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THE EVOLVING NOTION OF DEFENCE DIPLOMACY: STRATEGY FOR BANGLADESH AND ITS ARMED FORCES FOR PURSUING NATIONAL INTERESTS

Abstract

Defence diplomacy, in addition to traditional methods of diplomacy, has been recently emphasised by scholars and practitioners for achieving a country's national interests. Contemporary literature posits that defence diplomacy activities range from bilateral and multilateral exchanges between defence and senior military officials to bilateral defence cooperation agreements, training of foreign civilian and military personnel, appointment of defence attachés to foreign countries, and bilateral and multilateral military exercises or training. Bangladesh, since its independence, has ensured an active presence in the arena of global diplomacy, peace and security. To uphold its national interests, the country has also actively pursued economic diplomacy to secure its national growth and developmental goals. However, the evolving geopolitical environment globally and especially, regionally necessitates that Bangladesh makes use of all sorts of diplomatic measures and initiatives to achieve its national interests. Hence, Bangladesh needs to tap into the tools and techniques of defence diplomacy. There are some existing measures and strategies of defence diplomacy strongly pursued by Bangladesh. Nevertheless, it is suggested in the paper that Bangladesh needs to revamp these existing tools and techniques as well as adopt new ones such as: acknowledging defence diplomacy as a component of national soft power, expanding 'outreach' to regional collective security and stability, acknowledging it as a component of national diplomatic manoeuvring and finally, also acknowledging it as an area of expertise. The paper is qualitative in nature but makes use of both secondary resources and primary information generated through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs).

Keywords: Defence Diplomacy, Strategy, Defence Cooperation

1. Introduction

Over the years, Bangladesh has exhibited a strong track record of growth and development. For the last decade, the country has achieved the status of one of the world's fastest-growing economies. This progress has to a great extent, resulted in widening and deepening of its national interests. Traditional actors using traditional instruments of diplomacy are working well so far in securing Bangladesh's national

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interests in national, regional, and global contexts. Bangladesh has remained neutral in the wake of great power rivalry for the national interest. Though it was challenging, the next decade will bring even more challenges due to the evolving nature of the global order.¹ Therefore, Bangladesh needs to tap into new opportunities for its diplomacy to pursue its multifaceted national interests. Defence diplomacy, in addition to traditional methods of diplomacy, has been recently emphasised by both scholars and practitioners for achieving the national interests of a country. However, the ideas and strategies of defence diplomacy are nothing new.

Many great strategic thinkers throughout history recognised far-reaching effects of the military beyond battlefields. Centuries of debate on military theory and practice illustrates not just the military's ability to function outside of pure combat, but also the need to employ their talents wisely throughout the range of national power. Defence diplomacy is an idea employing both old and new instruments, measures and strategies of diplomacy. Many great powers have utilised defence diplomacy to pursue their goals and grow their global influence across decades and centuries. Bangladesh, as a peace-loving country, has always stressed on the value of diplomatic approaches, which can lead to more effective solutions than direct confrontations. With the evolving strategic dynamics in the region, importance of understanding the potential of military diplomacy is now even more pertinent.²

Defence diplomacy is not a new concept. There is a variety of ideas and debates in the existing literature. However, major works on defence diplomacy can be divided into several broad categories. In a limited fashion, some diplomacy research reflects on the past and contemporary interaction between military establishments and sovereign states as part of the historical diplomatic tradition. There are also several reports of research groups and chapters in various books that explore specific bilateral military relationships, such as US practices of defence diplomacy with the Soviet Union or the US military's engagement with China's People's Liberation Army. Defence officials have authored theses on the subject, whether in general terms about defence attaché employment or in detail about a specific bilateral defence diplomatic relationship. Military periodicals also discuss the role of defence diplomacy, military diplomacy and strategic engagements.

¹ Following relative stability during the Cold War period, the global order is in flux in the post-Cold War era. Many opinions have been put forward regarding the nature of contemporary world order. Some scholars say it is a multipolar world order, while scholar like Amitav Acharya terms it as a 'multiplex global order.' For discussion about multiplex global order, see Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics and International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2017).

² General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed, "Military Diplomacy to Enhance Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region" (Speech, 46th Indo-Pacific Armies Management Seminar, IPAMS, Dhaka, September 13, 2022).

However, there is not much research on this issue and even less is written when it comes to talking about Bangladesh. Questions can be raised as to why a country like Bangladesh needs to adopt defence diplomacy as a strategy in addition to traditional diplomacy? And what are the new strategies and tools of defence diplomacy that Bangladesh needs to adopt in addition to as well as to revamping its existing strategies? Therefore, the main objectives of this research paper are: firstly, to provide a recount of the evolving notion of defence diplomacy as well as to explore the significance of defence diplomacy for Bangladesh. Secondly, the paper intends to enumerate the various existing defence diplomacy measures and initiatives pursued by Bangladesh to achieve its national interests. Finally, the paper makes an effort to suggest some new strategies of defence diplomacy that Bangladesh and the Armed Forces of Bangladesh can follow and adopt for pursuing national interests further. Hence, the present paper would be a significant value addition to the literature on diplomacy of Bangladesh in general and on utilising defence resources for pursuing its national interests in particular. The paper is divided into six sections. Following introduction, section two delineates the evolution of the notion of defence diplomacy, its contours and parameters. Section three discusses the significance of defence diplomacy for a developing country like Bangladesh while section four lays out existing practices, measures and initiatives of defence diplomacy pursued by Bangladesh government and the Armed Forces. After reviewing the existing measures, a few new strategies of defence diplomacy are suggested in section five. Section six concludes the paper. The paper is qualitative in nature based primarily on secondary resources, e.g., books, journals, research reports, online resources, newspaper op-eds., government reports, archival documents, etc. To complement the findings, the paper also makes use of primary information gathered and generated through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) of senior defence officials and scholars of international relations in general and of diplomacy studies in particular. Moreover, renowned former diplomats have also been interviewed to understand and analyse the role of defence diplomacy in pursuing national interests of a country like Bangladesh.

2. The Evolving Notion of Defence Diplomacy: Definitions and Parameters

As already mentioned, defence diplomacy is not a new concept. What scholars are referring to as the contours of defence diplomacy has existed for long in the practice of diplomacy and statecraft. Sometimes the concept is equated with military diplomacy which relates to the subject matters of military missions, and also the participation of military representatives in multilateral negotiations viz.,

disarmament and arms control negotiations.³ Thus, before delving into identifying the parameters and practices of defence diplomacy, there is a need of reflecting on the origin of the concept and the related practices.

2.1 *Genesis of the Concept*

Origins of defence diplomacy may be traced back to ancient times. The Roman Republic used to invite sons of neighbouring rulers to come to Rome to get educated, while the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty built Alexandria's Great Library for similar sorts of purposes.⁴ Defence diplomacy had later been revived in the Napoleonic era.⁵ However, Its evolution witnessed little substantial modifications until the end of the Cold War, since it was centred on military relations and hence restricted to the typical military sphere. The start of a new era in international relations in the 1990s, gradual increase of interdependence, emergence of new actors on global stage, and advent of public diplomacy all allowed a place for new conceptualisations of defence diplomacy. The 1998 British *Strategic Defence Review* was the first official source that specifically mentioned the goal of 'defence diplomacy' as one of its 'new missions'. The review also mentioned that it was, designed to "dispel hostility, build trust, and take part in developing armed forces under democratic control (thus helping conflict prevention and resolution)".⁶ However, a new type of defence cooperation has gained importance over the past two decades, involving peacetime deployment and use of military forces, assets, and infrastructures to accomplish broad foreign policy objectives.

2.2 *Definitions and Parameters of Defence Diplomacy*

As T. Balzacq et al. acknowledged that there is no final definition of defence diplomacy but opined that this is the inclination to use military channels, or experts on defence issues, to assist building a climate of trust and convergence of interests.⁷ It implies more about diplomacy than military efficiency. They also ruled out the use

³ Lech Drab, "Defence Diplomacy—An Important Tool for the Implementation of Foreign Policy and Security of the State," *Security and Defence Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2018): 66.

⁴ Jim Murphy, "The Need for Defence Diplomacy," RUSI, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/need-defence-diplomacy>

⁵ Napoleon had planned to order an entire French Army to convert to Islam to help establish French rule in Egypt.

⁶ Frédéric Charillon, Thierry Balzacq and Frédéric Ramel, "Defense Diplomacy," in *Global Diplomacy: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, eds. Thierry Balzacq et al., trans. William Snow (Paris: The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 268, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28786-3_19

⁷ T. Balzacq et al. eds., *Global Diplomacy: An Introduction*.

of force or threat in support of defence diplomacy, commonly known as gunboat diplomacy. Juan Emilio Cheyre demarcated defence diplomacy as a demonstration of network diplomacy⁸ which links the implementation of foreign policy objectives to those of the defence sector.⁹ He argues that defence diplomacy fits at least partly under the wider notion of public diplomacy, and also more widely under the concept of network diplomacy, and may play a significant role in achieving the state's foreign policy objectives.¹⁰ Peter Viggo Jakobsen noted, “the military has traditionally been a means for achieving a government’s foreign and security policy either through the threatened or actual use of coercion in diplomacy.”¹¹

Therefore, in the broadest sense, defence diplomacy is a set of all peaceful/non-violent foreign-policy activities and initiatives of a nation-state in order to ensure its external security. The defence wing of the government through other means can have a direct influence on foreign policy. Furthermore, defence connections among countries can provide a base for future relationships.

From a more precise perspective, defence diplomacy is the non-combat or non-violent activities of armed forces, which are carried out with a view to enforcing the country’s broader foreign policy objectives. Effectiveness of defence diplomacy at strategic level depends on varied issues. Firstly, the combat commander’s authority should support formulation, funding, and implementation of defence diplomacy initiatives within a unified command structure. Secondly, the combat command should have a highly skilled staff based on time-tested institutions and doctrines. This workforce and accompanying processes produce an unrivalled capacity for planning and organization within the executive arm of government. Thirdly, implementation of defence diplomacy operations should be facilitated by a vast network of persons and organisations positioned to coordinate and communicate across many levels of authority. Lastly, defence or military diplomacy enables

⁸ Experts of diplomacy are now discussing about a shift from ‘club’ to ‘network diplomacy’. As Cooper et al. noted, “the former is based on a small number of players, a highly hierarchical structure, based largely on written communication and on low transparency; the latter is based on a much larger number of players (particularly of civil society), a flatter structure, a more significant oral component, and greater transparency.” Andrew F Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, “Introduction: The Challenges of 21st Century Diplomacy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, eds. Andrew F Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur (UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15. For a detailed discussion on network diplomacy, see Jorge Heine, “From Club to Network Diplomacy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, eds. Andrew F Cooper et al.

⁹ Juan Emilio Cheyre, “Defence Diplomacy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, eds. Andrew F Cooper et al., 297.

¹⁰ Juan Emilio Cheyre, “Defence Diplomacy,” 300.

¹¹ Peter Viggo Jakobsen, “Coercive Diplomacy,” in *Contemporary Security Studies*, ed. Alan Collins (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), 277–98.

exceptional flexibility and agility when adapting to a difficult situation from the existence of an unrivalled reservoir of resources.

Defence diplomacy also seeks to fill in the gaps, when needed, to make a country responsive to difficulties and complexity of disruptive, rapidly-changing, conflict-ridden geopolitical circumstances, in conjunction with other state instruments. It is not a separate tool but complements a country's foreign and security policy goals. In addition, it facilitates the process to acquire or develop means for cutting-edge weapons, equipment, and systems from technologically advanced countries; knowledge about contemporary ideas and methods for combating traditional and non-traditional threats, as well as each other's operational procedures and intelligence inputs is exchanged to assure interoperability for mutual benefits. Cooperation in responding to dangers—both natural and man-made—combating terrorist threats, pandemic threats, anti-piracy operations, and achieving synergy in a variety of humanitarian actions are now parts of key purposes of defence diplomacy. When military troops, for instance, engage in bilateral or multilateral exercises, the objectives are multifaceted: the contact improves interoperability between and among forces, fosters cultural exchanges and mutual understanding, and affords the chance to strengthen each nation's capabilities while simulating possible eventualities. The significance of defence diplomacy in international involvement is also to establish a conversation that may promote future communication and prevent cultural misunderstanding during a crisis.

Cotter and Foster in their research have come up with outlining various parameters and contours of defence diplomacy activities. According to them, defence diplomacy activities range from bilateral and multilateral exchanges between defence and senior military officials to bilateral defence cooperation agreements, training of foreign civilian and military personnel, appointment of defence attachés to foreign countries, and bilateral and multilateral military exercises or training.

Much of the scholarly literature on defence diplomacy also focuses on confidence building and conflict prevention. It is considered as a less costly and less risky instrument for building cordial defence and security relations, therefore, diminishing the possibility of international conflicts.¹² Evan A Laksmana, a Southeast Asian expert on defence diplomacy highlights that this notion of confidence-building and conflict prevention role of defence diplomacy finds its

¹² International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey 1998/99* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 40–41.

relevance in cases of “relatively weaker (in terms of military capabilities)” countries who conduct defence diplomacy for different rationales and policy directions.¹³ Hence, Cottey and Foster also referred to defence diplomacy as a process of “strategic engagement” for conflict prevention that encompasses a spectrum of military cooperative engagements that work in various ways and operates on different levels.

Therefore, for developing countries, defence diplomacy has been one of the most prolific policy options while pursuing foreign policy objectives in terms of securing their national interests. Now, before discussing various existing defence diplomacy measures and initiatives of a developing country like Bangladesh, the necessity and significance of defence diplomacy in the context of Bangladesh need to be deliberated.

3. Significance of Defence Diplomacy for Bangladesh

Bangladesh, since its independence, over the last five decades, has ensured an active presence in the arena of global diplomacy, peace and security. It has always been a strong proponent of global peace and stability and steered its foreign policy and diplomatic initiatives to achieve peace and security at the international level. During the Cold War period, the country followed a policy of non-alignment and in the post-Cold War period, the country successfully pursued balanced diplomacy to achieve its national interests. Because of such relentless efforts, the country is now seen, as Delwar Hossain noted, as a symbol of peace, friendship, cooperation and humanitarianism.¹⁴ As a developing country, Bangladesh has been a strong voice in global platforms for securing the interests of the LDCs and for the marginal section of society. The country has also been a strong advocate of a ‘culture of peace’, ‘humanitarian diplomacy’ and ‘enlightened foreign policy’.¹⁵

However, for last few decades, Bangladesh and its foreign policy stakeholders have successfully pursued economic diplomacy to secure it’s national interests. The growth of Bangladesh, as Kabir et. al.,¹⁶ noted, so far has been the

¹³ Evan A Laksmana, “Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Trends, Prospects and Challenges,” in *From “Boots” to “Brogues”: The Rise of Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia*, eds. Bhubundar Singh and Seng Tan (Singapore: RSIS Monograph no. 21, RSIS, 2011), 75.

¹⁴ Delwar Hossain, “Editor’s Note,” *Journal of Bangladesh and Global Affairs* 01, no. 01 (2022):1.

¹⁵ Delwar Hossain, “Editor’s Note.”

¹⁶ Mahfuz Kabir, Mohammad Jasim Uddin and Md Rafid Abrar Miah, “Economic Diplomacy of Bangladesh: From a ‘Basket Case’ to a Middle-Income Country,” *Journal of Bangladesh and Global Affairs* 01, no. 01 (2022): 67.

product of three primary drivers: foreign direct investment, overseas development assistance and trade. Bangladesh's growing share of global economic commerce, bilateral investment treaties trade agreements negotiated, trade fairs and exhibitions, and investment promotion roadshows are all pieces of evidence of successful economic diplomacy.¹⁷ Bangladesh also emerged as a humanitarian state that seeks to reorient itself away from traditional geopolitics, and instead strive towards humanitarian considerations associated with global norms and values.

However, the evolving geopolitical environment both globally and in particular, regionally, necessitates that a developing country like Bangladesh makes use of all sorts of diplomatic measures and initiatives to achieve its national interests. Traditional means and measures of diplomacy may prove inadequate in this evolving environment. As renowned diplomat Ambassador Humayun Kabir has noted, "the domain of diplomacy of Bangladesh itself has to be upgraded significantly to be effective as a tool to protect and promote our national interests".¹⁸ General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed in an interview said that "military diplomacy resonating with the traditional diplomacy will certainly be an add-on in negotiations. More so, military diplomacy at the strategic level can be practised where interpersonal relations of leaders help in dealing with issues of common interest, i.e. peacekeeping operations, counter-terrorism activities and transnational crimes".¹⁹

Moreover, given the surrounding geopolitical, strategic and security environment as well as to meet various traditional and non-traditional security challenges, Bangladesh has undertaken efforts to modernise its armed forces. These efforts in no way should be construed as militarism, as the country always strives to maintain world peace and stability that has been the mainstay of its foreign policy dictum that says, "Friendship to all, malice to none". Nevertheless, enhancing defence capabilities necessitates enhanced defence cooperation through defence negotiations, military exchanges, getting access to advanced technologies, defence purchases, bilateral and multilateral military exercises and training, etc. Hence, it is to be reckoned that defence diplomacy has a meaningful prospect for Bangladesh as the country now needs to tap into these new tools and techniques to secure its national interests. Moreover, as Shahab Enam Khan has noted, Bangladesh needs defence diplomacy "to supplement the political objectives of maintaining regional peace and

¹⁷ For detail discussion see, M Uddin, "Economic Diplomacy of Bangladesh: ODA in Perspective," *BIISS Journal* 37, no. 1 (2016): 47–66; and M Uddin, "Economic Diplomacy of Bangladesh: Foreign Trade in Perspective," *BIISS Journal* 36, no. 3 (2016): 203–216.

¹⁸ Ambassador Humayun Kabir, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), interview with author, January 2023.

¹⁹ General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed, "Top Brass Interview: General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed, Chief of Army Staff, Bangladesh," *Asian Defence Journal* (November–December 2022): 10.

stability, diplomatic endeavours to resolve refugee, climate, and economic issues, and national interests that focus on growth and development”.²⁰ Therefore, at this point, it is pertinent to delineate the existing measures and initiatives of defence diplomacy pursued by Bangladesh to achieve its national interests and foreign policy objectives.

4. Existing Strategies of Defence Diplomacy of Bangladesh

Bangladesh as a developing country and as a country tenuously working for maintenance and improvement of global peace and security, has been using some of the strategies, measures and initiatives of defence diplomacy. Over the years, the country has undertaken various measures and initiatives to pursue its national interests that fall within the purview of defence diplomacy. They are identified and discussed below.

4.1 *Bilateral Security Dialogues*

Bangladesh has bilateral security cooperation with many countries, regional powers as well as global powers alike. Bangladesh has tremendous security cooperation with China that focuses on military training, defence purchases and production.²¹ China is Bangladesh’s largest supplier of military hardware and equipment. The two countries maintain a robust relationship for training and military exchange as well. The signing of the “Defense Cooperation Agreement” in 2002 in the areas of military training and defence production is the fine-tuning of Sino-Bangladesh military collaboration. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited China from 01–06 July 2019. During the visit, two sides agreed that defence cooperation is an important part of China-Bangladesh friendship and will maintain and enhance exchanges at various levels between their armed forces. The two sides would deepen cooperation in defence industry and trade, training, equipment and technology, mutual visits of navy ships, and the United Nations peacekeeping operations. They agreed to hold dialogue on maritime cooperation on a regular basis.²² Chinese State Councilor and Minister of National Defence, Wei Fenghe visited Bangladesh in April 2021 and met the President of Bangladesh and high-ranking military officials. The two sides agreed to advance bilateral military cooperation.

²⁰ Shahab Enam Khan, Professor of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, interview with author, February 2023.

²¹ “The Changing Dynamics of China-Bangladesh Relations,” *The Daily Star*, December 13, 2022.

²² “Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the People’s Republic of Bangladesh,” Beijing, China, July 06, 2019,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201907/t20190707_679575.html

On the other hand, Bangladesh has been holding security dialogues with the US since 2012 to enhance security cooperation and defence exchanges. The 8th dialogue was held in Washington in April 2022.²³ Over the years, during these security dialogues, the whole spectrum of bilateral security cooperation has been deliberated that ranges from counterterrorism, disaster management, maritime security and peacekeeping operations to shared commitment to peace, security and prosperity in the region and beyond. Bangladesh also holds defence dialogues with the US. The 9th dialogue was held in May 2022 in Hawaii that focused on enhancing defence cooperation in areas of global and regional security, defence equipment, disaster management, technology, training, visits, peacekeeping operations, joint exercises and deployments, workshops etc.²⁴

Bangladesh and the United Kingdom hosted the First UK-Bangladesh Defence Dialogue in March 2022. Both sides discussed a shared commitment to peace and security and identified areas for further cooperation. The areas included capability building in terms of disaster response, equipment, technology, peacekeeping operations, visits and training, joint exercises, and deployments.²⁵ Bangladesh is a founding co-chair (along with Canada and the UK) and current chair of Women, Peace and Security Chief of Defence Network.

Bangladesh and India have also agreed to have a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Defence Cooperation Framework in 2017 which included a defence credit line of US\$ 500 million. This was formally extended in 2018 to be utilised by 2029.²⁶ They have also been holding defence dialogues. The 4th Bangladesh-India Annual Defence Dialogue was held in August 2022.²⁷

In January 2022, Bangladesh and Turkey signed an MoU on security cooperation, counterterrorism, and countering drug trafficking. Turkey has been supplying defence equipment to Bangladesh and also providing training to members of Bangladesh Armed Forces.²⁸ According to news report, Bangladesh has also signed a 'Letter of Intent' on defence cooperation with France during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to France in November 2021. However, as Foreign Minister A

²³ "Bangladesh-US Security Dialogue Held in Washington," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 07, 2022.

²⁴ "Bangladesh-US Bilateral Defence Dialogue Held in Hawaii," *New Age*, May 27, 2022.

²⁵ "First UK-Bangladesh Defence Dialogue Held," *The Daily Star*, March 03, 2022.

²⁶ Smruti S Pattanaik, "Taking the Next Step," *Dhaka Tribune*, September 09, 2022.

²⁷ "Bangladesh, India Agree to Strengthen Defence Cooperation," *New Age*, August 12, 2022.

²⁸ "Bangladesh, Turkey Sign New Security and Counterterrorism Deal," *The Diplomat*, January 11, 2022.

K Abdul Momen notes, this defence cooperation between Bangladesh and France relates mainly to training and technology transfer.²⁹

4.2 *Participation in Multilateral Security—Related Treaties and Negotiations*

Bangladesh is a state party to almost all major disarmament treaties. It remains committed to complete and total disarmament which emanates from its constitutional obligation. For instance, Bangladesh is committed to full compliance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Bangladesh is the first South Asian country that signed and ratified the CTBT.³⁰ Bangladesh is a state party to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC) and remains committed to fulfilling the provisions of the BWC regime.³¹ The country is also a state party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and its five Additional Protocols. Bangladesh signed the “Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction” on 07 May 1998, ratified it on 06 September 2000, with the Convention entering into force for Bangladesh on 01 March 2001.³² Bangladesh is also a responsible member of the “Chemical Weapon Convention.”

Bangladesh signed the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) on 25 September 2013 in the 68th UNGA. The treaty came into force on 24 December 2014. Bangladesh is the first country to have signed the treaty in South Asia. However, Bangladesh is yet to be a state party.³³

Bangladesh supports the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA). This PoA aims to advance member states’ small arms laws, export/import controls, and management of stockpiling as well as engaging in cooperation and assistance.³⁴

²⁹ “Bangladesh, France sign Letter of Intent on Defence Cooperation,” *New Age*, November 10, 2021.

³⁰ Mr. Rokebul Haque, “Statement of Bangladesh, made by Mr. Rokebul Haque, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations” (Statement, First Conference of State Parties, Cancun, Mexico 24–27 August, 2015).

³¹ “Statement by Bangladesh at the UN,” 2018, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/statement-by-bangladesh-ow.pdf>

³² “Bangladesh,” Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction, <https://www.apminebanconvention.org/states-parties/bangladesh/>

³³ “Status of ATT Participation,” Arms Trade Treaty, <https://thearmstradetreaty.org/>

³⁴ “Statement by Deputy Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the UN on Thematic Debate: “Conventional Weapons” (Statement, First Committee 77th Session United Nations General, October 20, 2022).

4.3 *Participation in Regional Security Dialogues*

Bangladesh participates in both regional and sub-regional security dialogues. Prominent among them is the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Established in 1994, the ARF has been the most ambitious attempt in Southeast Asia to deal with regional security issues in a multilateral framework. Bangladesh joined ARF as its 26th member during the 13th Ministerial meeting of the Forum in July 2006.³⁵

On the other hand, being a founding member of SAARC, the country has been a very active participant as far as security cooperation is concerned under the aegis of the SAARC framework. SAARC attempted to include different forms of security cooperation at different times like the Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, the Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Terrorism, SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk, SAARC Drug Offences Monitoring Desk, SAARC Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters and SAARCPOL—a common regional police institution that would work similarly to Interpol. However, there has been little noteworthy collaboration in the SAARC context. Nevertheless, Bangladesh has always been a strong supporter of cooperation for enhanced security in the South Asia region and in many cases has been the proponent of many initiatives.

In contrast to SAARC, BIMSTEC—the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation recently undertook measures to initiate security cooperation among the member states that started during the 2016 Goa Retreat of the BIMSTEC Leaders following the BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach Summit. The BIMSTEC Leaders, realising the positive correlation between regional economic development and regional security, decided to revamp their focus on security cooperation. They started with the Annual Meeting of the National Security Advisers/Chiefs of the member states. The regional grouping has also commenced the Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Security Dialogue Forum and also BIMSTEC Think Tank Dialogue on Regional Security to formulate suggestions and recommendations for the National Security Advisers/Chiefs. In all these meetings the whole gamut of security cooperation ranging from terrorism, human, drug and arms smuggling and trafficking, cyber security, maritime security, and radicalisation, to natural disasters,

³⁵ “Bangladesh officially admitted into ASEAN Regional Forum,” *bdnews24.com* accessed December 10, 2022, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/bangladesh-officially-admitted-into-asean-regional-forum>

climate change, and environmental degradation have been deliberated, and Bangladesh has been an active participant in all these fora.

4.4 *Bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements*

Bangladesh does not belong to any defence alliance, as alliance formation is against its basic foreign policy dictum of “Friendship to all, malice to none”. However, the country has 27 bilateral defence cooperation agreements, MoUs, letters of intent and protocols with 14 countries. Some of these countries are China, India, the US, Turkey, the UK etc. Moreover, to diversify and extend its area of operation, Bangladesh is continuing its defence cooperation negotiations with many countries. Currently, the country is continuing its negotiations on 51 defence cooperation agreements, MoUs, letters of intent, and protocols with 33 countries.³⁶

4.5 *Bilateral and Multilateral Defence Training*

Bangladesh has always been very active in participating in various bilateral and multi-lateral defence training. So far, members of Bangladesh's armed forces have participated in such programmes in 40 countries, some of whom are: the US, India, China, Turkey, the UK, Saudi Arabia, etc. Participation in these training usually includes: higher defence studies at various levels such as graduate and post-graduate courses in renowned defence institutions. Some of these training also include higher management courses and various professional diploma courses. For instance, a team of Bangladesh Armed forces comprising 41 members attended a training exercise in Turkey in 2021.³⁷

Bangladesh armed forces have also carried out various training programmes and courses where foreign military and civilian defence personnel participate. Hundreds of participants from 14 countries viz., the US, UK, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, etc., and also from African countries have participated in various programmes and courses organised and implemented by Bangladesh armed forces. Each year, a good number of foreign defence personnel participate in graduate and post-graduate defence courses in Bangladesh conducted by the Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC) and National Defence College (NDC).

³⁶ Information gathered by the author during an interview with Director General, Operations and Plans Directorate, Armed Forces Division (AFD), Bangladesh

³⁷ Information gathered by the author during an interview with Director General, Operations and Plans Directorate, AFD, Bangladesh.

4.6 *Bilateral and Multilateral Defence Exercises*

Bangladesh has been a very active participant in various bilateral and multi-lateral defence exercises. So far Bangladesh has participated in various bilateral and multi-lateral defence exercises that involve seventeen countries.³⁸ To mention, Bangladesh regularly participates in the bilateral SAMPRITI exercise with India. This is an important initiative carried out by both the countries and they alternatively host this exercise. It is a 12-day exercise and the 10th edition of the exercise was held recently, in Jashore Cantonment in June 2022.³⁹ “Bongo Sagar” is another naval exercise between Bangladesh and India and the first edition of Bongo Sagar was held in 2019. The 2nd edition of the “Bongo Sagar” took place in October 2020 in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁰ The exercise is aimed at developing a high degree of interoperability and joint operational skills through the conduct of a wide spectrum of maritime exercises and operations between the two Navies.

Meanwhile, forces of Bangladesh and the US held a joint training “Exercise Tiger Shark-39” in Jalalabad Cantonment, Sylhet. Members of the Para Commando Forces of Bangladesh Army, SWADS of Bangladesh Navy, and US Special Forces participated in this from 25 May 2022 to 16 June 2022. The objective of the exercise was to acquire and exchange of knowledge about anti-terrorism in details, close quarter battle, counterterrorism, and firing practices. It is expected that such exercises will enhance relations and improve professional communication among the forces.

On 04 November 2020, Bangladesh and the US held a joint Naval Exercise entitled CARAT (Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training) in Chattogram. Bangladesh Air Force and US Pacific Air Force (PACAF) also participated in a six-day joint exercise entitled ‘Exercise Cop South-2022’. The exercise was held at the Bangladesh Air Force Base Bangabandhu under the direction of the Armed Forces Division and managed by Bangladesh Air Force in February 2022. Moreover, the Bangladesh Armed forces and the US Indo-Pacific Command jointly organised a bilateral exercise at Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operations Training (BIPSOT) in Rajendrapur Cantonment on peace assistance activities titled “Exercise Tiger Lightning-3 (2022)” on 20 March 2022. This sort of exercise makes an

³⁸ Information gathered by the author during an interview with Director General, Operations and Plans Directorate, AFD, Bangladesh.

³⁹ “Bangladesh–India Joint Training ‘Exercise Sampriti-10’ Inaugurated,” *The Business Standard*, June 06, 2022.

⁴⁰ “India and Bangladesh Hold Bilateral Naval Exercise Bongosagar and IN–BN CORPAT,” *Force India*, October 03, 2020.

effective contribution to further consolidating the existing relationship between armed forces of both the nations.

4.7 *Modernisation of the Military: Defence Purchases Negotiations*

Military Factory and Shipyard Management (Turkish: Askeri Fabrika ve Tersane İşletme, ASFAT) is a state-owned military contractor in Turkey which has 27 ordnance factories and three naval shipyards. The Chief of Naval Staff, Bangladesh Navy led a team to ASFAT in April 2021. The Bangladesh Navy is currently implementing its national frigate program and for that purpose, it has fitted Turkish naval guns onboard its newly built Padma class (Batch II) coastal patrol craft and also refitted its existing warships with these new guns. In August 2021, the Chief of Army Staff, Bangladesh Army also visited AFSAT.

In January 2022, Turkish Ambassador in Dhaka, Mustafa Osman Turan, said “Currently there are several ongoing conversations between Turkish companies and Bangladeshi counterparts”. He noted that Turkey had already delivered multi-launcher rockets to Bangladesh and Ankara is prepared to commence joint ventures in shipbuilding both for military purposes and non-military services.⁴¹ Later, Bangladesh and Turkey signed an MoU on security, counterterrorism and countering drug trafficking on 08 January 2022.

4.8 *Participation in Strengthening and Securing Global Peace and Stability through Peacekeeping Operations*

The United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) was formed to guarantee security and peace throughout the world, and Bangladesh started its journey with UNPKO in 1988. Over the past three decades, Bangladesh has grown into a respected member of the initiative. Following completion of successful operations during second and third generations of peacekeeping, the country is now adapting itself to the fourth generation of peacekeeping, mostly known as ‘Robust peacekeeping’.⁴²

Bangladeshi troops ranked first in 2011, 2014, 2015, 2021 and 2022.⁴³ Current deployment of Bangladeshi peacekeepers in multiple UN missions accounts for 9.2 per cent of the total number of UN peacekeepers, making Bangladesh the

⁴¹ “Turkey-Bangladesh Defense Co-op Ensures Mutual Benefits: Analysts,” *Daily Sabah*, accessed December 02, 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/turkey-bangladesh-defense-co-op-ensures-mutual-benefits-analysts>

⁴² Marco Longobardo, “Robust Peacekeeping Mandate: An Assessment in Light of Jus Post Bellum,” <https://academic.oup.com/book/39643/chapter/339611114>

⁴³ “Position of Bangladesh in UN Peace Operation,” Armed Forces Division, available in <https://afd.gov.bd/un-peacekeeping/position-of-bangladesh-in-un-peace-operation>

largest troops-contributing country. Around 1,63,887 members of Bangladesh's Armed forces have been deployed in 56 different UN Missions in 40 countries. Presently, around 6,007 Bangladeshi Peacekeepers are deployed in 10 missions in nine countries. Around 20,811 members of Bangladesh police has served as peacekeeper so far, and 504 police personnel are deployed in several missions. Some civilians are also involved in UN peacebuilding efforts.

By sending women to UNPKOs, Bangladesh played a crucial role in advancing women's rights. When the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda, Bangladesh was a forerunner in embracing it. A WPS Agenda National Action Plan (NAP) for 2019–2022 was subsequently accepted by Bangladesh.⁴⁴ As a result of their stellar performance, female peacekeepers from Bangladesh have been assigned the role of Contingent Commander in the armed forces of the Ivory Coast, Haiti, and the Congo. It is also worth noting that in last few years, Bangladesh has actively worked to include and promote women in peacekeeping. It is close to reaching the UN target of 18 per cent women staff officers and military observers deployment. Currently, around 519 Bangladeshi women peacekeepers are working in several missions.⁴⁵ However, with the status of a leading 'Troop and Police Contributing Country' to UN Peacekeeping, Bangladesh has very few representations of senior leadership at the decision-making level both at the field and Headquarters. The Chief of Army Staff of Bangladesh Army visited UN Headquarters in New York in 2022 and peacekeeping mission areas in Sudan in 2023. Top brass military officials' also had similar visits in the recent past. The recent announcement of appointment of a Force Commander in the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) may be noted as the outcome of such visits. Nevertheless, Bangladesh needs to revamp these existing tools and techniques of defence diplomacy and at the same time, adopt new strategies as well as needs reorientation towards defence diplomacy acknowledging the role of senior military officials in pursuing its national interests.

5. Need for Incorporating New Strategies and Revamping Existing Strategies of Defence Diplomacy

So far, Bangladesh has performed relatively well in pursuing its national interests using all strategies and measures of diplomacy it has at its disposal.

⁴⁴ "Implementation of the NAP on WPS," *The Daily Star*, June 14, 2022.

⁴⁵ "PM says, Bangladesh is ready to send more peacekeepers to UN," *Financial Express*, May 29, 2022, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/pm-says-bangladesh-ready-to-send-more-peacekeepers-to-un-1653822020>

However, in recent years, military experts, security analysts and scholars of defence diplomacy are deliberating on new strategies as well as revamping older ones. Bangladesh being a developing country with its widening and deepening national interests, needs to incorporate these new strategies into its mixture of tools and strategies of defence diplomacy.

5.1 *Acknowledging Defence Diplomacy as a Component of National Soft Power*

Scholars of defence diplomacy in contemporary times are increasingly identifying the concept of defence diplomacy as a variant of soft power which is used to integrate the strategic thinking of another state. Proponent of the soft power concept, Joseph Nye, defined it as “the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion. Soft power adds to the international relations realm the much broader suit of activities and attributes, which totals to a nation’s power of attraction.”⁴⁶ K A Muthanna conceives of defence diplomacy in a similar line of thought and envisions it as constructing “sustainable cooperative relationships, thereby building trust and facilitating conflict prevention; introducing transparency into defence relations; building and reinforcing perceptions of common interests; and changing the mindset of partners.”⁴⁷ So the fundamental goal of defence diplomacy is to pursue national interests without using physical or coercive force, hence, can be considered a component of soft power. Lech Drab also identified main areas of defence diplomacy most of which fall within the category of nation-states using soft power. For instance, bilateral and multilateral cooperation—established and maintained at a high level by both civilian and military representatives; education and military training; intelligence cooperation and exchange of information on the military-political situation and other events related to issues of security and the state of armed forces of other states; historical military cooperation and patriotic education.⁴⁸

Bangladesh is a nascent state especially, when it comes to using its soft power. For long, scholars of foreign policy missed this aspect of national power and not much analysis and discussion have been carried out on the soft power potential of Bangladesh. Very recently, scholars are focusing on this issue however, they concluded that Bangladesh’s potential for effectively using its soft power hinges on undertaking the necessary steps to transform its soft power resource capacity into

⁴⁶ Quoted in ANM Muniruzzaman, “Defence Diplomacy: A Powerful Tool of Statecraft,” *CLAWS Journal* (Winter 2020): 68.

⁴⁷ K A Muthanna, “Military Diplomacy,” *Journal of Defence Studies* 5, no. 1 (2011):1–15.

⁴⁸ Lech Drab, “Defence Diplomacy—An Important Tool for the Implementation of Foreign Policy and Security of the State,” *Security and Defence Quarterly* 20, no. 3(2018): 68–69.

soft power capability.⁴⁹ In this respect, defence diplomacy can fill the void as the country is already using various measures and strategies of defence diplomacy. Moreover, as supported by conceptual exposition, acknowledging defence diplomacy as a component of national soft power would assist policymakers and other stakeholders to reorient their approach towards defence diplomacy as well as direct enhanced emphasis on pursuing defence diplomacy for achieving national interests of Bangladesh.

5.2 *Acknowledging Defence Diplomacy as a Component of National Diplomatic Manoeuvring*

Bangladesh has embassies approximately in 44 countries including all major countries of the world; high commissions in 21 countries, 10 consulates in various cities and honorary consulates in 74 cities of the world.⁵⁰ However, until now, Bangladesh has defence attachés in only 18 countries. And the discussion is going on to increase the position of defence attachés to five more countries. It is understandable that, given limited resources, Bangladesh government has opted for defence attaché positions in only those countries with which it has defence cooperation and exchanges. However, as Bangladesh needs to strengthen and modernise its defence capabilities to fulfil its expanded national interests, the country needs to diversify its sources of defence articles which necessitates negotiations, discussions and exchanges with new countries and stakeholders. Therefore, in addition to adopting new strategies of defence diplomacy, Bangladesh needs to revamp its existing measures i.e., increasing the number of defence attachés in more countries and training them as “ambassadors of defence diplomacy”. A former defence advisor (same as defence attaché)⁵¹ has also stressed on the importance of training and suggested for developing a ‘training package’ for the officials to enable them to productively carry out their responsibilities.

Moreover, capacity building also involves military modernisation. Ambassador Kabir noted “Armed forces have to be modernised in many dimensions, in terms of outlook, orientation, capacity, equipment, and deeply embedding them within the aspirations and experience of the common people.”⁵² Professor Khan also

⁴⁹ Lam-ya Mostaque and Syeda Tanzia Sultana, “Exploring Soft Power Potentials of Bangladesh: Resources, Limitations and Options,” *BIISS Journal* 38, no. 4 (October 2017): 379–406.

⁵⁰ For list of Bangladesh embassies, high commissions, consulates and honorary consulates abroad, see <https://embassies.info/bangladesh>.

⁵¹ Brigadier General Mirza Ezazur Rahman (retd), Former Defence Advisor, Bangladesh High Commissions in Iran and Pakistan, interview with author, February 2023.

⁵² Ambassador Humayun Kabir, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), interview with author, January 2023.

emphasised on military modernisation and noted that modernising the armed forces would fulfil two objectives: a) to create a solid deterrence capability against any regional aggression or threats; and b) create defensive armed forces that can withstand threats from non-traditional sources, be it technological or climate.⁵³

5.3 *Defence Diplomacy as an Area of Expertise*

At the policy level, stakeholders need to acknowledge the fact that defence diplomacy has to be carried out by professionals, mostly defence officials but also by defence experts and traditional diplomatic cohorts. Just like traditional diplomacy is recognised as an area carried out by trained professionals, especially at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, similarly, there is a need for expertise and professionalism to pursue defence diplomacy to achieve extended national interests of Bangladesh. Ambassador Kabir also made a similar argument that “diplomats’ role in defence diplomacy is often peripheral, traditional and largely one-way traffic. Others set the agenda and diplomates participate with limited space to contribute. Bangladesh needs to upgrade its capacity to innovate or initiate new agendas, ideas and processes, which could make her an attractive promoter of peace and a creative contributor to strengthen regional and global prosperity”.⁵⁴ However, rather than making it an exclusive area of expertise for a particular ministry, efforts have to be undertaken for coordination and collaboration among relevant ministries, scholars, and analysts to develop defence diplomacy expertise and a professional group of functionaries.

5.4 *Expanded ‘Outreach’ to Regional Collective Security and Stability*

Bangladesh has been very committed when it comes to participation in regional initiatives and measures. It has been a pioneer in establishing SAARC, the maiden regional architecture in South Asia. Over the years, despite having tremendous potential SAARC has become inactive due to geopolitics of the region and many commendable regional initiatives for security cooperation remain ineffective. Bangladesh needs to continue its efforts for making this regional grouping work. Defence diplomacy can play a crucial role in reducing conflicts among member countries and promote confidence-building measures and defence exchanges.

⁵³ Shahab Enam Khan, Professor of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, interview with author, February 2023.

⁵⁴ Ambassador Humayun Kabir, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), interview with author, January 2023.

Other regional initiatives like BIMSTEC and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in recent years are exhibiting more prospects in laying out architecture for enhanced regional cooperation. Such an architecture will add tremendous value to regional peace, and stability, and Bangladesh needs to factor in the strategies of defence diplomacy to promote regionalism. Regional military exercises, defence exchanges among armed forces, participation in regional training programmes, visits of high officials, participation in military education in renowned military education institutions, etc., will contribute considerably to building trust and confidence as well as greatly enhance interoperability among regional defence forces. This will also help Bangladesh to achieve its objective of regional security, stability, as well as its foreign policy objective of upholding global peace and stability.

6. Conclusion

Defence diplomacy as an official strategy to pursue national interests and foreign policy objectives of a state, is relatively new. Practised extensively since ancient times and is considered established statecraft by kings and rulers, it had been revived in the Napoleonic era. However, the UK government officially adopted it for the first time in late 1990s. Nevertheless, as per conceptual understanding and a universal definition, there is no agreement among scholars and researchers. Efforts have been made to identify the contours and parameters of defence diplomacy that range from bilateral and multilateral exchanges between defence and senior military officials to bilateral defence cooperation agreements, training of foreign civilian and military personnel, appointment of defence attaches to foreign countries, bilateral and multilateral military exercises or training etc.

Bangladesh, in spite of being a developing country, has been very active on the diplomatic front and committed to global peace and stability. Since independence, the country has successfully carried out its diplomacy to uphold and pursue its national interests. Over the years, the country has made use of all strategies and measures of diplomacy including economic diplomacy. Given the primal importance of development, economic diplomacy dominated Bangladesh's diplomatic arena. Nevertheless, the country has also been pursuing various measures and strategies of defence diplomacy. As the paper demonstrates, Bangladesh has been very active in international fora on arms control and disarmament negotiations; state-party to various multilateral conventions and treaties related to defence issues; actively participates in bilateral and multilateral defence training and exercises; promotes security dialogues; and rely on negotiations for peaceful resolutions of

conflict at national, regional and global levels. All these are testimony to Bangladesh pursuing strategies of defence diplomacy to achieve its national interests.

However, the global and regional geopolitical and strategic environment is evolving in recent times. Bangladesh has emerged as a centre-stage country in the Bay of Bengal, being encircled by geopolitical and strategic competition among major powers of the world. This evolving scenario and impressive economic growth coupled with the need of continuing it, have widened and deepened the national interests of Bangladesh. This in turn, necessitates that the country must focus on new strategies of defence diplomacy and revamp older ones. The paper argues, among others, Bangladesh needs to consider and acknowledge defence diplomacy as a component of soft power, hence, promoting and make use of its soft power to achieve its national interests. The country also needs to acknowledge defence diplomacy as an area of expertise and develop a professional group of functionaries of defence diplomacy. As for revamping older measures, the country needs to increase its number of defence attachés abroad, train them as “ambassadors of defence diplomacy”, as well as reenergise efforts to lay out and implement regional collective security architecture to enhance regional security and stability through cooperation.

Defence diplomacy is a constantly evolving idea. It also provides rays of hope against various difficulties confronted by nation-states in traditional and non-traditional realms. As the discussion demonstrates, Bangladesh has always shown awareness and interest in defence diplomacy. The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Bangladesh have considered it as crucial too, as a responsible entity, a peaceful and peace-desiring nation, and also as a benign military power.