



## INDIAN ARMY CHIEF'S VISIT TO NEPAL: IMPLICATIONS ON INDIA-NEPAL BILATERAL TIES

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*Indian Army Chief Manoj Mukund Naravane , wrapped up his Nepal visit on Friday. The relations between Nepal and India have witnessed cold, actually the new low particularly due the border dispute that erupted November last year. Nepal Army has concluded Indian Army Chief's visit a successful one and it is expected the visit will further strengthen the bilateral relations between the two countries. In this session of Expert Speak, Maj. General Ashok K. Mehta (Retd), Indian Army and a Defense Expert answers the questions regarding the implications of the visit.*

**Expert: Maj General Ashok K. Mehta (Retd), Indian Army**

**Host: Shristi Kafle, Journalist, Foreign Affairs**

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Q. As we know Indian Army General has just wrapped up his Nepal visit, it is also one of the highest level visit since the relations went bitter since last year. So how do you review this trip? What are the major takeaways?

A. Well to start with India-Nepal relations as far as military to military side is concerned is one of the key ingredients of the overall bilateral relations and in many instances like in 2015 economic blockade the two army chiefs of the time General Rajendra Chhetri of Nepal and General Dalbir Suhag from India got together and instrumental in getting the economic blockade lifted. So they played key role in stabilizing and improving relations bilaterally. The India-Nepal military relations are actually at three levels; not just between the Indian Army and the Nepal Army just because the two army chief are made Honorary Generals of each army's. Which is the tradition started during the time of Marshal Manekshaw in 1972 although the Nepal Army puts this tradition on its website to resonating in 1950. I don't think that is correct.

The second level of relationship is between Indian Army and Gurkha it recruits from Nepal which form the Gurkha Regiment almost half the size of Nepal Army in the Indian Army. And the third level is which many people don't realize is between the Indian Army and rather India and ex-servicemen; the servicemen who retired and live in Nepal and that number is about 1.50 lakhs and if you include their family its about 10 lakhs. So these are the three levels of relationship and General Naravane's visit this year was confined only to the first level because I noticed that this year because of the COVID19 pandemic he did not visit Pokhara. Pokhara is the place where they organize an ex-servicemen's rally in the Pokhara pension camp and this was not organized. So, yes this relationship is very important especially as you mentioned, at a time when bilateral relations are low and I agree completely with your statement that this is a new low between India and Nepal following the differences over the map and road and several other issues.

Q. So, can we regard this visit only a ritual or the symbolic one? Because many experts in Nepal have claimed that it is just a symbolic visit rather than substantive one. So what is your understanding on that?

A. Well the answer I gave to your first question should dispense the speculation amongst the doubters about the significance of General Naravane's visit that it is not symbolic. What may be

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symbolic is the fact the Indian Army Chief was made Honorary General of the Nepal Army like General Purna Chandra Thapa was made one last year in India. That may be symbolic to people who are making these expert comment without knowing what exactly it means. And the India-Nepal relationship is not just the *Honorary* part of it, there are other facets between Indian Army and the Nepal Army which goes to joint training, inter-operability, India being first responder in any natural calamities. The fact that bulk of the Nepal Army's advance training is done in Indian Military Institutes and like that you can actually list the number of activities that happen, which don't happen between the armies of any other two countries. So, people who speculate and doubt this and think this is just a symbolic need to understand this.

Q. So that was the part of strengthening the military relations but when it comes to political or diplomatic ties, can we see this visit or can we expect this as an attempt to patch the cold relations or resume the bilateral talks? As we know that Nepal has been calling for a high level talk for few times and it has not been almost unheard by New Delhi.

A. Absolutely, defense and diplomacy are part and parcel of a combined attempt by any government to improve relationships with another country. And remember the Army chief does not go visiting countries like he has visited Nepal as an independent representative and the fact that he does this in the case of Nepal is by itself very significant event. The fact when he is being conferred the honorary title of the Nepal Army, that ceremony is attended by the Prime Minister of that country and subsequently the Army chief does not make mere courtesy call. But in this instance as we know from the Foreign Affairs Advisor of Prime Minister Oli, Rajan Bhattarai that he discussed matters of state relations and Prime Minister Oli urged India through the Indian Army Chief that we must start talks on the border dispute. So, I think it is a positive attempt by both country not only India. Both the country want to improve their relations and Gen. Naravane's visit to Kathmandu, meeting the Prime Minister is a very significant event.

Q. We know that the issues like border disputes are often resolved through high level political and diplomatic dialogue so as we are facing border dispute, so in your opinion what role should or can the Nepal Army and the India Army play?

A. Well you know first, there is recognition amongst everybody that land, territory, soil, is the most important ingredient for a country. Especially Nepal is a small country, it is sandwiched between China in the north and India in the south and we already read from Nepali newspaper that there have been attempts by the Chinese to intrude into Nepalese territory in the north and similarly there has been this long outstanding *Kalapani Limpiadhura and Lipulekh* dispute. For a small country territory is very emotional and sentimental issue and can spark nationalism to great height and this is precisely what happened in this year. Because what happened when India published new map and constructed and completed a road *Lipulekh* and there was no dialogue. The failure to engage with each other in my view was the key culprit of this relation deteriorating to the new low. We must never break communication. Strategic communication must remain and this is what ruptured during the nine months that we have seen of this dispute. And it's been the

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failure of both sides I think especially India to communicate effectively with a smaller country and a very important civilizational neighbor. And I am happy to see that this visit will certainly get the talks moving and numbers of other small developments have taken place, like Prime Minister Oli's call to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 15<sup>th</sup> August, that 11 minute conversation was very important followed by the visit of RAW Chief Samanth Goel again, he was a political emissary, he met Prime Minister Oli. People in your country are saying that RAW Chief has no business to be talking on behalf of India. I think that is not correct. The Prime Minister could have sent me an ordinary citizen envoy and he is the RAW Intelligence Chief so, he went there on a special visit and met Prime Minister Oli so, we should put all these events together, I think these are the harbingers of an improved relations and steps been taken and I believe that sometime next month this dialogue between Foreign Secretaries could resume either face to face or virtually. And I am absolutely sure that we are on the right path of starting communication on very sensitive and emotional border dispute.

Q. Following the completion of this visit can we expect a formal or high level dialogue anytime soon? What is your outlook on India Nepal relations now?

A. First, it is very sad that India-Nepal relations plummeted to such a new low, it happened in 2015 and it happened in 2020. Well ups and downs in relationships are natural. But ups are very good but when you down to the level when your communication breaks down or one country is accused of imposing economic blockade, those are very serious matter. Therefore, what has happened now; these visits we have outlined in the discussion I am sure and confident will open the root towards bettering these relations and more importantly starting a normal civilized communication between two friendly neighbor who have a very age old historic and civilizational relationships.