
CSS STRATEGIC BACKGROUND PAPER – 21/2015

REGIONAL DEFENCE DIPLOMACY: WHAT IS IT AND WHAT ARE ITS LIMITS?

Introduction

Within the Asia-Pacific region the linked concepts of ‘common, comprehensive and cooperative security’ have been used almost as a mantra as the region has attempted to avoid the perceived perils of confrontational approaches to security. The region has not always been successful in avoiding confrontation, but has worked assiduously to reduce the possibility and mitigate its effects. We see this through the development of the regional security architecture, the region-wide acceptance of the *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation* 1976, and the development of integrated supply chains that reduce the ability of states to act autonomously against the interests of the wider group. Another approach leading to a culture of non-confrontation and one which encapsulates all three non-confrontational concepts is that of ‘defence diplomacy’ or ‘military cooperation’. The two ideas overlap, but are not identical. Probably, military cooperation should be seen as a sub-set of defence diplomacy.

We should understand defence diplomacy to include the range of non-warlike activities undertaken by the armed forces of any country, intended to develop in the international community a positive attitude towards and trust in the country undertaking the activities.

This kind of approach has the advantage of being all-encompassing, but gives little hint as to what might actually be involved. Reasons for undertaking defence diplomacy typically include to ‘dispel hostility, build and maintain trust and assist in the development of the democratically accountable armed forces (thereby making a significant contribution to conflict prevention and resolution)’. As well, contacts between officials; the appointment of defence attachés; cooperative arrangements of various kinds; provision of material equipment or other material aid; contacts and ship visits; and exchanges and training activities should be included. To that listing might be added activities at a relatively high and politically charged level such as capacity building for security sector reform or other reasons, cooperation in the defence industrial sphere, or as routine as communicating official positions on issues, publication of professional journals, publication of defence white papers, displays of solidarity with like-minded countries and ceremonial activities to honour international visitors.

Clearly, defence diplomacy runs the gamut from the significant to the mundane. None of the activities are particularly new; indeed some (the appointment of defence attachés, for example) date back several centuries. The point, however, is that whereas these activities once had a purely military role designed primarily to further one's own armed forces, their position vis-à-vis other armed forces and their position in the world, today they are a component in most countries' national strategy, intended to support the nation rather than the armed forces alone. The activities have moved from being an end more or less in themselves to being a means to wider national ends.

Regional Defence Diplomacy Today

Bilaterally, many countries have cooperative activities at varying levels ranging from the exchange of attachés, through high level dialogues to capacity building, combined exercising and arms transfers. These wax and wane according to the state of relations between the countries, but generally it may be said that there is more bilateral defence engagement between regional countries today than at any other time in the region's history. The range and possibilities of such activities is as wide as the imagination. They include, for example, the activities of USNS *Mercy* and its Chinese naval counterpart *Peace Ark* bringing medical support to remote areas, or the various activities under the Australian Defence Cooperation Programme or New Zealand's Mutual Assistance Programme, or sports visits by teams from one defence force to another.

Examples of regional multilateral defence and security cooperation manifest themselves in a wide variety of forums. Purely military cooperation occurs routinely and systematically through the various alliance systems (of which the Five Power Defence Arrangements is the main such multilateral regime), through seminars and meetings such as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (first held in 1988 and itself a successor to a two-yearly symposium dating from 1969) which most recently agreed the 'Code For Unplanned Encounters at Sea', the Rim of the Pacific (Rimpac, first held in 1971) naval exercises which actively involve over 20 nations including, in 2014 China, and the various conferences and seminars such as the Chiefs of Defence Seminar, the Pacific Armies Chiefs Conference and the Pacific Armies Management Seminar. This listing, which is by no means comprehensive, should also include the development of regional peacekeeping centres that have become a feature of the landscape and cooperation between which is institutionalised regionally through the Asean Peacekeeping Centres Network, the second meeting of which was held in 2013.

At the official level, regional multilateral defence diplomacy is centred around the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM, established in 2006) and the ADMM Plus grouping, established in 2010, which includes Asean's dialogue partners and which meets biennially.

At the edge of multilateral 'defence diplomacy', and expanding the concept of 'comprehensive', are a number of activities that deal with 'security' more widely rather than

just with defence matters. Examples include the ASEAN Regional Forum Inter-Sessional Meeting on Maritime Security (track 1, official linkages) and the Expanded Asean Maritime Forum (track 1.5, officials and academics together). Both examine a wide range of maritime security issues and through this contribute to regional security and stability.

At the track 2 level (that is, officials in their private capacity and academics) two meetings need to be mentioned (although there are more), even though again they deal with security rather than purely defence issues. The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, (CSCAP) was established in 1992 and now includes 21 member committees (each representing a national organisation and fronted by a national research centre) from across the region, and also including Europe. CSCAP primarily works to the agenda of the track 1 Asean Regional Forum. In the two decades of its existence CSCAP has produced a range of memoranda on issues of regional salience as their contribution to track 1 regional security processes.

The Shangri-La Dialogue has been described as Asia's 'most prominent exercise in defence diplomacy'. It is a privately organised (by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies), and therefore track 2, meeting of Defence Ministers, senior officials and analysts from around the region, with annual meetings in Singapore since 2002. Shangri-La has, however, evolved to the extent that all speakers are officials and all speak in their official capacity and conduct much business on the side-lines of the main conference. To that extent it is a track 1 or track 1.5 event.

An area on the edge of defence diplomacy is the increasing cooperation between defence industries in different countries. The point of such cooperation is surely to reduce costs and expand profits, but such cooperation both feeds on an atmosphere of trust and contributes to it. To that extent these activities too are exercises in defence diplomacy.

What is the Point?

The underlying assumption in defence diplomacy is that the interactions are positive for each participant and more beneficial than military force, hard power, in achieving political ends, whether those ends are stability, security, influence, status or something else. There are at least nine broad outcomes or intentions for military cooperation processes, whether the cooperation is between armed forces or between armed forces and civilian agencies:

- Reduction in hostility or tensions;
- Symbolic positioning by signalling a willingness to work with and trust interlocutors;
- A more competent armed force with a commitment to accountability mechanisms;
- Transparency in terms of capacity and intentions;
- Development and reinforcement of good relationships with partners;
- Changing perceptions of each other;

- Confidence building;
- Encouragement through incentives and rewards; and
- Building a domestic constituency for the armed forces.

For these outcomes to be achieved each participant (because diplomacy is not a single actor game) must be invested in and receptive to the messages being developed. At different times some states are the ‘transmitters’ of defence diplomacy signals and others are the ‘receivers’. Defence diplomacy cannot work if the transmitting state is seen to be equivocal about its activities and it cannot work if the intended recipient is unheeding of the messages.

As well, the methods used for defence diplomacy must be appropriate to the context and the environment. It is not necessarily ‘diplomatic’ to provide arms transfers or training skills to a region in which conflict is endemic and tensions are high (although there may well be other reasons for the activity).

Underlying all of this is the concept of trust. Conventional wisdom would have it that trust will be developed as the habits of cooperation are reinforced and defence diplomacy is a series of cooperative habits. Equally, it might be that states must choose to trust and use various defence diplomacy mechanisms as the vehicle to translate the trust into specific outcomes.

Challenges to and Limits on the Concept

Challenges are wide-ranging and both material and conceptual. Probably the most difficult is the need for each partner in defence diplomacy to consider ‘partnership’ to be paramount. The participants must meet as equals with different capacities almost certainly, but with the understanding that there are benefits for each in the relationship. If one partner in the process asserts a ‘senior’ status, the diplomacy is likely to be less than successful.

There is a need to align the partners’ aims. Even if each side wants different benefits, each should also be aware of the other’s needs from the relationship. If these are not transparent one side or the other is likely to feel deceived, to the detriment of the diplomacy. States should not take different understandings of what is being attempted into the event itself.

Differing cultures lead to differing imperatives and differing operational procedures. There are commonalities between armed forces, but there are also significant differences based on the different histories and different national imperatives. Where one country is, for example, providing capacity-building assistance, it makes little sense to assume that what works for the provider will also work for the recipient.

Partners bring their own perspectives to issues. This is clearly so if the issue is about an international intervention. It is equally so on lesser issues such as, perhaps, the appropriate role of the armed forces in national governance (if the defence diplomacy is aimed at security

sector reform), or the appropriate level of secrecy to be given to joint activities (especially if increased transparency is one of the aims), or the ceremonial honours to be accorded visitors (some countries are more informal than others). These differences are based partly on culture, but also on differing circumstances. Defence diplomacy that doesn't attempt to understand the partners' perspectives and be empathetic towards them will be less successful than activities that are fully informed by an understanding of what is important to each other, what can be done together and what cannot.

Given that much defence diplomacy is about cooperative activity, the partners must be able to work together in a material sense. That might involve one partner deliberately limiting its capabilities so that it does not overshadow the other, or it might involve ensuring that what is being offered is useful rather than immediately available.

There is much scope for misunderstanding, even over the simplest of shared events. Even if all activity is based on the use of English, one challenge is that words have different meanings in different contexts and systems. 'Security' to an Australian might have quite a different meaning to the same word when used by a Thai official. Defence diplomacy cannot be effective if the participants are divided by a common language. It is even more difficult if one side of the conversation is using the common language as a second language.

The challenges described can all be overcome with careful preparation and with a determination to make the processes work. More problematic is the situation when a state decides that the group interest hurts what it considers to be a core national interest. This could be during group negotiations over an issue where one state chooses to 'defect' to make its own arrangements or it could be where a state chooses a national solution over a group one, in the provision of regional training facilities for example. In these kinds of cases defence diplomacy as a concept will be disregarded and replaced with concepts of 'strategic importance', or of 'sovereign imperatives'.

The reality that there are limits to diplomacy and cooperation does not invalidate the concept. Instead, it reminds us that in a state-centred world, state-makers will ultimately privilege the state. This is true within a close grouping such as Asean and even more true in relationships that are not so close.

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NOTE: *A fuller version of this Strategic Background Paper, with citations, is available on request from css@vuw.ac.nz*