

India's Military Diplomacy



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It is undeniable that the nature of military force in international affairs has changed in the seven decades since India's Independence. It has been almost 45 years since India fought a major conventional war, and events since – including the experience of India's counter-insurgency in Sri Lanka, its development of nuclear weapons, and changing commercial, political, and social relations between India and its neighbours – have further decreased the prospect of large-scale conflict. However, the structure and preparedness of the Indian armed forces has not fully adapted to these changing circumstances.

One development that has gone relatively unnoticed is the greater frequency and visibility – and consequently greater importance – of activities that can be considered military diplomacy. This is natural in peacetime, and in an international environment in which India has few true adversaries and many partners. Although there is no universal definition of what constitutes military diplomacy or defence diplomacy, it can be thought of as any military activity with an expressly diplomatic purpose; in other words, activities where the primary objective is to promote goodwill towards India in other countries.

India has leveraged military diplomacy in its external relations almost since Independence, by virtue of its inheriting a large, professional military force from the British Raj, by its size, and by its projection of itself as a leader of the post-colonial world. But the increasing demand and appeal of military diplomacy in recent years will require devoting considerably greater resources, manpower, and equipment towards several kinds of activities. These include foreign officer training and education, high-visibility military visits abroad, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) efforts outside India. More than resources, improved military diplomacy will require much closer cooperation between the services, between India's military and civilian leadership, and between the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of External Affairs.

What is Military Diplomacy?

There is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes military diplomacy or defence diplomacy. By its broadest definition, almost every externally-oriented military activity can be considered military diplomacy, as it would constitute an extension of international policy. Military force is, as the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously noted, “a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.”¹

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However, many military activities have more specific, or supplementary, functions, and are therefore not simply diplomatic. Most military operations that have ultimately diplomatic purposes – including coercive force, peace keeping operations, and evacuation and rescue operations – are meant to achieve specific tactical and operational objectives.² During official contacts between two or more countries' militaries, such as staff talks and military exercises, the purpose is often to improve interoperability and coordination, and not simply increase goodwill.³ And military assistance – including sales and technology transfers – contributes not just to interoperability and diplomacy, but can serve expressly commercial objectives.⁴

A narrower definition – military activities whose sole purpose is diplomatic – leaves a much more specific set of actions as items that constitute military diplomacy. These include (i) the education and training of foreign officers and cadets, (ii) military visits with significant public exposure (such as port calls by naval vessels or the military's participation in parades), and (iii) humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in foreign countries. The historical record shows that while India's efforts have been admirable, certain steps can still be taken to purposefully improve India's abilities in each of these domains.

Officer Training and Education

Having inherited the armed forces from the British Raj, India had at Independence among the most advanced professional military training and education centres in the developing world. The Army Staff College was in Quetta at Independence, and so transferred to Pakistan. Indian facilities shifted after 1947 to Wellington Cantonment in what is now Tamil Nadu. In 1958, a National Defence College was approved by the Cabinet Defence Committee and it opened its doors in 1960. In the 1970s, the College of Combat (later renamed the Army War College) was established at Mhow in Madhya Pradesh, and the Institute of Defence Management (which became the College of Defence Management) was set up in Secunderabad. In addition to training Indian officers, India's military academies and staff colleges took students from other armed forces, advancing diplomatic efforts by fostering cooperation and goodwill with military officers from other countries.

At Wellington, the intake of foreign students began in 1950, with seven students from Britain, Burma, the United States, Australia, and Canada. These expanded in the 1950s to a large number of students from other Non-Aligned and newly independent countries, such as Indonesia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nigeria (including future Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari). Despite India's close relationship with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, it was not until 1988 that a Russian officer attended the course at Wellington.⁵ Meanwhile, the NDC produced future chiefs of the army, air force, or navy of Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Australia, and Kenya, as well as future heads of state or government of Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Ghana, among many other distinguished foreign alumni.

High Visibility Military Visits

While officer education and training targets individuals in other countries' militaries, some of whom rise to prominent positions in their armed forces, other forms of military diplomacy have the ability to have a broader impact, reaching public audiences. These include military activities, such as exercises, on foreign soil. Although both bilateral and multilateral military exercises are seen as a key element of military diplomacy, they serve a number of purposes, including enhancing interoperability and are a means of training.⁶ By contrast, high visibility efforts such as the Indian armed forces' participation in military parades and port visits by Indian naval vessels serve expressly diplomatic functions, as do activities such as the International Fleet Review.⁷ A recent example of India's contribution to a high-visibility diplomatic effort abroad was an Army contingent's participation in the Victory Day parade in Moscow in May 2015, which marked an effort at showing solidarity with the host country and was a public demonstration of India's military capabilities.⁸

Port visits serve a similar function, and they have now become a prominent feature of the Indian Navy's activities and international profile. In 2015, an Indian naval flotilla from the Western Fleet visited Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. The same year, Indian vessels also docked in ports across Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific, including in the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia, leading to favourable media coverage and recognition of deepening goodwill among the host countries.⁹ These efforts constitute a continuation of a trend that began in the early 2000s, when the Indian Navy began to make regular visits to both the Asia Pacific and to West Asia and the Gulf, and marks a significant departure from an earlier period when Indian naval vessels rarely ventured outside the Indian Ocean.¹⁰

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

Another area of military diplomacy at which India has demonstrated greater capabilities in recent years is in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in other countries. The focus to date has been on evacuating members of the Indian diaspora, as in Lebanon (Operation Sukoon), Libya (Operation Safe Homecoming), or Yemen (Operation Raahat).¹¹ These operations have also occasionally extended to securing the citizens of other countries (primarily India's neighbours), which has contributed to diplomatic goodwill and has been a means of showcasing Indian leadership.¹²

But while the Indian armed forces have a solid track record of disaster relief operations on Indian soil, and of evacuating Indian nationals, it has also contributed to disaster relief efforts independent of these considerations: military diplomacy in its purest form. Recent examples include India's role in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, including to Indonesia and Sri Lanka, and assistance following Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh, as well as more recent efforts in Nepal following the devastating earthquake there. By the standards of regional militaries, the Indian armed forces do have a sizeable number of transport aircraft, helicopters, and support vessels, and this has enabled them to carry out the quick provision of food, water, and medical supplies. The acquisition of the INS Jalashwa in 2007 and

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the addition of larger Shardul-class variants to Magar-class tank landing ships in the mid-2000s have bolstered the Indian Navy's disaster relief capabilities in the maritime sphere.¹³ Similarly, India has benefited significantly from the recent acquisition of C-17 aircraft, the largest transport aircraft in the Indian Air Force, and more will be delivered in the coming years.

Navigating Resource Constraints

In all three areas of evident military diplomacy – officer training and education, high visibility military visits, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief – India's abilities have improved, a clear by-product of better diplomatic relations, wider international interests, greater budgetary resources, and the acquisition of key pieces of equipment. Unlike many other aspects of military preparedness, which are based to a certain degree on strategic foresight, military diplomacy tends to be more demand-driven and commensurate with Indian interests and extant capabilities.

Military diplomacy is also, by its very nature, low-cost and high-impact. While resource and capacity shortages should not be exaggerated, they do provide real constraints and certain limitations. Training and education, for example, constitute a marginal item in India's budget, a rounding error in the overall defence allocation.¹⁴ If India is to upgrade the quality – and not just the quantity – of its defence forces, greater spending on developing military doctrine, training, and education is needed.¹⁵ This would have the added benefit of allowing a larger number of foreign students to attend India's defence academies and staff colleges, and may even attract a higher calibre of international students.

Similarly, while the Indian Navy has seen its share of the defence budget increase in recent years, it is still small at less than 20 percent.¹⁶ Given the particular importance and value of port visits as an aspect of high visibility military diplomacy, a larger naval allocation will increase India's ability to fly the flag more regularly and in more places. Budgetary and resource constraints are perhaps most applicable to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts. While India's airlift and expeditionary capabilities have improved since the early 2000s, they are still wanting in many respects.¹⁷

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Bridging Divides and Facilitating Coordination

Beyond the deliberate allocation of resources that could strengthen India's military diplomacy, coordination between the services, between the military and civilian arms of government, and specifically between the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs would be beneficial. Inter-service cooperation would help minimize duplicating efforts between the various military academies and staff colleges (including the tri-service institutions). It could also advance humanitarian assistance efforts, particularly in contingencies that would involve resources or personnel from multiple services (or the paramilitary forces).

The civil-military disconnect is, possibly, a more important consideration, not least because it creates a drag on operational effectiveness and because

overcoming that divide is ultimately crucial to ensuring that military means can achieve the desired political and diplomatic outcomes.¹⁸ A two-way dialogue is needed to ensure that the political objectives are clearly articulated by the civilian leadership (whether political or bureaucratic) and that the military has the capability and willingness to achieve those objectives, particularly as they relate to training and education or to humanitarian operations.

Finally, by its very nature, military diplomacy falls at the intersecting purviews of the Ministries of External Affairs and of Defence, and as such requires close cooperation between the two entities. This has not always been seamless. As defence analyst Nitin Gokhale writes in the context of training foreign forces, “The military confines itself to purely professional exchanges and exercises and leaves the political dimension to be handled by the Ministry of External Affairs.”¹⁹ A certain amount of cooperation does take place already at the most senior Cabinet and secretary levels. Defence attachés posted in embassies abroad also play a critical function in harmonizing defence policy with diplomacy. Efforts have also been made in recent years to bridge the divide in New Delhi, including through 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.²⁰ But such efforts can still be built upon and broadened.

A few specific steps can be taken to help bridge all of these divides. One would involve creating a designated political-military affairs division within the Ministry of External Affairs. The current Disarmament and International Security Affairs (D&ISA) division bears considerable responsibility for non-proliferation issues, leaving little time for defence coordination and planning. At the same time, an increase in the number of personnel at the Ministry of Defence dealing with various aspects of international policy is necessary. Calls for a designated defence track within the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), possibly by the creation of “a special cadre of defence specialists,” may or may not be immediately feasible, and would certainly face resistance. But the creation of specialized defence expertise within the civilian bureaucracy would help considerably in improving coordination with the services and with the diplomatic corps.²¹

Secondly, given their unique positions as a public face for defence policy, India’s defence think tanks – the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), National Maritime Foundation (NMF), and the United Services Institute of India (USI) – can play a particularly useful role in military diplomacy. This can be through scenario planning on behalf of the armed forces, based on open source intelligence, and through coordination activities and interactions with external partners, including foreign governments. Staffing these think tanks with more serving officers would give them greater currency and take advantage of their being both intellectual resources and conduits.

Finally, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations could certainly benefit from greater coordination with other countries and between

ministries. They require better standard operating procedures, designated channels for communication in the event of an emergency, pre-arranged diplomatic protocols, and a certain amount of advance preparedness to secure the appropriate naval and air assets. Most importantly, HADR operations could benefit from contingency planning, another area in which the services and Ministries of Defence and External Affairs can consult India's defence think tanks.

Conclusion: Modest Enhancements

Among the many diverse challenges facing India's national security, military diplomacy represents something of an opportunity. India has historically taken an active role and interest in military diplomacy, and its government and military has seen it as important for India to present itself as a responsible stakeholder, net security provider, and benign military power. Military diplomacy has also benefited from a conducive international environment and India's growing profile and interests. It also remains, by necessity, opportunistic. The broader trends suggest that India's capabilities will increase organically.

But a few relatively modest steps could have a meaningful impact on India's military diplomacy profile. These include designating resources to increase the quantity and quality of foreign students at India's military academies and staff colleges; improving India's expeditionary capabilities, particularly in the maritime domain; and generally increasing the navy's share of the defence budget. More importantly, efforts must be made to improve coordination between the services, between the military and civilian branches of government, and between the Ministry of External Affairs and Defence. This can be accomplished through relatively small steps, including through creating specialized divisions in both ministries, by making better use of India's defence think tanks as conveners and for planning purposes, and through better preparation for humanitarian disasters. In a peacetime international environment filled with global uncertainty and regional instability, a few such modest steps would help ensure that India gets the maximum diplomatic bang for its military buck.

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