



DEFENCE DIPLOMACY: A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE FOR INDIA

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Posting of New Defence Attaches

In April of this year, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) finally began posting Military and Defence Attaches of the three Services to several new countries in Africa and Europe. The Defence Attaches have been posted to Poland, Armenia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast and the Philippines.¹ The long-delayed and eagerly awaited posting of Defence Attaches to the new countries has been implemented through ‘rationalisation’ of manpower by cutting down military personnel from countries having more than one military officer posted at the Indian Embassy. The broad aim of this initiative is to establish Indian defence and strategic ties with a larger number of countries in these regions and also to enhance Indian defence exports.

Defence Diplomacy endows the military a role that goes beyond protecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the nation to avoidance of conflict and building cooperative defence partnerships.

Defence Diplomacy: An Oxymoron

While diplomacy is essentially the art and process of carrying out successful engagements/partnerships with Friendly Foreign Countries (FFCs) in consonance with the prevailing geo-political environment and national interests, Defence Diplomacy is the art and process of the peaceful employment of the various instruments and capabilities of the defence in furtherance of the foreign policy objectives and national interests. Defence Diplomacy endows the military a role that goes beyond protecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the nation to avoidance of conflict and building cooperative

defence partnerships. In a lighter vein, in international relations, the term Defence Diplomacy is actually an oxymoron.² While anything and everything associated with diplomacy is all about soft power, anything and everything associated with Defence is all about hard power. When all diplomatic efforts to resolve a problem fail, diplomacy ends and the Defence Forces step in. Defence Diplomacy has also been referred to by some scholars as 'Boxing with velvet gloves'. The term Defence Diplomacy has gained salience as an important and integral component of foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. Since then, it has become a vital instrument in the diplomatic tool bag of most countries, including India.³

Defence Diplomacy: An Integral Part of Strategic Partnerships

In the last three decades since the end of the Cold War, Defence Diplomacy has been increasingly used by all major powers to supplement their diplomatic endeavours to further

their national interests. In India as well, there has been an increasing convergence between the Indian political leadership, the Indian diplomats and the Indian military. This has manifested in the several '2 + 2 Dialogues' that have been initiated in the last few years with the US, Russia, France, UK, Japan and Australia. In fact, defence is an extremely important pillar of the 'Strategic Partnerships' that we enjoy with several FFCs.

Defence Diplomacy comprises of defence cooperation and military cooperation. While military cooperation signifies all activities involving actual contact between the Armed Forces of two nations, such as joint training exercises, training courses, joint competitions and cultural exchanges, defence cooperation encapsulates all joint defence activities. This includes defence industry and technology cooperation between two nations like joint research and development (R&D), joint production, joint marketing and sale of defence equipment, transfer of critical defence technology, and all the activities of military cooperation as well.⁴

Strategic Guidance for Defence Diplomacy

If Defence Diplomacy is to be successful and achieve its intended objectives, it needs to be synchronised and synergised with the national diplomatic efforts. Defence Diplomacy needs to be provided with strategic guidance and directions, which need to flow from the top—from the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)/National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS). The strategic guidance needs to flow from the CCS/NSCS to both the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the MoD, who must jointly formulate their long-term plans to achieve the national interests and foreign policy

objectives. MEA and MoD need to jointly formulate the broad defence diplomacy policies and objectives and provide the requisite funds for the defence diplomacy initiatives. Keeping the Defence Diplomacy objectives in mind, the MoD International Cooperation (MIC) Wing must formulate the Annual Defence Cooperation Plans with the FFCs and give broad guidelines to the Headquarters of Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) and the Service HQ. These Annual Defence Cooperation Plans must then be executed by the HQ IDS, Service HQ and the Defence Wings in the Indian Embassies abroad. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of coherence and strategic guidance from the top in the formulation of the Annual Defence Cooperation plans with the FFCs. It has generally been seen that the Annual Defence Cooperation Plans with the FFCs are formulated from the bottom up. The proposals get initiated from the Defence Attaches in our Defence Wings and move upwards to the MoD through the Service HQ and HQ IDS. Consequently, the broader vision and direction are lacking. This needs to be improved significantly with directions from the top providing a broad vision.

Defence Wings: Essential Tools of Defence Diplomacy

The Defence/ Service Attaches in our Defence Wings abroad are at the forefront, the cutting edge of our Defence Diplomacy initiatives. The Defence/Service Attaches function as Diplomats in uniform and are instrumental in building bridges of friendship between the Armed Forces of the host nation and our Armed Forces. India presently has approximately sixty Defence Wings in FFCs, of which ten new Defence Wings through re-appropriation of manpower were approved by Raksha Mantri (RM) in 2023 and are in the process of being opened up in FFC.⁵

Hon'ble RM has also given in-principle approval for the opening of an additional ten new Defence Wings through the accretion of manpower. This process needs to be sped up. One of the founding principles of diplomacy is the 'Principle of Reciprocity'. Approximately 80 FFCs have Defence Wings in India. Our northern neighbour, China, also has approximately 110 Defence Wings in FFCs. With India's rising political, economic and military stature, there is an urgent need to expeditiously increase the number of Indian Defence Wings abroad.

Key Pillars of Defence Diplomacy

The six main pillars of Defence Diplomacy are Training, Capacity Building, Soft Power, Personnel Interactions, Exercises and Operations and Defence Exports Promotion.

- (a) **Training:** Providing Professional Military Training (PME) to the Armed Forces personnel of FFCs in our Military Training Establishments is an extremely potent tool of Defence Diplomacy. Apart from offering regular and custom-made

courses in our training institutes, we are also deploying our permanent or mobile training teams in FFCs to cater to their specific training requirements. The training exchanges help shape a favourable narrative and influence the operational philosophy and military tactics of the FFC.

Keeping in mind the necessity to enhance jointness and integration amongst our Armed Forces, it is recommended that we conduct more Bi and Tri-Service joint exercises rather than Single Service exercises.

(b) **Capacity Building:** The process of developing and strengthening the resources and the capabilities of the armed forces of the FFCs through providing assistance by means of grants/loans for better military infrastructure, grants/loans for the latest military equipment and training to improve efficiency is another important instrument enhancing Defence Diplomacy. MEA needs to provide adequate funds through the Defence Diplomacy Funds to HQ IDS and the Service HQ to ensure that the capacity-building initiatives in FFCs are undertaken expeditiously so as to enhance Indian influence and counter the rapidly increasing Chinese influence in our neighbourhood.

(c) **Soft Power:** Soft Power is another significant means of implementing Defence Diplomacy. This includes the projection of India's historical, religious and cultural linkages with FFCs to generate goodwill and bonhomie. Soft power initiatives include cultural and ceremonial visits, including visits to important religious sites, bilateral/multilateral sports and adventure activities, providing health care, medical education and medical treatment, regular think tank interactions and joint seminars, and regular engagements/visits of FFC alumni to their alma-maters (military training institutes) in India.

(d) **Personnel Interactions (Staff Talks):** Staff Talks are an extremely important mechanism for enhancing Defence Diplomacy and are held at different levels of the MoD, HQ IDS and the Service HQ. These meetings are alternately hosted by India and the partner FFC. Apart from the Staff Talks, the other instruments for Personnel Interactions are the security dialogues, conclaves, seminars, symposia, service chief Conclaves, subject matter expert sists, etc. Keeping in mind the focus on enhancing jointness and integration within our Armed Forces, there is a need to increase the number of Joint Staff Talks while concurrently reducing the Service-specific Staff Talks.

(e) **Exercises and Operations:** One of the most significant means for enhancing Defence Diplomacy is through the conduct of Joint Bilateral/Multilateral, single Service, Bi-Service or Tri-Service exercises. Exercises are instrumental in learning and sharing best practices and SOPs, enhancing interoperability with the

Armed Forces of the FFCs, gaining knowledge about the latest technologies possessed by the advanced Armed Forces and gaining intelligence about our adversaries. Keeping in mind the necessity to enhance jointness and integration amongst our Armed Forces, it is recommended that we conduct more Bi and Tri-Service joint exercises rather than Single Service exercises. Also, in order to interact with a larger number of FFCs, it is proposed that more multilateral exercises be conducted rather than bilateral ones. For instance, the Annual Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Joint Exercise 'Ex Chakravat 2023' was conducted by the Indian Navy at Goa from October 09th to 11th, 2023, wherein eight FFCs participated.⁶ IAF is also conducting a multinational air exercise 'Tarang Shakti-2024' in which as many as 12 countries would be participating in August 2024.⁷

Our Armed Forces are also implementing the Government's commitment to be the 'First Responder' in our extended neighbourhood and undertaking HADR or rescue operations in the eventuality of a natural disaster or a conflict. Notable examples of such operations undertaken by our uniformed diplomats in the recent past are Operation Ganga (Ukraine), Operation Devi Shakti (Afghanistan), Operation Dost (Turkey), Operation Kaveri (Sudan) and Operation Vande Bharat (COVID-19).

(f) **Defence Exports Promotion:** A recently added but vitally important pillar of Defence Diplomacy is the need for defence export promotion. One of the most important lessons learnt from the Russia- Ukraine conflict has been the necessity for our Armed Forces to have indigenous defence equipment and indigenous supply lines. This has brought greater focus on our 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' efforts. Our indigenous defence manufacturing companies would be successful only if they were able to sell their defence equipment to FFCs, recover the huge costs of carrying out R&D, and set up state-of-the-art defence manufacturing infrastructure. Towards this, our Defence/Service Attaches need to help promote defence exports of both our public and private defence companies.

Conclusion

India's rapidly increasing economic, political and defence prowess, along with its regional power status, mandates that India synergise its constantly expanding diplomatic and defence initiatives to further its national interests and foreign policy objectives. Defence Diplomacy must be utilised as an integral tool in the diplomatic toolkit. Strategic guidance, in the form of a broad vision and directions, must be provided by the top leadership to enhance our defence diplomatic endeavours. Defence Wings abroad and Defence Diplomacy funds need to be substantially increased so as to enhance India's area of influence and counter that of China in our extended neighbourhood.

Notes:

¹ Rajat Pandit, "India Posts Defence Attaches to Several New Nations for 1st Time", *Times of India*, April 11, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>. Accessed on July 23, 2024.

² Brig KA Muthanna, "Military Diplomacy", *Perspectives*, Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, Vol. 5, No. 1, January 2011, p. 1, https://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds_5_1_kamuthanna.pdf. Accessed on July 23, 2024.

³ Cmde Roby Thomas, "Indian Defence Diplomacy: A Handbook", Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, Monograph No 74, November 2021, p. 5, <https://www.idsa.in/monograph/indian-defence-diplomacy-rthomas>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

⁴ n.2, p. 2.

⁵ n.1.

⁶ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "Annual Joint HADR Exercise 2023-(Chakravat 2023) concludes at Goa", Press Information Bureau, October 11, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1967119#:~:text=The%20Annual%20Joint%20HADR%20Exercise,drills%20on%20rescue%20and%20relief>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

⁷ Mayank Singh, "12 Countries to Participate in IAF's Biggest-ever Exercise", *The New Indian Express*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2023/Jun/30/12-countries-to-participate-in-iafs-biggest-ever-exercise-2589987.html#:~:text=For%20the%20first%20time%2C%20Indian,participated%20in%20this%20multilateral%20exercise>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.



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