

22nd Colonel Pyara Lal Memorial Lecture

Role of Military Diplomacy in India's Foreign Policy*

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I am deeply honoured to be invited to deliver the 22nd Colonel

Pyara Lal Memorial Lecture. The topic chosen for the lecture is of considerable current interest, which is why I value the opportunity given to me to share my thoughts on the subject. I would like to clear some conceptual points, have a broad look at how some major powers and some in our neighbourhood use the military arm of their diplomacy to further their national interest, the reason why there is debate in India about our insufficient use of the military instrument in our foreign policy, the limitations we have in this regard, the evolution of our attitude towards a military role in our diplomacy and, finally, how the overall picture is much more nuanced than what may be commonly believed.

The concept of “military diplomacy” might suggest that it can be distinguished from “civilian diplomacy”, and might have an autonomous space in the conduct of India's foreign policy. “Military diplomacy” might also imply that in conducting relations between states in their many dimensions, which is the core function of diplomacy, the military has a role that goes beyond security and defence of the country against external threats and spills into avoidance of conflict and promotion of peace, building sustainable cooperative relationships and trust, perception management, changing mind-sets, clarifying elements of our foreign policy to interlocutors and generally improving understandings with those they interact with externally. “Military diplomacy” also assumes that the three Services, the Army, Navy and Air Force, have a coordinated view of their diplomatic role and mechanisms exist to produce a shared and coherent perspective. For all these reasons, it might be conceptually more appropriate to speak of the role of the Armed Forces in India's foreign policy, the

use of the military arm to make our diplomacy more effective and how Indian diplomacy can better integrate our military assets into policy making, rather than “military diplomacy” as such.

The military is, in actual fact, a powerful instrument of advancing a country’s foreign policy interests. The international system is still based on power politics and rapport of force despite the rhetoric of a values-based and rules-based international order, with the strong dominating the weak and largely having their say even as the international community has evolved norms and established institutions to control and temper the arbitrary exercise of power, albeit with limited success. Even when actual military power is not used, the possession of a compelling military capacity gives a country great advantage as others will seek to accommodate its demands, adjust their own policies accordingly and avoid a frontal challenge as much as possible when interests clash. The international stature and role of a country in the international system has a correlation therefore, for better or worse, with its military strength, though economic muscle, technological capabilities, human resources and such non-military attributes are relevant factors too.

As a general proposition it can be said that the military strength of a country bolsters its diplomatic posture. The US, as the strongest military power in the world, with a defence budget that is larger than that of the combined budgets of the next seven countries, has the capacity to intervene across continents. The US provides the most illuminating example of use of its military capacities as a powerful instrument of its foreign policy. This it has done through alliance systems such as NATO through which it dominates Europe and alliances with individual countries which gives it, as the stronger partner, considerable influence over their foreign policies. Through arms sales and military aid, training of foreign military officers, joint exercises, military to military contacts, exchange of top-level visits, periodic publication of strategic and defence reviews, reports prepared by Pentagon-related think tanks, the US gives large space to the military in its external relations. This gets strength from institutionalised involvement of its Armed Forces in foreign policy decision making. Its National Security Advisers, Secretaries of State and Defence, Homeland Security and CIA Chiefs, and even regional diplomatic envoys and

so on have often been military officers, and this is not seen as anomalous in an established democracy.

Russia too relies on its military assets to expand the room for its diplomacy despite its fall from super power status. The massive military exercise it has just held in the Vladivostok area with large Chinese participation, military exercises within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) format, its military outreach to Pakistan that has sent uncomfortable signals to us, the establishment of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to maintain its influence in some of the erstwhile constituent states of the Soviet Union, the resumption of long distance military flights close to the US coast, as well as naval exercises along with China in sensitive areas like the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas and the Sea of Japan, the unveiling of highly advanced weaponry by President Putin himself, are all instances of sending powerful political and diplomatic messages abroad.

China, with its growing military strength, is broadening its diplomatic foot-print across the globe, the demonstration of its capacity to sustain its naval forces far away from its shores, the appearance of its submarines in the Indian Ocean and especially in Colombo Port, its increasing arms exports, participation in UN peacekeeping operations, financial contribution to Organisation of African Unity (OAU's), peace keeping operations in Africa, arms supplies to our neighbours, especially Pakistan, the close ties between its armed forces and the Pakistani military, military exercises with Nepal (which is a matter of great sensitivity for us), the manner in which it has conducted itself militarily in the South China Sea with major diplomatic gains, are all examples of an active use of the military instrument in advancing foreign policy goals.

Pakistan too has been adept at advancing its diplomatic goals through its Armed Forces, be it in building strong ties with the Pentagon, sending large number of officers for training in US institutions, providing troops for protection of some Gulf monarchies and now its former Army Chief Raheel Sharif heading the Islamic anti-terror task force set up by Saudi Arabia, and its military underwriting the establishment of an all-weather friendship

with China. This has been made possible, of course, by the Pakistan Army's broad control of the country's foreign policy, which is not the case with proper democracies or even states like Russia and China.

All these instances are relevant for understanding and expatiating on the subject of the role of the Indian military in the country's foreign policy. India has one of the largest armies in the world and well equipped, even if largely with arms either imported or manufactured under license. It has a credible nuclear deterrence, one that will become even more so with the further development of its sea-launched nuclear capability. Its missile capability is well-established. India possesses the most powerful Navy amongst the Indian Ocean littoral states. In Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) activities the Indian Navy distinguished itself at the time of the devastating Tsunami in 2004. Our Army is ably defending the country's northern and western borders. In 1971 India broke up Pakistan into two. More recently, it stood up to the Chinese at Doklam. In the earlier instances of Depsang and Chumar, military firmness on the ground helped in diplomatic efforts to avoid a clash.

The debate in India whether we use what we loosely call "military diplomacy" sufficiently as an instrument to advance our foreign policy interests has been longstanding. Our military circles feel strongly that our system has not yet evolved enough to capitalise in a coordinated manner on the country's military arm to further our external objectives. These objectives, it is argued, could be better achieved if we gave a greater role to our military in the formulation and implementation of our foreign policy. The grievance is that we continue to rely primarily on conventional approaches to diplomacy to deal with foreign powers. If we have today clear great power ambitions, not necessarily modelled on those of the West of seeking to dominate others but more in terms of establishing a position for ourselves at the international level that is commensurate with our geographic, demographic and economic size, our civilisational and cultural heritage, our human resources and our scientific, technological and military strengths, reliance primarily on soft power and chariness about projecting our military strength would not enable us, it is argued, to realise

these aspirations in full. A more visible participation of our Armed Forces in securing our position on the international stage would seem necessary.

Behind this debate lies a strong sentiment in our Armed Forces that their role in the formulation of our security policies is limited. This is at the root of the growing malaise that is affecting civil-military relations in India, especially at the bureaucratic level. The present situation between the Service Headquarters and the Ministry of Defence is considered functionally unsatisfactory. That Service Chiefs have limited access to the political leadership is considered a functional handicap. On top of that, the inadequate coordination between the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of External Affairs is widely commented upon as a systemic deficiency.

There is some truth in these frequently made judgments. Our international posture for many years has been essentially non-military in character even if we have been embroiled in several armed conflicts with our neighbours. We have been since long active internationally in supporting disarmament, calling for peaceful resolution of disputes, opposing the use of force in international relations as well as military alliances, added to which has been our reluctance to project power and follow interventionist policies (with an exception or two), not to mention our philosophical commitment to non-violence rooted in our heritage and embodied by Mahatma Gandhi in modern times. We won our independence through a non-violent struggle against an imperial power, and this has also contributed to a lack of appreciation of the role of the Armed Forces in achieving national political objectives. Notwithstanding this, the actual position with regard to giving space to our military in our external relations is more nuanced.

We may not have used the military arm of our diplomacy sufficiently, but we have used it. The military arm that we speak of has many dimensions. Besides exchange of visits at the level of Defence Ministers and Service Chiefs, appointments of Military Attaches abroad who work in a diplomatic environment, involvement of retired military officers in Track 2 and Track 1.5

discussions, visits abroad by National Defence College teams, seminars organised by defence-linked think tanks such as the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) and United Service Institution of India (USI) and so on, the military arm of diplomacy includes defence alliances, military bases, arms exports, arms aid, licensed arms production, co-development and co-production of equipment, joint exercises on land, air and sea, patrolling in the air and sea, maritime cooperation, military training, and so on. Such links bring countries together strategically.

In India's case, the content of our military outreach abroad cannot be as wide-ranging as those of the principal big powers given our relatively limited military capacities and our general political outlook. We are traditionally against military alliances and establishment of military bases on our territory or seeking them abroad, though some evolution of thinking with regard to a more active maritime policy and access to ports for our Navy has taken place. We have been very restrictive in giving arms aid as a matter of policy, partly because our means are limited and partly because of reluctance to pursue this approach to relation-building, but here too policy changes are taking place. Political factors have been an inhibiting factor in the past, especially in our neighbourhood, where, in some cases, we did not want to be seen to be arming the government in a civil war situation. This policy has cost us politically in some countries as it opened the doors to China and Pakistan to move in as defence equipment suppliers and forge ties with local defence forces at the cost of Indian influence. We have given arms assistance, non-lethal or essentially defensive, to some of our neighbours, but in a limited way. Sri Lanka has been a recipient. With Nepal, our military diplomacy has a special dimension, with Gurkha soldiers from Nepal serving in the Indian Army and retired soldiers receiving pensions delivered locally in Nepal that help sustain the livelihood of significant numbers, which establishes unique bonds and earns goodwill, though in diplomatic terms this has not yielded adequate returns, with Nepal continuing to pursue unfriendly and insensitive policies towards India and deliberately using the China card against us. We have used the military dimension of our relations with Nepal at the ceremonial level by making the Nepalese Army Chief an Honorary General of the Indian Army and vice-versa and establishing a convention that

the first visit abroad by the Nepalese Army Chief is to India, though this practice has been breached in the past. Beyond this, we have not succeeded in generating resistance within Nepal to its often provocative outreach to China.

As has been brought out already, leveraging our military to achieve foreign policy objectives has not been a blank space. We have provided military equipment to Myanmar in the past and now to Afghanistan, but after considerable hesitation and delay. The suppression of democracy by the military junta in Myanmar distanced us from them till this policy became counterproductive in security terms because of the massive inroads China was able to make into that internationally isolated country. The supply of arms to Myanmar was intended to build bridges with the military and government and retrieve lost ground to some extent. The overall situation has evolved with the restoration of democracy in Myanmar. To manage our troubled northeast, military to military ties between India and Myanmar are most important and we have seen some cross-border operations in the area that required Myanmar's cooperation and understanding. In Afghanistan's case, US disapproval of arms supply in deference to Pakistani sensitivities held us back in the past, but our strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan provides for India's cooperation in building the combat capability of the Afghan Armed Forces. We have supplied some helicopters but Afghanistan seeks more assistance. We are training Afghans in our military institutions but have not taken any decisive step to boost supplies of military equipment to Afghanistan. The reality is that India is in no position to assume the responsibility of building the combat capability of the Afghan National Security Forces except in a very limited way. Where the Americans have failed India cannot succeed.

Unlike in the past, we are now willing to look at opportunities to export arms as a means of strengthening our diplomatic footprint abroad. We have in the recent past exported light helicopters to Nepal and Namibia and sonars to Myanmar. In December 2014 we supplied the 1300-ton offshore patrol vessel (OPV) *Barracuda* to Mauritius. Our Goa Shipyard Limited is currently building two OPVs for the Sri Lankan Navy, as well as eleven fast attack craft and two fast patrol vessels for Mauritius.

We are looking to export interceptor craft, corvettes, and frigates. We are keen to export the Akash surface-to-air missile (SAM) system to countries in Asia and Africa. We are looking at countries like Vietnam, Bangladesh, Philippines and Oman to export defence material such as bridging equipment, missiles, warships, OPVs and Self Propelled Artillery Guns. We have gone as far as Latin America, supplying armoured vehicles to Guyana, 4x4 trucks to Honduras, Argentina, Uruguay and Belize, two *Dhruv* helicopters to Peru, seven *Dhruv* helicopters to Ecuador and three *Chetak* helicopters to Suriname. Unfortunately, the sales of *Dhruv* helicopters to Ecuador and *Chetaks* to Suriname have become a source of controversy. A range of spares, mechanical components, and electronic assemblies are also being supplied to global majors as a result of offset agreements. In 2016, Indian defence equipment exports stood at INR 2060 crore, which is as yet a very modest figure. We have had problems of product support for our defence supplies from major arms producing countries such as Russia. We have ourselves to make sure that we can provide the requisite product support for the equipment we sell, as otherwise we will compromise our prospects for exports in the future.

As another instance of activism on the military front in our diplomacy, we have in the past helped set up military academies and provided military training to many countries in Africa. A large number of African military officers have been trained over the years in our military institutions. We have military to military cooperation with about 18 African countries. We could increase military to military engagement, especially in the training area, with countries like South Africa, Nigeria, Angola, Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Lesotho through institutionalised defence cooperation mechanisms. Actually, our military training teams are deployed in Botswana, Zambia, Lesotho and Seychelles, and were deployed earlier in Nigeria and Tanzania. We could and should become more proactive in this area both with regional groups and individual countries, as this would help consolidate our ties with Africa, especially when China has stepped up its military engagement with African countries. We could help build capacity of the African Union forces especially in the fields of logistics and communication and information systems.

Combined exercises with a focus on peacekeeping would be important. In the area of maritime security, a system of regional cooperation with the Indian Ocean littoral countries to combat threats emanating from non-state actors, particularly those related to terrorism and piracy could be explored. We are one of the largest contributors to peacekeeping in Africa, with sizeable contingents currently in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Southern Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, which gives us the credentials to scale-up our military engagement with the continent.

A major factor in India's inability to export arms in any significant way is a very weak indigenous defence manufacturing base, and the limited production capacity that essentially caters to the needs of our own Armed Forces. Former Defence Minister Manoj Parrikar had announced that India was considering defence exports by offering lines of credit so that recipient countries could depend on India for their defence and this policy has been reiterated by the present Defence Minister. In June 2018, we offered a second line of credit of US \$100 million to Seychelles for defence infrastructure and maritime security cooperation. In September 2016 we announced a new Defence Line of Credit of US \$500 million for Vietnam, with L&T set to supply 10 fast interceptor craft. India has reportedly offered a US \$500 line of credit to Bangladesh for purchase of defence equipment from India.

We have used training as part of our military outreach quite well. We have trained, and are training, a large number of Afghan officers. Foreign military officers from several countries attend and participate in our higher level defence courses, especially in the National Defence College. At least 38 countries are sending their defence personnel for training in India. More slots can and should be provided. As part of our Act East policy and Singapore's consistent support for a larger Indian role in Southeast Asia, India allowed for the first time in October 2007 a foreign country to use Indian airspace for training as part of an agreement on joint military training between the IAF and the Singapore Air Force. In July 2018 India and Singapore resolved to boost overall defence cooperation, with a pact on naval cooperation providing for increased engagement in the maritime security sphere, joint

exercises, temporary deployments from each other's naval facilities and logistics support. The 25th anniversary of the India-Singapore maritime bilateral exercise will be commemorated next year. In May 2018 Indonesia and India have agreed to boost defence and maritime cooperation, including regular bilateral naval exercises, with plans to develop a strategic Indonesian naval port in the Indian Ocean at Sabang. If and when this materialises, the port would, in principle, grant the Indian Navy a well-positioned base for supporting operations in the eastern Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait.

In the area of joint military exercises the military arm of our diplomacy has been particularly active. We do naval, land and air exercises with a whole host of countries. On the naval side, the annual bilateral Malabar exercise with the US which began in 1992, with three such exercises held before 1998 when they were suspended by the US after our nuclear tests. This exercise, which includes activities ranging from fighter combat operations from aircraft carriers to Maritime Interdiction Operations Exercises, resumed in 2002, and has been held regularly since, with ad-hoc participation of Japan, Australia and Singapore in 2007 when the exercise was held outside the Indian Ocean for the first time off Okinawa. The declared purpose of this exercise is to enhance interoperability for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, as well as issues of maritime security and piracy. In 2015 Japan was included as a permanent participant in the exercise, making it trilateral. Japan's inclusion is a significant development with geopolitical connotations. Australia's bid to join the exercise and make it quadrilateral has not met with success so far despite US support because of India's reservations. We participate in the biennial Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise, hosted by the US Navy.

Other than military exercises, we have begun deepening our overall defence ties with the US with the earlier signing of the logistics agreement (LEMOA) and most recently the interoperability agreement (COMCASA). Our military has been closely involved in concluding both these agreements which signal a deepening of the India-US strategic partnership with a geo-

political message to our two principal adversaries- China and Pakistan. India is now looking at the third foundational agreement- BECA- for which we have asked the US to propose a text. The Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions signed with the Obama administration in 2015 implies much closer cooperation between the Indian and US naval forces in what is now termed as the Indo-Pacific. At the recent 2+2 dialogue between the Indian and US Foreign and Defence Ministers a new tri-service exercise at sea has been agreed to. Exchanges between the Indian Navy and the US Naval Forces Central Command will be instituted to facilitate coordination in the western Indian Ocean, which is outside the jurisdiction of the US Indo-Pacific Command at Hawaii. India will also post a liaison officer at CENTCOM.

India also conducts naval exercise with other countries. We are holding the joint INDRA bi-annual military exercise with Russia since 2003. With France we hold the annual Varuna naval exercise since 2001, either in the Indian Ocean or the Mediterranean sea for better coordination. Maritime cooperation with France has acquired a new dimension with an agreement on a Joint Strategic Vision for the Indian Ocean Region as well as a logistics agreement. Detailed understandings have been reached with France on specific areas of cooperation in the domain of maritime security.

We also do naval exercises with the British Royal Navy, the Singapore Navy and those of Sri Lanka, Australia, Vietnam, Philippines, New Zealand and South Korea, as well as a joint exercise of Coast Guards with Japan. We did an exercise with the Brazil and South African Navies in 2008. We also conducted a PASSEX exercise with the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy in 2003 and 2007 and naval drills off Shanghai in 2012. The Indian Navy has been active in the Gulf region in the understanding that our maritime security interests in the Indian Ocean extend from the Straits of Hormuz to the Malacca Straits. In February this year, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between India and Muscat on the provision of facilities for the visit of Indian military vessels to Duqm Port covering services and the use of the dry-dock for maintenance. The maiden

India-UAE naval exercise was held in March this year. The last two are significant milestones in developing better defence understandings with key Gulf countries. The UAE is willing to look at investments in our defence sector.

Since 1995, the Indian Navy conducts the biennial Milan exercise with navies of the Indian Ocean region in the area of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The 10th edition of the exercise was held in March this year in the Andaman Sea with participation from India, Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Myanmar, New Zealand, Philippines, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Thailand. India launched the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008 with a view to providing a forum for all the littoral nations of the Indian Ocean to co-operate on mutually agreed areas for better security in the region. As part of naval diplomacy, Indian naval ships have made port calls in a host of countries. The first Atlantic Ocean deployment of the Indian Navy occurred in 2009 during which the Indian fleet conducted exercises with the French, German, Russian and British Navies.

The Indian Air Force too is active in participation in joint exercises with Russia, UK and France, not to mention the US. India has participated in Exercise Red Flag, the advanced aerial combat exercise hosted by the US Air Force at Nevada. With the US we have the Cope India exercises conducted in Indian air space. The first such exercise was conducted at Gwalior in 2004 and was repeated in 2005, 2006, and 2009, and abandoned after that. The exercise was revived in 2017.

With the US we hold army exercises in India since 2005, with one such exercise held in the US. We do such exercises with France, Sri Lanka and Nepal. We have done exercises with Mongolia, and Seychelles. We do the Hand-Hand joint military training exercise with China, with the fifth such exercise conducted over 12 days in October 2015 in Yunnan, with emphasis on joint handling of counter terrorism and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief. During the Chinese Defence Minister's visit to India in August this year it was decided to expand the

“engagement between their armed forces relating to training, joint exercises and other professional interactions”. A seven-day Exercise Force Eighteen, involving 400 personnel from 18 ASEAN Plus countries, including Japan, China, South Korea and the US, took place in March this year in India with a focus on humanitarian action and peacekeeping operations. Most recently we have taken the lead to organise The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) military exercise in India this month with a view to giving an additional dimension to the grouping.

Joint exercises serve the diplomatic purpose of confidence-building, improved operational skills, exposure to best practices, demonstration of capability and state of readiness of the armed forces, power projection, interoperability with the forces of friendly countries and, not the least, political signalling.

Our attitude towards establishing base facilities abroad for access and use has evolved. We had some years ago negotiated with Tajikistan to develop the Aini base. Apart from the logistics agreement that we have signed with US and France and agreements on access to ports signed with Oman and Singapore, we had negotiated an agreement with Seychelles to develop the Assumption Island for providing maritime security to the archipelago, but the project has got derailed because of political opposition to it in the Seychelles Parliament. In Mauritius, India will improve the sea and air transportation facilities in Agalega Island. India has an agreement with Maldives in the area of maritime awareness and security, though it has run into trouble because of the hostile policies of the Yameen Government towards India.

To promote more synergy between our defence and foreign policies towards countries considered important we have instituted 2+2 dialogues. These are at Foreign and Defence Secretaries level with Japan and Australia, but with the US the dialogue is at the level of Defence and Foreign Ministers, with the first such dialogue being held earlier this month. This format necessitates closer consultation and coordination between the MoD and MEA in India in dealing with key external relationships and brings in a

stronger military dimension to the country's foreign policy. But 2+2 dialogues by themselves will not lead to optimal levels of coordination between our foreign and defence policies to best pursue our national interests. Regular institutionalised coordination mechanisms are required, and we are far from establishing it yet.

To conclude, I would say that it will be more appropriate to speak of the military component of India's foreign policy rather than military diplomacy as such. The security challenges that India faces require a much closer association of our military in assessing them and devising a comprehensive strategy to deal with them. Progress has been made in this regard by positioning military officers in the National Security Council Secretariat. Some military officers have been appointed to positions in the Ministry of External Affairs. The Ministry of Defence should have more officers in position from the MEA for better synergy between the two Ministries. Even if optimal levels have not been reached, the role of the Indian military in India's foreign policy has expanded. The change in the strategic outlook of India expressed in its Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific strategy implies an inevitable expansion of the role of the Indian Navy in securing our strategic objectives. The freedom given to the Army to respond at will to Pakistan's cease-fire violations in J&K as well as the green light given to conduct surgical strikes across the LOC was intended to further our political objectives. The decision to stand up to China at Doklam militarily signified the use of the Armed Forces to deliver a strong diplomatic message. The Army is fully involved in managing the confidence building measures (CBMs) on the border with Tibet and developing more border management mechanisms to stabilise the LAC. On diplomacy related to access to bases, maritime security in the Indian Ocean, export of arms, military exercises and so on, our policies have evolved in a way that expands the room for our Armed Forces to contribute to the achievement of our foreign policy objectives.

*This is the text of 22nd Colonel Pyara Lal Memorial Lecture delivered by Shri Kanwal Sibal, IFS (Retd), former Foreign Secretary to the Government of India on 19 Sep 2018 at USI.

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