
Integration of Maoist PLA with the Nepalese Army

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Of the many challenges facing the Maoists, the more daunting are the drafting of a Constitution, retooling of civil-military relations and integration of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Nepal Army (NA) into a national army. Rejectionists of this last idea far outnumber the protagonists. The debate in Nepal among military experts is over selecting the appropriate model for absorbing the Maoist PLA into the NA. According to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of November 21, 2006, the Monitoring of Arms and Armies Agreement (MAAA) was to be followed by the integration of armies by fulfilling "standard norms" which were not defined. Articles 144 and 145 of the Interim Constitution 2007 deal with the NA while Articles 146 and 147 deal with Maoist combatants.

Under the heading "Transitional Management of the Fighters," Article 146 reads: "The Cabinet will form a special committee for the supervision, inclusion/integration and rehabilitation of the Maoist fighters and the rights and duties of the committee will be determined by the Cabinet". The CPA says the Cabinet will constitute an apex committee to carry out monitoring, adjustment and rehabilitation of Maoists. Neither the CPA nor MAAA, with Ian Martin, chief of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) as witness nor even the interim Constitution, specifically says that Maoist combatants will be integrated with the NA. In June 2008, the Seven-Party Alliance agreement noted that the Maoist Army will be offered a choice between an economic package and various alternatives for rehabilitation. It is no accident that nowhere is integration, as understood by the Maoists, reflected in any document.

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Two issues are clear: there is no categorical reference to integration of the PLA with the NA; and that any integration will be according to “accepted standard norms”. The candidates who choose integration in security bodies will do so only after fulfilling the standard requirements. Even the MAAA says integration will follow the fulfilling of standard norms.

In the past, the UN used to be happy in a post-conflict situation merely with a ceasefire, without addressing the complex problems of the warring factions returning to society. Post-conflict situations have been guided by two

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systems: Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reforms (SSR). Attached to DDR is the perceived stigma of defeat — and it also did not address in earnestness, the complex problem of reintegration. This model has been followed in Africa, while SSR is favoured by the European and Western nations. SSR aims to bring armies under civil democratic control, emphasising civilian supremacy and legislative oversight. It entails an overall security review and comprehensive reforms. The UN has tried to combine the virtues of both.

In Nepal, the army had initially insisted on implementing DDR — which the Maoists have rejected, as both armies were given parity through identical letters written to the UN secretary general inviting UNMIN to monitor, manage and supervise the arms, ammunition and armies of the Maoists at the seven cantonments and 21 satellite cantonment sites, three each for the main cantonment where the PLA will be based. The NA, similarly, will be confined to the barracks. The cantonments will be supervised and managed by the Joint Monitoring Coordination Committee (JMCC) constituting the representatives of the government, the Maoists and UNMIN. PLA arms will be stored in containers with a matching number of arms being deposited by the government army for storage. The keys to these containers will be with the local Maoist commanders.

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UNMIN monitors took time coming, an interim task force of retired Indian Army Gorkhas was established to assist the UN in its management and monitoring mission.

The official stand of the Maoists is complete merger of all UN qualified combatants in a group to join the NA. Yet, as we will see, they have shown flexibility but will never dissolve the PLA. The Deputy Commander of the PLA, Barsha Man Pun (Ananta) who is an elected member of the Constituent Assembly, at one time had said that the Armed Police Force (APF) formed to fight the PLA should be dissolved and the PLA could be transformed into the fifth security agency². The Maoist bottom line now is integration with the NA of unspecified numbers of the PLA.

The Maoists did not force integration before the elections though integration or management was a prelude to peaceful elections. They chose to shelve the issue until after the elections, showing that they have a sixth sense in postponing integration till after an election victory, which gives them a decisive political advantage in promoting SSR. In hindsight, not integrating the army was not a wise move on the part of the government. Former Deputy Commander of the PLA, now Defence Minister, Ram Bahadur Thapa (Badal) has already made the difference by persuading the army high command to accept integration of the armies. Chief of Army Staff Gen Rukmangat Katowal has been consistent in saying that the army cannot induct ideologically motivated persons into an apolitical army. The purity, sanctity and integrity of the NA should never be compromised, he said³. Already, the terms of admission appear to have been relaxed to “standard norms of recruitment.” While Katowal will not deviate from the book, he has shown considerable flexibility.

A number of committees/commissions for integration were ordered in the past but few were actually formed or their reports actually implemented. In July 2007, a three-member task force of three political parties set up a Special Security Committee for Democratisation of the Nepal Army. In June 2008, the Seven-Party Alliance drew up a seven-point draft proposal relating to the adjustment of Maoist combatants and drafting of a national security policy followed by adjustment and rehabilitation of guerrillas within a period of six months⁴. The Nepali Congress has been insisting on implementation of the seven proposals made by the task force as a precondition to joining the latest Army Integration Security Committee (AISC).

Initially, a special committee for supervision of integration and rehabilitation was to evolve terms of reference for selection. Later, Defence Minister Thapa asked the National Security Council (NSC) to work out standard norms for

integration to be completed between three to six months. Even the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) of the ruling alliance government was to set up a high level committee for integrating Maoist Army combatants, which is the new designation of the PLA into the national army. Prime Minister Prachanda's buzzwords are "democratisation of Nepal Army and professionalisation of PLA". All these efforts have finally fructified in the five-member AISC on October 29, 2008.

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A security commission for national security policy was also to be established as part of security sector reforms. This commission, many had recommended, should evolve a framework for the size and shape of security forces before any integration is attempted. Military and police forces should be scaled down from the current 180,000 personnel to more realistic force levels before integrating the PLA.

Integration of armies was first discussed during the second round of peace talks in 2003 under the premiership of Lokendra Bahadur Chand. The government's chief negotiator was former colonel of the NA, the high-flying late Narayan Singh Pun, who enjoyed rare confidence of both the Maoist negotiating team and King Gyanendra. He confirmed that the Maoists had agreed that only the PLA, which met the conditions of the Recruitment Manual, would be absorbed⁵. At that time, the PLA had around 5,000 hardcore guerrillas, with fewer than 3,000 weapons. At the time of the ceasefire, however, these figures had shot up to 33,000 PLA cadres but surprisingly the weapon count had remained below 3,000. Obviously, the Maoists had attempted to oblige as many of their fighting cadres as they could by inducting them into their camps.

UNMIN was tasked to do the initial screening on the basis of age and cut-off date corresponding to the ceasefire of May 25, 2006. Only those who qualified would be eligible to claim the status of a combatant and be allowed to stay in the cantonment. Of the 32,350 cadres in camps, 19,602 passed muster, including 3,846 women; 2,973 were minors, being born after May 25, 1988, 4,008 were disqualified and another 8,000 were to leave voluntarily. A majority of these is still in the camps, with the population having increased by hundreds of newborn babies. All those who do not make the grade will have to be rehabilitated and integrated in civil society.

By early 2007, a public debate had begun over the integration of armies. Many retired generals led by Chitra Bahadur Gurung and Balanand Sharma

made their public speaking debut. Both have suggested the need for a National Security Doctrine and White Paper on defence. The first post-democracy scrutiny of security was done in 1991 while the earliest perspective planning of the NA was produced in 1988. Both were vague and unprofessional.

The overall strength of the security forces in Nepal is 180,000, which includes 93,000 army, 60,000 police, 25,000 armed police and 5,000 special task force, created for the Terai. The National Intelligence Directorate has 2,000 personnel. Add to this, 20,000 of the PLA. Both Prachanda and Bhattarai had advocated an overall review of security in view of the end of the war before adjudicating force levels. They came up with security forces sized from as low as 30,000 to 50,000. Later, it was being said that 100,000 is “not too big for a 30 million population” and that reductions can be made over the long term.

Bhattarai’s idea is to maintain a lean, mean force backed by a people’s militia to be mobilised in times of war and emergency. He was suggesting restructuring the security sector as part of restructuring of the state as distinct from mere security sector reform.

Since both the Maoist leaders have said different things at different times, it is not clear what their position is on a review of the security forces after forming the government.

Meanwhile, politicians who have become exceptionally vocal after the Maoists’ election victory have joined the security debate. The old guard is saying that an indoctrinated force cannot be merged with the national army. That certainly is the articulated stand of all the political parties, especially the Nepali Congress that is pitching for its inclusion as an opposition party in the NSC. In the pre-election informal discussions, the Maoists are reported to have agreed that up to 6,000 PLA cadres would be integrated in the army while the rest could be absorbed in the police or newly designated forces ⁶.

It is no longer a question of ‘if’ but ‘when’ and in what manner the integration process will be evolved. The AISC and the NSC are to coordinate the criterion and procedure for integration acceptable to both the government (read Maoists) and the army. There is uniform opposition to group entry of politically indoctrinated combatants. While the first issue is negotiable, the second is not. Greater flexibility will have to be shown, both by the army and the political opposition to accommodate the Maoists combatants in the national army. They could also refer to the Pun formula and subsequent informal discussions on integration. Only recently, Prachanda observed that he was keen on integration and not merger of armies. With the Maoists heading the government, the ground reality has changed to their advantage.

Some options for integration are discussed below. Screening of the 19,602 PLA cadres verified by UNMIN against a consensus criterion: as group entry would be inadmissible, fit and qualified combatants, including females, could be sprinkled across the 63 infantry battalions and various supporting arms and services, as per composition norms of the NA. Women PLA cadres can be taken into the

logistics units of the NA or absorbed elsewhere. Senior PLA commanders could be absorbed in party work or rehabilitated in politics. The officers of the East German Army were given a golden handshake during the merger with the West German Army. The creation of a separate Maoist battalion is obviously a non-starter, as is the raising of a separate but pure Maoist oriented force. Yet, the Maoists have made integration with the national army a point of principle and prestige and the cornerstone of the peace process.

The review and reform of the security sector will continue in tandem with integration. For the last two years, the British have been helping to reorganise the Ministry of Defence (MoD) by creating an integrated civilian and military staff for streamlining decision-making and ensuring greater accountability and political legislative oversight. Only one colonel-rank officer was posted to the MoD: even he was transferred to head the president's Military Secretariat when that office was created in July 2008. The British, who take pride in their long and abiding Gorkha relationship, are keen to find and maintain a prominent role in the integration process and the new political order. A conference on integration scheduled in Thailand in July 2008, involving the PLA, NA and UK officials was called off at the government's request.

The Americans, through the US Institute of Peace, are engaged in reforming the Ministry of Home Affairs, especially the police forces, emphasising human rights and humanitarian laws. The armed police force, created in 2002 after the acceleration of the Maoist war, has been afflicted with three revolts in 2008, resulting in large scale disciplining of police officials.

India, the oldest and most durable military partner, is conspicuous by its absence from the security sector reforms process. Fearing that it would be perceived as intrusive at a sensitive time of historic transformation in Nepal, it chose to keep out of the security sector reforms. No other country has benefited as enormously as Nepal from India's military training, reequipment and modernisation almost gratis since the 1950s. More recently, India had offered

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vocational training for rehabilitating PLA cadres unlikely to be integrated into the army at its premier training institute for Gorkhas retiring from the Indian Army at Dehradun. It had made a pitch to facilitate integration of armies given its vast experience in assimilating armed rebels who came overground and surrendered.

India's historical experience has been zero tolerance and assimilation in the army of underground armed rebels — individuals or outfits — who waged war against the state. The Indian National Army came in that category at the end of World War II. Armed groups from Nagaland and Mizoram who came overground were absorbed in paramilitary forces like the Border Security Force (BSF). Later, Nagas and Mizos were recruited into regular infantry battalions. In Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), militants who came over ground were taken into state police and other militias but nobody was taken in the regular army.

The extended term of the UNMIN will expire on January 23, 2009. It will continue to have a role in the management of the PLA in camps till integration and rehabilitation are completed which will inevitably go beyond the current term. Ian Martin has said there is no exit strategy for UNMIN till integration is completed.

Stickier than the prickly integration issue is democratisation of the army and harmonising civil-military relations. A special security committee for democratisation of the NA was formed in July 2007, but like other committees, it remained mainly on paper. The structural and historical loyalty of the army to the king and Palace is a legacy of Nepal's strategic culture that made state security synonymous with the institution of monarchy and national unity. New strategic thinking must reflect the contemporary ground reality – everything from the motto of the army to manning policy to tradition and ethos will have to be refashioned in the true spirit of a people's army. The new Military Act of October 2007 is yet to be implemented.

A new army chief, the first ever Janjati, Gen Chhatraman Gurung will break the unwritten rule of the Chief of Army Staff belonging to the elite class. A shift of loyalty and orientation in the officer cadre is bound to occur in the future towards a more egalitarian order. It must be acknowledged that overall, the army has behaved quite responsibly, barring some loaded comments on national unity and sovereignty made by the Army Chief, Gen Rukmangat Katowal, doubtlessly cleared by Prime Minister GP Koirala. These remarks helped to deter any unconstitutional action by the Maoists and Madheshis in blocking the elections or Maoists attempting a power grab. The NA is the only institution that stands between the Maoist goals of a single party state, were that to be attempted unconstitutionally.

The interim Constitution notes, "The control and mobilisation of the NA will be conducted by the Government of Nepal based on the recommendations of the NSC." The fourth amendment of the Constitution has vested the power for mobilisation of the army in the president. It was mandatory to include the army chief in the NSC. He is no longer integral to the state security apparatus. The new military doctrine of the army was released in September 2008 and reflects the army's internal thinking but has no government approval.

The victorious Maoists who now lead a government and have their own defence minister in the AISC will strike a hard bargain on integration but one which is acceptable to the coalition partners and in accordance with the ethos of a professional army, reflecting the spirit of compromise that has been the hallmark of Nepal's peace process. They will be keen on taking the fast track whereas other political parties are opposed to even token integration. The six-month deadline for integration is highly ambitious.

Notes

1. See the Tripartite Agreement of the Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies signed between the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) Government and CPN (Maoist) on November 28, 2006. See also Article 4.3 of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed on November 21, 2006. Also see the Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007, published in the *Nepal Gazette*, published by the Government of Nepal on January 15, 2007.
2. Barshaman Pun, *The Kathmandu Post*, June 14, 2008.
3. Rukmangat Katowal, *The Kathmandu Post*, June 13, 2008.
4. Arjun Bhandari, *The Himalayan Times*, June 20, 2008.
5. Col NS Pun in conversation with the author in New Delhi, October 2005 and Kolkata, July 2006.
6. Shekhar Koirala, the Nepali Congress pointsperson on informal dialogue on integration of the PLA with the NA, in a conversation with the author, July 2007.