

Defence Diplomacy through the Prism of Soft Power

US–India Defence Partnership

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India's Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh's mention of the term 'Defence Diplomacy' (DD) during his address at the Commander's conference in April 2024,¹ and its discussion in the *Indian Defence Diplomacy: A Handbook* published by India's premier Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) in 2021,² underscore its increasing traction in New Delhi's policy circles. Even earlier in 2020, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar had chosen to speak on the relationship between defence and diplomacy at the Second Manohar Parrikar Memorial Lecture.³

A fairly new term, DD, rooted in European diplomacy, has been defined as 'peaceful (non-confrontational) use of armed forces and related infrastructure (primarily defence ministries) as a foreign policy and security tool'.⁴ Emerging as an important tool of contemporary statecraft,⁵ DD is advancing national interests under the broader framework of Public Diplomacy (PD).

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A profound transformation in global politics over the last few decades has pushed the boundaries of PD in line with post-Cold War dynamics. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and no imminent threat visible, cooperation and collaboration among nations became the focus. The concept of soft power,⁶ attempting to alter state behaviours by shunning aggression, became popular. Joseph Nye, Jr. justified soft power by arguing 'when you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction'. Soft power soon began to be deployed along with state capacity, strategic strengths and charismatic leadership, for converting a state's latent capacities into 'actualised power'.⁷

Not only did the post-Cold War dynamics force defence and diplomacy to come closer, they also started to dictate mutual partnerships together for reinforcing trust and understanding between countries. As India noted the magnitude, complexity and the pace of change in the international systemic, its size, political and strategic traditions began to demand a greater integration of defence and diplomacy in its strategic thinking.

The period, demanding a diversification of its partnerships,⁸ including in the areas of military and security, pushed the leadership to seek new partners. Eager to chart its own defence trajectory in line with its DD fundamentals, New Delhi has been striving to strengthen its defence cooperation with several countries, including the United States (US). In fact, India-US defence cooperation is expected to expand during the new Trump administration. The Indian Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to the US has set the stage for a new defence framework focusing on stronger defence collaboration.⁹ However, the extent to which defence and diplomacy will remain mutually integrated remains uncertain.

POST-COLD WAR DEFENCE DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER

The weakness of relying predominantly on military strength for expanding strategic influence was gradually becoming obvious after the end of the 20th century. An increasingly interdependent world, and the prospect of mutual benefit, led to the rise of a new PD with a strong soft power component. The genesis of the term DD, rooted in cooperative security, is thus closely related to the new dynamics of the post-Cold War period¹⁰ when national security policies begun being seen through a less-threatening prism. DD, aiming to promote cooperation between countries and mitigate conflicts and hostilities, emerged as a contemporary instrument of diplomacy on the premise that

non-coercive power (or soft power) would shape the world. Given its cooperative and collaborative undertone, academics have argued that DD 'functions as a military variant of soft power which relies on the processes of norm diffusion and state socialization to influence the strategic thinking of foreign governments'.¹¹

While the term DD might be somewhat ambiguous,¹² its goals have been clear: to establish different forms of collaboration, including the exchange of personnel, training and exercises, regional defence forums, military assistance, confidence-building measures (CBM) and so on.¹³ In keeping with the fundamentals of DD, military organisations soon begun getting restructured, and a new role of the military for securing peace and understanding of the post-Cold War international order was pursued. DD begun gathering prominence in strategic discourses across the world through its attempt to strengthen and entrench democracies; build strengths of partner countries through defence relationships; mobilise humanitarian assistance during crises; facilitate personnel exchanges for gaining regional expertise and promote better cultural understanding. While the pursuit of benign diplomacy pushed states to heavily concentrate on trade, economic, scientific and military contacts, strategic communication became a major function of the military, thereby directly impacting national foreign policies. After all, military can also serve as 'effective platforms to advance diplomatic goals'.¹⁴

With India's foreign policy evolving, and its PD witnessing profound transformation in line with the changes in global conditions, harmonising defence with diplomacy became an imperative for the government. It was expected that DD will not only support India's foreign policy but also convey to the international community its aversion to militarisation, and in the process help shape a favourable balance of power, bolstering deterrence.¹⁵

SOFT POWER AND GLOBAL AMBITIONS DRIVE INDIA'S DEFENCE DIPLOMACY

While historically India's soft power resources¹⁶ have long been globally recognised, it is only much later that both Nehruvian and neo-liberal constructs posited soft power within the larger paradigm of Indian strategic thinking.¹⁷ Both approaches view 'force' (or hard power) as a 'regrettable last resort' of 'declining utility' and therefore best avoided.¹⁸ The rising significance of DD in India's strategic thinking arose from this reluctance to

use force while fostering cooperation with friendly countries. In fact, New Delhi's more recent efforts to brand itself as a constructive and responsible global actor also emanates from its non-aggressive strategic thinking. Whether during hosting the G20 Summit¹⁹ in 2023, or in pursuing vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic,²⁰ the occasions were effectively employed to communicate 'rising' India's charm, while demonstrating its responsible and leadership role in contemporary global politics.

India's great power ambitions and the Modi government's efforts 'to transform India from being merely an influential entity into one whose weight and preferences are defining for international politics'²¹ have been instrumental in deepening and widening India's engagement,²² including with the US. India's enlarged view of security and defence and its benign strategic thinking have collectively been responsible for striking 'a balance between advancing its own interest and the collective interest, between unilateral and multilateral approaches' and pushing the 'perimeter out'²³ for broader meaningful international partnerships.

Expectations of India becoming the world's third largest economy in the next five years,²⁴ its pioneering role in advancing Artificial Intelligence (AI) and use of critical technologies, and visibility as a key power—including in the Pacific Quad—coupled with the recognition as a security provider in the region, has deepened the India-US long-term strategic relationship. The current Indian leadership's willingness and pragmatism to manoeuvre around differences with the US has further enabled closer collaboration between the world's two largest democracies. With their common vision of advancing a free, open and rules-based global order, India's 'estranged' relationship with the US during the Cold War years²⁵ appears a forgotten past.

Great power discord, transactional alliances and a complicated digital media landscape are challenges that leaders across the world are grappling with. While disordered international priorities are propelling like-minded countries like India and the US to come closer, partnerships from the Cold War era are far from over²⁶ and are defying common predictions as they draw inspiration from geopolitical considerations. With this background, DD is striving to shape and implement state security policies for creating stable, long-term relations and cooperation that foster transparency in the field of defence and technology. The India-US defence and technology partnership, in line with the aspiration of DD, strives to incorporate the objective of building trust and better understanding of each other's defence culture. A strong defence relationship is also aimed at framing threats and challenges while providing non-coercive options for deploying respective military capabilities during crises.

DEFENCE DIPLOMACY AND GREATER US–INDIA DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP

Defence and technology cooperation are key areas of a wide-ranging US–India strategic relationship. In fact, a senior official of the US Department of Defense had commented that the bilateral defence partnership is at a ‘transformational moment’.²⁷ The 2005 New Framework for the US–India Defence Relationship, which had set in motion enhanced bilateral defence cooperation, guides the partnership, including military exchanges and exercises, defence trade and close consultations and dialogues on regional security and maritime security issues.²⁸ Subsequently, in 2012, the two countries signed the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) to create opportunities for US–India co-production and co-development and foster science and technology cooperation.²⁹

The 2014 Joint US–India Declaration on Defence Cooperation and the 2015 Framework for US–India Defence Relationship further strengthened bilateral defence collaboration. These foundational frameworks signalled the continued commitment of both countries to defence cooperation for global security and stability.³⁰ The frameworks enable joint military exercises (JMEs)³¹ while identifying mission-driven cooperative projects for solving military problems of mutual interest involving advanced technologies. They also establish mechanisms for developing and sustaining dialogues to address areas of mutual concern that may inhibit collaboration,³² quite in line with what DD seeks to achieve.

India’s JMEs with the US, over the last few years, have been extensive. JMEs like the *Vajra Prabhar*, while promoting a positive image of the military as a force for stability, contribute to international peace and security,³³ aligning with the larger objectives of DD. With India and the US emerging as key actors in the Indo-Pacific, the JMEs constitute a ‘key confidence-building measure to enhance a securitised regional order’.³⁴ Aiming to expand the scope of strategic cooperation, the first edition of the *Vajra Prabhar* took place in 2010, reinforcing exchange of ideas and sharing of best practices between the Special Forces. An ongoing exercise, the 14th edition of December 2023, communicated a peaceful approach to security through enhanced bilateral cooperation between the two, each boasting considerable soft power resources.

Frequent defence dialogues between India and the US have aspired to promote peace and bilateral understanding. These dialogues advance ‘a wide range of ambitious initiatives across the breadth of the US–India partnership, including defence and security, emerging technologies, people-to-people ties, clean energy and supply chain resilience’³⁵ and have been important CBMs.

Given India's strategic heft in the Indo-Pacific region and its ability to ensure 'political stability, and peace, and economic progress in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia region', the 2+2 Intersessional Dialogue in 2023—charting regional security developments and strategic priorities across the Indo-Pacific—is a notable initiative implemented under the Roadmap for US–India Defence Industrial Cooperation and will contribute to further wider defence collaborations.³⁶

Combined maritime engagements have also been a crucial part of the US–India bilateral defence partnership. Given the Indian Ocean Region's (IOR) importance for global trade, geopolitical competition and maritime security, Washington's attention on the IOR has risen sharply.³⁷ The US, an extra-regional power but wanting to 'transcend geographic seams'³⁸ has been keen to engage with the regional stakeholders, most importantly India. The latter's strategic location in the Indian Ocean and the IOR's escalating strategic significance for New Delhi³⁹ has encouraged closer India–US maritime partnership. India's full membership of the multinational US-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in November 2023 is a major step towards strengthening bilateral defence ties. The partnership, in keeping with the fundamentals of DD, is aimed to bolster international and regional peace, and security, while upholding the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴⁰ Enhancing interoperability, the CMF also help in prioritising areas of deconflict and strengthen India's capacity-building, thereby propelling India as a leader in the region,⁴¹ where China is a major strategic contestant, actively expanding influence.

Advancing and nurturing innovation and technological development for both defence and security are essential requirements of modern times. The US–India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), announced in January 2023, is noteworthy in this regard, as it also expands US–India defence and strategic partnership. An effort to affirm that technology 'is designed, developed, governed, and used' for shaping shared democratic values, the iCET also attempts to foster 'an open, accessible, and secure technology ecosystem based on mutual trust and confidence' to reinforce their respective democratic institutions.⁴²

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Developing a new strategic thinking in defence has been a necessity of the post-Cold War years. The new priorities have given rise to a non-coercive DD, which is evolving, and has obtained considerable traction in global strategic

discourses. Focusing on ideas, exchanges and collaborations—attributes that guide national and international policies based on soft power—greater salience of DD underscores the varied critical tasks carried out by the specialist foreign apparatus, namely the armed forces, the Ministry of Defence and defence attachés for the security and defence of states.⁴³ Aiming to shape and implement contemporary security policies in tune with long-term foreign policy objectives, DD is being recognised as an important tool of modern statecraft. Negating conflicts, DD makes it imperative for democracies like India and the US to foster closer defence and strategic partnership for achieving common goals.

There is still a fair amount of ground to be covered though. The contemporary global systemic is unusually complicated. While countries like Russia and China continue to rely mostly on coercion, democratic principles and ideas have not been wholly successful in bringing India and the US closer.

New Delhi's great power ambitions and Washington's persistent efforts to sustain its global supremacy, while encouraging a deeper bilateral defence partnership over the last decade or so, are yet to transform an occasionally 'fragile' relationship.⁴⁴ Their mismatched expectations, insurmountable differences on issues like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, continue to create cleavages and mistrust. In fact, Modi's visit to Washington early this year also raises concerns over the ambitious defence collaboration plan triggering an arms race in South Asia.⁴⁵ The proposed sale of advanced F-35 stealth fighter jets to India could be inimical to the larger goals of DD!

Will the two democracies find DD a valuable instrument for deeper engagement in an increasingly complex global order? Will DD succeed in generating more trust and understanding in the contemporary world? Only time will tell whether an effective integration of defence and diplomacy is able to strengthen mutual trust and understanding between India and the US.

NOTES

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