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Singh, Jaswinder

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Military Diplomacy: An Appraisal in the Indian Context

Jaswinder Singh

Abstract

Defence Diplomacy is an integral part of foreign policy and state security, it helps in increasing military cooperation between the countries and strengthening relations between the states. India's growing global outreach and vibrancy of its foreign policy can be gauged by the fact that it has made substantial efforts in defence and security cooperation, however, India's defence diplomacy efforts do not commensurate to its rising global status, since all tools of defence diplomacy have not been used optimally. In this context, the paper argues for the need to revisit and formulate a strategy that is aligned with India's foreign policy. It is because defence diplomacy is vital for a state to not only ensure its stable and strong international position but is also significant in shaping a structured and functional security policy.

Introduction

Defence Diplomacy is an integral part of foreign policy and state security, it helps in increasing military cooperation between the countries and strengthening relations between the States. In the dynamic and

Colonel **Jaswinder Singh** is Senior Fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

ever-evolving geopolitical global landscape, Defence Diplomacy can effectively leverage our national interests. Defence diplomacy enables to occupy a strategic space where one's adversary should not be able to engage. Defence Diplomacy was a relatively new term coined in the post-cold war era describing cooperation between countries on different ends related to Officer exchanges, Ship visits, combined training missions and Joint Military Exercises. Military Diplomacy is often confused, or used interchangeably with the term Defence Diplomacy. However, 'Defence' (related to all components of Ministry of Defence) is a broader umbrella term which subsumes the 'Military' (Army, Navy and Air Force); and hence, Military Diplomacy is a subset of Defence Diplomacy.

Military diplomacy is developed and implemented conjointly by the foreign and defence ministries and is often associated with conflict prevention and application of the military. It is distinct from the concept of 'coercive diplomacy' which is generally motivated by the desire to intimidate potential adversaries.

India's growing global outreach and vibrancy of its foreign policy can be gauged by the fact that it has made a substantial effort in Defence and Security cooperation, however, Indian Defence Diplomacy efforts do not commensurate to its rising global status, since all tools of Defence Diplomacy have not been used optimally. There is a need to revisit and formulate a strategy that is aligned with the Government of India's Foreign Policy.

The scope of Defence Diplomacy in India includes visits by Service Chiefs, conferences at the Service staff level, joint training and exercises, participation under UNPKOs, port calls, training in Service Academies and training institutions, survey by Naval hydrographical ships, etc.¹ Since Defence Diplomacy is an integral part of foreign policy, hence it becomes mandatory to understand the effectiveness of the two concepts, namely- Hard Power and Soft Power by assessing their use in foreign policymaking.

Hard Power Versus Soft Power

The terms Hard Power and Soft Power represent two important concepts in the field of International Relations, more specifically, in the political relations between States. Soft Power Projection can be defined as ability of a state to project its influence other than through military combat into an area that may serve as an effective diplomatic lever, influencing the decision-making process and acting as a potential deterrent on other States' behaviour. Although appearing as an oxymoron by referring to components of both force and negotiation at the same time, defence diplomacy is actually an expression of Soft Power. Deployment of various countries' militaries during the humanitarian response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami is one of the best examples.

Hard Power facilitates India's use of military, economic and political means to influence other States; soft power has, through our cultural or ideological means, the ability to indirectly influence the behaviour of other States.² Hard power is referred to the ability to change other states' positions by force or by inducing military and economic power to coerce them into submission. It is tangible and easy to measure, the effects of which are visible and even predictable to a certain degree. On the other hand, soft skills refer to the ability to shape the preferences of others through cultural exchanges and understanding, co-option, and influence based on context and necessity.³ Hence, defence diplomacy is a display of soft power, wherein States are able to peacefully use armed forces and related infrastructure as a foreign policy and security tool to achieve a State's foreign policy objectives.⁴

Defence Diplomacy: Ends, Ways and Means

Defence diplomacy is not the interest or responsibility of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) alone, and therefore not a stand-alone activity of the MoD. Since the effort should be towards leveraging the country's strength to take it forward and serve the larger cause of nation's foreign

policy, all organs of the State must contribute to the successful execution of the same. *Ends* are the strategic outcomes which can be broadly classified under three categories - conflict prevention/resolution, security and, stability and prosperity. The objectives have to be clearly identified with an aim of arriving at a result-orientated output. *Ways* are the methods, tactics, procedures, practices, and strategies to achieve the ends. *Means* are the instruments of defence diplomacy to achieve the above objectives. Accordingly, a nation needs to have a roadmap both short term and long term with definite timelines.

Need for Global Defence Diplomatic Footprint by India

Today's world order is mired in strategic brinkmanship, that is, in a VUCA environment characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity with number of flash points, witnessing the end of unipolar era, and rebalancing of powers. Post withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, the Pakistan-China nexus is already taking roots in Afghanistan as witnessed in the coordinated efforts between Islamabad, Beijing, and the Taliban. The rise of China challenging the US has led to increased strategic jostling in the IOR, further enhancing the geo-strategic importance of the region. India, with its growing economic might, aspires to be a key player in world affairs. This calls for bolstering its Comprehensive National Power (CNP) which includes its global diplomatic clout. It is, therefore, axiomatic that India's global defence diplomatic footprint needs to grow proportionately.

Therefore, one needs to have a comprehensive and a three-dimensional understanding of the environment one is operating in. There is a perceptible building of partnerships and strategic power-play between nations. India has made progress in bilateral, diplomatic and economic engagements. Military diplomacy is a campaign that does not work without a plan. It must be documented and mutual interests, as well as objectives, must be clearly articulated with time lines. There should

be a stated strategic objective for every country we wish to engage with. Military diplomacy is not one-off visit, it is a continuous engagement and of course, Partners should be prepared to fulfil commitments.

Military Diplomacy Across the World

We live in a strategic environment, there are no permanent friends or enemies. Commercial interests and economic gains have begun to play an increasingly prominent role, leading to traditional allies doing business with traditional foes. The best example is of Russia and USA selling weapons to both India and Pakistan.

USA, UK, France and the NATO nations could be considered the world leaders in military diplomacy. China has been aggressively enlarging its military-diplomatic efforts and could also be considered amongst the leaders. Australia and India have well established military-diplomatic efforts. USA, UK, France, the NATO nations and Australia have very focused and relatively transparent policies and programmes. India, with a long tradition of use of military diplomacy, is also ramping up its efforts, albeit, in its own slow and perplexed style under the overly centralised and bureaucratic control of its ministries of external affairs and defence.

India's Immediate and Extended Neighbourhood

A major challenge to India's defence diplomacy is posed by the rise of China, this is a concern not just in the immediate neighbourhood but also in terms of its newer strategic partners. In its neighbourhood, China has expanded its military cooperation exponentially. Nepal and Sri Lanka are already balancing India's rise by doubling their strategic partnerships with China. Even China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presents India with many strategic challenges and it has been the most vocal opponent of the infrastructure strategy. It is particularly concerned that Gwadar Port might give China control over the West Indian Ocean, including Indian energy and trade supplies.⁵

In sharp contrast, China employs military diplomacy at the global level proactively in order to secure every possible advantage. China's extensive defence diplomacy in the region is further supported by its economic presence in the region. China has perhaps the biggest economic footprint in the CAR region and the Gulf States, principally owing to its massive project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In order to deter China's expansionist tendencies in the region and to establish formidable ties with the region, India needs to consequently exploit its military cooperation with the region and supplement it with economic ties.⁶

India in its constructive engagements with different parts of Asia itself i.e., South Asia, South East Asia and Central Asia have tried to maintain strategic partnerships with the immediate and extended neighbourhood by engaging in different sectors simultaneously and creating an atmosphere of mutual benefit. India has from time to time brought changes in its foreign policies to revamp its relations with its neighbours.

India's military cooperation with the Gulf largely encompasses naval cooperation, joint exercises, regular Indian ship visits and broad-based MoUs. In terms of military education and training, Gulf Armed Forces personnel are trained in Indian defence and military academies. Most importantly, all the Gulf states are members of the Indian Navy-conceived Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, which is a biennial forum for Navy Chiefs of Indian Ocean Littoral.⁷

Pakistan, by virtue of its important geostrategic location, its Army's "exalted" position within the state, and its Islamic affiliation, will remain a challenging competitor to India. India will need to strengthen its defence diplomatic capability and strategy to deny advantage to Pakistan, particularly in immediate neighbourhood, West Asia and Central Asian region. In spite of poor state of its economy, Pakistan's performance in the sphere of defence diplomacy can be rated as comparable to India, if not better in some aspects.

India's Defence Diplomacy Efforts

India is an emerging regional power and a rising global power. India has made successful strides in expanding its defence diplomacy. Today, India is seen by the world as a country of high technology and skilled professionals. India has not only expanded its activities of military cooperation, humanitarian assistance, contribution to UN Peace Keeping Forces, etc. with respect to its immediate neighbourhood or the major players like that of the USA, UK, France, Russia Japan, etc., but has also discovered new partners of strategic importance. Indian foreign policy aims at securing India's economic interests, protecting India's Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC), border protection and securing India's energy security, and therefore, acquiring the required capabilities.⁸

Defence cooperation is emerging as a critical tool to complement foreign policy goals. However, it is important to note that drawing up a defence engagement plan is a tedious and high-level process. A defence cooperation engagement plan is drawn up by the Services and is executed after the same receive clearance from the Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Defence.⁹

India's defence diplomacy footprint is increasing by the day. India is an avid practitioner of 'military diplomacy.' India presently has 89 Embassies and 108 Consulates worldwide. She hosts 152 Embassies/High commissions and 18 other representations. However, Defence Wings in Indian embassies abroad exist only in 45 States. The sanction of 10 new Defence Wings, taking the number up to 55, is a positive step. However, on a comparative scale, India lags hugely behind the US and China, both of which have military-diplomatic presence in more than 100 states globally.¹⁰

Building Defence Capability of Friendly Foreign Countries (FFCs)

India has been assisting Friendly Foreign Countries (FFCs) to develop their defence capability without impinging on their own security. India

can become a net defence exporter and meet the growing needs of militaries around the world, The Indian defence industry can be home to manufacturers who can create a perfect blend of State-of-the-Art, high quality and cost-effective hardware. This will not only bolster national security but make India a net defence exporter.

On 28 September 2021, India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in his address at the annual general meeting of the 'Society of Indian Defence Manufacturers' (SIDM) in New Delhi stated that an atmosphere of jointness has been created to ensure the modernization of the Armed Forces. This is being achieved by encouraging the participation of the private sector to achieve '*Aatmanirbhar Bharat*'. Due to these steps, defence exports had already crossed Rs 38,000 crore mark in the last seven years. More than 10,000 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have joined the defence sector. The minister further urged that private sector defence companies must invest in Research and Development (R&D), particularly in technologies relating to Cyberspace.¹¹

Enhance One's Defence Capability

Military diplomacy could enable cooperative efforts for drawing up equipment specifications, research and development, technology transfers, acquisitions and production. The Making of own Defence Industry and R&D effective, and financially viable gives the added advantage of not being dependent on imports during conflict situations and reduces the vulnerability to sanctions or exorbitantly high prices or economically detrimental contracts.

The international military engagement can be undertaken to enhance own military capability overtly, through personnel contacts in the form of professional military exchanges, defence and military human resource development in basic and advanced military skills, war fighting skills at tactical and strategic levels, and in conceptual and doctrinal abilities; and defence management specialisations in

resources, techniques and training. There is an urgent need to also energize our military-industrial complex, which can play a major role in military diplomacy and which should be fully dovetailed into our military diplomacy framework.¹²

Role of Defence Attaches

A Defence Attache (DA) is a Military diplomatic footprint in the host nation for facilitating the military exchanges between two countries. DAs are the linchpins of defence diplomacy. Defence Attaches share ground-level experiences and concerns so as to enhance Defence Cooperation. DAs work in a genuine tri-Services/defence framework and contribute more actively towards our broader defence diplomacy goals. The DAs can help in conveying national point of view to the respective host country and ensure that the government line is being followed.

As seen, military in certain countries have a large say in the national policy, therefore, the Defence Attaches must harness interpersonal military relations in such countries. In the fast-changing geo-strategic scenario, Defence Attaches need to keep abreast of the development and enhance their efforts to find traction with the national goals. The Defence Attaches are expected to nurture linkages with their host countries and enhance interactions between Indian Think Tanks and similar institutions in other countries.

Participation in United Nations Peace Keeping Operations (UNPKO)

A formal commitment to the UN and other regional cooperative organisations or coalitions for provision of forces and equipment for UNPKO, humanitarian assistance and relief and joint operations is a cornerstone of military diplomacy. The Centre for UN Peacekeeping (training) (CUNPK) in New Delhi is a small step in this direction. The US has an elaborate training programme and funding for training other nations

in peacekeeping operations under the former president's Global Peace Operation Initiative (GPOI).¹³ GPOI has subsidiary programmes such as Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA)¹⁴ and Enhanced International Peacekeeping Capabilities (EPIC).¹⁵

Establishment of IFC-IOR

With an intent to make India the maritime information hub, towards which the Indian Navy has set up Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and has signed agreements with a number of countries for sharing white shipping information.¹⁶ There are a number of initiatives like Exercise 'MILAN', Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Goa Maritime Conclave etc which are used by Indian Navy to interact with other foreign Navies.

Synergy for Effective Military Diplomacy

Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) considers diplomacy as its preserve, and therefore, assumes lead role in defining the tasks for the Armed Forces in pursuance of foreign policy. Both MEA and the MoD are of the opinion that Armed Forces should be able to provide them consolidated military security objectives which can be further incorporated as part of the overall foreign policy objectives. There exists a difference in opinions with respect to the priority of objectives of India's military between the MoD and MEA.¹⁷

India must make a thorough overhaul of military diplomacy as part of its foreign policy and create the *capacities, structures and processes* necessary to put it into action. To achieve the same, MEA and MoD have to jointly develop a *vision statement* which aims at expanding defence cooperation and establishing Indian military presence around the globe to secure India's national interests. Correspondingly, military security concerns, duly incorporated as part of foreign policy objectives, must be pursued by MEA in unison with MoD.

Though efforts have been made in recent years to bridge the divide by the posting of an Indian Foreign Service Officer in the Ministry of Defence's Planning and International Cooperation Division and the deputation of a serving military Officer as a Director for Military Affairs at the Ministry of External Affairs. But such effort scan still be built upon and broadened.¹⁸

The Way Forward

Creation of Appointment of the CDS and Department of Military Affairs (DMA)

The creation of the office of the CDS and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) on 31 December 2019, has enabled Defence Diplomacy to be conducted with an emphasis on *Synergy and Jointness*. A large number of changes and new formats have been adopted for exercises and courses et al. As Armed Forces are placed under the DMA, there is a need to streamline the roles of the latter and the Department of Defence (DoD). The defence cooperation will get a major impetus. With a separate vertical of the DMA, the decision making will be faster. Even the procedures will need to be simplified for the faster processing of cases. DMA would be responsible to process the requisite documentation and issuing Government Sanction Letter (GSL) for all activities under its ambit.

In addition, Joint Secretary (International Cooperation) has been retained by the DoD, the new structure must clearly bifurcate the roles of DMA and DoD. As Armed Forces are placed under the DMA, it is recommended that Tri-Services activities must be classified under the domain of the DMA while balance tasks of the defence diplomacy are undertaken by the DoD.

Funding

The budget or the funding for facilitating defence cooperation has been an issue. Defence diplomacy fund was being analysed with the

aim of granting more financial powers to the Defence Attaches and for the judicious use of the Defence exports promotion fund. Funding or budgeting for own Defence Attache has to be non-lapsable. There is a need to revise the guidelines. Moreover delink/free defence funding and allocations from undue internal bureaucratic processes that lend stagnancy to the processes, due to lack of strategic perspective of low-level functionaries. The Defence Attache should have calibrated financial powers for which he can be answerable.

Language Training

The DAs and support staff at Defence Wing has an important role to play as part of the team and hence needs to be better trained in language and culture of the host country. Our DAs during dealing with officials need to have achieved a certain amount of fluency in local language prior to the induction in Defence Wing. To discharge diplomatic duties, the DAs need to have a certain degree of language proficiency, conduct befitting diplomacy(that is, social skills) and have the aptitude to understand geostrategy apart from sound knowledge of one's own country and its major issues. In view of a large number of informal exchanges and meetings, family especially spouses of Defence Wing Officers could also be encouraged to acquire requisite language proficiency.

Preparation of Roadmap

There is a need to prepare a roadmap by all stakeholders in the areas of mutual interest. In the absence of a plan, it is a path heading nowhere. Internal review of policy framework of defence diplomacy must be carried out every five years, to appropriate and re-allocate priorities, focus, finances and efforts for effective outcomes.

DAs Conference

The Defence Attaches Conference is being conducted annually since 2018 based on the Defence Minister's directive and held together with

Defexpo/Aero India. The collective forum helps to get the best out of efforts in Defence Diplomacy. This includes timely and comprehensive defence policy assessments of foreign countries and promotion of defence industry cooperation, in particular enhancing defence exports and technology partnerships. DAs Conference provides a platform to bring Defence Diplomacy in synergy with the foreign policy initiatives of the government. Hence, the DAs conference is recommended to be held every year alongside Defexpo/Aero Indiaas invogue.

Conduct of JDC/Staff Talks

The need for institutionalising mechanisms for interaction like JDC/Staff talks, high-level visits, setting up of new Defence Wings, presence of defence industry in R&D, collaborations and defence exhibition is required. India should aim for realistic expectations, focus on building leverages, keep a check on competition and therefore must look at long term investment rather than short term gains. There are multiple agencies conducting separate staff talks and visits with the same region/country. Such an approach results in lack of coherence, duplication of effort, wasteful expenditure in travel, administration, and coordination. Any Staff talks or other such engagement must end in an action plan otherwise it would only remain a mere activity.

Transfer of Technology

In future, owing to Transfer of Technology the indigenous content in our equipment would increase and foreign content would decrease. There is a need for DAs to tie up with the Academic Institutes, R&D organisations – both government and private players of host countries in order to increase the export of their own defence production. The DRDO is particularly interested in core technologies of other nations where development has taken place. The Country is interested in harnessing technology from advanced countries of Central Asia

and West Europe where companies with such technology are under economic pressure.

Alumni Connect

There is a systemic apprehension in permitting continued alumni to connect with foreign participants. The members of National Defence College and War Colleges delegations from FFCs include Senior Military Officers who attend Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. These Officers are groomed to take senior leadership positions in the future. The majority of these Officers in their subsequent assignments are involved in shaping policy for their respective countries. There is a need to institutionalise mechanism of keeping a record of personnel from FFCs who attended the Indian Military ITEC programme as the same generates goodwill and open doors for defence diplomacy.

In the world of advanced communications and no digital borders, there is a need to allow officers who have been abroad to keep in touch with their contacts. The archaic policy of 'No contact' needs a review. This connection can be capitalised institutionally as people rise in their respective hierarchies. Accordingly, the requisite policy changes with due regard for security, may be made to permit contact with foreign Officers.

Optimisation of Manpower

As seen, defence diplomacy is a very important aspect of a Foreign Policy. In the fast-changing geo-strategic scenario, the Staff handling the International Cooperation needs to keep abreast of the development and enhance their efforts to find traction with the national goals and capitalise in the available window of opportunity. Hence it mandates continuity of uniformed Personnel preferably akin to IFS Staff who is Country specific/Foreign Division specialist. Therefore cross-staffing of officials from the Services and MEA/MoD must be ensured at all levels of the incumbent organisation to provide a military perspective in foreign policy

decision making. This will ensure coherent functioning as well as domain specialisation, and tenure stability in important planning appointments. Similar optimisation and capitalisation on the Human Resource that repatriates from Foreign Missions, including JCOs and NCOs, be ensured by posting them in relating appointments for harnessing their experience and gained potential.

Liaison for Foreign Service Attaches

When a Foreign Service Attache (FSA) arrives in an Embassy/High Commission in New Delhi, he is looking for advice and guidance to help him in familiarising with his job, getting training slots and liaison with Directorates of three Services. There is a need to reach out and walk that extra mile, as these are the intangibles which have to be factored in military diplomacy protocols, as they have far-reaching dividends in the longer run.

Need for New Defence Wings

Need to establish new Defence Wings to ascertain needs of host country, offer assistance, and to ensure execution on ground. Need to familiarise the government narrative on sensitive issues to ensure that official viewpoint and not the individual perception is given out during discussions at various forums.

'IN/OUT-Visits'

Structured visits of important personalities in the defence hierarchy must be planned as per priority of region/nations. Limits restricting number of international visits by Service Chiefs must be removed. Invitation to Service Chiefs of Immediate Neighbourhood nations may be extended on assumption. There should be no cap on number of visits, rather strategic interests of visit should be kept in mind. The visit should be result oriented.

Conclusion

Defence Diplomacy has become an important component in our foreign policy and contributes towards achieving our national goals. Military Diplomacy is quite quickly becoming a vital aspect of foreign policy, as seen developing among the powerful states, such as the United States, China, the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Russia. Depending on the state's agendas, powerful states use defence diplomacy to establish dominance among regional neighbours and dictate their foreign policies to clarify their terms and conditions in an alliance. This is why defence diplomacy is so vital for a state to not only ensure its stable and strong international position but also etch a structured and functional security policy.¹⁹

The challenges in successful pursuit of defence diplomacy are borne out of infirmities in guidance, structure and processes. Therefore, there is a critical need to establish frameworks for guidance, planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation, and to review existing structure of defence diplomacy in India.

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