

# Military Diplomacy: Strengthening Linkages in India's Neighbourhood

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## Introduction

Military diplomacy occupies little space in the public imagination in India. So, if some serious inquisition on the topic is intended, a historical perspective in the Indian context would be befitting to start with. Some time around 1890, nearly 40 percent of the political services (later it took on the form of the Foreign and Political Department of British India, the predecessor to the present-day Indian Foreign Services—IFS) were from the armed forces. These officers managed rather deftly the complex relationship between a fledgling British Raj and the over 500 Rajas and Maharajas who lorded over their often warring kingdoms in the subcontinent.

An independent India in the 21st century has to establish and maintain cordial and mutually beneficiary relationship with less than 200 nation states. Yet it is acknowledged that India's diplomatic services have grossly underperformed, resulting in the country punching far below its weight in the international arena. In an insightful article in the *Indian Express* dated August 24, 2012, veteran diplomat Sashi Tharoor wrote that India has roughly 900 diplomats staffing 120 Embassies and 49 Consulates. In stark contrast, the USA has over 20,000, the UK 6,000 and China 4,200. In fact, we have the same numbers of diplomats as Singapore or New Zealand, with a population of 4 million each! More tellingly, there are more officers in the US Embassy at Delhi than Indian employees in its

entire foreign service. The underperformance is often explained by saying they are understaffed. Why understaffed in a country of teeming millions of graduates and post graduates? One possible reason is that the diplomatic staffing has become more or less an exclusive preserve of the IFS, tailored as a tight band of brothers, each of who should retire at least as an Ambassador. The lower staff in our diplomatic missions are spectacularly undertrained, underpaid and largely perform like the loathed lower bureaucracy back home, grossly inefficient, unimaginative, unresponsive, unhelpful and arrogant. The movie 'Airlift' isn't too much of artistic imagination despite what the establishment might claim!

### **Military Diplomacy: A Perspective**

It is instructive to take a look at some of the extraordinary diplomats of the past century. Any further look backward may allude to a world so very different in terms of the prevailing international security order as it exists today that its relevance may come under scrutiny. The great wars and the aftermath have largely guided the formation of nation states and the codification of international laws. George Marshall was an true example of a special league of military diplomats. Commissioned as a Second Lieutenant into the US Army in 1901, Marshall served on the Western Front in the World War I. President Franklin Roosevelt appointed him as the new Chief of Staff in September 1939. Marshall directed the United States, armed forces throughout the World War II. He was given the rank of a five-star General in December 1944. Marshall resigned as Chief of Staff on November 21, 1945, but a few days later, Harry Truman persuaded him to become US Ambassador to China. In January 1947, Truman, who called Marshall "the greatest living American", appointed him as his Secretary of State. While in this position, Marshall devised the European Recovery Programme (ERP) popularly called as the 'Marshall Plan'. Over the first year, the ERP spent \$5,300,000,000 and played a decisive role in the reconstruction of war-torn Europe.<sup>1</sup> In 1953, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace for his contribution to the recovery of Europe after World War II.

There are naysayers in the Indian establishment who will not relate to examples from the US. They would argue that the US as the global superpower is intrinsically linked with power projection and, hence, any comparisons are odious. The Indian situation is very different, we are told. India is the so-called non-aligned, peace loving country which works as a beacon to the world. A reality check would quickly disperse such fog. Vulnerable at home and abroad, we are struggling to grapple with the unfolding security quagmire that's staring at us. Since 1989, a proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir

**Soldiers can play a pivotal role in post war reconstruction.**

(J&K) keeps sending body bags of soldiers with scary regularity for ceremonial funerals. The northeast remains a tinder box, with occasional upheavals that leave the country perplexed but unmoved, as it does not occupy its imagination. Some of our missions abroad have been targeted by inimical forces backed by state powers.

So, at this juncture, as a comparable example for the benefit of naysayers, it is apt to recall the contribution of Gen Kodendera Subayya Thimayya, DSO, one of the outstanding soldier-diplomats that India has ever produced. He was specially selected by the United Nations in July 1953 to head the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission in Korea. It was a very sensitive and delicate task dealing with unruly Chinese and Korean prisoners. Here again, through sheer charisma, impartiality, firmness and diplomacy, he completed this task to the satisfaction of the world body.<sup>2</sup> After retirement from the Indian Army, the United Nations sought his services yet once again when he was appointed as the Commander of UN Forces in Cyprus (UNFICYP) in July 1964. This only goes to further affirm the pivotal role that a soldier can play when the war winds have blown away and it's time to reconstruct, rebuild and take the civilisation forward. Two Generals from different hemispheres of the world were entrusted for this onerous task and came out with flying colours.

**Foreign Policy Challenges in the Prevailing Circumstances**

The unfolding situation in West Asia and the neighbouring Europe points to ominous signs of where the world is headed today. At no other time after World War I has the world witnessed such a widespread security upheaval. Weak and failing states like Libya, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, and Afghanistan, etc, provide a fertile breeding ground for terrorist networks and organisations. During the last 40 years, first, the Soviet invasion and then the US-led coalition's military intervention in Afghanistan, Israel's massacres and annexation strategy through settlement construction in the occupied Palestine, the state collapse in Iraq following the US invasion, the Iran-backed Maliki government's ensuing sectarian policies against the Sunni Arabs, the chaos in Libya after the international intervention, and the protracted Syria crisis have created conditions in Muslim countries that the terrorist groups could exploit. Also, the rising Islamophobia in the West in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks; and Iran's and Saudi Arabia's sectarian policies in the Middle East exacerbated these conditions favourable to the religiously motivated terrorist networks.<sup>3</sup>

Religiously motivated terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) are global terrorist groups targeting the Western-led global order with networks and extensions in several countries, carrying out attacks in different parts of the world. These organisations thrive on global instabilities, power gaps and collapsing government systems. India has high stakes in these developments, not the least because of its troubled relationship with Pakistan but also because of its massive dependency on Gulf oil and its significant working expatriates in the Gulf. The ‘Airlift’ movie couldn’t have come at a more apt time, if only to arouse popular conscience about the emerging situation wherein India successfully concluded its evacuation efforts in Yemen by airlifting 5,600 people, including 4,640 Indians and 960 nationals from 41 countries. Again, this Operation Raahat, was led by a military man, Gen VK Singh.

Let it be clear that intentions of peaceful coexistence and benevolent development will not secure India’s borders. It’s important to remember, at this juncture the wise words of Kautilya, our ultimate forbearer of statecraft. The principle of foreign policy—that nations act in their political, economic, and military self-interest—was a timeless truth of his science of politics, or the *Arthashastra*. He did not believe that nations never act in an altruistic manner—indeed, Kautilya advocated humanitarian acts that also coincided with one’s self-interest—but he did believe that one must assume, if entrusted with political or military power, that one’s neighbors will eventually act in their own interests. Put another way, one would be betraying one’s own people if one did not assume a worst-case scenario. A nation forced to rely on the kindness of neighbouring states is weak and, unless it can change rapidly, is doomed to destruction.

Just as the situation post World War II called for a pivotal role for soldiers in post war reconstruction, today’s security scenario, which is dominated by the threat posed by the ISIS and other radicalised elements at home and abroad, needs global cooperation in intelligence sharing and coordinated operations. No single country is equipped to thwart attacks on its soil by solely depending on its own intelligence and resources. The Paris attacks were traced to radicals who were based in/ transited through Brussels. The migrant crisis in Europe needs huge efforts continent-wide and across the Mediterranean.

Tragically, the developments in the neighbourhood have been more or less inimical to India’s national interests in the past decade. It must worry that countries in the immediate neighbourhood that have deep civilisational, cultural and geographical ties with India and should have been naturally looking up to India to shepherd their economies and polity, have to turn to China and Pakistan.

China has contacts with the Nepalese Communist Parties, focussed on enhancing its cultural presence, including influence over Buddhism in Nepal, and has increased its activities in the Terai belt bordering India, through a progressively widening network of China Study Centres. Simultaneously, Pakistan has been active in using Nepal as a conduit for pumping fake Indian currency and uses it as a route for terrorist related activities. Most of Bangladesh's military hardware is being sourced from China. There has been a heightened Chinese and Pakistani activity in Sri Lanka, aimed at cashing-in on the goodwill created from the support they had extended to GoSL during the Eelam War IV, though some of this influence may be waning since the Rajapakse government was thrown out last year. The Maldives crisis of February 2012, it is believed in some quarters, could have been far better handled by India had there been a military presence in our diplomatic mission there. The then future Maldives Army Chief had only just completed his training at the National Defence College in New Delhi. Yet such connections are not leveraged by the establishment, as if they are just stand-alone arrangements.

The presence of international officers at Indian military schools is substantial, yet very little is known about the long-term impacts of these exchanges. Military organisations can influence political processes and decisions through the development of cross-border communities of military professionals. Military exchanges can build personal and professional networks that then serve as important conduits of ideas to help to improve interoperability with partner nations and extend India's influence through military soft power rather than through hard power. The utter neglect in sidelining the military by the foreign policy establishment may not be a workable option anymore. Close cooperation to harness each other's core competencies is the key.

## **Diplomacy and the Indian Military**

India has not successfully leveraged the awesome reputation its peacekeepers have built across the wide spectrum of countries in the world through sheer hard work, non-partisan conduct, and genuine warmth and connect with host country populations. The interaction of Indian military contingents with Indian missions in host countries of peacekeeping missions is rather perfunctory, and often testy. A hugely hierarchy and protocol conscious diplomatic bureaucracy in our missions often deliberately ignores the presence of hundreds of Indian soldiers deployed in the foreign shores and rarely leverages on their mission

achievements. War-fighters as peacekeepers have been the hallmark of 20th century post-cold war era geopolitics. And India has been at its forefront, yet this is not reflected in our diplomacy.

Perhaps this points to a deeper confusion about diplomacy, a notion that diplomacy is only talking nice. This view is captured in the quote attributed to Robert Frost: “A diplomat is a man who always remembers a woman’s birthday but never remembers her age.” In this view, diplomacy is artful speech and the alternative to diplomacy is anything else: spying, sanctioning, and threatening.

In the world of policy realism, however, effective diplomacy usually involves all four aspects: artful and encouraging language; the use of economic and non-economic sanctions as leverage to shift the opponent’s cost-benefit calculation; the delicate deployment of “or else” threats that credibly back up the diplomat’s commitment to resolve the matter, one way or the other; all backed up and informed by careful, all-source intelligence. In other words, I think the definition attributed to Chou Enlai is closer to the mark: “All diplomacy is the continuation of war by other means.”

Because foreign policy is just an extension of a nation’s wars, the goal of foreign policy is not just to end wars, but rather to ward off defeats and to make sure one is successful in subsequent warfare. Wars today no longer have defined borders, they have seamless frontiers. There is a paradigm change. The teachings of Kautilya must be recalled for their profound applicability to the current situation. For him, all Ambassadors were potential spies with diplomatic immunity.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, he wrote an entire section about how to “fight with the weapon of diplomacy.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In these troubled times, astute diplomacy is the key to building successful and lasting security partnerships for achieving sustained economic growth. India is located in a volatile neighbourhood, with ongoing insurgencies and unrest taking place in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. It has to contend with a rising China which retches up border skirmishes with disturbing regularity while providing succour to Pakistan through strategic infrastructure projects. The South China Sea may appear distant but is very closely linked to the security of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) that is vital to India’s energy security. India currently imports 70 percent of its oil and 50 percent of its gas; it is

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projected to import 80 percent of its energy needs by 2025. There is a need to have substantial and robust military diplomatic engagement with select countries that are at the receiving end of Chinese belligerence. These may include Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Philippines and Taiwan.

The military and diplomatic establishments in India are headquartered in the same office space in South Block, New Delhi, but rarely leverage each other's capabilities. As India advances its position in the world and lives up to the potential that its character and natural assets imply, it could become a powerful force for transformation in key areas such as energy, non-proliferation, environment, economic development and terrorism. It is vital at this juncture to build a robust multi-disciplinary diplomatic architecture that goes beyond the insipid framework of a few military attaches perfunctorily thrown in more as placating the military than achieving any real purpose.

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## Notes

1. John Simkin (john@spartacus-educational.com) © September 1997. Updated August 2014.
2. Humphrey Evans, *Thimayya of India: A Soldier's Life (Other)* (Lancer Publishers).
3. Prof. Atilla Sandikli, *The New Wave of Terrorism: The ISIS Case, A Wise Men Board Report*, (Bilgesam Publications).
4. Bimal Kanti Majumdar, *The Military System in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960), p.64.
5. Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, 12.2: 462; Also see Indra, *Ideologies of War and Peace in Ancient India*, pp. 80-81.