



## **Centre For A New South Asia**

### **India-Nepal Seminar Vision Paper**

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## **HIMALAYAN SHIELD: STRENGTHENING INDIA-NEPAL DEFENSE COOPERATION**

### **ABSTRACT –**

India and Nepal share a unique and longstanding defense partnership characterized by historical ties, strategic interests and socio-cultural similarities. Gorkha recruitment has been the cornerstone of India-Nepal relations with thousands of Gorkhas having served in the Indian Army during the colonial era and now in the contemporary times. However, now the recruitment of Gorkhas has been halted ever since the implementation of the Agnipath scheme and now the crises of Gorkha recruitment looms. Military cooperation, which includes joint military exercises, defense trade agreements and technology sharing, have helped Indo-Nepal relations to reach different levels, however, factors like political vulnerabilities, nationalist divergent interests and external influences have frustrated such a relationship and hence a healthy dialogue and mutually agreed policies could help steer this bilateral relationship out of instability. Both India and Nepal have been key allies to the UN Peacekeeping forces and this has been a crucial element of bilateral ties which not only enhances their military cooperation but also increases their standing on a global footprint. Nevertheless, mutually agreed logistical coordination, communication and welfare will reinforce the relationship between the two Nations. Hence, this vision paper aims to provide an answer to the intersectional histories, military legacy, strategic needs, evolving global dynamics and emphasizing needs for reforms in defense cooperation and address contemporary issues to leverage opportunities for mutual benefit.

### **INTRODUCTION –**

The Indian subcontinent is comprised of various ethnicities, races and tribes. India demographically is a complex case study {Chakrabarty, D. (1995)}. Ever since the advent of the nation, several races and tribes have been living together and co-habited the subcontinent. The process of classifying races as “martial” and “non martial” was started by the British East India Company {Barua, P. (1995)}. The British were

impressed by the bravery portrayed by the Gorkhas and entered a Peace Treaty with the Kingdom of Nepal in the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816 and which led to recruitment of Gorkhas by the English East India Army {Kumari, P., & Kushwaha, R. (1816)}. Throughout these years, the Gorkhas have aided and demonstrated great bravery whether it is in the Anglo-Sikh Wars or the two deadly World Wars. After the independence of India, a tripartite agreement was signed between India, Nepal and the United Kingdom that aspired to continue the policy of recruitment of Gorkhas with certain terms and conditions. Post Independence, the Indian Army has maintained seven Gorkha Regiments which have fought and demonstrated unparalleled successes and bravery during such wars. To this day, the Gorkha Regiment is one of the most decorated and distinguished regiments in the Indian Army, as well as it is a globally acclaimed and well recognized regiment.

### LEGACY OF INDO-NEPAL DEFENSE COOPERATION–

In 1947 when India became independent from the rule of the Crown, the British, Indian and Nepalese governments signed a Tripartite Agreement to split the Gorkha Regiments between the British and Indian armies — six Gorkha units became part of the new Indian Army, while four were transferred to the British Army. It was agreed that the Gorkhas serving in British and Indian service should, broadly, be placed on the same conditions of service to avoid any unfair advantage being gained by one over the other. This would ensure economic stability and social harmony in the Gorkha recruiting areas. This Tripartite Agreement has been following from decades and has ensured a smooth recruitment of Gorkhas in both the British and Indian Armies. The Gorkha Regiments have proved their mettle in both Indian and British warfare zones. One of the most remarkable military operations in the Indian warzones was the capture of Kargil which has been praised and has served as a precedent for military operations worldwide {Suraj (2024, May 14)}.

In these contemporary times, both India and Nepal are in a harmonious defense cooperation with several military exercises taking place like – SURYA Kiran. Furthermore, India has supplied arms to Nepal to help them modernize their army

{Sarkar, D. (2014, June 10)}. Both Indian and Nepalese armies have honored their long-standing tradition of awarding Honorary rank of General to each other's Army Chief.

Furthermore, the deep mutual relations and harmony was demonstrated when India unequivocally aided Nepal during the devastating earthquakes of 2015, and provided Nepal with disaster management assistance, essential goods and rehabilitation camps. This has led to relationships between the nations, to a next level of harmony and cooperation. Such events have further deepened the bond between the two nations and made it evident that defense cooperation between the two is in the best interest with regards to the changing global dynamics.

### **PRESENT ISSUES**

In the present contemporary times, the bone of contention with regards to defense cooperation in Indo-Nepalese relations is the enforcement of the Agnipath scheme. This new recruitment policy of the Indian army entails that a young candidate between the age of 17.5-21 will be selected in the army for a period of 4 years including training period and then after the term of 4 years upto 25% of the batch will be absorbed into the regular army and the rest will be retired with a corpus fund {REFERENCE DIVISION, & Thakur, A. (2022)}. This scheme has not only caused an upheaval in India but also among the Gorkhas, who face the threat of service in the army {Sagar, P. R. (2024, May 24)}.

It also leaves a majority of ex- Military Gorkhas unemployed which will lead them to join separatist forces or the Private Military Contractors i.e. "mercenaries" which defeats the object of the India-Nepal-United Kingdom Tripartite Agreement. Additionally, it can lead to the unemployed Gorkhas in joining separatist or anti-nationalist forces like the Madheshi factions which can have severe implications for India as well.

These Ex-Agniveers will, in the future face the issue of unemployment, since they have no professional degree course, and it reduces their chances of employability in corporate sectors. The Agnipath policy will also create a section of combat-trained

young men and women in the society, where their integration in the society is going to be very erratic. Moreover, it will leave the society to be at peril since these young, combat trained ex-Agniveers would be without jobs and if they are left to be unemployed for a long period of time, frustration will soon take over them and it may lead to unpleasant circumstances and can be a threat to national security to both India and Nepal.

Moreover, such a scheme is a violation of the tripartite agreement between India, United Kingdom and Nepal, where none of the recruiting partners – India or the United Kingdom are allowed to bring in such policies without consultations, since such may deprive the Gorkhas of their rights. India did this without United Kingdom and Nepal's consultations and moreover, they did not make any safeguards for the Gorkhas. Hence such a policy is protested by both Nepalese Government and Nepalese Gorkhas. Additionally, such a policy will lead to an erosion of trust and hence it is unfavorable to both the parties.

Also, India faces a geopolitical threat from one of its hostile neighbors, i.e., China which will be deemed to leverage this situation against India by recruiting Gorkhas in its army. With no new recruitment of Gorkhas in the past 4 years, the future of Gorkha regiment looms {Sharma, A. (2024, September 11)}. The Nepalese Government declared that it would deal with both India and the United Kingdom bilaterally and set aside the Tripartite Agreement {NatStrat. (2021, April 22)}. However, such a policy may or may not be in the best interest of parties to the agreement and certain policies should be brought to re-mobilize the recruitment of Gorkhas in the Indian Army.

Hence, a policy should be brought which respects the rights of the Gorkhas and guarantees them a social, economic and culturally stable life and should build stronger and robust mechanisms so that the rights and welfare of Gorkha soldiers are honored post-service, especially regarding pensions and rehabilitation. Moreover, the main contention with the Agnipath Scheme is that the tenure of Agniveers is very short with just 4 years of service and no pension and health benefits.

**NEW SPECIAL POLICY FOR GORKHAS IN THE ARMY –**

A new special policy must be implemented especially for Gorkhas to protect their rights and guarantee them social, economic and cultural stability.

**INCREASING TENURE FOR GORKHAS –**

According to Agnipath Scheme, the tenure of an Agniveer is 4 years and after the superannuation, upto 25% of the batch will be inducted into the regular army. The rest 75% percent of the Agniveers will be retired along with the SevaNidhi package. However, to suit the needs of the Gorkhas, it is in the best interest that the tenure may be increased, only for them.

What I propose is that the Gorkhas continue with the regular 4 years of service as stipulated under the Agnipath Scheme and after the completion of the said 4 years, they should be given an option to further continue the service for a period of 6 more years. Those who wish to serve for 6 more years shall be inducted into the regular Gorkha Regiments. This would reserve the rights of the Gorkha personnel who might want to retire from the army, and it would also protect the rights of the personnel who still wish to continue with the service.

Moreover, the Gorkha personnel who will have served in the army for 10 years should be entitled to pensionary benefits as well as health benefits. Furthermore, after the completion of 10 years, they should be given an option to retire or request an extension of service for another 4 years. It should be noted that the further extension of tenure should be selective and with only 50% of the batch being retained. It is imperative to note that Gorkha Personnel continuing their service for another 4 years shall be provided with long service compensation and benefits, along with regular pension and other benefits.

**RATIONALE –**

The rationale behind this is that it gives the Gorkhas an opportunity to further serve in the army. It also has a provision for personnel who might want to retire from the army. Hence, it will serve both the purposes of Indian Army to reduce the average age of its personnel while protecting the rights of the Gorkhas. Furthermore, in the case of service of 10 years of service or 14 years, it is similar to the regular tenure of Short Service Commission Officers who serve for a minimum period of 10 years which is extendable to 14 years. Hence, such a policy will not create any irregular retirement and is in consonance with the Army's retirement policy.

Moreover, such a policy has guaranteed the rights of both the Agniveer Gorkhas, ones who might want to retire from the army and the others who still wish to serve in the army. Those who wish to retire after the original tenure of 4 years shall receive the SevaNidhi corpus and may wish to pursue further studies or may start a business. The SevaNidhi package shall prove to be of great use to the Agniveers in fields of both education and business, however, they would not be entitled to any government pension or health benefits.

Moving forward, the Gorkhas who serve for 6 more years shall be inducted into the regular Gorkha Regiments and serve for a total of 10 years which shall be extendable for 4 years. 10 years of service is a stable time and along with pensionary and health benefits for such personnel, the issue of job insecurity and instability shall be eliminated. With the tenure extendable for 4 years, however, induction of only 50% of the batch, based on performance shall motivate the Gorkha personnel to work more dedicatedly towards their service and the long service compensation and benefits shall be an incentive for rendering their long, precious service to the Indian Army. The retirement pension and health benefits will eliminate the question of economic insecurity and ensure the welfare of retired Gorkha personnel.

In addition to this, the Indian Government should endeavor to provide special quotas for Ex-Agniveer Gorkhas in the Central Armed Police Forces. However, the special quota, in addition to the present 10% quota in Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) {ET Bureau. (2024, July 11)}, should be provided to the primary 4-year retiree Agniveer

Gorkhas. Moreover, 4-year retiree Agniveers should be provided special Ex-Agniveer Gorkha Reservation in all government public universities and private universities should be encouraged to reserve seats for Ex-Agniveer Gorkhas. This will provide adequate protection to Gorkha Agniveers who want to retire after their primary term of 4 years and wish to pursue education. Additionally, there should be more hospitals for the care of Gorkha veterans and both, the governments of India and Nepal, should take up this as a joint venture.

This policy is crafted while keeping in mind the interests of the policies of Indian Government and Indian Army as well as the Nepalese Government's concern regarding recruitment of Gorkhas.

However, there will be some shortcomings of this policy and some more may appear as this policy is implemented. Firstly, the evident problem with the policy will be the transitioning process of converting the Gorkha personnel, from 4-year Agniveers into the personnel of the regular Gorkha Regiment. Moreover, the records and paperwork will increase which will, thereby, increase the burden on the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) and the Defence Ministry. Furthermore, after the tenure of 10 years, the grounds for selecting only 50% of the candidates for further extension of 4 years of service might be cumbersome. However, the most suitable grounds for such could be discipline, track record of the candidate, operational capability, health risks, etc.

This policy has tried to address most of the contentions faced by Gorkhas with regards to their recruitment in the Indian Army under the Agnipath Scheme, while being mindful of the best interests of India and Nepal. Moreover, proper communication, coordination and implementation of such a policy shall help eradicate the problems faced by the Gorkhas.

### MILITARY COOPERATION –

India and Nepal are active members of the UN Peacekeeping forces and have contributed significantly to the Peace operations undertaken by the UN Statista {(2024, July 4)}. Both India and Nepal have been undertaking joint military exercises such as the recently held – SURYA KIRAN. However, being a part of UN Peacekeeping Forces,



I believe that to increase military cooperation between the two nations, an India – Nepal Operations Centre for Joint Training of UN bound Peacekeeping Forces, more in the lines of Birendra Peace Operations Training Centre, comprising of the personnel of Indian and Nepalese Army should be established. Such an endeavor would not only increase operational capabilities, but it would also provide experience of two armies working together in a UN Peacekeeping Operations. This will increase exposure of the troops and would result in exchange of military knowledge and skills. Additionally, in the instances of Joint Operations, it can be used as a shared operations center to facilitate military information and technology sharing.

Furthermore, as evident from the devastating earthquakes in Nepal in the year 2015, India launched Operation Maitri and provided immediate aid to Nepal with rescue missions, rehabilitation programs and sent material aid to Nepal {Laskar, R. H. (2015, April 26)}. The swift aid helped to prevent further loss of life. However, the main point to note is the cooperation between the Indian and Nepalese Disaster Response Units which selflessly helped the victims which were caught in the devastating earthquakes. Thus, keeping in mind the environmental changes causing natural disasters to become common occurrences, a specialized Joint Training Centre for Disaster Relief should be established, where personnel of Army, Navy, Air Force, Disaster Response Units of both – Nepal and India shall train together. This will further deepen the cooperation between the two nations and will prove to be of mutual benefit in times of contingency.

With regards to defense cooperation, a Joint Weapons Development plan should be adopted by the two nations. India has been developing BrahMos and AK-203 Rifles with Russia {Peri, D. (2024, May 20)} and is currently exploring co-development and co-production in the defense sector with Germany. With the changing global dynamics and the use of cyber warfare {Fairleigh Dickinson University Online. (2018, October 29)}. With the digitalization of warfare and with terrorist organisations using technology to fund their operations, hack computer systems, disrupting banking or security systems, I believe that the time is ripe for India and Nepal to jointly develop an anti-cyber warfare and cyber defense against cyber-attacks to ensure peace. It will be a great foundational step to engage the Indian Defense Ministry and other relevant authorities along with Nepalese Defense Ministry. Such an engagement will be fruitful

to both the nations and will help in building robust Indo-Nepalese Relations and launching them to a global platform.

### CONCLUSION –

On a concluding note, Indo-Nepal relations have been harmonious, however they have been turbulent at times, mainly due to the internal problems regarding boundary issues and more recently – the Kalapani issue {Bhattacharjee, K. (2020, May 24)} which has caused a huge uproar in both Nepal and India. However, such small incidents have not deterred the two nations in maintaining their relationship with each other and have made dedicated efforts to resolve such issues. This vision paper has attempted to solve the Gorkha Recruitment issue and has additionally attempted to frame a pathway of defense cooperation, which is in the best interests of the two nations to launch them to a global forefront and with respect to changing global dynamics.

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