the House of Gorkha by Dravya Shah in 1559. In the late 18th century, Gorkha conquests extended the kingdom through the Himalayas for almost 1,500 km from the western boundary of Garhwal, India, through the territory of Sikkim in the east. In the early 19th century, Gorkha power came into conflict with the British East India Company. The resulting Anglo- Nepalese War (1814-16) was devastating for Nepal: the Treaty of Sagauli reduced the kingdom to the boundaries it has since occupied, less than 900 km from east to west. For almost thirty years after the treaty was concluded, infighting among aristocratic factions characterised Nepal.

The Nepal Army has had a long and distinguished history and was one of the oldest institutions in South Asia. In fact, Nepal's single major unifying force was its Gorkha-led army and its supply system. Prithvi Narayan Shah and his successors had done the best they could to borrow military techniques used by the British in India, including modern ordnance, command structures, and even uniforms. An entire munitions and armaments industry had been created in the hills, based on locally mined and processed raw materials, and supported by a system of forced labor to transport commodities. The soldiers in the army were renowned for their ability to move relatively fast with their supplies and to fight with discipline under tough conditions. They also knew their terrain better than the British, who had little experience there. Although the Nepalese Army of an estimated 16,000 regulars would have to fight on a wide front, it had great logistical advantages and a large reservoir of labour to support it.

The present Nepal Army (NA) traces its origins to 1748, when the first army unit, Shri Sher Gan was raised under the orders of King Prithvi Narayan Shah. Over the next twenty years, the total strength of the army was raised to ten similar infantry battalions (called *Gans*) and a number of independent

companies (called *Gulmas*) basically raised to administer captured territories. At the time of Indian independence, the NA had 16-18 infantry battalions and approximately 20-25 independent companies. The NA had participated in a number of foreign campaigns including helping the colonial army in the suppression of the 1857 war of Indian independence and the two World Wars. They had also supplied a number of units (reportedly nine battalions) to independent India to occupy important cantonment areas and guard some vital areas while the Indian Army was involved in the 1947-48 war and Hyderabad Operations of 1948.

The British East India Company had already captured major parts of India and was moving forward towards the northeast and approaching Nepal. Nepal was divided into many principalities during this period. It was at this time that King Prithvi Narayan Shah, hailing from one of the principalities called Gorkha, decided to unify Nepal. He was the architect of modern Nepal. Although Gorkha was small and economically weak, King Prithvi Narayan Shah astounded the world by carrying out such a challenging task under difficult circumstances. The unification campaign was initiated in 1740 AD at which time the British had already started colonising the Indian provinces.

This was a turning point in the history of the Nepal Army. Since unification was not possible without a strong army, the management of the armed forces had to be exceptional. Apart from the standard army being organised in Gorkha, technicians and experts had to be brought in from abroad to manufacture war materials. After the Gorkhali troops finally captured Kathmandu (then known as Nepal), the Gorkhali armed forces came to be known as the Nepalese Army. Their gallantry, sincerity and simplicity impressed even the enemy, so much so, that the British East India Company started recruiting Nepalese into their forces. Since the British had fought against the Nepalese Army which was till that time still colloquially known as "Army of Gorkha" or "Gorkhali" army, the British took to calling their new soldiers "Gurkhas". Hence, in essence, the "Gorkha" heritage belongs, first and foremost, to the Nepalese Army.

The Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-16) was a total disaster for Nepal. According to the Treaty of Sagauli, signed in 1816, Nepal lost Sikkim, the territories west of the Kali river (Kumaon and Garhwal), and most of its lands in the Tarai. The British East India Company was to pay Rs.200,000 annually to Nepal to make up for the loss of revenues from the Tarai. Kathmandu was also forced to accept a British resident, which was extremely disturbing to the Government of Nepal because the presence of a resident had typically preceded outright

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British conquest throughout India. In effect, the treaty proved to be less damaging, for the company soon found the Tarai lands difficult to govern and returned some of them to Nepal in 1816, simultaneously abolishing the annual payments. The return of the Tarai territory was important for the survival of Nepal because the government relied on the area as a source of land grants, and it is doubtful that the country as it was then run could have survived without this source of endowments. The presence of the resident, too, turned out to be less difficult than first imagined because all later governments in Kathmandu took stringent measures to isolate him by restricting his movements and keeping a close watch on the people he met. Nevertheless, the days of conquest were over, and Nepal had

been squeezed into the boundaries it still had in the early 1990s.

The Nepalese Army has long been intertwined with the monarchy; the 1990 Constitution, however, changed the relationship between the military and the king. For the first time, the military no longer was solely an instrument of the king; it was also subordinate to the authority of the Parliament.¹ Although under the 1990 Constitution, the king retained his title as the supreme commander of the army, the functional commander-in-chief was appointed on the recommendation of the prime minister. Although both the king and the government were responsible for implementing national security and military policy, the king's power to declare a state of national emergency and to conduct foreign affairs had national security implications. However, with the passage of time and the continuous disagreements coupled with intra-political party differences, the monarchy again started wielding influence which was not in consonance with the spirit of the 1990 Constitution. This issue was again changed with the advent of the Jan Andolan-11 in 2006 when Nepal was declared a republic.

The Present

The Indian military mission in Nepal was set up in February 1952 at Kathmandu at the request of King Tribhuvan with the purpose of reorganising and modernising the NA. This task was carried out over the next ten years

exclusively by the military mission [though the nomenclature was changed to Indian Military Training and Advisory Group (IMTAG) in 1958 and thereafter Indian Military Liaison Group (IMLG) in 1963]. From 1963 onwards, possibly as a result of India's 1962 defeat at the hands of China, the NA started looking at other countries for training and modernisation requirements. Important among these were China (supply of air defence guns, clothing and radio sets), the UK (training of officers and pilots, supply of armoured cars, weapons and ammunition), the USA (supply of weapons, vehicles and signal equipment) and Israel (training of paratroopers and supply of parachutes). Notwithstanding the above, the bulk of training and equipment needs were and are still being met by the Indian Army. The reorganisation of the NA into an Army Headquarters (HQ) and three infantry brigades as also the setting up of training institutions and logistics installations were basically carried out by the IMLG. The IMLG was withdrawn in August 1970 following a formal request by the His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMGN).

By the early 1970s, some 9,000 "Khampas" (Tibetan tribesmen resisting Chinese authority) had crossed over to Nepal and established various high altitude camps which they used as launch pads for operations into the Chinese Autonomous Region of Tibet. By 1973, these fighters, initially enjoying substantial foreign material and moral support, decided to invest the remote Nepalese district of Mustang as a firm base. After various diplomatic initiatives, Nepal was finally compelled to carry out military operations to disarm the Khampas. A brigade sized task force left Pokhara on June 15, 1974. The Nepalese Army Air Corps played a crucial role, conducting extremely hazardous resupply and other missions in a largely uncharted, radarless high altitude environment. It is to the credit of Nepal that the Khampas who opted to remain in Nepal were provided land and have since settled peacefully.

The NA is today organised into an Army HQ, six Division HQ, 16 infantry brigades, one Palace Guards brigades, seven specialist brigades [numbers 10 (Special Forces), 11 (Air Support), 13 (Artillery), 14 (Engineers), 15 (Signals), 16 (Logistics) and 17 (Electrical and Mechanical Engineers)]. It consists of 62 infantry battalions, two artillery battalions, three engineer battalions, one signal battalion and one motor transport battalion. In addition, the NA has 47 independent infantry companies, eight light batteries of artillery and eight air defence companies apart from signal and logistics elements with the Divisional and Brigade HQ. The total strength of the NA is approximately 93,000 of whom approximately 3,000 are deployed for the protection of National Parks. Two of

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the infantry brigades and all seven specialist brigades are deployed in Kathmandu. Three infantry brigades are deployed in Eastern Nepal (Hile, Udaypur and Ilam), three in Central Nepal (Baireni, Makwanpur and Sindhuli), three infantry brigades in Western Nepal (Pokhara, Butwal and Baglung), two infantry brigades in Far Western Nepal (Dhangadhi and Dadeldhura) and three infantry brigades in Mid-Western Nepal (Dang, Nepalgunj and Jumla). The NA has expanded from a strength of approximately 48,000 in 2001 to 93,000 as on date. This effectively means that 60 percent of the NA leadership has been there for about nine years.

Prior to November 2001, the NA was essentially a ceremonial army contributing to various UN missions and involved in rare

operational tasks. The total strength was approximately 48,000, half of whom were deployed in the Kathmandu valley. The then existing field formations consisted of seven independent infantry brigades reporting directly to Army HQ located at Kathmandu. However, after five and a half years of intense counter-insurgency operations, the NA has emerged today as a fairly battle hardened 96,000 strong force divided into five operational divisions and a Valley Division responsible for protection of the Kathmandu valley.

As a consequence of the Jan Andolan-II, in 2006, Nepal moved towards a parliamentary democracy from a monarchical form of government to a multi-party democracy and as a consequence, the prime minister of Nepal became the head of the government. At present, executive power is exercised by an interim government. Legislative power is vested in both the government and the Nepal House of Representatives and is presently the supreme authority in the country. Governments in Nepal have tended to be highly unstable; no government has survived for more than two years since 1991, either due to internal collapse or parliamentary dissolution by the monarch.

Nepal's Peace Process

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difficult negotiations and was predicated on a fragile consensus; it depended on interlocking commitments which neither side entered into wholeheartedly.² The parties to the talks were not the same as the parties to the conflict. The mainstream seven-party alliance that represented the state had already allied with the Maoists to topple King Gyanendra who, with absolute control of the army, had formed the third point of a triangular conflict.

The November 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was not as comprehensive as its name implied.³ It was vague on the future of the two armies and, just as damaging, silent on the question of militias and demilitarisation. Meanwhile, there was little in the way of sustained process. Inter-party committees met only sporadically; there were no effective mechanisms to monitor the many commitments that held the deal together. The process may be unique but its travails are not. While adversaries can reach compromises and find mutually acceptable solutions, combatants “cannot credibly promise to abide by terms that create numerous opportunities for exploitation after the treaty is signed and implementation begins”.

The most dramatic shift in Nepal’s power equations came with the elections. All the parties had assumed that the Maoists would perform poorly. Instead, their strong showing significantly changed the political landscape. The combination of the Maoists’ *de facto* power on the ground with *de jure* authority increased their opponents’ fears. At the same time, the NA kept itself at full strength while confidently, if privately, predicting that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) capacity would be rapidly degraded by desertions and lack of new recruitment. This critical equation lies at the heart of the dispute over NA recruitment, just as raw power calculations have encouraged otherwise unmilitaristic individuals to look to the NA as the only credible opposition to the Maoists.

The Maoists, on the other hand, felt that they were the single force that delivered the republic, the Constituent Assembly (CA), the prospect of federalism and other dramatic changes.⁴ To them, the idea that Nepal would move ahead more easily without them in the lead seemed ridiculous. Other parties have yet to offer evidence to controvert this view. For its part, the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [UCPN (M)] has offered little proof that it will genuinely forgo armed revolution in favour of accepting the

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rules of a politically pluralist game. Mutual recriminations and heightened suspicions have prompted further reconsideration of the assumptions that underlay the CPA.

Integration of Maoist Combatants into the Nepal Army

Integration of Maoist combatants into the Nepal Army has become the most contentious and emotive issue.⁵ According to the agreement on Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies between the Nepal Government and the Maoists on December 8, 2006, the UNMIN (United Nations Mission in Nepal) had identified 19,602 Maoist combatants. Initially, the Maoists had registered 32,250 Maoist cadres who were then placed by the UNMIN in 28 cantonments. Later, after a detailed screening, 19,692 cadres were found eligible to be treated as combatants and they were transferred to seven camps. However, due to the lack of a better solution, approximately 11,000 cadres continued to stay in these 'cantonments' or camps as they are commonly called, without any payment being made to them. It is felt that in the final analysis, the Nepalese government would have to take the responsibility of these 'illegals' as well.

These combatants continue to live in seven UNMIN supervised cantonments since November 2007. Around 90 per cent of them are from rural areas. They have not undergone any training programme either for military integration (MI) or civilian integration (CI). UNMIN was only mandated to provide technical support to the CA elections and monitoring of the peace process⁶. There has been no change in this mandate.

Resettlement of the PLA Discordant Voices

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recruitment rules framed by a legitimate government which laid down the regular army recruitment norms, on who could and could not be recruited. Further, he felt that the NA would accept only those recruits who met international recruitment norms.

The late G P Koirala of the Nepali Congress (NC) and ex-prime minister, who was the architect of the peace process, had pointedly opposed reintegration, clearly stating, “We cannot allow the Maoists to integrate the radical communist indoctrinated PLA and any attempt to integrate the armies would result in a Nepalese bloodbath. We cannot allow the Maoists to transform Nepal into a Cuba or a North Korea.”

According to an NC leader, Shovakar Parajuli, the Maoist leadership designated Nanda Kishore Pun as chief of the PLA after Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal relinquished the position upon becoming prime minister in August 2008. Parajuli states, “We suspect that the Maoists have received support from China in this regard. Other parties are silent but we object to it.” Also, he claimed that the Maoists were planning to send Pun to China where he would receive a nine-month defence course. Parajuli felt, “This is a part of the Maoist covert strategy to prove that Pun meets internationally-accepted standards to hold the post of chief of the Nepali Army.”

The Maoists, on the other hand, argue that since their militia possesses military skills rather than academic qualifications, this should be the criterion rather than any other aspect and since they claim that their cadres were involved in a 15-year ‘war’ with the then RNA (Royal Nepalese Army), they had adequate combat experience and should be given equal positions in all the rank and file of the NA.⁷ The Maoists’ insistence on military skills and not education as the criterion is likely to create problems especially when it comes to promotions. This will especially be problematic while integrating the middle level leadership of the PLA. Treating academically underqualified ‘commanders’ of the PLA at par with well-trained officers of the NA is creating, and will continue to fan, resentment among the existing NA leadership. Since

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the NA and PLA have different doctrines, organisational structures, and widely divergent political backgrounds, their integration would in all probability be a tortuous and difficult process.

The Future

No issue is as sensitive and crucial to the stability of Nepal's third experiment with democracy as the security sector, mainly the army, and its reform, improvement, governance or its democratisation that is being debated⁸. While it is a truism that the Nepal Army has been in existence since the unification of the country, its inability to tame the Maoist insurgency has brought it under the scrutiny of the people⁹.

Article 4.7 of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and Article 147 of the Interim Constitution of Nepal refer to "democratisation" of the Nepal Army. For this purpose, the Interim Council of Ministers was expected to prepare and implement a detailed action plan which would have dealt with the "determination of the appropriate size of the Nepali Army"; making the structure and composition of the army more inclusive and representative of the diverse mosaic of Nepal's population; and ensuring the training of military personnel on democratic and human rights values. Given the delays and complications on the more urgent issue of the management, integration and rehabilitation of Maoist combatants in temporary cantonments, the issue of "democratisation" of the Nepal Army has so far been relegated to the back burner. However, the Constitutional controversy surrounding attempts by the previous UCPN (Maoist)-led government to change the leadership of the Nepal Army, points to the great importance of addressing this issue seriously. The term "democratisation" of the army is probably a misnomer, since a professional army is a hierarchical institution. Similarly, the term "civilian supremacy" has become controversial as it has been appropriated by the Maoist, a political party in command of its own private army in which civilian and military functions are not sharply differentiated.

As per international practice in mature democracies, the real intended meaning of the term "democratisation" is to ensure "democratic control of the Nepal Army", i.e. ensuring that elected representatives of the people in the executive and legislative branches of the government provide effective oversight of the army (and of other security services).

"Rightsizing" of the Nepalese Army

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement refers to the need for “determining the appropriate size of the Nepal Army”. This is generally understood to mean a certain downsizing of the Nepal Army in a peaceful, post-conflict Nepal. During the decade of conflict, the size of the Nepal Army grew from 46,000 to 96,000. And Nepal’s defence budget increased from less than Rs. 2.5 billion to Rs. 15 billion+ in 2009-10. During peace-time, most political parties, including the UCPN-Maoist, agree that there is a need to reduce rather than increase the overall size of the Nepal Army. Furthermore, there is a desire to see some of this huge military security budget reallocated to human security priorities. There is indeed a need for a serious review of the right size of Nepal’s security services in the light of our evolving security challenges. Currently, the Nepal Army alone has some 96,000 personnel. With the APF and Police Force, Nepal’s total security personnel exceeds 170,000+. This number is higher than all of Nepal’s civil servants combined, excluding school teachers. However, recognising the continuing political instability and the internal threat that might accrue from this, and the fact that military service in Nepal is an important source of employment and income for many impoverished families, great care should be taken to ensure that alternative jobs are created, skill training is provided, arrangements are made for loans and financing for starting small enterprises and businesses by former soldiers, including ex-Maoist combatants, before rushing to large-scale down-sizing of the Nepal Army.

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Conclusion

Nepal simply cannot have two armies in one country. In the spirit of the CPA and the Interim Constitution, the urgency to complete the process of integration and rehabilitation of the Maoist combatants and to dismantle the temporary cantonments, to create a conducive environment for the completion of the new Constitution which will spell out specific provisions for the democratic control of the Nepal Army and other security services simply cannot be over-emphasised.¹⁰

The risks to the peace process posed by this polarisation and the individual actors’ mala fide intentions are clear. But Nepal’s transition is conditioned just as much, if not more, by deeper and broader social, economic and cultural

change. Great as the influence of top party leaders can be, the country's transformation is not solely in their hands. A young and growing population is caught between aspiration and frustration; marginalised groups continue to agitate for greater representation; faith in the state and political processes has not evaporated but is conditional. With so much contestation and conflict, the structural challenges involved in achieving a lasting resolution should not be underestimated.

The Nepal Army's leadership must develop a culture of strategic thinking, for though the army has for the past 250 years successfully upheld the territorial integrity of Nepal at great sacrifice to itself, it is now finding itself on the wrong side of history.¹¹ It is certain that even after the integration issue is resolved, the army's role and function, its loyalty and its ability to curb militancy and terrorism will continue to be key issues of a new Nepal and, therefore, it would remain a critical institution of the country in the foreseeable future.

Notes

1. Country Studies/Area Handbook published by the US Library of Congress, Washington.
2. "Nepal's Future: In Whose Hands?" *Crisis Group Asia Report*, n. 173, August 13, 2009.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. "Nepal's Election and Beyond," International Crisis Group, April 2008.
6. Blogspot on "Democracy for Nepal".
7. Gautam Kul Chandra, "Enhancing Democratic Control of Nepal Army as Part of Nepal's Security Sector Reform," Nepal Institute of Policy Studies, Kathmandu, January 12, 2010.
8. Nischal Nath Pandey, *New Nepal, the Fault Lines* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2010), p. 51.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Chandra, n. 7.
11. Pandey, n. 8, p. 88.