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Towards Civil–Military Synergy in National Security Governance: Challenges and Opportunities in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges and opportunities of integrating military leadership into Nepal's civilian governance structures, focusing on the period from 2015 to 2024. Grounded in Network Governance Theory, Civil-Military Relations Theories, and Realism, the research employed a pragmatic mixed-methods approach. Data was collected using key informant interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and semi-structured surveys among policymakers, military leaders, and national security experts. The study identifies legal-institutional gaps, political resistance, and trust deficits as key barriers, while pointing to opportunities in strategic education, leadership development, and defense diplomacy. The article concludes that a structured, democratically accountable integration can significantly enhance national security outcomes.

Introduction

This article investigates the challenges and opportunities related to the integration of military leadership into Nepal's civilian-led security governance structures between 2015 and 2024. This issue was critical in light of Nepal's strategic geography between India and China, the absence of a published National Security Strategy (NSS), and evolving security demands. While sensitive in post-conflict democracies, military integration—when conducted within democratic frameworks—can contribute to strategic depth and governance resilience.

Nepal's geopolitical vulnerability and increasing exposure to both traditional and non-traditional threats have made national security governance more complex and urgent. With Nepal lacking a consolidated NSS and facing institutional inertia within government ministries such as the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), the role of military leadership in governance has become a pressing issue (Rawal, 2022; Rana, 2018). Despite the proven strategic, humanitarian, and operational capabilities of the Nepali Army (NA), its involvement in policy-level decision-making remains ad hoc and underutilized.

Studies have shown that structured integration of military leadership—within frameworks that preserve democratic oversight—can enhance strategic planning, defense diplomacy, and crisis coordination (Matei, Bruneau, & Halladay, 2022; Bruneau & Goetze, 2006). This article, therefore, seeks to contribute to the evolving discourse on civil-military relations by critically analyzing the institutional, political, and operational dimensions of military integration in Nepal’s national security governance structures.

Following the end of its decade-long Maoist conflict and the promulgation of a new constitution in 2015, Nepal has consolidated its transition to a federal democratic republic. However, the transformation of its national security architecture lagged behind compared to the seismic political shifts. The country has historically lacked a published NSS and efforts to institutionalize civilian oversight and inter-agency coordination have been, to a large extent, sporadic and reactive (Rawal, 2022). The Ministry of Defense (MoD), which should serve as a vital interface for the civilian and the military arms, remains under-resourced and politically marginalized, often functioning without a robust policy or planning division (Rana, 2018).

Meanwhile, the National Security Council (NSC) has yet to evolve into a high-level strategic policy body, as intended. Instead, strategic and operational security decisions are frequently made on an ad hoc basis, leading to fragmented responses to national threats. The NA, despite being a key actor in humanitarian assistance, border security, and international peacekeeping, has limited representation in formal governance processes. While its capabilities are recognized globally, integration of its leadership into policymaking remains institutionally informal and episodic (Matei et al., 2022). These gaps highlight the urgency of developing mechanisms to incorporate military leadership into civilian-led security governance in a structured, democratic, and strategic manner, especially amid growing regional and transnational security challenges.

Despite Nepal’s strategic geopolitical context and increasing exposure to complex national and regional threats, the country yearns for a comprehensive institutional mechanism that enables effective civil-military integration in security governance. The absence of a formal National Security Strategy (NSS), combined with weak inter-agency coordination and underdeveloped civilian defense institutions, such as the Ministry of Defense (MoD) has significantly impeded Nepal’s ability to respond to security challenges in a timely and coordinated manner (Rawal, 2022; Rana, 2018). Although the NA has consistently demonstrated its effectiveness in disaster response, peacekeeping, and crisis management, its strategic expertise is not fully leveraged in national security policy processes. This disconnect has resulted in fragmented security governance, policy gaps, and a dearth of strategic foresight. Furthermore, political resistance and civil-military mistrust—stemming from Nepal’s historical experiences with autocracy and internal conflict—continue to constrain efforts at structured military integration in strategic security governance (Matei et al., 2022). These structural and political barriers underscore the urgent need to explore the challenges and opportunities of integrating military leadership within Nepal’s democratic governance framework. The article, therefore, examines the institutional, legal, and political challenges hindering the integration of military leadership into Nepal’s civilian governance system. It further explores the strategic

opportunities for civil-military collaboration that can enhance national security planning, crisis response, and policy coherence.

This study is significant for national policymakers, defense institutions, and governance practitioners seeking to modernize Nepal's national security framework. It bridges the knowledge gap between military capabilities and civilian governance responsibilities, offering empirical insights that support legal and institutional reforms. By examining the practical and theoretical dimensions of military integration, the research aims to enhance civil-military trust and inform whole-of-government collaboration models (Bruneau & Goetze, 2006; Matei et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study contributes to regional security scholarship in South Asia and serves as a reference for comparative civil-military relations in post-conflict democracies.

First, the integration of military leadership into civilian governance—when guided by legal and institutional safeguards—would contribute positively to Nepal's national security outcomes. Secondly, it assumed that democratic civilian oversight would be preserved, even with increased military engagement in policy formulation and crisis coordination, provided that transparency and accountability mechanisms were upheld. Finally, it was assumed that the existing national security institutions in Nepal, particularly the Ministry of Defense, the NSC, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, underutilized the strategic potential and expertise of the Nepali Army due to weak frameworks and a lack of formal channels for integration. These assumptions underpinned the rationale for exploring how structured civil-military collaboration could enhance governance effectiveness and institutional resilience.

Literature Review

The existing body of literature reveals a nuanced and multifaceted view of the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating military leadership into Nepal's civilian governance structures that are central to national security. It addresses the overarching general objective of the study—assessing the challenges and opportunities for integrating military leadership into civilian governance spaces—and directly informs the three specific objectives, namely: (1) identifying institutional, legal, and political barriers; (2) exploring opportunities for strategic civil-military collaboration; and (3) examining stakeholder perceptions and institutional readiness.

In terms of institutional, legal, and political challenges, the literature points to several deeply rooted impediments. Sharma (2023) and Rawal (2022) underscore the weaknesses of Nepal's NSC and Ministry of Defense (MoD), highlighting limited institutional capacity, opaque processes, and ineffective oversight mechanisms. Despite constitutional provisions, the absence of a detailed legal framework hampers efforts to formalize civil-military collaboration. Political instability and frequent leadership turnover—highlighted by Thapa and Basnet (2019)—disrupt continuity in security planning and create an environment where national security policy is frequently subordinated to partisan priorities.

Historical tensions between the military and political leadership have further exacerbated civil-military relations (CMR). The highly publicized confrontation between Army Chief Katawal and Prime Minister Prachanda, in 2009, described by Rai (2021), symbolizes the enduring mistrust between civilian authorities and the NA. Shrestha (2018) notes that political

interference in military promotions and postings reinforce this mistrust, often discouraging institutional cooperation. These frictions are compounded by an uneven distribution of expertise and experience, with civilian officials in the MoD and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) often lacking defense education and strategic insight that their military counterparts possess (Rana, 2018; Rawal, 2022). Consequently, integration efforts face structural and cognitive mismatches that hinder institutional alignment and cooperation.

From a strategic perspective, however, the literature also identifies significant opportunities for enhanced civil-military collaboration. Sharma (2023) advocates for structural reforms to the NSC that include broader stakeholder participation—such as opposition leaders, provincial representatives, and subject-matter experts—to encourage shared security ownership and informed policymaking. The integration of military leadership into the NSC under civilian control is seen as a measure to foster accountability while tapping into military expertise. Similarly, Danaa (2023) outlines key enablers for adopting a Whole-of-Government Approach (WoGA), emphasizing leadership commitment, clear institutional mandates, legal frameworks, and collaborative cultures as drivers of improved interagency coordination. In this context, civil-military collaboration could enhance policy coherence, crisis response, and national security planning.

Several authors also explore stakeholder perceptions and institutional readiness for integration. Rana (2018) and Poudel (2019) emphasize the urgent need for professional military education (PME) and the establishment of a National Defense University (NDU) in Nepal to bridge the competency gap between civilian and military officials. A shared strategic culture, cultivated through joint training and education, is posited as a critical enabler of an effective CMR and institutional integration. Such educational efforts would not only foster trust but also promote a common understanding of national security issues, allowing both civilian and military actors to operate with greater synergy and coordination.

In addition, empirical accounts by Kumar and Smith (2020) and Gautam (2020) illustrate how resource constraints impede integration efforts. Budgetary limitations restrict the MoD's ability to develop institutional structures—such as military liaison offices or joint planning units—that could facilitate civil-military coordination. The NA's prominent role in the 2015 earthquake response serves as an illustrative example of the potential benefits of integration; however, the lack of financial support for sustained collaboration has prevented the institutionalization of such efforts.

Defense diplomacy is also highlighted as a promising area for civil-military synergy. According to Rana and Singh (2022), the integration of military advisors into the MoFA can strengthen Nepal's regional security posture, particularly in navigating complex geopolitical environments with neighbors like India and China. Military insight, especially drawn from extensive peacekeeping experience, can complement civilian diplomacy in shaping a coherent foreign policy.

This study is theoretically grounded in three complementary frameworks—Agency Theory, Network Governance Theory, and Realism—which collectively justify the inquiry into the integration of military leadership into civilian governance structures. Feaver's (2003)

Agency Theory explains the principal-agent relationship between civilian authorities and military institutions, reinforcing the importance of oversight mechanisms in preventing agency slack. It supports the question of challenges by emphasizing that institutional clarity and legal boundaries are essential for effective military engagement in governance. Network Governance Theory (Bryson et al., 2006) justifies integration by highlighting the need for cross-sectoral coordination, shared authority, and institutional trust. It aligns with the idea that strategic opportunities for military engagement are best realized when actors collaborate through flexible, yet accountable networks. Lastly, the theoretical perspective of realism (Mearsheimer, 2001) underscores the importance of internal capability development to safeguard national sovereignty. It, thus, justifies military integration as a pragmatic response to geopolitical threats, particularly for small states like Nepal facing regional competition. Together, these theories provide robust analytical lenses for evaluating both the challenges and opportunities of structured military integration in governance.

Methodology

The study adopts a pragmatic research paradigm to address the complex, real-world problem of integrating military leadership into Nepal's civilian governance institutions, notably the NSC, MoD, and the MoFA. This paradigm was considered appropriate due to Nepal's unique post-conflict democratic transition and evolving civil-military relations (Morgan, 2014). Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the research combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide comprehensive insights into the rationale, strategies, challenges, and national outcomes of such integration (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The study was conducted in Kathmandu, the administrative and security hub of Nepal, and targeted senior military officers, policymakers, security agency officials, academics, and media experts. Data were collected through semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and structured survey questionnaires, including both closed and open-ended that were distributed among six quota-based groups, such as civil society, think tanks/academicians, government officials, Nepal Police Officers, Armed Police Force Nepal Officers, and Nepali Army Officers through Google Forms. Purposive and quota sampling methods were used to select participants based on expertise, with snowball sampling employed where necessary to reach knowledgeable respondents (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Document analysis of the Constitution, National Security Policy, and academic literature supplemented primary data. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, using content and narrative analysis to identify patterns, while quantitative survey data were analyzed using inferential techniques such as NVivo and Excel (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pilot testing, triangulation, and member checking were applied to ensure reliability and validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Whilst conducting this research, ethical clearance was obtained, and participant anonymity, including informed consent were maintained in line with National Defense University–Kenya standards.

Results and Analysis

Challenges to Military Integration in Civilian Governance Spaces

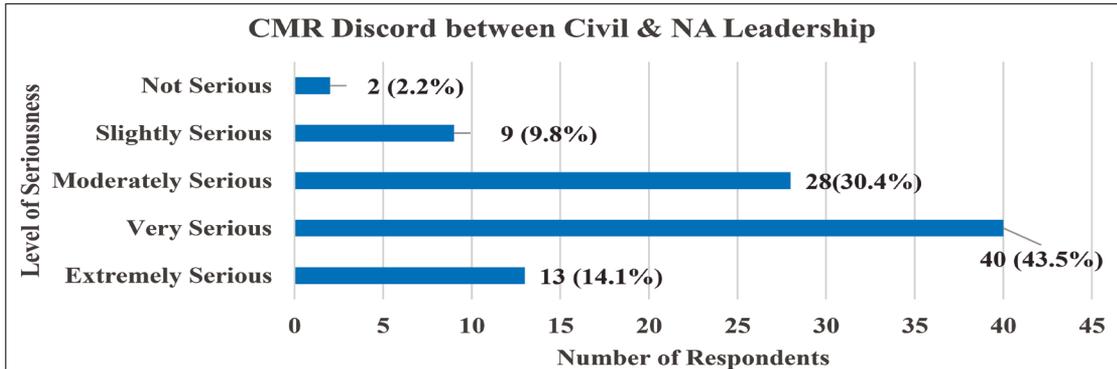


Figure 1. *CMR Discord between Civil and NA Leadership*

Source: Field Data, 2025

A dominant theme that emerged through the study was the widespread perception of CMR discord. As illustrated in survey data shown in Figure 1 below, a striking 87.9% of respondents acknowledged tensions between the NA and civilian leadership, with 57.6% rating it as very or extremely serious. This data indicates an urgent need for institutional dialogue and coordination to address these tensions, which were seen as a critical barrier to effective military-civilian integration. With nearly 90% acknowledging the issue's seriousness, there was a broad consensus that civil-military discord was a real and pressing concern in Nepal's security governance and therefore required mitigation measures and reforms to enhance CMR in support of military integration into civilian governance spaces. From the FGD session conducted on 27 December 2024, participants expressed different viewpoints, thus:

In Nepal, uniformed personnel are perceived by political leadership and civilian politicians with skepticism. The civil-military trust is low, and there is a deep-rooted perception that integration may shift the balance of power. (FGD Participant 1) Military integration can be accomplished only through the willingness and commitment of political leadership... but there is reluctance, fear of politicization, and absence of open dialogue. (FGD Participant 2) Civilian supremacy is not contested, but there's a lack of confidence from the civilian side to engage meaningfully with the military. This affects coordination, planning, and trust-building. (FGD Participant 3)

These responses are consistent with the 43.5% of the survey respondents who rated the issue as very serious, highlighting mistrust and power concerns as core concerns. Additionally, they emphasize the leadership gap and institutional hesitation, confirming perceptions of deep-rooted discord. From the KII R5, some of the emergent concerns are captured in these excerpts:

Military and political leaders don't communicate unless there's a disaster. There is no active hostility, but there is hesitation on both sides. I would call it a cautious relationship, not fully functional. This kind of relationship is not sustainable for national security governance. (FGD Participant 4)

The perception of serious civil-military relations (CMR) discord between the Nepali Army (NA) and civilian leadership—reported by 87.9% of survey respondents and substantiated by FGDs and KIIs—is strongly supported by literature. Rawal (2022) highlights a deep trust deficit, asserting that “civilian authorities often lack the confidence and technical expertise to engage constructively with military leadership,” which results in limited dialogue and mutual suspicion (Rawal, 2022). He further observes that fears of politicization and military encroachment contribute to political reluctance to institutionalize military integration. This aligns with FGD concerns about political hesitation and perceived power imbalance. Feaver’s (2003) Agency Theory provides a theoretical lens, portraying the civil-military dynamic as a principal-agent dilemma marked by mistrust and misaligned expectations. Similarly, Rana (2018) critiques Nepal’s reactive approach to CMR, noting that engagement is often “crisis-driven rather than institutionalized,” thus undermining long-term coordination and policy coherence. While most scholars affirm the principle of civilian supremacy, they emphasize that the lack of structured mechanisms and proactive leadership has entrenched CMR dysfunction. These perspectives triangulate with primary data, affirming that Nepal’s CMR challenges are both systemic and relational, and underscore the urgent need for institutional reform, strategic dialogue, and trust-building to enable effective military integration into civilian governance.

As depicted in the Figure 2 below, other major challenges to the integration of military leadership and expertise in civilian governance spaces were identified as follows: a lack of understanding and appreciation for civil-military relations (27.2%), political resistance and lack of bureaucratic will (26.1%), absence of clear legal and policy frameworks (21.7%), mutual trust deficits and civilian ownership issues regarding the Nepali Army (10.9%), and concerns surrounding civilian oversight and risks of military power including fear of coups (14.1%). These challenges spanned awareness gaps, institutional obstacles, relational issues, and fears of governance imbalance.

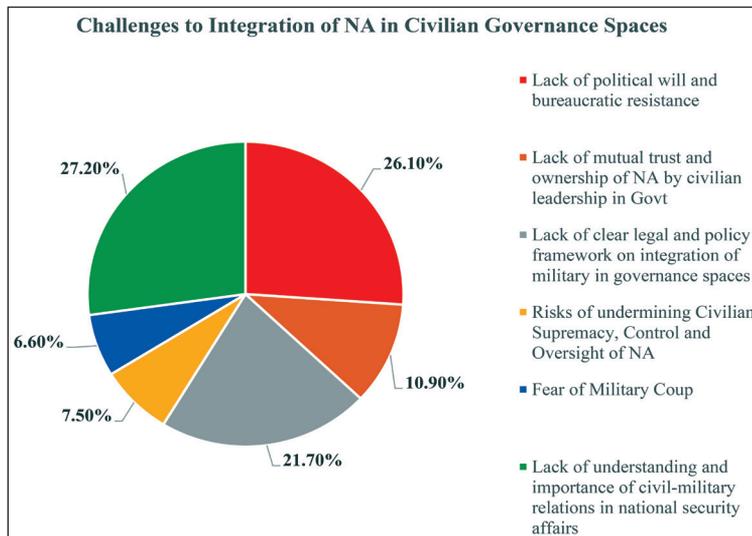


Figure 2. Challenges to Integration of NA in Civilian Governance Spaces

Source: Field Data, 2025

Another hindrance to effective military integration into civilian governance spaces is the inadequate understanding and appreciation for civil-military relations (27.2%) as depicted by the survey findings, which has been corroborated by CMR scholar like Rana (2018) who argues that in the case of Nepal, civilian officials within ministries and departments often lack civil-defense education and experience in strategic planning as opposed to their military counterparts in matters of National Security Affairs that is critical for realizing a Whole-of-Government Approach (WoGA) towards solving strategic national security problems. According to Rana (2018), military integration is essential until civilian competency is adequately developed, noting that such collaboration is vital for crafting and executing effective national security strategies. These views align directly with FGD and KII respondents who stress the value of military insight in intelligence, crisis management, and operational coordination, especially through capacity enhancement of civilian officials within ministries. One of the FGD participants remarked: My personal opinion is that there is a need to incorporate a unit of expert group of military personnel comprising retired and active NA leadership and experts within MoD to deal effectively with matters concerning strategic intelligence and broader areas of national security.

In the same way, KII R2 explained that:

Military leaders bring a unique set of strengths and expertise, such as strategic planning, crisis management, operational efficiency, and coordination with civilian authorities. Their insights would ensure that national security policies are grounded in practical, operational realities. So, yes, Nepal would benefit from integrating the military leadership within civilian governance spaces to realize a Whole-of-Government Approach (WoGA) for enhancing national security.

Furthermore, these barriers are compounded by institutional silos and the weak operational capacity of key civilian bodies such as the MoD and the NSC, which often act more as ceremonial entities rather than strategic hubs (Sharma, 2023; Rana, 2018). Hence, there is a need for capacity enhancement of civilian officials to bridge the CMR gaps with regard to defence education in matters of national security affairs as highlighted by a FGD participant:

Capacity-building should focus not just on military officers but also civilian officials, particularly those in MoD and MoFA, who often lack an understanding of security strategy. This dual competency is essential.

Thus, in order to enhance the competency level of civilian officials and bridge the gap due to a lack of understanding of the value of CMR in national security affairs, respondents widely supported mandatory joint training, including National Defence Courses (NDC), for both military and civilian officials. These programs were seen as essential in fostering mutual understanding, respect, and a shared knowledge base. In some instances, respondents emphasized that such training should be a requirement for promotion in both civil and military personnel serving at policy and strategy levels within government ministries and departments. Furthermore, CMR experts emphasize the need for enhancing the competency levels of both military and civilian officials through professional military education (PME) and civil defence education (CDE) to bridge the CMR gaps in national security affairs (Hallady, 2017; Bruneau & Matei, 2015, Guttieri, 2006, as cited in Rana, 2018).

As depicted by survey data in Figure 2 above, 26.1% of respondents identified political resistance and bureaucratic inertia as another major hindrance to integration, while 21.7% pointed to the absence of clear legal frameworks (Field Data, 2025). This tension manifests as institutional political reluctance, legal ambiguity, mistrust, and is further exacerbated by political instability and partisanship amongst political leadership within various political parties in government and those in opposition. A security expert from among the FGD participants observed that:

Political leadership shows reluctance in institutionalizing the military's strategic role, and there's no legal mandate that formalizes NA participation in MoD or MoFA in the way other democracies do. What exists is a liaison cell in the MoD, but it is not a permanent institutionalized arrangement. It lacks policy-level authority and operates informally. This doesn't meet international civil-military norms.

The findings from the survey, FGDs, and KIIs—indicating widespread skepticism about the adequacy of Nepal's legal and policy framework for integrating military leadership into civilian governance—are strongly validated by Rawal (2022), who directly echoes this concern, notes that “the MoD lacks the legal-institutional robustness to exercise effective civilian control and integration,” and emphasizes current arrangements that are largely informal (Rawal, 2022). He highlights the absence of a formal mandate for integrating the NA into decision-making roles within civilian ministries such as the MoD and MoFA, concluding that “there is a critical gap in institutional design and legal authority”. This aligns precisely with the FGD participants' critique of the liaison cell in the MoD as being “not a permanent institutionalized arrangement” and falling short of international norms. From a theoretical standpoint, Bruneau and Goetze (2006) assert that civil-military effectiveness relies on codified, institutional frameworks that clearly define roles, authority, and accountability, without which integration remains superficial and unstable. Their call for ministries “to be institutionalized with legal status and formal responsibilities for defense policy” directly supports the survey's call for reform (Bruneau & Goetze, 2006). Thus, the literature consistently affirms that the absence of a supportive, legally grounded framework is a major impediment to structured military integration in Nepal. As Rawal (2022) notes, the absence of a comprehensive legal framework, particularly within the MoD, limits the ability of civilian authorities to engage the military constructively. In addition, he argues that this legal vacuum erodes effective civilian oversight and contributes to suspicion and hesitation on both sides. Furthermore, historical narratives of the NA being associated with the history of monarchy and its role in counterinsurgency against the Maoist rebels continue to incite mistrust between the NA and civilian elites, especially since the events like the 2009 Katakawal-Prachanda standoff during the federal democratic transition period. A FGD participant highlighted this cultural and political skepticism as follows:

In Nepal, uniformed personnel are perceived by political leadership and civilian politicians with skepticism. The civil-military trust is low, and there is a deep-rooted perception that integration may shift the balance of power.

Strategic Opportunities for CMR Collaboration and National Security Enhancement

The study found a number of strategic opportunities that would advance government effectiveness through integration of military expertise in governance spaces, as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4 below.

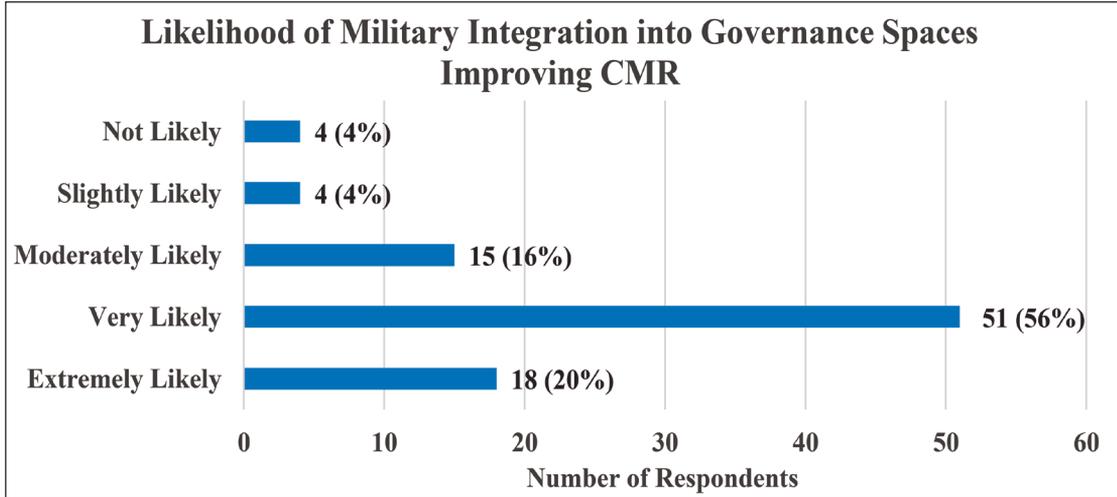


Figure 3. Likelihood of military integration into civilian governance spaces improving civil-military relations

Source: Field Data, 2025

Triangulated data from surveys, FGDs, and KIIs revealed a strong consensus that integrating military leadership into civilian governance spaces presents a critical opportunity to enhance CMR and advance Nepal’s national security architecture. A clear majority—76.1% of survey respondents—considered military integration as either “very likely” or “extremely likely” to improve CMR. FGD participants reinforced this sentiment, arguing that integration would reduce long-standing “misperceptions” and formalize existing informal collaborations between civilian and military actors. Similarly, KII R4 emphasized that institutionalized inclusion of military leaders in the MoD, MoFA, and NSC would “build trust” and “clarify roles and responsibilities that currently remain ambiguous”. These findings echo Feaver’s (2003) Agency Theory, which contended that clear institutional mandates, oversight mechanisms, and regular interaction between civilian and military actors reduce mutual suspicion and enhance democratic control. Bruneau and Goetze (2006) also posited that integrated defense institutions in democracies foster more accountable and effective security governance. Thus, Nepal stands to benefit from a transparent and structured model of military integration as a means to strengthen trust, role clarity, and the effectiveness of its civil-military interface.

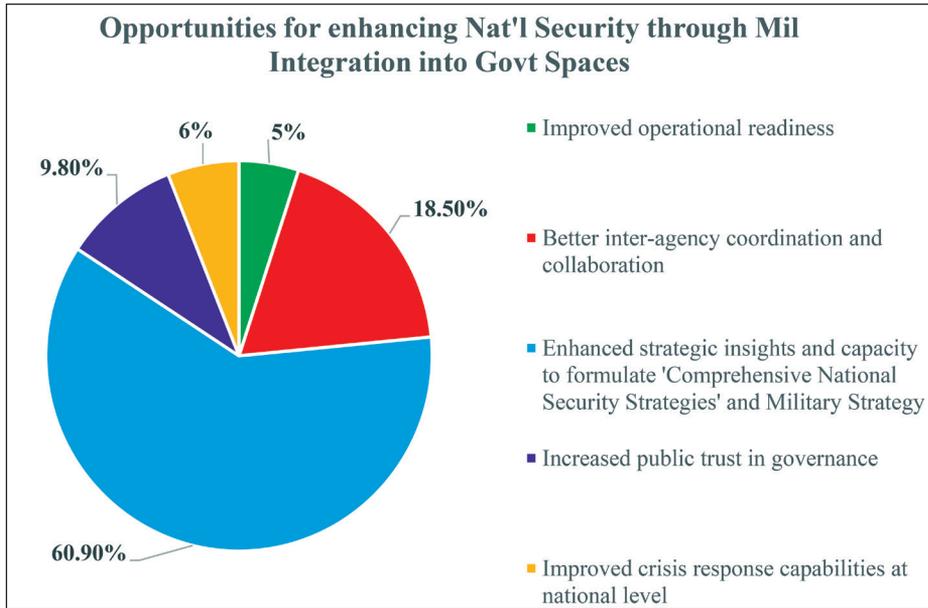


Figure 4. Opportunities for enhancing National Security through Military Integration into Government Spaces

Source: Field Data, 2025

This opportunity was further emphasized in survey findings, where 60.9% of respondents cited the integration of military leadership as a means to enhance strategic insight and national security planning, while 18.5% pointed to improved inter-agency collaboration, 9.8% felt it would develop greater public trust in governance, and only 6% believed it would enhance national crisis response capacity. These findings align with Network Governance Theory, which emphasizes interconnected, multi-actor systems to solve complex governance challenges—an idea reflected in WoGA. FGDs and KIIs reiterated that Nepal’s siloed institutions currently lack the cohesion to address emerging hybrid threats, and military inclusion could bridge this gap. A participant noted that the Nepali Army’s swift response during national emergencies like earthquakes and COVID-19 “showed that its logistics, discipline, and reach make it indispensable,” and that integration could “institutionalize that capability”. Furthermore, Rana (2018) asserts that the NA possesses an unmatched crisis management experience and strategic discipline, both of which are underutilized in civilian policy-making forums. Hence, scholars such as Matei, Bruneau, and Halladay (2022) advocate for a three-dimensional approach to democratic CMR—effectiveness, efficiency, and democratic civilian control—which supports the idea that military integration must be both functional and accountable. In fact, as identified and advocated by Eekelen (n.d.), Bruneau and Goetze (2006), successful lessons of balanced military integration within civilian government spaces (MoD/DoD, DoS/MoFA/MoEA) are currently practiced in democratic nations like the U.S., U.K., Canada, and India, which can be emulated by Nepal. Cashing on this opportunity would amply justify further how structured integration can enhance national resilience without undermining civilian supremacy, while it allows for collaborative efforts under integrated WoGA framework for overcoming modern-day

security challenges effectively and efficiently. Hence, this study affirmed that institutionalizing military leadership in Nepal’s governance—if guided by legal safeguards and democratic oversight—offers a transformative path toward improved CMR, coordinated national security strategy, and a more resilient WoGA framework, as one FGD participant stated:

In most democracies around the world, and especially in the United States, military and civilian components are very much well integrated within the DoD in Pentagon. In Nepalese context, however, this has not been the case in our MoD. History illustrates that during crisis situations the government, concerned ministries, and political leadership, when they are paralyzed prefer to give emphasis in integration and grant responsibilities and sometimes with excessive authority to the NA to respond. But during peace time, there appears to be no effort to integrate military within governance spaces. The study also identifies the integration of military leadership and expertise within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) as a key opportunity to strengthen defense diplomacy, as shown in Figure 5.

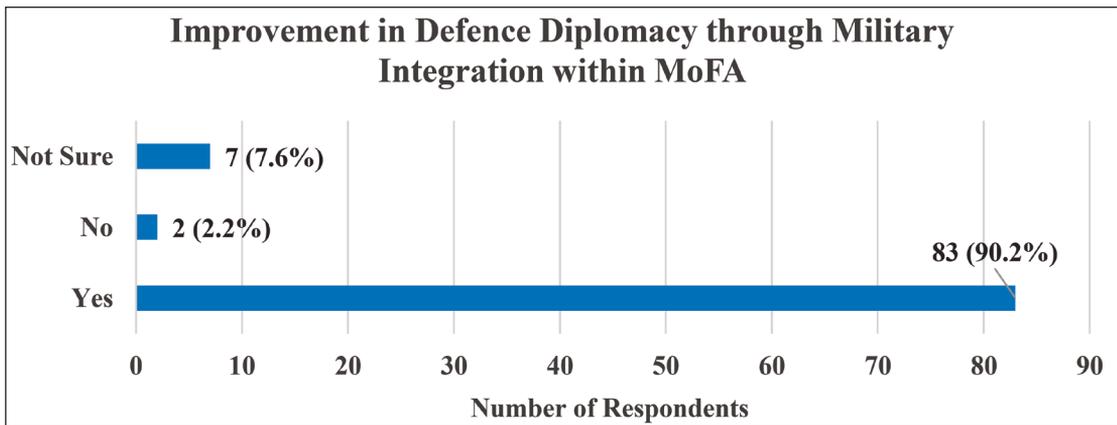


Figure 5. Improvement in Defence Diplomacy through Military Integration within MoFA
 Source: Field Data, 2025

A robust 90.2% of participants supported embedding military expertise within the MoFA to improve strategic negotiation and security dialogue. As one KII respondent explained:

Military and political leaders don’t talk unless there’s a disaster. There is no active hostility, but there is hesitation on both sides. I would call it a cautious relationship, not fully functional. This kind of relationship is not sustainable for national security governance.

Strategic integration could formalize and institutionalize ad hoc collaborations that already occur during national emergencies. For example, the Nepali Army’s roles during the 2015 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic underscore its capacity to contribute meaningfully to national crisis response—a view that reflects Eekelen’s (n.d.) and Bryson et al.’s (2006) advocacy for cross-sector collaboration under Network Governance Theory and WoGA framework, which are echoed by both FGD and KII participants. One FGD participant stated:

Without structured military input, national disaster responses are fragmented. We need liaison roles in civilian agencies.

Furthermore, the triangulated findings from surveys, KIIs, and FGDs underscored a broad consensus that Nepal's geopolitical positioning significantly warranted the integration of military leadership into civilian governance structures, such as in the NSC, MoD, and MoFA. Quantitative data revealed that 87% of the 92 survey respondents believed Nepal's location between China and India made military integration either "extremely" or "very" important. This perception was echoed in qualitative responses: one FGD participant emphasized the need for a "unity of effort" to confront regional geopolitical tensions, stating that "integration must be the utmost priority during peacetime". Similarly, KII respondent R2 noted that Nepal, "sandwiched between China, an aspiring superpower and India, a regional power," required military leadership in governance to navigate these complex dynamics. These findings align with Mearsheimer's (2001) realist proposition that states must rely on power—particularly military capability and strategic leadership—to survive and maintain autonomy in anarchic international systems, especially when surrounded by stronger powers.

In support of these empirical observations, literature from Civil-Military Relations (CMR) theorists also reinforced the case for military integration. Rana (2018) emphasizes that Nepal's strategic vulnerabilities and the lack of civil-defense expertise among civilian officials justified incorporating senior military leaders into key ministries to enhance national security decision-making. Similarly, Rawal (2022) argues that MoD lacks the institutional capacity to exercise effective oversight and would benefit from experienced military professionals. From a theoretical standpoint, Bruneau and Matei (2013) advocate for effective civil-military relations that balance democratic civilian control with military effectiveness and expertise. They posit that national security is achieved when military expertise is harnessed within appropriate institutional frameworks, rather than excluded. Halladay (2010) further emphasizes the significance of military professionalism and its role in informing governance decisions in fragile or strategically vulnerable states. Therefore, both the realist and CMR frameworks validated the study's conclusion that integrating military leadership into Nepal's civilian governance offers a viable and necessary pathway to fortify national security amid increasing regional complexities.

Strategies for Civil-Military Integration

Triangulated findings from surveys, FGDs, and KIIs revealed strong consensus on key strategies to enhance civil-military integration in Nepal, supporting the realization of a Whole-of-Government Approach (WoGA) for national security. Foremost among these was legal and policy reform, supported by 34.8% of survey respondents and repeatedly emphasized in qualitative data. Participants stressed Nepal's lack of formal mandates allowing peacetime military participation in governance, contrasting it with countries like India and the U.S. Capacity-building for both civilian and military officials was highlighted as equally critical, particularly for MoD and MoFA personnel often unfamiliar with defense strategy. FGD and KII participants consistently recommended adapting—not copying—international models to Nepal's context, alongside institutional restructuring of the MoD to include strategic planning and military advisory units. KIIs also advocated for permanent joint coordination mechanisms to institutionalize inter-agency dialogue beyond crises. These recommendations align with

Network Governance Theory, which advocates multi-actor collaboration and shared authority to improve decision-making in complex policy environments.

Supporting these findings, scholars such as Bruneau and Goetze (2006) stress the need for legal-institutional arrangements that define roles and ensure accountability, while Rawal (2022) urge inclusion of military expertise to strengthen civilian capacity in national security policymaking. Feaver’s (2003) Agency Theory contextualizes the need for well-defined oversight structures to mitigate civil-military mistrust, while Matei and Halladay emphasize capacity-building and democratic oversight as pillars of effective CMR. Rana (2018) warns against blind replication of foreign models, urging Nepal to tailor civil-military integration based on its unique geopolitical and institutional context. Thapa (2024) critiques the MoD’s limited strategic function and called for embedded military advisory roles. The findings also underscore political will, joint training programs like NDC, and institutional innovation—such as joint task forces and coordination desks—as enablers of trust-building and strategic cohesion. Together, these strategies affirm that legal clarity, structural reforms, and shared competency development are vital for Nepal to institutionalize civil-military integration within a democratic WoGA framework, enhancing resilience, coordination, and national security governance.

Stakeholder attitudes revealed a broad consensus on the necessity—but also the sensitivity—of integration. While most participants welcomed the idea of incorporating military leadership into governance structures like the NSC and MoFA, they also emphasized the need for legal safeguards, transparent mandates, and strong civilian oversight. This reflects Bruneau and Goetze’s (2006) view that democratic civil-military integration requires legal clarity and functional accountability mechanisms.

Some skepticism remains, particularly regarding the potential for military overreach. However, this fear was largely countered by calls for role-specific and merit-based inclusion under democratic control. As one FGD participant noted:

Military integration into governance will reduce misperceptions and help formalize the already existing informal collaborations. This could be the bridge to a balanced and stable CMR.

To ensure institutional readiness, participants called for targeted reforms such as the establishment of a National Defense University (Rana, 2018), greater civil-defense education, and professional development for civilian bureaucrats. Such efforts could help bridge knowledge gaps and foster a shared strategic culture.

Conclusion

This study concluded that integrating military leadership into Nepal’s civilian governance structures was both necessary and timely but faced substantial institutional and political hurdles. The lack of a formal legal framework, coupled with institutional inertia within ministries such as the MoD and MoFA, emerged as a primary barrier to structured integration. The findings confirm that while the political leaders were weary of a military overreach, the military’s strategic capacity, particularly in areas like disaster response, defense diplomacy, and peacekeeping, was widely acknowledged and respected. The study found that stakeholders—including policymakers, national security experts, and military leaders—were generally

supportive of initial steps such as advisory or liaison roles, rather than wholesale integration. This cautious but constructive approach was grounded in the belief that pilot initiatives and structured engagement mechanisms could foster civil-military trust and demonstrate the utility of integration without threatening civilian supremacy. Moreover, the findings affirmed that strategic education and leadership development—through institutions like the NDC and NDU (in the near future)—would be instrumental in bridging knowledge and coordination gaps. In sum, the study affirmed that while challenges were real, the opportunity to institutionalize a Whole-of-Government Approach to national security through inclusive, democratic, and phased integration of military leadership remained both relevant and feasible.

Recommendations

1. Parliament and the executive arms of government should prioritize the development of legal safeguards and transparency mechanisms, initiate structured civil-military dialogues, and leverage public awareness campaigns to bridge perception gaps and reduce fears of militarization.
2. The executive arm of the Government of Nepal should formally recognize and take steps towards integration of the strategic advisory role of the Nepali Army in national governance through structured inclusion in policy forums such as the MoD and the MoFA, besides the National Security Council.
3. Government should take immediate steps such as drafting comprehensive legal provisions for military roles within governance, introducing mandatory joint training programs, and piloting integration efforts in select ministries such as the MoD and the MoFA.
4. The Government of Nepal should enhance inter-ministerial and civilian-military trust through training, dialogues, and professional military education by operationalizing the National Defense University as a platform for civil-military strategic learning and policy development.

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