

# AIR DIPLOMACY FOR FURTHERING INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

PANKAJ JAIN

*Growing air power effectiveness presents itself as a precision tool, particularly for deterrence by punishment and even coercive diplomacy.*

– Air Commodore Jasjit Singh

## DEFENCE DIPLOMACY

The *Merriam Webster* dictionary defines diplomacy as “the art and practice of conducting negotiations between nations” or “skill in handling affairs without arousing hostility”. *Collins* defines it as “the activity or profession of managing relations between the governments of different countries” or “the skill of being careful to say or do things which will not offend people”. *Cambridge* says it is “the management of relationships between countries”. Central to all the definitions of diplomacy is its role in achieving a nation’s objectives in a ‘peaceful’ manner, without an outright application of force or violence. Diplomacy is usually conducted in pursuance of foreign policy objectives, and is, thus, a domain of the Ministry of External Affairs. Diplomacy also finds a place in the DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military and Economic) construct, which are the four broad instruments of national power that can either individually or in unison, achieve the national strategic objectives. Interestingly, diplomacy and military, in the DIME construct, are

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shown to be exclusive, leading many to believe that diplomacy and the military work at either ends of the force application spectrum, and are, thus, divorced from each other. The usage of the term 'gunboat diplomacy'<sup>1</sup>, in the 19th century was probably the first time that the military and diplomacy were portrayed in a symbiotic relationship. However, as this version of diplomacy required a display of force, it remained outside the realm of the usually accepted peaceful diplomatic measures of those times.

The term 'military/defence diplomacy' has been a relatively recent addition to the lexicon of international relations<sup>2</sup>, and is believed to be post-Cold War product, wherein the understanding of international security and the associated security policies underwent a significant change.<sup>3</sup> The military was expected to assist in war avoidance, through confidence-building methods, like military-to-military interactions, port calls, mutual training, etc. It started getting deployed in peaceful roles on foreign territory, primarily for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and towards peacekeeping operations.<sup>4</sup> *These peaceful measures to prevent conflict have traditionally been clubbed as 'preventive diplomacy'*, a term first coined by Dag Hammarskjöld at the United Nation<sup>5</sup> about five decades ago. As brought out, this term refers to "specific diplomatic actions to avoid conflicts, mitigate the factors that may lead to one, and, finally, limit the spread of the conflicts

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1. *Gunboat Diplomacy*, National Museum of American Diplomacy, <https://diplomacy.state.gov/exhibits/diplomacy-is-our-mission/gunboat-diplomacy/>. Accessed on September 10, 2025.
  2. Though the concept may pre-date the modern era. In the classic *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu says, "For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill, but to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill". While it is interpreted as the skill of the commander in creating conditions that would lead to capitulation of the enemy before the first shot is fired, it could also be interpreted as a win orchestrated through diplomacy. Similarly, there are other old texts that allude to a diplomatic role for the military, *Arthashastra* by Kautilya being another well-known treatise.
  3. Lech Drab, "Defence Diplomacy—An Important Tool for the Implementation of Foreign Policy and Security of the State", *Security and Defence Quarterly*, vol 20, September 2018, <https://securityanddefence.pl/Defence-diplomacy-an-important-tool-for-the-implementation-of-foreign-policy-and,103330,0,2.html>. Accessed on September 10, 2025.
  4. Mohak Gambhir, "Defence Diplomacy and its Relevance", Centre for Land Warfare Studies, March 18, 2021, <https://www.claws.in/defence-diplomacy-and-its-relevance/>. Accessed on September 10, 2025.
  5. Bertrand G. Ramcharan, *Preventive Diplomacy at the United Nations*, UN Chronicle, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/preventive-diplomacy-united-nations>. Accessed on September 15, 2025.

as and when they occur". In short, preventive diplomacy is practised along the entire conflict spectrum.

Though considered an oxymoron in its initial years, the concept of military diplomacy has come a long way. It has found its way into the military doctrines of many countries, and has been used effectively, however, mostly in the Western world. In India, the aspect of defence diplomacy has been covered in the Joint Doctrine of the Armed Forces, 2018<sup>6</sup>. The diplomatic role of the Indian Navy has been extensively elaborated in the Indian Maritime Security Strategy, 2015.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, air diplomacy was part of a separate chapter in the Basic Doctrine of the Indian Air Force, 2012<sup>8</sup>, wherein the coercive capability of air power is described thus: "...diplomacy has emerged as the first option for both power projection and conflict resolution, albeit with military power to back it up with deterrence and coercive capability."<sup>9</sup> In the latest version of the Indian Air Force (IAF) Doctrine, diplomacy is mentioned as "...remains the first option for both power projection and conflict resolution. Military power provides the deterrence and coercive capability to wield national foreign policy effectively. It reinforces diplomacy, enabling it to communicate its credibility and intent during negotiations."<sup>10</sup>

Still, military diplomacy remains a facet that is yet to be fully integrated into the foreign policy initiatives, working mostly in stand-alone mode and confined to limited activities, mostly in the trust-building roles. A lack of synergy is visible between the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the armed forces, in identifying areas where the diplomatic role of the military could be gainfully utilised. The lack of a 'defence diplomacy policy' at the MEA, and the corresponding structures, may be

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6. *Joint Doctrine of the Armed Forces, 2018*, <https://ids.nic.in/doctrine.php>. Accessed on September 20, 2025.

7. *Indian Maritime Security Strategy, 2015*, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-maritime-security-strategy-2015>. Accessed on September 20, 2025.

8. *Basic Doctrine of the IAF, 2012*, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download;jsessionid=8C04D7B593D6007FF4CB09E94EC51506?doi=10.1.1.303.2177&rep=rep1&type=pdf>. Accessed on April 20, 2022.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

10. *Doctrine of the IAF IAP 2000-22*, [https://cms.spacesecurityportal.org/uploads/IND\\_Doctrine\\_Air\\_Force\\_832d5b6c62.pdf](https://cms.spacesecurityportal.org/uploads/IND_Doctrine_Air_Force_832d5b6c62.pdf). Accessed on October 23, 2025.

**The importance of military diplomacy, even when a conflict breaks out, cannot be overstated, as most of the peace-time diplomatic roles are applicable during hostilities too. Military diplomacy is, therefore, a full spectrum role, during both peace and war.**

hot wars, anything but short and swift, are returning, it is imperative that military diplomacy be reassigned its primary role of preventing wars. In most of the writings, military diplomacy finds a place, only in a 'peace' scenario, and through peaceful means. *A conflict that gets averted through show of force, however, is also attributable to the coercive/deterrent/compellence aspects of military diplomacy.*<sup>12</sup> The underlying threat of use of military force is fundamental, irrespective of the definitions considered. The importance of military diplomacy, even when a conflict breaks out, cannot be overstated, as most of the peace-time diplomatic roles are applicable during hostilities too. Military diplomacy is, therefore, a full spectrum role, during both peace and war. *This is traditionally clubbed under a term known as 'coercive diplomacy'.* Alexander L George defined it as "the use of threats and limited force to make an adversary halt a course of action it has embarked on, or undo what has been done already"<sup>13</sup>. This 'limited use of force' is calibrated to signal to

a causal factor. A compartmentalisation of diplomatic and military endeavours is regressive in achieving the strategic objectives, as echoed by John F Kennedy when he famously said, "Diplomacy and defense are not substitutes for one another, and either alone would fail".<sup>11</sup>

In the interesting geopolitical landscape that is unravelling, wherein the existing theories and norms are getting challenged, and conventional

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11. Kelly Peter, "The UW's Last Presidential Visit: A Different World in 1961", *University of Washington News*, October 21, 2010, <https://www.washington.edu/news/2010/10/21/the-uws-last-presidential-visit-a-different-world-in-1961/>. Accessed on September 18, 2025.
  12. As per Thomas Schelling, coercion includes both compellence (forcing favourable action) and deterrence (dissuading someone in taking an action). Another school of thought places coercion and deterrence as two separate verticals, with deterrence referring to maintenance of status quo, while coercion is to force someone to take an action (change behaviour).
  13. Alexander L. George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1991), p. 4.

the adversary that more force can be used, if it does not agree.<sup>14</sup> It is important for the military to understand its critical role in promoting coercive diplomacy, and include it in its thinking, doctrines and actions taken on the ground.

In India, military diplomacy is almost akin to an 'unorganised and informal sector', with the 'air' aspects of it getting sidelined even further. In the troika of the Indian armed forces, it is the Indian Navy which has established itself as the 'lead' Service in diplomatic activities. The relative ease of being in the seas, the global commons, enables navies in seamlessly integrating the diplomatic role in their peace-time as well as war-time roles. On similar lines, it can be argued that air power too is free to operate over the international air space, the global commons, and, hence, could curate for the nation and itself, diplomatic roles, which are beyond the traditional. In fact, only the air forces that can operate over both land and water, unlike land and maritime forces which are restricted to only one medium, thus, making air power more versatile. The globally accepted characteristics of air power, like flexibility, reach and responsiveness, amongst others, could, therefore, contribute to air diplomacy.

The inadequacy in understanding air diplomacy arises both due to limited awareness about the application of air power in a diplomatic role, at the policymaking level, and the seemingly indifferent attitude displayed by the proponents of air power themselves. A scan of the literature, in both print and on the internet, reveals a woefully limited number of books/articles, etc. on aspects related to air diplomacy in India. A study of the various think-tanks in India, associated publications and seminars, also brings out a general lack of public discourse on the subject. The doctrine of the IAF,

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14. Alexander L. George, "Coercive Diplomacy: Definition and Characteristics," in Alexander L. George and William E. Simons, eds., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 11.

mentions air diplomacy and lists out a few “globally acceptable missions”,<sup>15</sup> limited to UN missions, joint exercises, air displays abroad and HADR. These are all related to only *preventive diplomacy*. The aspects of *coercive diplomacy*, like the threat of using air power as an instrument for deterrence, coercion and shaping the world opinion has not been deliberated in the IAF formally, though it is an effect created as a natural offshoot to many of its traditional roles. The use of force has been mentioned only in relation to an Out of Area Contingency (OOAC).<sup>16</sup> The absence of these roles in the doctrine is indicative of the inadequate awareness of the diplomatic potential within the IAF. There is even less understanding and recognition in the public domain. The net contribution of air power towards diplomacy, therefore, finds very limited favour in the Indian context.

#### AIR POWER IN THE DIPLOMATIC ROLE

On August 23, 1927, Paul Claudel first mentioned the term “air diplomacy”, while referring to the transatlantic flight undertaken by Charles Lindbergh in 1927<sup>17</sup>. The term was later echoed by many. Guy Vanthemsche referred to it when Belgium got connected by air to many foreign capitals.<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline de La Rochère also described ‘air diplomacy’ to be a part of US policy<sup>19</sup>, as it could have a leading voice in formulating international laws on civil aviation. In August 1938, General Joseph Vuillemin visited Germany, where he was shown the much developed German Luftwaffe and the capabilities of the aircraft factories, the implications of which resulted in France not standing up for Czechoslovakia. This move by Germany has been considered by many to be a masterstroke, wherein the display of air power was used to intimidate a potential adversary. Since then, the term has found its way into

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15. n. 10.

16. Ibid., p. 37.

17. Guy Vanthemsche, cited in Jerome de Lespinois, “What is Air Diplomacy?” *Air & Space Power Journal-Africa and Francophonie*, vol. 3, issue 4, Air University Press, Winter 2012, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/ASPJ\\_F/Display/Article/1274678/volume-03-issue-4-winter-2012/](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/ASPJ_F/Display/Article/1274678/volume-03-issue-4-winter-2012/). Accessed on October 5, 2025.

18. Guy Vanthemsche, *The Birth of Commercial Air Transport in Belgium (1919-1923)*, 913-944, <https://doi.org/10.3406/rbph.2000.4471>. Accessed on October 5, 2025.

19. Jacqueline de La Rochère, cited in de Lespinois, n. 17.

doctrines of many air forces, as well as in the lexicons of offices responsible for foreign policy.

### **AIR POWER AND PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY**

A large number of peaceful diplomatic roles are performed by air forces around the world. They are the first responders in handling humanitarian disasters. The ability to fly across the oceans, sometimes into conflict zones, enable Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEOs) of not only own citizens, but of other countries as well. The diplomatic dividends gained through evacuating the diaspora of other nationalities cannot be overstated. Another dimension to air diplomacy is the interaction with the air forces of friendly countries. These are in the form of bilateral/multilateral exercises, high level delegation visits, exchange programmes, etc. that build trust and take the state relationships to the next level. Commencement of military exercises indicates a period of much higher level of trust between the participating states.<sup>20</sup> Over years, the IAF has contributed to India's foreign policy through participating in a large number of exercises with friendly countries. Air shows by display teams on foreign soil are a big draw, which help in favourable moulding of public opinion in that country, along with political and diplomatic dividends.

The military plays a direct role as diplomats through the Defence Attachés (DAs) placed at missions/embassies across the world.<sup>21</sup> The DAs have been pivotal in managing and promoting interactions with friendly air forces which have increased multifold over the past decade, and in the

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20. The air-to-air refuelling of the IAF Rafale aircraft in March 2021, by the UAE, when these were being ferried from France to India and refuelling of the Su-30MKI in June 2022, when they were ferrying for an exercise with the Egyptian Air Force, brings out the role of air power in the promotion of diplomacy, while also indicating a highly developed relationship between India and the UAE.

21. The IAF officers posted in these missions, along with support staff, play a major role in building relationships with the host military, provide military advice to the ambassadors, promote outreach in the field of defence diplomacy and security operation, assist in bilateral exchanges, promote own country defence industry, handle emergency response in host country, if required and supervise consequent relief efforts. Due to their presence in these countries, they provide a continuum to the overall diplomatic efforts by the military, and, thus, remain the frontrunners in exercising the military/air diplomacy.

process extracting diplomatic dividends from the host countries. The DAs also facilitate the promotion of own defence industry, through aspects of sourcing, development, production and marketing of defence equipment between countries. Bilateral training, exchange visits and subscription to various international training institutions are major components of air diplomacy.<sup>22</sup> Along with exchanging views on air power, these training courses and visits expose the participants to the culture and people of the host country, promoting people-to-people connect, an essential component of any diplomatic initiative. An important spinoff is the bond of friendship that the participating personnel develop during these courses and visits, which may help in diffusing future crisis situations. The use of air power in peacekeeping operations is another important contributor to air diplomacy. India has contributed significantly to the United Nations for manning such missions across the world. It has also contributed air platforms, attack helicopters as well as medium lift helicopters in various conflict zones. These have had a multiplier effect on the diplomatic gains, as helicopters are contributed by only a limited number of countries.<sup>23</sup>

Civil aviation resources too form part of a nation's air power capacity. Nations project the civil airlines as symbols of national identity internationally, the 'Maharaja' of Air India airline being an apt example. The national airline has been an ambassador of India and a diplomatic vehicle during times of HADR and NEOs. Since the first flight more than a century ago, the opening of civil aviation internationally has seen diplomatic overtones, with connections being allowed only to countries that were to be engaged as a part of foreign policy. Civil aviation diplomacy is used to influence international relations directly, as a soft power asset, and through interaction with international agencies like International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

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22. Carol Atkinson, *Military Soft Power: Public Diplomacy Through Military Educational Exchanges*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), pp. 3-9.

23. Daniel Forti and Mark J. Wood, *Analyzing Member State Pledges from the 2021 UN Peacekeeping Ministerial*, IPI Global Observatory, February 9, 2022, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2022/02/analyzing-member-state-pledges-from-the-2021-un-peacekeeping-ministerial/>. Accessed on September 21, 2025.

## AIR POWER AND COERCIVE DIPLOMACY

For much of its history, mankind has been resorting to the use of force for settling issues between groups/societies/kingdoms, etc. The Treaty of Westphalia brought in a change, with nation-states and distinct borders, along with a belief that states shall resort to diplomacy in resolving their differences, marking an end to the perennial violence. There were attempts to promote peace through diplomacy, with bodies like the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, the League of Nations in 1919 and the United Nations (UN) in 1945. However, as history shows, these bodies failed in achieving lasting peace, through traditional peaceful diplomatic methods. It was only natural that nations started to include the threat of force in their diplomatic dealings, which is now known as coercive diplomacy, and targets the space between peace and war. President Theodore Roosevelt once described this concept as “speak softly but carry a big stick”.<sup>24</sup> Bernard Brodie, an American military strategist, too related the threat of war, open or implied, to an instrument of diplomacy, either deterring an adversary from carrying out an inimical action or coercing it to a favourable action.<sup>25</sup> As per Thomas Schelling, who wrote extensively on coercion, military potential has always been used by states to influence other countries, governments or the population, by the harm it could cause. He goes on to say that whenever military force gets used as bargaining power, it automatically forms part of diplomacy, though it is the “the uglier, more negative, less civilized part of diplomacy”.<sup>26</sup> The strategy of coercive diplomacy acknowledges the primacy of traditional diplomacy, and advocates threat/use of force, only when peaceful options fail, or when they need support. Like preventive diplomacy, the idea is to prevent conflict, though with the display of force. As a whole of nation approach, the coercive

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24. On September 2, 1901, Teddy Roosevelt used the phrase “speak softly, and carry a big stick” to describe his foreign policy. Big stick diplomacy defined his presidency. The quote is picked up from National Geographic Resource Library, Historic Article, “September 2, 1901 CE: Big Stick Diplomacy”, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/big-stick-diplomacy>. Accessed on July 15, 2025.

25. Bernard Brodie, *The Anatomy of Deterrence* (California: The RAND Corporation, 1958), p. 3.

26. Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press, March 17, 2020), p. 35.

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aspects need to be dovetailed with other instruments of national power, to keep the communication channels open, and allow for negotiations, thus, preventing either only the threat of using force or its calibrated application, from escalating to a full-scale war.<sup>27</sup>

When speaking specifically about coercive air diplomacy, *almost all the major air combat roles* fall under this category.

Though lethal force may have to be used too, its nature and extent are much below conventional war. In its simplest form, air power has been seen to be used as a threat in being, through deployments, undertaking combat air patrols in affected areas, or simply standing by on the ground, at a high level of readiness. In certain cases, it has been used to enforce no fly zones, to prevent air activity by an adversary. There have been many instances, including in India, where the air combat assets have been deployed to give a deterrence signal to an adversary. Populating the front tier airfields with fighter squadrons, heightening the alert state of the air defence weapons, increasing the number of aircraft on the Operational Readiness Platform (ORP), etc. are a few such measures. It could also be achieved through increasing the frequency and intensity of air exercises, in stand-alone mode as well jointly with the other Services. This display of operational preparedness is an important driver to effective coercive diplomacy. On the kinetic front, the Western air forces have used physical force regularly as a tool for coercion, mostly against a relatively weaker adversary. *This escalation control is critical in the employment of air power.* While the intention may be to limit the air action, and gain the desired outcomes, it has the risk of spiralling out of control,

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27. Gretchen Fryar, *The (Air) Power to Coerce: The Role Of Air Power In 21st Century Coercive Diplomacy*, (Canberra: The Air Power Development Centre, 2013), p. 2, [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiw4rjW9\\_75AhX18DgGHTtrBGkQFnoECAkQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fairpower.airforce.gov.au%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2021-03%2FFELL38-The-Air-Power-to-Coerce.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2Re5x2j4gpn1Zi8oIru6J](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiw4rjW9_75AhX18DgGHTtrBGkQFnoECAkQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fairpower.airforce.gov.au%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2021-03%2FFELL38-The-Air-Power-to-Coerce.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2Re5x2j4gpn1Zi8oIru6J). Accessed on October 15, 2025.

especially against a well-equipped air force. Though the IAF has, since the several decades of its formation, not been requisitioned for a kinetic action, as part of coercive diplomacy, it saw action during the Kargil conflict<sup>28</sup>, where it pursued the “deterrence by denial” strategy.<sup>29</sup> The Rubicon was first crossed during the Balakot strikes, when the IAF carried out a surgical strike on the terrorist infrastructure deep inside Pakistan, as part of the ‘deterrence by punishment’ strategy. Recently, Operation Sindoor, took that strategy further, deeper and wider in its application. Along with signalling the resolve of the country, it was a promise to Pakistan that any misadventure in the subconventional domain shall be responded to in the conventional domain, thus, raising the costs. More importantly, it confirmed the existence of a strategic space, wherein a suitable kinetic response through air power can be given, without the risk of a full scale war under the nuclear overhang. The degree of the force used, its calibration and control, would remain fundamental to this process.

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#### **GLOBAL EMPLOYMENT OF AIR POWER IN THE DIPLOMATIC ROLE**

The United States has been at the forefront of air power for the past century, enabling it to deploy its air forces globally and prevail through both kinetic and diplomatic means. Air diplomacy has roots in the early days of aviation, when supporters within the US Army promoted aviation through public campaigns, cross-country tours, air shows, “show the flag” flights, HADR missions, etc. Defence attaches, overseas bases, and more provided the US with a distinct diplomatic advantage through air power. The US Air

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28. VP Malik, *India's Military Conflicts and Diplomacy: An Inside View of Decision-Making* (Harper Collins India, 2019), pp. 99-156.

29. Samanvya Hooda, *The Future of Deterrence along the LAC*, Working paper submitted at the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi, 2020, <https://www.icsin.org/publications/the-future-of-deterrence-along-the-lac>. Accessed on October 15, 2025.

Force (USAF) has been deployed regularly for coercive roles. *Drawing a line between coercive diplomacy and direct military action can be challenging, but it hinges on the way that the force is used.* For instance, Operation Provide Comfort in 1991<sup>30</sup> involved humanitarian aid supply and combat missions to prevent Saddam Hussein's intervention and protect the Kurds in northern Iraq. Operation Northern Watch, which continued until 2003,<sup>31</sup> policed the area north of the 36 parallel. All these combat missions were not part of war, but a measure short of it, and can, thus, be clubbed under the umbrella of diplomacy. A few examples of using even more force, however remaining short of conflict, are operations like El Dorado Canyon (1986), Deliberate Force (1995), and Allied Force (1999). In these operations too, kinetic action was taken, wherein both force and diplomacy were at play, but remained below the threshold of a conventional war.

The employment of air power by the United Kingdom individually, in the post World War II era, has been infrequent. Mostly, it has operated as part of the UN mandated peacekeeping/enforcing operations, in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) led operations and along with the US, in coalition operations. In peaceful roles such as HADR and NEO, the Royal Air Force (RAF) has remained active, like any other modern air force. Similarly, it has conducted exercises across the globe, bilaterally as well as multilaterally. Its own formation aerobatics team, the Red Arrows, has performed round the world, influencing and fostering favourable opinion.

Interestingly, while the China's People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) doctrinal literature does not highlight air diplomacy, its activities, especially around the contested islands in the East and South China Seas have been a copybook display of coercive air diplomacy. The PLAAF has been consistently flirting with the Japanese air defence set-up, forcing interceptions off scrambles, for the past decade. An official estimate puts a total of 704 interceptions, between April 1, 2024, and March 31, 2025, which

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30. "Operation Provide Comfort", GlobalSecurity.Org, [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/provide\\_comfort.htm](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/provide_comfort.htm). Accessed on October 12, 2025.

31. John T. Correll, "Northern Watch". *Air Force Magazine*, February 1, 2000, <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/0200northern/>. Accessed on October 12, 2025.

are uncharacteristically high for any nation, and include a few against Russian aircraft too. These flights have focussed on the area close to the Senkaku/Dioyudao Islands, amongst others.<sup>32</sup> Declaring an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), in 2013, in the East China Sea, was another such example<sup>33</sup>. In the recent Taiwan crisis, the PLAAF aircraft have consistently operated close to Taiwan's airspace, intruding into its ADIZ. It is worthwhile to mention that the PLAAF has only entered the ADIZ unannounced, and remained outside the sovereign boundaries (territorial waters) of both Japan as well as Taiwan. However, it has been able to achieve its aim of keeping both Japan and Taiwan under continuous pressure, while reinforcing its claims over the contested spaces, more specifically the islands.

#### **AIR DIPLOMACY IN INDIA: MINDSETS, DOCTRINE AND INNOVATIONS**

Air diplomacy is an important instrument of foreign policy, and though used copiously by the major powers, these diplomatic roles have not been integrated in the policies, thus, remaining divorced in the minds of policymakers as well as in action. They do not find adequate mention in foreign policies and in the doctrines of air forces of the world. In India too, there are no direct references to air diplomacy in the documents, available on official websites of the MEA or MoD. The doctrine of the IAF covers a set of tasks conforming to preventive diplomacy only. In the minds of planners as well as executors, these tasks are so wired, that they do not evoke anything beyond 'business as usual'. The diplomatic perspective is rarely understood, which reflects in training as well as on ground execution. This disconnect between the mind space and actual actions on the ground, is all pervasive, and includes the political leadership, bureaucracy, military hierarchy and personnel on ground. This has ramifications detrimental to the achievement of foreign policy objectives, most important of which is

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32. AFP, "Japan Fighter Jets Scramble 704 Times as 30 Chinese Drones, Dozens of Russian Jets Crowd Its Airspace", *The Economic Times*, online edition, April 11, 2025.

33. Ian E. Rinehart and Bart Elias, *China's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ)*, Congressional Research Service Report, January 30, 2015.

the suboptimal leveraging of the diplomatic work undertaken by the IAF across the spectrum.

## MINDSETS

Mariners use an interesting term known as 'sea blindness'. In simple terms, it is an inability to recognise the central role played by the seas and naval power in a nation's security.<sup>34</sup> Duncan Redford defines it as "the inability to connect with maritime issues either at an individual or political level"<sup>35</sup>. It can also mean that the maritime domain is seldom understood, not just from a military, but also from a wider perspective.<sup>36</sup> Extensive literature is available on this theme, and it has been invoked numerous times by navies to garner public support and in spreading awareness of their importance and relevance. *Interestingly, there is no term as 'air blindness'*. At least, the internet search didn't produce any positive results for this term<sup>37</sup>. A case could be made for coining 'air blindness' as a term in air power literature that would describe a general and widespread apathy in understanding the role and scope of air power, especially in the diplomatic domain. As in the maritime domain, where the oceans are beyond sight and are, thus, argued to be forgotten, the domain of aerospace is also beyond visual range. In that context, it is probably only the land forces that operate closest to the eyes of the public. To be fair to the argument, the IAF is well known and respected in the country. The many wars that India has fought since independence, along with the Kargil conflict, have shaped a favourable public perception of the IAF. Add to it the glamour quotient of flying,

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34. Butch Bracknell and James Kraska, "Ending America's 'Sea Blindness'", *The Baltimore Sun*, December 6, 2010, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/bs-xpm-2010-12-06-bs-ed-sea-treaty-20101206-story.html>. Accessed on July 17, 2025.

35. Duncan Redford, "The Royal Navy, Sea Blindness, and British National Identity", in Duncan Redford, ed., *Maritime History and Identity: The Sea and Culture in the Modern World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 62.

36. Sir Humphrey, "Are we 'Sea Blind', or Merely Suffering from 'Sea Myopia'?", April 27, 2012, <https://thinpinstripedline.blogspot.com/2012/04/are-we-sea-blind-or-merely-suffering.html>. Accessed on July 17, 2025.

37. The term was first introduced by the author in a thesis submitted in pursuance of M.Phil, with Madras University, while undergoing a course at the National Defence College, New Delhi in 2022.

boosted immensely by movies like *Top Gun*, *Vijeta* and many more, the IAF has remained popular in the society. The good news though ends here. It is only through 'fascination', that the majority knows the IAF. A very small number are conversant with the nuances of air power, and even less are conscious of its diplomatic role. *One can argue that we as a nation suffer from 'air blindness'*. This ignorance by foreign policymakers and the bureaucracy, in understanding the way air power gets deployed, in both peace and war, makes the IAF punch well below its weight, especially when it comes to air diplomacy.

This lack of knowledge can be attributed to many reasons. At the highest level, one can argue that it is the strategic culture of India, amorphous as it is, which has not allowed a deeper understanding of the diplomatic capabilities of air power. Many authors have ascribed the missing link to the absence of a National Security Strategy (NSS), which could have articulated the diplomatic role of the military towards the achievement of national objectives, and, thus, provided guidance for all the stakeholders.<sup>38</sup> A quick read of the annual report (2024) by the MEA<sup>39</sup>, reconfirms the absence of the military in the foreign affairs calculus. While the 402 page report has dedicated chapters on economic diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, public diplomacy, etc. it does not have any chapter on defence/military diplomacy, of which air diplomacy could have been a component. Apart from these, in the individual country briefs, various exercises, training activities and industry participation have been listed, along with several other types of diplomatic engagements. These briefs, country-wise, are a collation of bilateral engagements in all conceivable fields, a sort of laundry list. A dedicated chapter, bringing out the concept and macro issues, as has been done for economic diplomacy or cyber diplomacy, would have lent greater importance to the issue. This incoherent approach is a direct consequence

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38. Arvind Gupta, "An Indian Security Strategy", *The Diplomat*, Online Edition, October 20, 2011, <https://thediplomat.com/2011/10/an-indian-security-strategy/>. Accessed on October 20, 2025.

39. Ministry of External Affairs, Annual Report, 2021-2022, [https://www.mea.gov.in/annual-reports.htm?57/Annual\\_Reports](https://www.mea.gov.in/annual-reports.htm?57/Annual_Reports). Accessed on October 20, 2025.

**Among the personnel of the IAF (except the personnel at foreign missions), there is little awareness about their role as diplomats when interacting with the foreign air forces or other apparatuses of state organs, aggravated by no formal training, making it a 'hands-on experience' process.**

of the absence of a 'Defence/Military Diplomacy' section in the MEA. The syllabus at the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service, includes defence diplomacy as a subject, the extent of which, however, cannot be derived from the website.<sup>40</sup> If one extrapolates the large number of subjects/topics mentioned in the relevant phase (Phase-1) vis-à-vis the duration (eight weeks), it can be inferred that the time spent on understanding the nuances of defence diplomacy is likely

to be very limited. The subject of defence diplomacy is not taught in any military institution either. Among the personnel of the IAF (except the personnel at foreign missions), there is little awareness about their role as diplomats when interacting with the foreign air forces or other apparatuses of state organs, aggravated by no formal training, making it a 'hands-on experience' process. The Indian Navy, with its inherent job profile, gets to interact with foreign personnel, building awareness and confidence in the process. However, both the Indian Army and IAF personal do not have that opportunity, and generally obtain this experience very late in their service careers.

A lack of suitable strategy, along with limited institutional training of officials from the MEA, MoD and the military, is the underlying reason of military diplomacy not being exploited to its full potential. These issues could be attributed to a general indifference, low level of understanding and a single-minded emphasis on the aspects of peaceful diplomacy, leaving the coercive aspects to be handled as part of conventional military operations. The general mind-set when it comes to the use of air power, is that it is inherently

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40. Training Programme available on the official website of the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service for the trainee officers can be accessed at <https://ssifs.mea.gov.in/?5137>.

escalatory, and, thus, should be restricted to a full-scale conflict.<sup>41</sup> However, the short history of air power has produced enough examples, confirming coercive employment of air power, while keeping escalation under control.

#### **POLICY, STRATEGY AND DOCTRINES**

India's foreign policy has not been laid down in any document by the MEA, though it is implicit through the discourse put forward by the political and bureaucratic dispensations. Within a nation, it may be easier to coerce/compel/or simply force people to act in a certain way; it is, however, challenging to convince other nations to conduct their business in a certain manner. While foreign policy may not specifically mention military diplomacy, as it only lays down the broad contours, it is the task of the MEA to draft a strategy, which includes all components of national power into its execution. Strategy can be simplified as 'ends, ways and means', the 'ends' here being the goals laid down by the foreign policy. One of the 'ways' to achieve these 'ends' is military diplomacy, a subset of which is air diplomacy, both preventive as well as coercive. The 'means' would be the entire resources at the behest of not only the IAF, but other

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41. The apprehension that air power is escalatory has been in the Indian discourse for very long. It is the prime reason that the IAF was not employed in Indo-China conflict in 1962, leading to disastrous consequences. The use of air power, however, needs to be examined through established theories on escalation control and dominance, one of them propagated by Herman Kahn. Though Kahn had nuclear escalation as the backdrop, his concept of escalation dominance can be applied to the usage of air power. Robert C Owen, et al, in their book *Restraining Air Power: Escalation Management between Peer Air Forces* also put forward theoretical and empirical assessments of restrained air warfare through five historical case studies since 1945, evaluating the principles of escalation and escalation management to better understand when, why, and how peer opponents in past conflicts have expanded or restrained air operations. A number of instances have been brought out in the article earlier, which confirm availability of space in which coercive air power, even kinetic, can be applied successfully. In India, the Balakot air strikes across the border, and Op Sindoor, could be termed as successful coercive diplomatic endeavours.

sources of national air power as well. A strategy clearly enunciated by the MEA and then adopted by the MoD and the armed forces, would result in coherence in actions and would be aligned with the overall national objectives. A study of the organisational structure of the MEA<sup>42</sup> shows two divisions, namely, the Bureau of Security (BOS) and the Disarmament and International Security Affairs (D&ISA), which deal with the security aspects. There is a Policy Planning and Research (PP&R) division, which undertakes studies focussing on foreign policy issues, and may have a subset of defence diplomacy planning aspects. As already brought out, there is no division that handles defence/military diplomacy as a stand-alone subject. These two/three desks, manned by an officer each from the armed forces, are woefully short of the vast scope and work required in this field. It is also noteworthy that there is no officer from the IAF, deputed to the MEA<sup>43</sup>, further bringing out the aspect of '*air blindness*' in the country. A few other divisions have officers from the armed forces, however, these desks have no link to defence diplomacy. To summarise, a detailed defence diplomacy strategy does not get formulated at the MEA. The media fiasco and the war of narratives, post Balakot strikes, is an apt example of organisational deficiencies at the MEA to handle defence diplomacy.

The organisation at the MoD has a dedicated vertical for international cooperation, headed by a joint secretary<sup>44</sup>. It is tasked to coordinate activities with friendly foreign militaries that partly fulfill the role of diplomacy. These are only related to preventive diplomacy and do not incorporate the coercive aspects. The promotion of these 'peaceful' activities, is bottoms up as well, wherein the Service Headquarters (HQ) propose to engage a foreign country, triggered by high level military exchanges. As with the MEA, there is no strategy put out by the MoD, which could become a guide to the armed

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42. The organisational structure/organogram is available on the official website of MEA, <https://www.mea.gov.in/organization-structure.htm>

43. This information has been gleaned through the official website of the MEA, wherein the names of all officers, division-wise are given. Informal chats with the armed forces officers posted to MEA have also confirmed this fact.

44. The organisational structure is available on the official website of the MoD, under the Department of Defence, <https://www.mod.gov.in/dod/jspic-0>

forces, provide them perspective, and assist them in approaching these roles holistically.

The Services have performed a shade better in this regards. Despite vague directions from the government, individual Services have included defence diplomacy as land, air and maritime diplomacy in their respective doctrines. The Joint Doctrine of the Armed Forces (JP-01/2017)<sup>45</sup>, brings out in adequate detail the importance of diplomacy. *It is perhaps the only document in the Indian context that mentions the term 'coercive diplomacy' and assigns this role to the armed forces.* Additionally, the doctrine speaks about high levels of military preparedness and good war-waging potential as the key to credible deterrence. Amongst the three Services, it is only the Indian Navy, which has kept the coercive aspects in its maritime strategy document. The IAF, in its doctrine, has enunciated only peaceful roles for diplomacy, though it brings out the deterrence and coercive aspects with respect to air power. The Indian Army, surprisingly, in its Land Warfare Doctrine, 2018, has limited it to a small para, mentioning only military-to-military cooperation and the role of the DAs.

The Basic Doctrine of the IAF, 2012, was unique, as it carried a chapter, titled "Nation Building, Air Diplomacy and Perception Management". The chapter on the IAF's vision brought out the presence of diplomacy in the mind space of the IAF leadership. In the erstwhile doctrine, 'diplomacy' appeared 27 times in the document, as compared to 14 times in the current doctrine, though the coercive aspects of air diplomacy have not found a mention in the current doctrine too. An analysis of the air diplomacy tenets in the current doctrine is fundamental to the argument of the coercive aspects, as an integral component, arguably an even more important one, of military diplomacy. The concept of air diplomacy in the IAF doctrine is hinged upon the concept of 'soft power', which, as per Joseph Nye, is "the ability to get what you want through attraction and not coercion".<sup>46</sup> The

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45. *Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces*, 2017 Edition, available at HQ IDS official website.

46. Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Origins and Political Progress of a Concept* (Palgrave Communications, 2017), <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms20178#citeas>. Accessed on September 16, 2025.

doctrine, thus, sets the stage for preventive, and non-coercive diplomacy. It goes on to say that soft power shall form the bedrock of nation-building as well as diplomacy. However, in the ensuing paras, a sense of contradiction emerges. Though it starts with the 'soft power' and 'without coercion' idea, the doctrine further brings out the importance of 'deterrence and coercive' capabilities of military power as a critical enabler to the diplomatic initiatives. Examples given in the doctrine of 'anti-piracy' patrols by the Indian Navy are fundamentally kinetic and coercive in nature. Similarly, Operation Cactus was not a simple evacuation operation; it involved kinetic action to repel the mercenaries at Male. *The dichotomy is clear, and it perhaps exists in the minds of all proponents of air power.* The conventionally accepted belief is of diplomacy being restricted to peaceful means, while the aviator, with his knowledge on the characteristics and capabilities of air power, is subconsciously aware of the power of limited kinetic action to achieve assigned objectives. Therefore, while the doctrine sets the stage for soft power, and non-kinetic actions, the roles described subsequently have a violent connotation. The competencies too, as described above, include firepower as well, thus, championing the use of the entire spectrum of air power. The hesitancy to accept the 'violent' side of air power as a diplomatic tool, could be the reason that these roles have not been formally incorporated in the doctrine. The experience of the Balakot strikes and later, the punitive strikes on the terrorist infrastructure, as part of Operation Sindoor, are ideal examples. These strikes validated the coercive role, but the subconventional air strikes/surgical strikes have neither been included in the chapter on diplomacy, nor are being discussed as a diplomatic tool in the public domain.

### **INNOVATIVE APPLICATION OF AIR POWER IN THE DIPLOMATIC ROLE**

A large number of peaceful roles, brought out earlier, are relevant in the Indian context as well. The IAF doctrine only mentions a few, and needs to be updated with all these roles. There is a need for studying the medium of air holistically, and as its extension, the diversity of air power, to be

able to fully exploit its potential. A huge advantage of the medium lies in its seamless connectivity. There are no physical obstacles in the air, only artificial barriers created due to reasons of sovereignty. Civil flying is conducted across the medium and boundaries, guided by mutually accepted rules. The transit of military aircraft too takes place across the borders with established procedures. Over oceans and seas, the IAF is free to operate outside the limits set by the territorial waters of any country, just as surface elements of the Indian Navy. This flexibility has the potential to employ air power across the world, in roles that can have a diplomatic intent, too. It can be argued that an aircraft making a halt at any of the foreign air bases, could be equated with a ship making a port call, with all the diplomatic connotations. It is only an issue of mindset and acceptance in going along with this theory.

Over the years, the capability of the IAF has grown significantly. Since participation in its first international exercise at Gwalior in 2003, known as Ex Garuda, with the French Air Force, the IAF has really come a long way. Apart from being ambassadors of own country and creating goodwill, the unequivocal praise by the other modern air forces bestowed on the professionalism of the IAF has comprised strategic signalling to adversaries, and could be counted as deterrence. These engagements could be broadened in scope. While deploying for overseas exercises, the IAF contingent makes maintenance halts generally at foreign military bases. These could be used to fly certain missions together, conduct smaller exercises, or alternatively arrange interaction with the personnel at that base. The benefits shall certainly outweigh the time penalty accrued, if any. As the IAF becomes more interoperable, these missions can be coordinated, to be conducted while overflying a friendly country. In naval parlance, these exercises are understood as PASSEX (passage exercises). While it appears complicated, the execution would only require a higher degree of coordination. Through these steps, a single deployment shall extract much more diplomatic mileage, with a greater number of countries, at a very nominal cost and time overrun.

**While India does not have security arrangements or military alliances with its neighbours, increased cooperation can be reached in the field of air surveillance with countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Myanmar.**

There are many other areas in which air power can contribute towards preventive diplomacy. Reconnaissance is one such theme where India can contribute to its neighbours. This could be through air as well as space-based assets. As a start, it could be limited to civilian use, and extended to policing aspects. As trust builds up, it could be extended to military purposes as well. India has made significant progress in the field of the

Geographic Information System (GIS) wherein support could be extended to friendly countries. As a nation, resources could be built up for benign roles like airdrop of fertilisers, pesticides and insecticides, through aircraft known as crop dusters. These can be then provided as a service to nations in need, and could be part of the overall credit or even grants extended to these countries. There are other roles like fire-fighting, air seeding, cloud seeding, etc., that are an excellent source of soft power, and are not big on the budget. A parallel can be drawn with the 'hydrography' role of the Indian Navy, which reaps rich diplomatic dividends with a number of Indian Ocean Region (IOR) littorals. The naval air assets, specifically the P-8I, are ideal platforms to extend surveillance services to smaller littoral/island neighbours.

While India does not have security arrangements or military alliances with its neighbours, increased cooperation can be reached in the field of air surveillance with countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Myanmar. A combined radar surveillance system, along with networking, could create interdependencies, as well as shared interests. These could be later developed to common Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZs), cross-posting of controllers in defence surveillance units, and many more steps, to improve friendly relations and create confidence in the smaller neighbours, about India's policy of non-belligerence. Along with these structures,

intelligence and information sharing in the air defence domain can also be undertaken. In the case of contingencies, where the neighbouring countries request for assistance, dedicated surveillance of disturbed areas, Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) support, Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) from airborne platforms, etc., could be provided in coordination with local forces. Air power is capable of this support without a single boot on the ground, and, thus, remains a more acceptable tool domestically. Some of these cooperative engagements would be feasible only if there is a shift in the foreign policy, which will allow engagement with neighbours militarily. Till then, these should form part of discussions and debates, which can be converted to strategies and doctrines, as and when the country is ready.

**Air power is an effective tool, when it comes to the display/threat of use of force.**

Air power is an effective tool, when it comes to the display/threat of use of force. While there may be instances when this approach has to be used with friendly nations, it is the adversaries that need to be involved in 'strategic engagement'. The term 'strategic engagement' has been explained by Daniel H Katz as "defence diplomacy which leads to an establishment of instruments that allow otherwise adversarial states to manage their relationships with the ultimate goal of diminishing the risk of interstate conflict".<sup>47</sup> From the air diplomacy perspective, this would help to deter conflict by creating own aura of superiority, and establish an ascendancy, whenever a conflict breaks out. This aspect needs more discussion and has unexplored possibilities, particularly in an Indian context. Globally, there have been several instances of strategic engagement, especially during the Cold War, which resulted in conflict avoidance.

The strengthening of friendly air forces in the neighbourhood is another important aspect that needs attention. While a few aircraft and radar systems have been shared with neighbours, this aspect needs to be

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47. Daniel H Katz, *Defence Diplomacy: Strategic Engagement and Interstate Conflict* (Taylor and Francis, 2020), p. 4.

institutionalised in line with India's foreign policy, and not as an ad hoc measure. This dependency shall wean the neighbours away from China, build their capability to pose a future threat to likely adversaries, and create interdependencies, which are vital for building better relations. The sale of the BrahMos missiles recently to the Philippines<sup>48</sup>, falls under this category. An important aspect is to be a reliable partner, providing full support on maintenance and spares subsequent to the sale.

Air power is capable of reaching far distances, and could be a force multiplier in peacekeeping roles, where the land forces cannot be deployed or are difficult to deploy for safety reasons. The offensive element of air power can take control of hostile airstrips and helipads, and be used to build up ground forces. These aircraft and the airstrips would also be a lifeline for the supply of relief material. At places, where the ground troops cannot be deployed, the IAF can sustain operations through the medium of air, keeping distances, etc. in account. While deploying towards UN mandated missions, air power can be effectively used as a tool for deterrence, but, more importantly, for coercion.

The versatility of air power allows it to be used in many more roles, where it can be effective in messaging, deterring and coercing the target nation in making favourable decisions. The otherwise established roles have not been brought out here, however, they remain as important. The vaccine diplomacy conducted by India would not have been possible without the strategic air lift capability provided by the IAF. The pictures of IAF C-17s at Kabul airport, post sudden withdrawal of US forces, extracting the Indian diaspora and persons of other nationalities, in a hostile environment, were worth more than 'a thousand words'. During the response to international disasters, the first images of Indian assistance are of the air bases and transport aircraft involved in HADR efforts. The night operation undertaken at Wadi

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48. Dinaker Peri, "Philippines Inks Deal Worth \$375 Million for BrahMos Missiles", *The Hindu*, Online Edition, January 28, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/philippines-inks-deal-worth-375-million-for-brahmos-missiles/article38338340.ece>. Accessed on October 7, 2025.

Seyidna airfield in Sudan is another case in point, wherein the C-130 aircraft was used to evacuate Indian diaspora, a total of 121 people, in an extremely hostile situation.<sup>49</sup> Though only Indian nationals were evacuated, it elevated the image of the IAF in the international arena. There is a definite case of increase in investment in these heavy as well as tactical lift platforms, which provide dual advantage, in war and peace, accruing diplomatic mileage in the process.

It is easy to infer that the process of codifying air diplomacy into the nation's foreign policy needs to begin with a change in mindsets. The potential of air power has to be realised by both the foreign policymakers and the IAF. While the MEA and MoD must utilise it as a favoured instrument and provide clear guidelines, the IAF needs to educate its personnel on the diplomatic connotations and the importance of the roles being performed by them. These aspects need to find their way into the doctrine of the IAF, be part of the overall IAF strategy, and feature in the strategies of the operational commands. It is also evident that the coercive aspects of air power have not been fully understood, and there is a general reluctance to include it in the foreign policy. There are many roles wherein air power can be intuitively used for diplomatic purposes, and must be included in the doctrines.

## **PROGNOSIS**

It is evident that air diplomacy needs to be practised as 'whole of nation' approach, coordinating diverse missions, under a common strategy emanating from the foreign policy of the nation. It is imperative that a national defence diplomacy policy is laid down, from where the MoD and the armed forces can derive their strategies. At the apex level, a national defence diplomacy board could be formed, with members from the

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49. Rajat Pandit, "IAF Aircraft Rescues 121 Indians in a 'Daring Night Operation' in Conflict Torn Sudan", *The Times of India*, online edition, April 29, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/iaf-aircraft-rescues-121-indians-in-a-daring-night-operation-in-conflict-torn-sudan/articleshow/99853135.cms>. Accessed on October 20, 2025.

**It should be an ideal combination of hard and soft power capabilities that can persuade adversaries, and reassure allies, either through peaceful means or kinetic action.**

MEA, MoD, National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), Department of Military Affairs (DMA) and the three Service HQ. This board could meet periodically, with one of its charters being the formulation of a national defence diplomacy policy towards adopting a coherent approach. The board could lay

down long, medium- and short-term goals. It could also issue mid-course corrections, depending upon the varying geopolitical situations. In order to provide for higher levels of coordination between the MEA and MoD, the relevant departments could be restructured, with specific desks tasked to formulate, promote and execute a coherent defence diplomacy strategy. The nominated personnel from the MEA and MoD need to be trained on aspects of air power and its versatility, especially as a diplomatic tool. It is essential that officers from the IAF are posted to the MEA, as is happening currently for the army and navy. A larger representation of officers from the armed forces, especially from the IAF is needed at the foreign missions/embassies, while also augmenting the staff support. Air forces have the responsibility of deriving missions for themselves, as well as corresponding capabilities. The existing doctrines need to be built upon, ensuring that they remain aligned with the overall foreign policy, and, consequently, with the defence diplomacy policy. In the end, it should be an ideal combination of hard and soft power capabilities that can persuade adversaries, and reassure allies, either through peaceful means or kinetic action. With war-waging becoming expensive by the day, defence budgets on a downward trajectory, and subconventional threats becoming primary, the armed forces have to adapt to continue being relevant and useful to the nation. An increased impetus needs to be given to developing interlinkages with foreign military institutions, war colleges, etc. Increasing arms exports to friendly countries could be better leveraged as a diplomatic tool.

Providing military hardware to smaller countries alongwith robust maintenance support remains a good policy option. The preventive diplomacy roles brought out earlier like increased scope and complexities of international exercises, providing Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) support to friendly countries, airdrop of fertilisers, pesticides and insecticides, fire-fighting, air seeding, cloud seeding, etc., need to be included in the relevant portions of the doctrine. Collaborative security is essential, wherein the armed forces play a greater diplomatic role through loose partnerships with their counterparts in foreign countries, promote interoperability, and, thus, foster familiarity and peace.

**It is important that the IAF personnel are educated formally on diplomacy, with special emphasis on air aspects, through a training curriculum held at various stages in the career.**

The nation needs to adopt the concept of coercive air diplomacy in its mind space. The understanding at the political and bureaucratic levels of the coercive capabilities of air power would be essential to take this concept forward. The apprehension of escalation needs to be put to rest, as it has been seen to be manageable historically. In a future conflict, it may well be the leading instrument, to both deter and coerce, and to finally deliver the winning blows in case a full scale conflict breaks out. A few aspects of the same have already got played in Operation Sindoor. The coercive aspects of air diplomacy also need to find a place in the IAF's doctrine. This would include a change in mindset, not only in the IAF, but in the MEA as well. It is to be understood that the entire spectrum of kinetic application of air power falls under this category. It is finally the manner in which air power is employed, and the occasion that would limit it to the realms of diplomacy. It is important that the IAF personnel are educated formally on diplomacy, with special emphasis on air aspects, through a training curriculum held at various stages in the career. Aspects of escalation control, while using coercive air power in the kinetic role, to avoid a full scale conflict, needs to

be studied further. It would also be interesting to study various scenarios in which coercive military (more specifically, air) diplomacy would be able to achieve political aims without resorting to full scale war (e.g. when enjoying military asymmetry, strong vs weak leadership, undertaking perception management, etc.).