

Examining Nepal's CMR Dynamics and Contemporary Circumstances for Strengthening it

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"Regardless of how superior the military view of a situation may be; the civilian view trumps it"

- Peter D. Feaver

Abstract

Civil-Military Relations (CMR) in Nepal has been a subject of ongoing contention amid the nation's dynamic political landscape. This article deals with Nepal's CMR dynamics, focusing on its historical progression and CMR-related contemporary circumstances. Despite the Nepali Army's historic non-intervention in politics, the state of CMR remains contentious. Drawing upon established CMR theories such as Principal-Agent, Institutional, Convergence, and Trinity theories, this study explores the root causes of CMR-related circumstances and its outcomes posing challenges in Nepal and proposes viable approaches for its mitigation. Highlighting the importance of civilian control over the armed forces, the study emphasizes the significance of coordinated efforts, effective communication, and respective stakeholder understanding on consolidating CMR. It asserts that the Nepali Army, being at the forefront of national security, holds a pivotal responsibility in fostering conducive CMR approaches, crucial for Nepal's national security interests. In essence, the article highlights the urgency of strengthening CMR in Nepal, advocating collaborative efforts among stakeholders to ensure effective civilian control, and safeguarding national interests and sovereignty.

Keywords

Civil-military relations, Political transitions, Civilian control, Strategic approaches, National security

Introduction

Civil-Military Relation (CMR) is a multidimensional approach relating civilian and military world. The relationship among the military, state, and civilian sectors has age-old ties (Weber, 1946). A state tends to maintain and contain its power within a specific boundary. A state has to look for a sustainable resource for funding its military. Hence, modern states start collecting taxes from people to run state affairs as well as the military. This practice links the state, the people, and the military. Collecting taxes creates a pattern for developing the Civil-Military Relations (CMR) theory. Richard H. Kohn maintains "Among the oldest problems of human governance has been that of securing the subordination of military forces to political authority" (Kohn, 1997). Many scholars in this field have different explanations on CMR so the role of the military changes depending on the situation. Likewise, it also differs from country to country based on social, political, and economic conditions. CMR, then, defines all interactions between the leadership of the armed forces on the one hand, and non-military political elites who have the power to make political decisions on the other.

Nepal's political landscape trajectory has undergone diverse phases, transitioning from monarchical rule, oligarchy, a system devoid of political parties, to its current status as a federal democratic republic. The persistent bouts of political instability in Nepal have significantly complicated and intensified the comprehension of Civil-Military Relations (CMR) among involved stakeholders. Notably, despite being led by civilian authorities such as the executive or constitutional monarch, president, or head of executive authority, the Nepali Army has refrained from intervening in political affairs, a distinctive departure from the belief held by numerous

CMR scholars that volatile political scenarios often prompt military involvement in state matters. Yet, notwithstanding these exceptional attributes of the Nepali Army, CMR in Nepal has consistently remained a contentious issue over time. This article delineates the fundamental causes of CMR-related issues in Nepal and proposes strategic methodologies that the Nepali Army could employ to alleviate these challenges.

Theoretical Understanding of CMR

There are several theories on CMR, each having distinct characteristics. Subordination of the military under civilian control exercised through elected leadership is a fundamental argument in most of those theories, other common essential qualities being professionalism and the value of their work. A brief overview of some of the notable scholars and their arguments/theories present the following perspective:

Principal Agent Theory

The academic field of civil–military relations involves the study of interactions among a state's civilian public, its civilian government, and its military. The type of regime determines the nature of CMR in the respective country. Feaver (2003) notes "Most of democratic theory is concerned with devising ways to ensure that the people remain in control even as professionals conduct the business of government."

Institutional Theory

Samuel P Huntington (1957) argues that the core issue of civilian control is directly related to the reduction of military power in state affairs. He further explains that the state intends to achieve civilian control either through subjective or objective forms.

Subjective Civilian Control. This approach intends to maximize civilian control, as Huntington notes, by delegating state power to "particular governmental

institutions, particular social classes, and particular constitutional forms." To make it more precise it is about civilianizing the military by bringing the military into the political sphere.

Objective Civilian Control. Huntington's perspective on "militarizing the military" advocates the military should be given its sphere. Furthermore, he asserts that the military should be professionalized, and isolated from society. His perspective is that professionalism helps to reduce political power and when it is curtailed it will make the military "politically sterile and neutral": an ideal condition for civilian control.

Convergence Theory

Morris Janowitz's (1960) perspective on civilian control is civilianizing the military. Furthermore, he asserts "the future of the military profession rests on a balance between organizational stability and adaptation to rapid technological and political change." His perspective is that the military is abreast with society and better serves civilian control.

The Trinity

Thomas Bruneau provides insights into the concept of democratization through the "trinity" as an approach to civilian control, effectiveness, and efficiency (Bruneau, 2008). It emphasizes that the effectiveness and efficacy of armed force on its given task would determine the approach to control it.

There are multiple arguments on the approach of CMR yet the basic norms of CMR remain the same i.e., control of the military. Scholars have also discussed the military role and influence from different perspectives - the extent of military influence over national policies as defense and foreign relations, alignment of military policies with the countries' broader social and cultural values, the distinction between civilian control in strong and weak democracies, and what contributes to stronger civilian

control. The principal problem they examine, however, is empirical: to explain how civilian control over the armed forces is established and maintained.

Contemporary Circumstances of CMR in Nepal

The national interests of Nepal as stipulated in the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 are "safeguarding of the freedom, sovereignty, territorial integrity, nationality, independence, and dignity of Nepal, the rights of the Nepali people, border security, economic wellbeing, and prosperity". With that said, Nepal's expedition in political transitions, democratic institutions, and constitution has seen its highs and lows, enshrined in different constitutions promulgated in the last 70 years. However, when it comes to relating things in the CMR domain, almost all constitutional provisions are necessary conditions, but not sufficient to ensure strong CMR and civilian authority over the army. The contemporary complexities in the CMR dynamics of Nepal are further discussed below;

Unstable Politics

The unstable political changes in Nepal ranging from a party-less System to that of a Multi-Party Democracy, followed by the monarch's direct autocratic to that of the Federal Democratic Republic, have given a sort of paradigm shift in Nepalese politics. All these developments signify that the forms and structures of states are not permanent; they change their shapes with time (Sharma, 2010). The role and the responsibility of both the military and the civilian authority seem to alter significantly. Though NA has been successful in transforming itself in line with the political changes and has always proven itself as a dependable force, it has equally faced criticisms. Despite all its endeavors, however, there have been few occasions of respectful recognition of NA's efforts by political parties.

Limited Security Awareness on the part of Civilian Leadership

There is a political tendency to curtail the role and responsibilities of the military imposing different restrictions, acts, and laws. But most of the lawmakers lack adequate knowledge on security, strategy and military affairs. Political parties and government apparatus, which control and mobilize the NA, have very narrow knowledge about the military's working system and lack military expertise and professional military personnel in a political and bureaucratic domain to make rightful use of the NA. Leadership and management ambiguity always raise the question on judicious mobilization of military forces. The lack of critical analysis of the NA and their role in furthering the CMR aggravates the problem (Barakoti, 2017). Furthermore, such dilemma on part of civilian leadership towards the acts of the military always fueled to increase level of trust deficit between two sides i.e. military and civilians.

Understanding Civil-Military Action (CMA) as CMR

CMR is a broad interdisciplinary field referring broadly to the interaction between armed force as an institution and sectors of society that primarily focuses on the control or direction of the military by the highest civilian authorities of a nation (Bhattarai and Wagle, 2010). On the other hand, CMA is the various actions taken by military forces on a tactical and operational level to foster the relationship between the civil population and military forces. CMA is an effective tool to lay a foundation for strategic maneuver in strengthening CMR. Thus insightful understanding about CMR between NA and civil leadership is better sought.

Media Handling and Public Relations

In Nepal, often it is observed that during an environment of mistrust and misunderstanding both parties (civilians and military) make use of media to counter each other. Therefore, media should be given limited access to classified information. A case in point is India where the media has a limited critique and largely supports the security

organizations when it comes to issues related to national security, which is not the case in Nepal (Sharma, 2009). However, as media holds a great influence on public opinion, it possesses a greater role in fostering CMR and should be handled effectively.

Conclusion

Civilian military control is a crucial debate of modern democratic politics. An unending and explicit friction for power and authority between political parties has been a characteristic of Nepal's politics since time immemorial. On the contrary and rightly so, the military supremacy of the ancient and middle age has turned to civilian supremacy in the modern age. Despite being one of the oldest army organizations in the world, CMR more than established concept still remains a thriving subject in NA. In contrast to this, given the turbulence of period through which the status of CMR went through in Nepal, as well as comprehending the level of understanding of CMR on part of political leadership, it can be argued that there is a greater need for a comprehensive understanding of CMR in Nepal. For this to happen there should be understanding among different stakeholders and adequate flow of interaction and communication. Primarily, GoN in general and MoD in particular are the main components to strengthen CMR in Nepal. However, NA being at the forefront and at the helm of national security can bear the responsibility of creating an amicable environment and fostering feasible CMR approaches in Nepal, which is also key to solidifying Nepal's national security.

Feasible Way Forward

The following suggestions have been drawn for effective and efficient CMR in Nepal.

Recommendations for Civilian Authority

- The MoD should organize a series of round-table or in-house discussions focusing on CMR, restructuring at the apex level, optimum utilization of the defense budget, intelligence reforms, and inter-departmental coordination where

experienced practitioners and government senior officials, both serving and retired, should involve in their specific fields of expertise.

- MoD, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) need to develop a regular consultation and collaboration mechanism for the judicious use of resources while promoting and protecting national interests.
- The NSC must conceptualize, assess, and define the national security threats and challenges and accordingly should delegate and monitor the execution of national security policy on a sustainable and continuous basis. Policy guidelines regarding CMR should be formulated in the light of context and historical perspective.
- MoD and NA should work in tandem to establish the Institute of Defense Affairs (IDA) to facilitate a frank and honest discussion of the problems and possible solutions. Intensifying exchange programs and visits of scholars, journalists, researchers, business community and ambassadors would contribute substantially to achieving the results.
- The concept of CMR should be part of the university syllabus.

Recommendations for Military

- There should be continuous engagement with related stakeholders through media that could help in fostering CMR. The current DCOP (Defense Correspondence Orientation Program) by NA DPR should be continued.
- CMR plans should be complemented with a holistic approach and sufficient budget.
- NA should facilitate MoD in creating a favorable environment where GoN would take ownership of NA's United Nations peacekeeping mission endeavor as a main asset to project Nepal's national interest in the international arena rather than considering it as merely a welfare activity of NA.

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