

## Nepal's military diplomacy: Retrospect and prospect

Pragya Ghimire

### Abstract

*Military diplomacy has been an important security and foreign policy tool for many centuries. However, in the age of globalization, its importance has grown more rapidly than ever because of the recognition that country's survival and development also depend on a peaceful and stable national and regional environment. Some of the significant practices in the past reflect that various tools of military diplomacy could be implemented to strengthen country's overall diplomacy, including bilateral and multi-lateral contacts of military and civilian defence officials of foreign countries; preparing bilateral/multi-lateral security and defence agreements; exchanging experience with foreign military and civilian defence officials; providing military assistance and support to other countries, such as aid, materials and equipment when there is need and request during the disaster or humanitarian crises. However, these tools of strengthening military diplomacy will not be as effective as expected if there is no effective civil-military relations and synergies between a country's national security and foreign policy. Moreover, it will require strong expertise and good command of civilian diplomats on security issues and military diplomats on foreign policy issues. To strengthen its military diplomacy to contribute to Nepal's overall diplomacy and foreign policy, it will require more military attaché in Nepal foreign diplomatic missions of vital security and development interest.*

*Moreover, Nepal should continue building synergies between its national security, foreign and development policies as well as strengthening military diplomacy both at bilateral and regional levels.*

**Keywords:** military diplomacy, civil-military relations, regional security dialogue

### Military diplomacy

After the Second World War (1939–1945), the allied military force engaged in a multi-faceted military diplomacy in Europe, Japan and South Korea. For example, the US's European Recovery Plan post-World War II, also known as Marshall Plan remains central to the recovery missions of Europe from the war, establishing democracies, and laying foundation for long-term economic growth and development. In the US, with its military's long engagement all around the world, the military personnel serving overseas were often at the forefront of American diplomacy, considering that such a discretion can be supporting to accomplish goals and objectives of the country's foreign policy.

Traditionally, military diplomacy which is also taken for defence diplomacy used to be a major tool for the peacetime military cooperation and assistance to strengthen allies against common enemies. Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster remark that the western democracies increasingly started using military diplomacy for multiple purposes,

such as to encourage multilateral regional cooperation, support the democratisation of civil-military relations, and assist states in post-conflict reconstruction for peace, development prosperity ever since early 1990s (2004). It has been applied in several countries, and Nepal has been gradually using such taking such measures.

Given the above background, the modern definition of military diplomacy is: “To provide forces to meet the varied activities undertaken by the Ministry of Defence to dispel hostility, build and maintain trust, and assist in the development of democratically accountable armed forces (Swistek, 2012). Swistek considers the following activities parts of military diplomacy:

- Creating bilateral and multi-lateral contacts of military and civilian defence official of foreign countries; appointing defence attaches in country’s foreign missions;
- Preparing bilateral/multi-lateral security and defence agreements; conducting training activities with foreign military and defence personnel;
- Exchanging experience with foreign military and civilian defence officials including experiences on civil-military relations and democratic control of armed forces;
- Proving military assistance and support to other countries, including aid, materials and equipment when there is need and request during the disaster or humanitarian crises (Swistek, 2012, pp. 79-86).

In addition to the use of military diplomacy in bilateral relations, more recently, military diplomacy is also understood as a specific subset of a broader regional cooperation. For

example, the ShangriLa Dialogue, which is held annually by an independent think tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), is “Asia’s premier inter-governmental security forum attended by defence ministers, permanent heads of ministries and military chiefs of 28 Asia-Pacific states. The dialogue is premier forum to discuss pressing security challenges and come up with fresh solutions together.” The military diplomacy is one of the strategies to resolve national and regional problems while other measures fail to accomplish specific goals.

Similarly, under its “Look East” policy, India has also been using its military diplomacy to build strategic and economic partnerships in South and East Asia by participating in varying degrees of military-to-military exchanges. For example, in 2016, “India conducted joint military exercises with Thailand, Indonesia, and Japan; and engaged in high-level visits with Vietnam, Singapore, and China” (“ChinaPower”). Similar kinds of diplomatic fronts function in the West, including Europe and North Americas.

In general, the military diplomacy can set objectives could be divided into two categories: strategic and operational objectives. Strategic objectives include supporting overall military diplomacy by engaging key countries on military and security matters, including providing public goods, strengthening military to military cooperation and technical assistance. Operational objectives include collecting intelligence on foreign militaries, learning new skills, techniques, and procedures and benchmarking country’ military capabilities against other militaries (McDonald & Burgoyne, 2019).

To summarize, defence diplomacy is understood to include the range of non-warlike activities undertaken by the armed forces with an objective of developing a positive image in the international community and contribute to the country's overall foreign policy and diplomacy.

### **Military diplomacy and foreign policy**

As mentioned above, military diplomacy includes a set of non-combat activities carried out by a country's armed forces to advance its national diplomatic interests. For example, most of the diplomatic missions with a high foreign policy priority, appoints military attaché, who are diplomats in uniform but posted in different diplomatic missions. The tradition of military attaché was first emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century.

It is widely believed that the main appeal of defence diplomacy is that it provides a less controversial means to work collaboratively on security issues than traditional diplomatic methods because most activities of the military diplomacy are related to military cooperation, dialogue, joint drills, and training activities. Since military diplomacy is exercised to strengthen military to military relations, it is expected to reduce tensions and help manage crises between countries. This is why it is believed that both civilian and military personnel working in non-coercive ways provides the opportunity to keep crises from escalating.

It is also believed that military diplomacy is instrumental to accelerating information flows and enhance the mutual understanding of states, particularly understanding about the red lines between countries regarding their security concerns, territorial and other disputes. Defence diplomacy can

also improve the strategic environment by building high-level trust through regular dialogues among senior defence officials. For example, the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been using the common, comprehensive and cooperative security to avoid the consequences of confrontational approaches to national and regional security.

Now, the question is: What would a good practice in military diplomacy look like in the context of a country's foreign policy? To be effective, defence diplomacy should be developed and implemented in close coordination with the foreign and development ministries to ensure coherence among country's foreign policy, security and development agendas. If military diplomacy is not being fully integrated with the nation's overall foreign policy and diplomatic efforts, it could be counter-productive for country's political stability and peace.

This means that strong civil-military relation is very important for the effectiveness of military diplomacy. Civil leaders should have better understanding of military policy and strategy so that defence diplomatic should be considered in a broader context, but not just restricting it to military-defence policy context. Similarly, military personnel, who are in charge of military diplomacy, should also have better understating of country's foreign policy and a broader development context. For example, in addition to their knowledge and professional skills of military, a military attaché should also have the skills required of professional diplomats including skills of intelligence, tact, teamwork, adaptability, the ability to communicate messages precisely to the target audience" (Cooper & Heine et al., 2013).

## Nepal's military diplomacy

It is often believed that powerful and bigger countries more frequently engage in military diplomacy as they have resources and tools to effectively maneuver their tactics and strategies in the best of their national interests. However, Nepal has been tactfully responding to its immediate neighbors and countries overseas.

Ever since the 1816 Sugaulie Treaty, Nepal has been involved several battles in Asia and beyond as mercenary soldiers to the British Empire. During the Rana regime, Nepal maintained neutral relations with the foreign countries except the Nepal Army's direct involvement in the British Army initiated wars across the world. The Gurkha soldiers, including those in the Nepali Army and the British Army have served the imperial powers as mercenary soldiers. During last several centuries, many Nepalis have engaged in foreign battles and sent mercenary force for foreign powers. In that way, the Rana regime initiates the military diplomacy.

Nepal's military consistently stays connected to the foreign armies, including those of India, UK and US for training, technical assistance and joint military exercises. Nevertheless, Nepal has increasingly been reaching the Chinese Military while maintain close connections with the armies of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Shree Lanka. Moreover, the Nepali Army continuously launches joint drills and trainings with armies of these countries. Further, the world communities appreciate Nepal's tremendous contribution to the United Nations in its peacekeeping missions to the war-ravaged and conflict-ridden countries across the globe.

In Nepal, there is an overwhelming perception that military diplomacy is only conducted by military. However, as explained above, military diplomacy should not be viewed in a narrow sense. Eric Pajtinka military defines military diplomacy as "a set of activities carried out mainly by the representatives of the defense department, as well as other state institutions, aimed at pursuing the foreign policy interests of the state in the field of security and defence policy, and whose actions are based on the use of negotiations and other diplomatic instruments" (2016, pp. 81-82). Thus, it is not only the military, but also the civilians, who are working in the area of security and defense, should also engage on promoting military diplomacy including foreign visits on national security and lessons from other countries, such as participation at the official ceremonies and other events and promoting cooperation, communication and mutual relations with department departments and military forces of other countries.

The National Security Policy 2016, which has been updated by the current government and has not been made public yet, aims to prevent Nepal Army and other security bodies from holding casual visits with security counterparts stationed at various foreign missions within the country. The document envisions that countries that have bilateral ties with Nepal shall coordinate security-related activities and interactions through Nepal government's Ministry of Defence.

In a way, the Nepal's National Security Policy 2016 has two contradictory objectives. On the one hand, the National Security Policy aims to ensure "Enhancement of international support and cooperation by increasing bilateral and multilateral relations and cooperation through effective operation

of diplomatic relations” (2016, pp. 11-12). On the other hand, the major limitation of the Nepal’s National Security Policy 2016 is that it aims to restrict Nepal Army to be in touch with foreign powers but does not take into account how Nepal’s Security and Foreign Policy be brought to together to build synergies between these two policies.

### Conclusion

In the age of open and globalised economy, countries’ survival and development also depends on a peaceful and stable national and regional environment. Based on the experiences from the ASEAN countries, defence diplomacy has a huge potential in case of Nepal to manage current and future tensions by improving information flows and building trust with two big neighbouring countries (Cotter & Forster, 2004, p. 65). Nepal should be taking some measures to protect its sovereignty amidst the emerging powers through some military diplomacy.

First, Nepal should continue strengthening its military cooperation and ties with all major powers, including India, China, United States and United Kingdom. Its military capability incorporates effectiveness of Nepal’s foreign policy and diplomatic relations while balancing superpowers. For example, if Nepal continues its military cooperation with China, United States and the United States, Nepal could secure necessary supports from the UN member countries for the Nepali Army’s increasing presence in the UN peacekeeping missions. Nepal’s technical cooperation with these countries could help upgrade Nepal’s security forces by providing training to Nepal’s military and police officials. Nepal should also promote regional diplomacy by learning from Singapore and other countries, such as the Shangri-La Dialogue by engaging

on a range of activities related to military diplomacy to deal with security more widely rather than just with defence matters.

Second, Nepal should continue its contribution towards multinational efforts to maintain international security, including its participation at the United Nations missions. This will tremendously help to build positive image about the country and strengthen Nepal’s bilateral and multilateral relations. Nepal’s participation in such efforts would also help to enhance Nepal’s own security as well by knowledge exchange and capacity development of Nepal’s military.

Third, as mentioned above, Nepal’s diplomat as well as military attaché should have better orientation about Nepal’s national foreign and security policies. Thus, to be diplomatic policy effective, both military and civilian defence personnel should also have a broader knowledge of country’s foreign policy and diplomacy to effectively discharge their job of military diplomacy. There should be strong synergies between Nepal’s National Security Policy and Foreign Policy.

Finally, the Nepali Army has proposed to the government to add several military attaché in more diplomatic missions abroad, including in India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the US and the UK. These new positions will contribute to Nepal’s overall diplomacy and foreign policy. More specifically, having military attaché in France and Russia, which are the permanent members of the UN Security Council, will help coordinate Nepal’s overall presence and participation at UN peacekeeping missions. The government of Nepal, thus, should increase the number of attachés in those countries with vital diplomacy interest of Nepal.

## References

- Andrew, F. C., Heine, J. & Thakur R. Eds. (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*. UK: Oxford UP.
- Brisley, N. (December, 2019). The possibilities and limits of defence diplomacy in Asia. Retrieved from <https://defence.gov.au/WhitePaper/docs/250-Bisley.pdf>.
- China Power, how is China bolstering its military diplomatic relations? Retrieved from <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-military-diplomacy/> 10 January 2020.
- Cotley, A. & Forster, A. (2004). "Strategic engagement: defence diplomacy as a means of conflict prevention." *The Adelphi Papers*, 44 (365).
- CCS. (December, 2020). Regional defence diplomacy: What is it and what are its limits? *CSS Strategic Background Paper*, 21/2015. Retrieved from <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/strategic-studies/documents/strategic-background-papers/21-defence-diplomacy-and-regional-military-cooperation.pdf>.
- McDonald, D. Scott & C. Burgoyne, Michael, eds. (2019). *China's global influence: Perspectives and recommendations*. Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu.
- Government of Nepal, Ministry of Defense. National Security Policy 2016. Retrieved from <http://mod.gov.np/public/files/231574029-National%20Security%20Policy,%202016.pdf>. 18 December 2019.
- Pajtinka, E. (2016). Military Diplomacy and Its Present Functions. *Security Dimensions: International and National Studies*. 2016. pp. 81-82.
- Swistek, G. The nexus between public diplomacy and military diplomacy in foreign affairs and defence policy. *Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes*, 11 (2). pp. 79-86.