

# Downsizing the Nepalese Army?

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Nepal is at a military crossroads. The national army that was defending the state against the Maoists is back to the barracks following the declaration of the ceasefire by the government of Seven Party Alliance (SPA) and the Maoists, and the commencement of the peace process.

This has led to a discussion about the rationale behind maintaining the current size of the national army, their capability, and whether the military modernization plan that started with 2002 should continue in the changed context.

No doubt, there is a necessity to take a balanced decision, because the economy of the country cannot continue to bear with the existing level of military expenditure without adversely affecting the much needed developmental projects, and many people are assured that the ongoing efforts towards political accommodation of the Maoists in the mainstream means that the internal challenges to democracy are about to be dried up. As such, some of the political activists have even started to lobby the SPA government to scale down Nepal's enhanced military outfit.

The context, however, is not so simple. While the economic logic is understandable, neither the nature of security threats to the government has changed, nor the strategic needs of the democratic parties at present. It need not be reminded here why the Maoists had failed to take over any piece of territory of Nepal despite so much of killing and grandiose propaganda. Moreover, the slack talk about restructuring and downsizing also tend to undercut the trust of the almost five-century old national army, which may vanish from the barracks, if this is what the government wants, but not from the country. This leaves the country with challenges that are yet to emerge. Moreover, even the economic logic also largely

springs from the poverty of mind rather than of economy. Until 1991, the military establishment of this country consisted of just an army of 35,000 personnel. Organized largely along British lines, the force included fourteen infantry brigades, an airborne battalion, an air defense regiment, a small air services wing, and a variety of independent infantry companies and supporting units. Not only were its soldiers insufficiently trained, the country also lacked the resources to equip its army with anything beyond obsolete imported weapons. The situation has changed now.

Over the last four years, the country has invested millions of dollars to modernize the national army, and enhance its skills and military capability, which have been an all ignored issue since the fall of Rana oligarchy in 1951. Downsizing them ignoring such heavy investment cannot be an economic decision at all. The challenge is to reposition the national army against the future – by re-developing strategies as to how to maintain the army at this level without making it a liability to the economy, and to the partners contributing to this country's defense.

Nepal has been one of the main troops-contributing country to the United Nations in its peacekeeping operations. These troops have taken part in some of the most difficult operations, and have suffered casualties in the service of the UN in all continents. Their professional excellence has won universal admiration. Compared to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, what Nepal is contributing to the UN is still negligible. Many of these duly trained excess soldiers can now be offered to the United Nations with a long term commitment.

They can enter the peacekeeping scene now with enhanced capacity (for example, several types of military aircrafts including Mi-17s, M28 Sky truck, ALH Lancer, Dhruv and the UK delivered two Islanders and two Mi-17s). With the increased strength of its soldiers, Nepal is now in a situation to revive its global image of robust soldiers.

Additionally, with a modest management and restructuring, Nepal can send many of these trained soldiers in the form of military engineering units,

medical teams, commando units, army observers and hundreds of staff personnel to the UN. There is no reason why Nepal cannot take responsibility for some of the major medical and engineering responsibility of the UN the way China, India and Pakistan have undertaken (apart from his contributions to the normal peace keeping operations). Sooner there is a demand, Nepal can send technical personnel, base units, light armored reconnaissance squadrons, motorized light infantry, armored infantry, helicopter squadrons, engineering battalions, and logistics battalions, basically meant for the UN. The UN can be assured of Nepal's newfound capacity of sustaining large troop commitments over prolonged periods.

An additional opportunity for Nepal is also to offer its contribution to the proposed United Nations Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS) which would be a permanent agency able to set off for an emergency zone within 24 hours after UN authorization. The UNEPS will be equipped to take action in face of serious threats to human security and human rights; offer emergency services to meet critical human needs; assist in the establishment of institutions to maintain law and order; initiate peace building processes with focused incentives; and to restore hope for local people in the future of their society and economy. The Nepalese army is capable for this service as well.

There are a few smaller yet economically powerful and racially sensitive countries in the Asia Pacific region like Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Thailand which are keen to develop anti-terrorist squads in the country. Nepal can discuss with them their need, and develop joint strategies with their national army in order to undertake specific security responsibility under some mutually convenient terms and conditions. Even Australia and New Zealand can take strong interest in this area. It is possible to have an economic strategy for the Nepalese army that helps it to adapt – that does not just hold them back – and find a role around the world.

The Singapore Police Force, for example, has already a Gurkha Contingent as a special guard force, currently used as a counter-terrorist unit. The force is deployed during a

crisis or a state of emergency as an impartial reaction force. In Singapore where racial harmony must be maintained, their presence as a neutral force is considered important in Singapore because local police officers are often perceived for being (or are even expected to show) bias towards their own ethnic groups when handling racial disturbances, further fuelling discontent and violence.

With the increasing concerns against terrorism and the continued security threat Singapore and these other countries face, it is very likely that a mutually beneficial arrangements can be made going beyond such a Gurkha Contingent (being employed by Singapore as a temporary security measure). Many of these countries need neutral force in the interest of maintaining normal order in the border areas, to prevent and crack down on illegal activities across the border, such as smuggling of weapons, trafficking in narcotics and other contrabands, and similar other challenges. Nepal can take the help of the British government to empower it to negotiate with the third countries.

Geographically, Nepal is a vulnerable place. It is prone to natural disasters. So far Nepal does not have any agency to assure a coordinated response should something very catastrophic happen in Nepal. The national army is the only permanent emergency response service that this country so far has. It needs to be there with additional training and capacity building in the area of disaster management. The recent tsunami in Asia and earthquake in Pakistan has demonstrated that the army has a key role to play in coordinating the response to large-scale disasters. The international system cannot muster the emergency support to act in time to prevent them from spiraling into national crises.

With increased foreign investment, Nepal will need to build capability to protect its infrastructure, industries, private investment like major hydropower projects. Our existing civilian capacity in this regard will not be enough for this purpose.

In fact, what is needed is not downsizing of the trained armed force of Nepal, but the willingness to make its creative use in the changed context.

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