

Why Nepal Needs Strong Defense and Security Institutions?

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Abstract

There are multiple threats to Nepal's National Interests. A country with strong political, diplomatic, economic, military, and informational foundations will have multiple policy options, but Nepal does not have that luxury at present. Therefore, Nepal must maintain a strong and professional Nepali Army and other national security institutions to effectively deter and counter possible threats to its National Interests.

Key Words

Defense, Deterrence, Diplomacy, Economy, Geo-Strategy, Great Power Competition, Information, National Interests, Policy Options, Political, Security, Threat

Introduction

Does Nepal really need a strong Nepali Army and multiple security institutions like Nepal Police, and the Armed Police Force-Nepal? There is no agreed answer among Nepali Politicians, Academia, and Security Experts. The relevance of having strong defense and security-related institutions often comes under scrutiny and opinions are divided into two opposite sides. But one thing is clear, the arguments on both sides lack sufficient analysis of geo-strategic realities and possible threats including likely consequences if the possible threats turn into reality. If a country has strong political, diplomatic, economic, and informational foundations; it may choose other options than maintaining strong defense agencies, but Nepal does not have that luxury and the prospect does not look very optimistic in the near future. Therefore, Nepal needs to maintain a strong, professional, and well-equipped Nepali Army and other national security institutions to counter possible threats to its National Interests.

Geo-Strategic Reality

Nepal is at a unique geo-strategic location between two emerging and competing world powers China and India that bring both threats and opportunities. "This distinct location situates Nepal as the natural bridge between two colossal giants, both of which are not only the world's most populous nations but are also vying for superpower status on the global stage"(Lama, 2023). Due to the increased strategic and security importance of the region, other big powers including the USA have increased their interests and engagements in the region. One expert argues, "The changing regional and global geostrategic landscape necessitates an increased U.S. presence in Nepal. South Asia, including Nepal, has become a theater of competition between Beijing and Washington"(Sharma Poudel, 2023a). The increased geo-strategic importance of the region and the competition among the great powers for domination can be the cause of military or other kinds of threats to Nepal which may seriously undermine its National Interests.

Furthermore, Nepal is going through an extended period of political uncertainty which may bring additional threats. "Not a single government in Nepal has served out a full five-year term since the restoration of democracy in 1990"(Baral, 2023). This situation may give rise to political, regional, and ethnic tensions where the national institutions are not strong enough to check it on time. Therefore, the internal tensions coupled with the competing interests of powerful neighboring countries can be the cause of some kind of threat or conflict in Nepal.

Threats to Nepal's National Interests

Nepal faces the likelihood of both external and internal threats in varying degrees. The possibility of external conventional military threats is low but cannot be ruled out. One prominent political activist argues, "In the context of Nepal, there are no imminent threats coming from the external elements, but this does not necessarily mean

that we do not need to take this factor into consideration"(Yadav, 2022). The National Security Policy of Nepal 2016 (The Ministry of Defense, 2016) and several other documents have outlined the following as threats and challenges to National Security:

- Political challenges and threats,
- Challenges and threats related to law and order,
- Socio-economic challenges and threats,
- Challenges and threats related to disasters and natural resources,
- Challenges and threats posed by extremism,
- External challenges and threats, and
- Strengthened and capacitated state machinery for facing challenges and threats.

Policy Options for Countering Likely Threats

Considering the likelihood of threats that may come either from external or internal sources that can be military, political, or any other nature; the Government of Nepal needs to develop an appropriate policy and corresponding strategies. The policy should clearly address the possible threats, provide clear guidelines on dealing with the threats, and designate the responsible agencies and their focus area to counter the threats so that the responsible agencies can devise suitable strategies, and plans to ensure the protection of Nepal's National Security Interests effectively. Considering the possible nature of threats to the National Interests, Nepal has the following strategic options.

Policy option 1-Balanced Proactive Approach

The most preferred option for Nepal would be adopting a balanced and proactive approach to prevent the likelihood of any external or internal threats by using Political/Diplomatic, Informational, and Economic Initiatives to address the root causes of possible threats to the National Interests of Nepal. In this approach, the political institutions should take the lead in proactively identifying the possibility of any kind of

threat to the National Interests and addressing the root causes of problems or issues by employing all available tools before the problem takes shape. Timely identification of the possibility of the emergence of any security threats and addressing the probable causes on time will certainly prevent the threats before they start. Moreover, the state can respond strongly even if the threat emerges despite preventive efforts.

This option also prioritizes and highlights the significance and important role of political, economic, and diplomatic initiatives to maintain peace and stability in the country in the increasingly competitive and challenging strategic environment of the South Asian region. As Nepal is on the path of political stability, development, and peace; the adoption of this policy helps to embrace the democratic values and principles that help to make the state apparatus strong and effective. Moreover, effective use of this approach helps to maintain a healthy international relationship. Adoption of this option will allow the political leaders to understand why political stability is important for ensuring national security which may help to create a healthy political environment. It will also be helpful in making resources available for making national institutions strong and effective which gives the government flexibility to mobilize all suitable available resources to address the root causes of the problem.

However, this option needs a stable political situation, a healthy economic system, and strong national institutions. The existing environment in Nepal may not be encouraging for this option. Rajib Neupane, indicating the existing political situation of Nepal, argued, "So far, federal Nepal appears to represent a state system with weak institutional foundations and a decentralized structure burdened by predatory political elite and exhaustive economic establishments"(Neupane, 2023). It will certainly take some time to bring lasting political stability in Nepal and to strengthen national institutions which also need an abundance of additional resources. Moreover, the effectiveness of national institutions will only be known at the time of crisis, which may be too late if they are not capable of countering the threat. Failure to identify the

emergence of threats early may lead to a situation lacking appropriate contingency plans and means to counter the threat. Furthermore, a possible lack of decisive action or delayed decision from decision-makers to make hard decisions against the threats may complicate the situation. Moreover, possible unhealthy competition among the national institutions may harm the overall effort. Additionally, there may be confusion and gaps may remain when there are multiple responsible institutions because "the strength of responsibility is inversely proportional to the number of people that are responsible. When everyone is responsible, no one is responsible"(Paquet, 2019). Therefore, the Government must designate a lead agency and establish an accountability mechanism to prevent any mix-ups and misunderstandings.

Policy Option 2- Reactive Approach

Strengthening the Nepali Army and existing Law Enforcement Agencies to monitor and counter possible threats to the National Interests is the other available policy option for Nepal. In this approach, the Nepali Army and other security institutions will play the main role in identifying, deterring, and countering possible threats. This option is likely to be one of the most preferred based on existing constitutional and legal provisions. The Constitution of Nepal and other legal provisions have clearly directed the responsibility of safeguarding the National Interests to the Nepali Army (The Government of Nepal, 2015). Similarly, the Nepali Army is also responsible for assisting law enforcement agencies in the case of internal security disorders that are beyond the control of local administration.

Strengthening the military and other national institutions will also have a positive impact on enhancing the deterrence capability of the state which may subdue some of the threats before they emerge. As the Nepali Army, Nepal Police, and the Armed Police Force participate extensively in UN Peace Operations, the adoption of this option may also help this initiative which, in turn, will enhance the level of Operational Readiness

and capability of these agencies to fight against threats to the National Interests. This option allows early detection of threats through the vigilance of national security institutions. Moreover, this will be one of the cost-effective ways as the Government does not need immediate additional arrangements and extra resources. Most importantly, existing constitutional and legal provisions also support this approach. Adoption of this option will make the political leaders understand why it is necessary to empower and strengthen the national military and law enforcement agencies. It will also be helpful in making resources available for making national institutions strong.

However, this is more of a coercive approach which may result in significant loss or damage in terms of blood and treasure when it comes into action. As Clausewitz famously said, "War is politics by other means" (Clausewitz, 1918); most of the threats are motivated by some kind of political factor, and therefore, military and security agencies can only shape or limit the problem but are not able to solve it which again needs a strong political will and leadership and, timely policy decisions, which is uncertain in the case of Nepal until national institutions grow and become strong. Moreover, it may be too late when this option comes into action. Most importantly, having an empowered national military and strong national security institutions may create an uneasy relationship between the civilian and military community which necessitates an arrangement of controlling and coordinating mechanisms.

Best Policy Option for Nepal

- Threats to Nepal's National Interests are real and imminent. It becomes more significant due to extended political uncertainty and existing internal ethnic and regional dynamics. The paradoxical relationship between China and India, the increased Great Power Competition, and the increased strategic interest of the USA may add more complexity to the region's affairs and may add more threats to Nepal's interests. However, Nepal does not have the luxury to depend on a more

proactive approach to counter these threats. Therefore, strengthening the Nepali Army and existing Law Enforcement Agencies to monitor and counter possible threats to the National Interests is the most suitable and reliable policy option for Nepal.

- However, the importance of defense and national security institutions needs to be highlighted as a segment of Nepali society presumes that Nepal does not need a strong army. Questioning the relevance of the Nepali Army, Former Foreign Minister Bimala Rai Poudyal questioned the utility of a large army during peacetime. She argued that the risk of a physical attack on Nepal from the neighboring countries was low and pointed out that even if they did attack, the Nepali Army could not win against them (Sharma Poudel, 2023b). Several prominent politicians and academicians share similar feelings which lack an in-depth understanding of the new and emerging trends and challenges to National Security. Additionally, such opinions by responsible personnel in public forums will not be helpful in settling the ongoing debate. Therefore, the political leadership should take ownership of this agenda and take the necessary steps to build a common understanding of the issues related to National Security.

Furthermore, Nepal needs to develop a suitable strategy considering the unique geo-strategic situation and availability of resources to deter and counter all possible threats to Nepal's National Interests. The formation of a powerful body to look after the issues related to National Security is important. Former Chief of the Army Staff of Nepali Army General Gaurav SJB Rana suggests, "Creating a separate parliamentary committee for National Security - Defense and Security by simply transferring current responsibilities held by the State Affairs Committee, is an effortless option" (Rana, 2023). Moreover, the National Security Council should be empowered by giving more executive roles and responsibilities that may help to address some of these issues. Some kind of reform and revision in its structure and role may be essential. Most significantly,

the crucial role of strong and committed political leadership must always be considered for this approach to be effective.

- The obvious next question is, "How strong should the Nepali Army be?" The answer is not simple and needs in-depth discussion and analysis. However, there is no doubt that the Nepali Army should be capable enough for a Credible Deterrence¹ against identified or likely threats against the National Interests of Nepal. Maintaining such a capability is not possible only by altering the size of the Army; but an appropriate policy, strategy, doctrine, modern equipment, training, and effective leadership at all levels are other critical factors for consideration.

Conclusions

World powers including the big neighboring countries have increased strategic interests in Nepal due to its unique geo-strategic location which can be the cause of threat to Nepal's National Interests. Moreover, Nepal has several internal political, economic, and demographic issues that can turn into some kind of threat to its National Interests which may be both external or internal, and of military, politico-economic, or any other nature. Due to the fluid political situation of Nepal, a comprehensive approach of adopting a more balanced strategy for safeguarding the National Interests seems less practical and unreliable. Therefore, Nepal needs to choose a cost-effective, dependable, and practical approach, i.e., strengthening its army and other security institutions to continuously deter and counter threats to its National Interests. For this, ensuring that the political leadership has enough willpower and continuous support to achieve the intended objectives is crucial.

¹ Deterrence - the use of a threat (explicit or not) by one party to convince another party to maintain the status quo - is a general phenomenon that is not limited to any particular time or space (Zagare, 2006).

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