

Reviewing the civil military relations in Nepal

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Abstract

An exegesis of the civil military relationship of Nepal in its entirety was maintained to examine its historical trend and to generate lessons for future direction. Review of historical materials, opinions of national and international scholars through different time spans, and study of the evolution of civil military relationship from medieval to modern Nepal was carried out. A critically meticulous analysis showed that the civil military relationship in Nepal has been cordial throughout history and the nature of the army has gradually changed from feudal clan based aggregation to a professional army. Much of this professionalism in the army began during the unification campaigns. Deliberation on the issue of the civilian control of the NA showed that it will be utterly unwise to produce civilian shoulders and that we need to stick to a professional army unless a grave danger to our sovereignty materializes. The activities of the army should always be controlled by a duly elected government and its expenses and actions checked and ratified by the parliament. It was concluded that the media image of the NA should remain open, accessible, and politically neutral, and that the army should continue its construction and humanitarian works, both within and beyond the borders. All concerned stakeholders must strive to maintain a harmonious civil military relationship in Nepal.

Keywords: civil military relations, civilian army, professional army, military humanitarian aid, civilian control over army

Introduction

Military is a fundamental element of any nation's existence and sovereignty. As the name indicates, defense services are needed to defend the country, its vital national interests and values against external and internal (existing or potential) threats of armed aggression. Armed forces are an imperative as the ultimate instrument of national security. Since time immemorial, scholars have emphasized the role of military for a nation's well being- be it Plato (Plato, 375 B.C., p. 55) from ancient Athens or Vegetius (Vegetius, 1473, p. 77) from Rome. Nepal is no exception in this regard.

This issue of civil military relationship has a long history that goes back to antiquity, to the very beginnings of military organization in civilian societies. In each country, the answer to this question is deeply influenced by national history, sentiments, and traditions. It depends on the role of the army as a state institution in the given country, subordination of the military to political authorities as defined in laws and constitutional arrangements, and so on. Public perceptions of military personnel, the prestige of the military officer's profession, public opinion toward defense and foreign policy of the regime and certain actions of the army determine it. The very nature of the problem is permanently changing because both society and the military are constantly changing as well (Rukavishnikov & Pugh, 2006, p. 87). Different dimensions of civil military relationships include relationships in the spheres of power and politics, economics

and media, science and technology, culture and history. Keeping in mind the peculiar military history of Nepal, the nature of civil military relationship well as the trend of changes in the structure, function and objectives of the army was analyzed from what we can call the roots of Nepali Army, before a scrutiny of some issues specific to Nepali Army in the light of global scholarship on civil military relationship.

Methodology

In this paper, review of the existing books on Nepal's military history, the history of the unification wars, the opinions on the nature of Nepal's medieval military, the opinions on civil military relationship by various national and international scholars, the trend of Nepal's military humanitarian aid and construction actions were examined and verified.

The author heavily relied on prior readings on Nepal's history and military evolution, field visits to historically significant places in Nepal and formal and informal discussions with scholars of general and military history of Nepal. Relevant materials were cross checked and juxtaposed with the author's perceptions for generating conclusions and recommendations. All the materials included herein are the author's personal accounts and narratives.

Civil-military relations in Nepal: A historical overview

Many commentators regard the rise of Prithvi Narayan Shah as the origin of what we may call the "Nepali Army". But, lately a different opinion has been taking shape. Scholars like Prem Singh Basnyat like to attribute the rise of Drabya Shah as the birth of the Nepali Army. A few others claim that we cannot assign any time period as the birth of Nepali Army

because there were states with militia in this region from ancient times, and that they were ultimately assimilated to the Nepali Army. It may be so, but in military studies, the idea of military victory is predominant in determining origin and assimilation of the army. There also is the question of modernization: were the militia of the medieval times trained enough to be called an army, especially in the backdrop of the fact that they were largely comprised of *Jhara* soldiers? We might debate upon the actual beginning of the institution what we call today "Nepali Army", but one aspect of it is beyond contest: that the institutionalization of the Nepali Army began during the unification wars and continued thereafter. It was also during the unification wars when the visions of a balanced Nepali Army first sprouted.

Until late Rana Regime, the Nepali Army was not a modern, balanced institution. It was basically a clan based army where the higher officers had a significant control over the soldiers, even in their personal, social and communal lives. Especially in the early stages, a Thapa (*Khas*) officer of another ethnicity under him, there would be a leader of the same ethnicity representing them.

Ownership of land provided the basic motive for unification of Nepal (Stiller, 1973, p. 220). Prithvi Narayan Shah (and his heirs) used the land not only to reward his soldiers, both officers and men of the battle line, but also as an effective lure in winning the support of men of influence in the areas under war. Later, as time progressed and the nation gradually modernized, so did the system of revenue for the soldiers; they began to get paid money, not land, and they ceased being under the command of the officer belonging to their ethnicity.

After the unification, the major test of the Nepali Army was, obviously, the Anglo-Nepal war fought as a result of border disputes and ambitious expansionism of both the belligerent parties. Nepali soldiers in the war consisted of both the professional soldiers and in some instances the *jhara* soldiers. While the war abruptly curtailed Nepal's expansionist ambitions, it did provide a touch of professionalism in the army structure, and as in many battles Nepal defeated the mighty British; it did not curtail the enthusiasm of the average Nepali soldier. The war had another unintended effect however; the British, awestruck by the Nepalese courage and fighting spirit, began to recruit them- a policy that still exists-, the relevancy of which will be dealt with in later paragraphs.

New developments in the Nepali Army organization occurred in the course of time. One of the major changes was the control of the entire army by the *Rana* clan. This was an unprecedented event in Nepal's military history since the King was the sovereign and the military was completely under his control until then. Unlike similar events in many other countries, the transition from the King's control of the army to the Prime minister's (that too in a family based hierarchical system) should be taken for a paradigm shift in the power dynamics of civilians and the establishment. Many scholars are puzzled by this event. Obviously, the reason for such a abrupt swift was because of the land based reward system and the clan based organization of the army. Although the control of the army changed from King to the Prime-minister, nothing changed for the staff and command. Indeed, Nepal was victorious in the Nepal Tibet war under the control of *Ranas*.

This brings us to the role of Nepali Army in relatively modern Nepal. A significant

awakening occurred in the Nepali psyche after the dawn of democracy in 2007 B.S. Just as the earlier switch from being under the King's command to being under the Rana Prime minister's command, the democratization of the army after 2007 B.S. should be taken for a landmark reform in the military institution. While full democracy remained short lived, the switch to the King's control was just as prompt. This shows the impartiality and neutrality of the Nepali Army when it comes to political power, especially in the modern times. This takes us to the ten year long civil war and the subsequent overthrow of monarchy. While in the beginning there were questions regarding the successful transition of Nepal into peace, and also the issue of assimilation of former Maoist soldiers into the army, these issues have largely been resolved by now- at least the military aspects of them. From its humble origins with a few thousand men with a vision of a unified Nepal to the modern Nepali army totaling around 95,000 men specialized in various military skills, it has always been loyal to the people, and also a staunch defender of Nepal's sovereignty.

Civilian control over Army

Unsurprisingly, the central issue in the modern theories of civil-military relations is that of civilian control of the military. Currently, in the literature concerning the subject, the term "civilian control" is used interchangeably with "political control." *Civilian* here simply indicates the preeminence of civilian institutions, based on popular sovereignty, in the decision-making process concerning defense and security matters. There are two main approaches of understanding what makes a military truly responsible to the society. The first can be called the "political approach" while the second can be named

the "sociological" one. (Huntington, 1957, p. 305 & Janowitz, 1960, p. 208). The political approach assumes that a formal body of laws and regulations, and a formal chain of command, would make the military responsible to society, given that a civilian head of state served as supreme commander-in-chief of the national armed forces; a civilian legislature approved its budget; and that the head of state and the legislators, as elected officials, represented the will and interests of the people more broadly, with checks and balances existing between government departments. The sociological approach developed from the assertion that genuine civilian control of armed forces could be completely realized only when the military is integrated into the broader network of societal relations implying that not professional warriors, but citizen-soldiers would better link the military to its host society through their civilian roots. In Nepal's case, we have had the chance to employ both of these views to practice; one in the beginning days, and the other in the modern Nepali army. The choice of using these two approaches has varied from country to country and time to time.

Apart from specific legal and constitutional arrangements, civil-military relations are influenced by a country's historical traditions and particularly its military history; economic and social conditions; the evolution of its internal political landscape; and, certainly, by the international security environment, primarily the country's inclusion in alliances (Rukavishnikov & Pugh, 2006, p. 87). The relationship between the military and the state, societal structures, and institutions forms the core of the complex set of civil-military relations. Despite the very importance of this point, we have to stress that the entire set of issues relating to civil-

military relations cannot be reduced to the political control of armed forces. The democratic principle requirement follows from the premise of popular sovereignty that only democratically constituted (elected) civilian authority can legitimately make policy, including defense and security policy. Where the civilian control is weak or nonexistent, military influence laps over into other areas of public policy and social life (Kohn, 1997, p. 60). Essentially, the military, as a subsystem of society, is characterized by distance from the people and a distinct non-civilian subculture and substructure. The need for such distinctiveness is related to the tasks, functions, and responsibilities which are assigned to military.

For instance, the primary role of military during the early days of Nepal's unification was the annexation of a foreign land. The lower number of the available fighting age soldiers, the difficulties of conquering forts set at hilltops, and the lure of the ownership of land that military service ensured shaped the civil military relationship of Nepal during the ancient and early modern days. We may not posit such a military as a prime example of an exercise of the sociological approach of military-such a structure of the army was largely a result of necessity-, but it is at least a rudimentary example of such. The question is: could we drastically change the entire outlook of the Nepalese military- creating citizen soldiers instead of professional soldiers- in the name of bringing the army under civilian control? Before we decide on such an issue, we have to deliberate on the military history, social and economic conditions and international security environment. In my opinion, we have to stick to a professional army during the period of relative peace, and should a grave danger appear that threatens

our sovereignty, we have no choice but to enlist citizen soldiers- something like a modern variation of the *jhara* system. In the long-run the military must shrink, in the greater powers elsewhere, i.e. civilians, but we must have a military that is professional, also well prepared for operations other than war, and respected by civilians.

We are fortunate in that we have a military that has always respected civilian supremacy since its birth, and there is not a single major case of violation of this ideal. Civilian control of the army includes the achievement of a degree of transparency in the sphere of defense spending and defense planning. In a democracy, the government is obliged to keep citizens informed. Information is a debt to be paid to the public (Gershman & Bellow, 1995, p. 67). Citizens have the right to know what their government plans and intends concerning the deployment of the armed forces. We must maintain our current system where the democratic government, the civilian executive authority, has the power to determine the size, type, and composition of the armed forces; to define the military and national security doctrines and concepts of military reforms; to propose budgets; and so on; for which it needs confirmation by the legislature.

In my opinion, it is now high time that we review the policy of exporting military service to other nations. This system began after the Anglo-Nepal war, and has continued till the modern day. Because of dire unemployment, a large number of youths are forced to sell their military services to foreign nations and fight under a different flag. While this may help us to maintain a cordial relationship with a few nations-and save a few thousand youths from unemployment-, it will not help

us in the long run. Nepali Army also needs to continue to maintain a proper media image to the public. Media forms the social image of the military and shapes public attitudes toward the missions of armed forces (Lode, 1997). Because soldiers are also exposed to mass communication, it can change the social outlook of soldiers along with other influences. Democracy assumes a free press for the dissemination of information.

Another aspect that the Nepali Army must continue is humanitarian aid (both within and beyond borders) and its role as a construction institution, as infrastructural development is highly due in current Nepal and the army has been a source of trust in these matters- shown by the success of army led infrastructure projects such as “Fast Track”. Especially under the UN peace keeping force, Nepalese military has often carried out humanitarian activities, and many commentators argue that military humanitarianism is not an oxymoron anymore because military action has often defended humanitarian values as in Nepal’s case (Weiss, 1999, p. 198). As shown by the Nepali Army, armed protection and military involvement can be beneficial in preventing or mitigating human sufferings.

The Nepali Army must be a proponent of the modern democratic ideals such as opportunity to all ethnic communities in the army; and Nepali Army has, since the past decade, obediently done so. While merit and military and critical thinking skills should be the prime basis for higher ranks, a proportional representation can be maintained at lower ranks with much less hassle. This includes opportunities for women and transgender. It is also a high time that the defense program of Nepal include higher grade artilleries and discussions of the inclusion of nuclear

power in its military arsenal, as many nations surrounding us have gone nuclear. While we must strive to maintain peace, the Nepali Army must be capable of retaliation, if a surrounding neighbor tries to threaten our sovereignty, and the help of obliging friendly nations will be the key. We must look forward to getting inside the military alliances in the region and beyond to prepare for such a drastic scenario.

Conclusion

Throughout history, the civil military relationship in Nepal has been cordial; and we must strive to maintain it that way. We must be ready to upgrade our military power, its democratic adherence, and must keep it under civilian control at all costs. The international security environment is unlikely to change dramatically over the short run and we would prefer to see a defining of the roles of our armed forces in foreign peace support missions and domestic construction missions in compliance with our national constitution. We must maintain a harmonious civil military relationship; but we must also remain prepared for threats.

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