



PROCEEDINGS

Seminar on

Defence Diplomacy: Strategy for Bangladesh

Thursday, 18 April 2024



Organised by

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)



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Publications Officer

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Designed & Printed by

nymphhea

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205/1/A, Tejgaon–Gulshan Link Road, Dhaka 1208

Phone: +88 02 222262032, +88 02 222262054

E-mail: info@nymphhea-bd.com

Website: www.nymphhea-bd.com

Date of Publication: 20 June, 2024

Price: Tk. 120 | US\$ 5

SEMINAR

ON

DEFENCE DIPLOMACY: STRATEGY FOR BANGLADESH

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a seminar on “Defence Diplomacy: Strategy for Bangladesh” on Thursday, 18 April 2024 at the BIISS auditorium. **General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed, SBP (BAR), OSP, ndu, psc, PhD**, Chief of Army Staff, Bangladesh Army, graced the occasion as the Chief Guest. **Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BIISS, Chaired the session and **Major General Md Abu Bakar Siddique Khan, ndc afwc, psc, G+**, Director General of BIISS, delivered the welcome address. **Lieutenant General Waker-Uz-Zaman, OSP, SGP, psc**, Chief of General Staff, Bangladesh Army, was also present in the seminar. Four presentations were made in the Seminar. **Dr. ASM Ali Ashraf, Professor**, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, spoke on “Evolving Notion of Defence Diplomacy and its Role in Achieving Foreign Policy Goals”; **ASM Tarek Hassan Semul**, Research Fellow, BIISS, talked about “Growing Geopolitical Competition: Challenges and Opportunities of Defence Diplomacy for Bangladesh”; **Major General (Retd) Main Ullah Chowdhury, SUP, OSP, awc, psc**, Former Deputy Force Commander, United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and A/FC, United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), presented on “Defence Diplomacy in United Nations and Other Overseas Missions: Horizon to Explore” and **Air Vice Marshall (Retd) Mahmud Hussain, BBP, OSP, ndc, psc, acsc, GD (P)**, Distinguished Expert, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Aviation and Aerospace University (BSMRAAU), and former Ambassador of Bangladesh to Brunei, made a presentation on “Existing Practices of Defence Diplomacy and Future Directions: The Case of Bangladesh”. There was an Open Discussion session followed the presentations.

Senior officials from different ministries, high officials from embassies and high commissions, former diplomats, senior civil and military officials, media, academia, researchers, faculties and students from various universities, and representatives from international organisations participated in the seminar. They enriched it by presenting their valuable questions, comments, suggestions, and observations during the open discussion session.

WELCOME ADDRESS



**Major General Md Abu Bakar Siddique Khan, ndc,
afwc, psc, G+**

*Director General, Bangladesh Institute of International and
Strategic Studies (BIISS)*

On behalf of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, **Major General Md Abu Bakar Siddique Khan, ndc, afwc, psc, G+**, Director General of BIISS, welcomed the distinguished guests to the seminar. He extended his heartfelt gratitude to the respected Chief Guest, General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed for gracing the occasion despite his hectic schedule. The Director General expressed that it would not be possible to discuss defence diplomacy or any form of diplomacy if Bangladesh was not independent. As such, he paid his solemn reverence to the the memory of the main architect of our independence, the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, for his lifelong struggle for our independence. He also paid his tribute to all the martyrs and freedom fighters who made their supreme sacrifices for the liberation of our motherland.

The Director General shared that defence diplomacy, in addition to traditional methods of diplomacy, has been recently emphasised by scholars and practitioners for achieving a country's national interests. There are various discourses about defence diplomacy in the existing literature. Throughout human history, many great strategic thinkers recognised the far-reaching effects of the military beyond the battlefield. Centuries of debate on military theory and practice illustrate the military's ability to function outside of pure combat and the need to employ their talents wisely



throughout the range of national power. Defence diplomacy is an idea that employs both old and new instruments, measures, strategies, and diplomacy. The Director General stated that the traditional understanding of defence has undergone a substantial transformation in an increasingly interconnected world. Defence is no longer confined to the battlefield, it now encompasses a multifaceted approach that includes diplomacy, cooperation and strategic engagement. Defence diplomacy transcends traditional military alliances, focusing on building cooperative relationships, fostering trust, and promoting stability in the international arena.

The Director General recalled that for Bangladesh, Bangabandhu laid the foundation for defence diplomacy way back in the early 1970s. It was that time when the country was looking for resources for post-war reconstruction and trying to cement its place in the international community. Pakistani's propaganda against Bangladesh was one of the major obstacles to establishing formal diplomatic relations with the Muslim-majority countries and the Arab nations. Bangabandhu's decision to send a military medical team and other aid in 1973 to support the Arab countries' cause during the Arab-Israeli war was a master stroke of defence diplomacy. This paved the way for obtaining recognition from Egypt and Syria, followed by Jordan, Kuwait and Yemen. Soon, most Muslim-majority countries followed the path. Even Bangladesh received forty-four T-55 tanks as a token of gratitude from Egypt. Subsequently, in 1974, under the leadership of Bangabandhu, Bangladesh received its first defence policy for restructuring its Armed Forces. Almost four decades later, under the aegis of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh re-formulated its Defence Policy 2018, which identified 'defence diplomacy' as one of its three pillars.

Major General Abu Bakar stated that Bangladesh, being a key littoral of the Bay of Bengal, bears a great geostrategic significance in the Indo-Pacific region. It is considered the gateway to South and Southeast Asia, making itself a hub for regional and inter-regional trade and commercial activities. He cautioned that any potential escalation of tension in the Indo-Pacific region would have far greater implications for Asian countries as well as for Bangladesh. He advocated that collaborative initiatives such as joint military exercises, information-sharing agreements, and capacity-building programmes can foster greater trust and cooperation among regional stakeholders.

The Director General observed that comprehensive. Now, it emphasises issues beyond the traditional security paradigm, including climate change, counterterrorism and disaster management. Moreover, Bangladesh actively contributes to international peacekeeping missions under the umbrella of the United Nations. As one of the largest contributors of troops to UN peacekeeping operations, Bangladesh has earned international acclaim for its commitment to promoting peace and security in conflict-affected regions around the world. Bangladesh can solidify its reputation as a responsible global actor and strengthen its diplomatic ties with the international community by further enhancing its peacekeeping capabilities and participating in training and capacity-building initiatives.

Major General Abu Bakar stated that the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, realised that in a world of realpolitik stained by war, conflict, and competition, it would be essential to defend multilateralism. Since then, Bangladesh's diplomatic forte has remained, where Bangladesh has been a proactive actor in numerous normative and policymaking platforms and initiatives.





The Director General recalled that over the last few years, as part of defence diplomacy, Bangladesh's Armed Forces have participated in bilateral and multilateral military exercises, provided training to foreign military personnel, and participated in post-disaster relief efforts in many regions of the world. Bangladesh Armed Forces shared their expertise in defence, peacekeeping and disaster management through the centres for excellence, such as the National Defence College (NDC), the Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC), the Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT), and so forth.

Major General Abu Bakar argued that, in the realm of non-traditional security, issues such as violent extremism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, transnational crimes, piracy, natural disasters and pandemics, among others, have acquired increased attention within the purview of security studies and global politics. On the other hand, states understood the value of multilateral cooperation and, conversely, the price of non-cooperation to face these challenges. In other words, non-traditional security has reinforced the neo-liberal faith in institutions as the guardians of international norms and values. In this respect, there is a growing expectation that the countries of the Bay of Bengal region can play a more active role in ensuring peace and stability in this region. The Director General emphasised that Bangladesh believes in peaceful and prosperous coexistence as one of the littoral states. Therefore, the country focuses on a stable Bay of Bengal as well as a peaceful Indo-Pacific region. In this regard, Bangladesh promotes peace and cooperation by practising multilateral arrangements and is committed to addressing the region's growing geopolitical uncertainties.

As Major General Abu Bakar reached achieving the end of his deliberation, he reiterated that Bangladesh's defence diplomacy is focused on creating a conducive environment for generating trust and friendship among the regional and global powers to achieve peace and stability. The country also tries to engage all the stakeholders bilaterally and multilaterally to counter the non-traditional security challenges of the region. In addition, Bangladesh believes that defence diplomacy can facilitate understanding and deepen the confidence among the defence forces of the region to work together. Since the Bay of Bengal region's security and stability is deeply connected with Bangladesh's national interest; the country seeks to extend its relations with the neighbouring countries. In this regard, the Director General expressed that he believed that promoting peace and cooperation through practising multilateral defence diplomacy is necessary to face the region's growing geopolitical uncertainties. He was optimistic that through strategic partnerships, collaborative initiatives and a commitment to multilateral cooperation, Bangladesh can navigate the complexities of the 21st-century security landscape and emerge as a leading voice for peace and stability in the region and beyond. The Director General concluded his remarks by expressing gratitude to the respected Chief Guest, distinguished panellists, media representatives, and the learned audience for encouraging BIISS's endeavour with their kind participation.

PRESENTATION ONE

EVOLVING NOTION OF DEFENCE DIPLOMACY AND ITS ROLE IN ACHIEVING FOREIGN POLICY GOALS



Dr ASM Ali Ashraf

*Professor, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Professor Dr ASM Ali Ashraf divided his presentation into five broad themes. He also raised two central questions: (i) how the notion of defence diplomacy has evolved, and (ii) what role defence diplomacy can play in achieving foreign policy goals. Being an academic, he argues that defence diplomacy does not have any straightforward meaning; instead, there are competing IR theoretical perspectives, each having its way of defining what defence diplomacy is. He mentioned that he would look at the global practices of defence diplomacy by analysing the major practices of four countries, viz., the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and China, to understand how the notion of defence diplomacy has evolved in these countries. Later, he would discuss the Bangladesh case study.

Professor Ashraf then reflected on why the topic of defence diplomacy should be cared about and argued that there are three major reasons. The first reason is that the very term 'defence diplomacy'

is quite problematic and a bit paradoxical because the traditional notion of defence is about the use of military force and the war-making capacity of a state. He informed that the conventional argument here is that defence is all about fighting war. On the other hand, diplomacy is about making peace through dialogues and conversations. So, according to conventional wisdom, defence and diplomacy do not go together. The second reason is that during the entire period of the Cold War from the late 1940s to the 1990s, the two superpowers divided the world into their spheres of influence and defence diplomacy was quite predictable because the Americans had their way of building military alliances. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, had their way of building its military alliances, and members of those alliances would practice defence diplomacy in a very predictable manner. However, at the end of the Cold War and the transformation of the international security environment, there was a need for reshaping defence diplomacy. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the post-9/11 era provided newer challenges and new opportunities for defining and practising defence diplomacy. Professor Ashraf said that the third major reason for understanding and studying defence diplomacy is that we are now dealing with complex humanity and emergencies in a wide range of countries where the demand for peacekeeping missions requires newer types of defence diplomacy. Professor Ashraf said that there are quite contrasting perspectives when it comes to defining defence diplomacy based on various theories of IR. The dominant school of thought here is the liberal school because, after the Cold War, the Western countries were trying to engage with the post-Soviet and Eastern European countries. At that time, expanding NATO and introducing security sector reforms in the post-Soviet countries were the ultimate goal of defence diplomacy. It was in that context where defence diplomacy was defined as a cooperative initiative to promote international security. Still, there are other schools of thought, like the Marxists, who like to argue that defence diplomacy has been the vehicle for the global north to maintain its



hegemonic relations with the countries of the global south in Africa, Asia and Latin America. On the other hand, constructivists focus on the notion of norms, arguing that defence diplomacy is about dialogues between armies; defence diplomacy is about mutually shared understanding and creating the norms of dialogues rather than escalating conflicts and tensions. The fourth reason is that the actual history of IR argues that the motivation behind the defence diplomatic initiative is not solely about goodwill visits but also defence consultations, arms procurement, or defence modernisation. Professor Ashraf said that these are all about enhancing the national interest and maintaining the balance of power for the great power countries.

Professor Ashraf then discussed that various theoretical perspectives each offer their interpretation of what defence diplomacy is. He stated that the traditional concepts of deterrence and territorial defence were considered obsolete after the end of the Cold War. In this context, in 1998, a strategic defence review of the UK advanced the notion of defence diplomacy as one of the eight different pillars of its strategic worldview, and it argued that defence diplomacy is about cooperative security with Russia and East European countries. That was the dominant school of thought in understanding defence diplomacy. Then, looking at the Asian countries, the ASEAN plus three, the ASEAN region of the Forum, and the Shangri-La dialogue, which is attended by quite senior officials such as the defence secretaries of the United States, Chinese senior military delegates, and defence ministers from major Asian countries, were creating the impression that they were moving towards building new norms. He said that primarily the Malaysian and the Singaporean concerns over national security and their concerns over Indonesian hegemonic ambitions in the Southeast Asian countries were the primary drivers of building these cooperative dialogues and the defence diplomatic initiatives. So, while the liberals focus on the benign and cooperative gesture of defence diplomacy, the constructivists look at how defence diplomacy is about a constructed idea developed by nations for their defence engagements. Conversely, Marxists focus on the behaviour of the former imperial powers and former superpowers along with their liberal peacebuilding efforts and argue that the patron-client relationship between the global north and the global south has not been ended. It is being persisted because of the evolving nature of defence diplomacy. They point to the African landscape where long-standing military presence by major European countries demonstrates the ability of the former imperial powers to maintain their influence.

Professor Ashraf then explained that the realist school of thought defined defence diplomacy as an instrument of national power, citing examples from the Australian Defence Force in the Pacific region and how Argentina, Brazil, and Eastern European countries practised defence diplomacy. The main goal is to use defence diplomacy to achieve their foreign policy goals. Now, looking at the post-9/11 era, it is known that the most significant international case study would be how the United States built up an international military coalition of more than 40 countries to deploy their forces in Afghanistan for the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This is poorly understood through the defence diplomacy lens. Still, the formation of the military coalition and the maintenance of the coalition were concurrent tasks for the defence diplomats of the United States. The primary objective was to build and maintain the coalition, do threat assessments and carry out civil-



military reconstruction, also referred to as provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan and Iraq. Subsequently, the focus shifted from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency and then planning for an exit. This whole range of activities was defined and practised under the notion of defence diplomacy.

Professor Ashraf then started discussing the selective country cases and started with the American case. He stated that the book titled, 'Boots and Suits' clearly illustrates the notion of defence diplomacy. The boots represent defence and suits represent the diplomats. The whole argument is that the traditional notion of diplomacy is quite narrow and is thought to be the only domain of foreign policy practitioners. On the other hand, the traditional notion of defence is also quite narrow because it refers to the practice of the military forces, and the whole idea is that there are no overlapping responsibilities and more interagency responsibilities. The post-Cold War multiple complex emergencies requiring defence and civilian diplomats to understand their objectives better and coordinate their activities in pursuit of defence diplomacy.

Professor Ashraf stressed that there are three levels of analysis when it comes to understanding American defence diplomacy practices: strategic, operational, and tactical. Looking at the strategic level, the argument is that it is about civilian as well as military personnel's pursuit of diplomatic goals concerning military topics. The topics encompass maintaining threats, managing threats or tensions, negotiating peace talks, forming alliances and coalitions, and promoting cooperation in areas such as arms. These pertain to the strategic pursuit of defence diplomacy. The operational aspects of the practice include government-to-government negotiations by defence officials, such as the engagement of defence ministers and their foreign counterparts in deploying warships to

enhance international waters navigation and conducting training exercises. At the tactical level, we observe that 21st-century warfare shares common aspects with UN peacekeeping missions looking at civil-military humanitarian emergencies. This is evident in contexts such as Afghanistan and Iraq, African peacekeeping missions, provincial reconstruction teams, and the crucial roles of military commanders and embassy officials. After completing major combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the American military forces and their coalition partners faced significant challenges in dealing with insurgencies in both countries, for which they were ill-prepared. This led them to innovate with the notion of province-based reconstruction. These priorities were quite different from the Americans; their model was more military-led, but they also needed to invite diplomats, civilian development activists, participants and NGOs. The whole idea is that there was an intensive need for ambassadors and military commanders on the ground to plan, design, implement and develop an initiative within the provincial reconstruction team. This was something quite innovative in the context of post-9/11.

Professor Ashraf then delved into British practices, highlighting that the UK is one of the champions in terms of innovating the notion of defence diplomacy, particularly in its commitment to ensure access to bases and overflight rights in African countries. Now, the realists have pointed out that it is all about cooperation, but these are all about maintaining the national interest of the country's concern. These are the traditional practices. These practices serve as a blueprint for all countries, including deploying defence attachés and advisors, using conflict advisors, and establishing a conflict prevention pool in the UK. The UK maintains a pool of experts ready for deployment. Additionally, the UK conducts both short-term and long-term visits by military training officials.

Professor Ashraf said that Australians have often used the term 'defence diplomacy' in their defence white papers. They are some of the best practitioners of defence diplomacy. They define defence diplomacy as a low-risk practice because it's not about heightening tensions; it's about sharing the burdens of cooperative security, and they argue that it's about generating transparency in the security relationship between countries. Some of the flagship defence diplomats' initiatives of the Australian defence force are that they are humanitarian in exercising in the Pacific countries. However, academics are interested in evaluating the extent to which these defence-deployed initiatives have yielded the intended results. The desired outcome has always been a strategic influence in the region. Academics are sceptical, arguing that some of these are overly ambitious and have produced very minimum strategic objectives. Often, it is quite problematic that defence diplomacy discussions are highly biased towards magnifying their desired outcomes, claiming that they create bigger impacts.

Professor Ashraf also discussed China's defence diplomacy practices, noting that China has been steadily catching up with Western powers. China's growing influence in African nations, particularly through its defence production support, clearly demonstrates its pursuit of economic, political, and strategic objectives. China's flagship foreign policy project, the Belt and Road Initiative, closely aligns with its defence diplomacy initiatives.



Professor Ashraf then delved into the Bangladesh case, demonstrating that, despite its humble resources and aspirations, Bangladesh has emerged as one of the top practitioners in the field of defence diplomacy. Examining some of the most recent examples, such as the I-PAM seminar for senior military officials and the joint exercises of four South Asian countries, highlights some of Bangladesh's most prominent defence diplomacy practices. He also highlighted the long-standing defence procurement partnerships with China, which are integral to our defence diplomacy efforts. However, Bangladesh's greatest pride lies in the peacekeeping missions it has participated in. According to the most recent data, Bangladesh ranks among the top four, with total troop contributions ranging from 6,000 to 7,000. Bangladesh's most compelling missions have been in Congo, Mali, the Central African Republic and Sudan. These are all complex multi-dimensional stabilisation missions, and some of them require robust posturing. So, defence diplomacy is not only about goodwill visits and high-level talks but also about creating standards and best practices for international multilateral military coalition operations in the context of UN peacekeeping missions. Bangladesh also contributed to the joint exercise in Saudi Arabia. It is important to keep in mind that there have been two different international military coalitions in the fight against ISIS: one is the US-led coalition, and the other is the Saudi-led coalition. The Saudi-led coalition gives the impression that Muslim countries are willing and able to fight against militant Muslims, which is a way of sharing the burden among countries with a predominantly Muslim population.

Professor Ashraf further emphasised that from a pragmatic view defence diplomacy does not always produce the desired outcome. Two factors have the potential to limit the impact of defence diplomacy. Investing in defence diplomacy may not produce the desired result if two countries have substantial political differences. The best example would be that despite years of military

and defence engagements between the United States and its counterparts in China and Russia, they have very sharply polarised world views, as illustrated in the context of the Ukraine war and tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. The argument suggests that the major obstacles stem from China's political differences over NATO's role in the post-Soviet era. Even though NATO and Russia had a council, NATO wanted to engage Russia and spent more than 10 years after the Cold War in the 1990s. It looked very promising from Francis Fukayama's theory, making the world look utopian, that we are looking at the end of history, and the liberal order is prevailing, which is not happening.

Professor Ashraf looked at the second major source of scepticism and pointed out that defence diplomacy is often thought to be a magic bullet. It will yield the desired outcome in the way of building good relations. Understanding defence diplomacy as a long-term investment is crucial. So, defence diplomacy practitioners need to be mindful of the fact that there might be a short-term crisis between countries even though there are long-standing and years-long defence diplomacy interactions. This means that defence diplomatic dialogues and initiatives cannot be extricated in the context of a short-term crisis. The best way to understand defence diplomacy is to say that it is a continuous process of building confidence and trust between partner countries and participating countries.

Professor Ashraf then stated that the biggest question for Bangladesh would be how to utilise these concepts, competing theories, and knowledge of these global practices in Bangladesh's context. He further asked how can Bangladesh think of integrating defence diplomacy into achieving its foreign policy goals. He said that before looking at the answer, it is important to consider Bangladesh's worldview and consider how Bangladesh perceives its strategic and economic environment. These are the two major factors that define Bangladesh's foreign policy priorities, and Bangladesh should also develop requirements for defence diplomacy. Now, given the fact that Bangladesh is located in the Bay of Bengal, it is essential to understand the Indo-Pacific strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative, which provide competing pressures for its foreign policy. There is so much power struggle and the search for sustained economic growth, the challenges for LDC graduation, turbulent neighbourhoods, and defining the southern and eastern neighbours are the strategic environment and economic realities that are major drivers of Bangladesh's foreign policy priorities.

Professor Ashraf argued that the five major priorities for Bangladesh are: first, a strategic precept, definitely striking a delicate balance between IPS and BRI; second, maintaining our excellence in UNPKOs; third, bolstering our Rohingya repatriation efforts; fourth, diversifying our export baskets is a relatively simple but challenging task. Bangladesh is over relying on RMG exports and overbanking on remittances from labour migration. Finally, extending best practices in counterterrorism. If these are the key foreign policy priorities, then the big question would be how to tailor Bangladesh's defence diplomacy initiatives to meet its foreign policy goal.

Professor Ashraf stated that defence diplomacy is not aimed at replacing existing foreign policy practices; rather, defence diplomacy is about adapting, tailoring, and integrating military engagements, military-military cooperation, and military-civil cooperation for the pursuit of foreign policy goals. Nowhere in the world has a defence diplomacy initiative attempted to undermine existing foreign policy practices. Defence diplomacy is about first understanding the broader foreign policy objectives, then understanding the existing bilateral and multilateral foreign policy practices, and then integrating the role of defence services and defence-level engagements for the pursuit of the broader foreign policy. To keep those parameters in mind and maintain the delicate balance between IPS and BRI, Bangladesh must design its defence deals in a way that reaps benefits from Bangladesh's relations with both the great powers- the United States and China. Joint exercises should also be continued, keeping in mind that the region has competing geopolitical interests. So, Bangladesh should not do anything to give the wrong signal; rather, building confidence and trust among great powers and reducing ambiguities would be our ultimate goal. For military education, Bangladesh has some of the best and finest military education institutions, including the Defence Staff College and the NDC. Professor Ashraf argued that these would be Bangladesh's venues for practising defence diplomacy. Bangladesh has one of the world's finest military training facilities for peacekeeping missions. Bangladesh must continue to enhance the capacity and performance of the BIPSOT system. The stabilisation missions and robust peacekeeping postures are putting us under increasing pressure. Bangladesh needs to understand the situation analysis better and upgrade its capabilities to meet the needs of complex emergencies in African countries like Mali.

Rohingya repatriation diplomacy is an area where defence diplomacy has yet to play a big role. There is a need to explore how defence diplomacy can play its rightful role in promoting dialogues with major Asian powers like India and China and also engaging Myanmar. Military officials from Myanmar often participate in staff colleges and NDC, and that needs to continue regularly.

Regarding export market diversification, we can think of new destinations, especially those countries where we have peacekeeping missions. It would be beneficial if Bangladesh could align those destinations with looking for market access. Finally, Bangladesh needs to perform joint training and assessments to enhance its counterterrorism capacities.

Professor Ashraf concluded by saying that we live in an anarchic world, and military forces remain a vital instrument of foreign policy in such an anarchic state system. There are competing theories and international best practices. Keeping those in mind, successful defence diplomacy must require understanding the broader foreign policy goals of partner countries and target nations, and then there is a need for coordinated efforts between the civilian and the military officials.

PRESENTATION TWO

GROWING GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DEFENCE DIPLOMACY FOR BANGLADESH



ASM Tarek Hassan Semul

*Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of International and
Strategic Studies (BIISS)*

ASM Tarek Hassan Semul, Research Fellow, BIISS delivered his presentation on ‘Growing Geopolitical Competition: Challenges and Opportunities of Defence Diplomacy for Bangladesh’. He based his presentation on two basic assumptions. First, he argued that the term ‘defence diplomacy’ should be defined from the practitioner’s perspective, and second, it has a geopolitical connotation.

While discussing the geopolitical roots of the term, Mr Hassan stated that a systematic study of defence diplomacy can trace its root in the aftermath of WWII and the early phase of the Cold War. In Europe, the epicentre of geopolitical competition, both the alliances, the Warsaw Pact and NATO, essentially pursued their member states to be ready not only to fight the war alongside one another but to fight any war as a single unit. To achieve such a high degree of interoperability and intra-alliance integration, defence diplomacy tools such as joint training exercises and officer

exchanges became the most common activities within the two opposing alliances. Beyond Europe, many of the newly independent nations from the decolonisation wave either maintained close military relations with their former colonial rulers or acted as free agents within the international system. Both the Americans and the Soviets competed with each other and used defence diplomacy as a wooing tool to bring these newly independent nations into their respective camps. To that end, alongside economic aid, the superpowers supplied arms and trained the recipient militaries of these nations to build political ties. Such defence diplomacy programmes known as security assistance were evaluated not by their ability to enhance the military capability of the recipient countries but rather by their political utility to bring these decolonised countries into either the capitalist or communist camp.

In the post-Cold War era, there was a considerable amount of doubt among the US and its Western allies that the large Soviet-style militaries of former Warsaw Pact countries could hinder these nations' delicate transition to democracy. Mr Hassan argued that to prevent such a scenario, which might have sent Eastern Europe into chaos, Western countries used their militaries to reconstruct the former Warsaw Pact countries' armed forces through different non-violent programmes such as officer exchanges and training programmes. NATO's Partnership for Peace was one such program which helped to establish democratic norms of civil-military relations as well as to bring Eastern Europe within the existing collective security institutions such as the NATO and European Union.

The UK's Ministry of Defence (MOD) coined a new term called "defence diplomacy" to bring all these different military cooperation programmes under a single umbrella term. During the US-led Global War on Terror (GWOT) in Afghanistan, defence diplomacy received renewed traction as a



tool of international statecraft for the American-led efforts to combat militant extremism around the world. Despite unilateralism being the early nature of this war, NATO's participation in the Afghanistan war brought interoperability to the core of NATO's defence diplomacy activities, such as exchange and integration programmes. Moreover, the complexities in both Iraq and Afghanistan wars have underscored the importance of local allies in combating militant extremism. During the Cold War, defence diplomacy was regarded largely as a symbolic gesture to gain traction with the local political elite in the recipient countries rather than building their military capabilities. However, GWOT called for the support of an efficient and capable local ally. Consequently, the US has used defence diplomacy to build the capabilities of its allies to support counterterrorism initiatives.

Mr Hassan asserted that the majority of the literature views defence diplomacy as a peacetime activity that employs nonviolent methods to maintain peace and ease tensions. However, he disagreed with such an assumption and argued that this is not only a peacetime activity. Rather, defence diplomacy is also a wartime activity, and increasingly, due to the brewing geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific, this tool has been used by the great powers to cultivate defence relationship with the countries of the region. Consequently, many of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region are preparing for a looming conflict that may lie ahead due to this geopolitical tussle.

The Indo-Pacific countries are conducting different kinds of joint military exercises among themselves to increase their level of interoperability in wartime situations or for disaster management. However, he argued that a good example of a peacetime activity was the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADMM), through which ASEAN countries tried to have a conversation between and among their armies to resolve any tension or concern that they might have. On the other hand, a great example of defence diplomacy as a wartime effort would be the recent Russia-Ukraine war. Where Iran provided surface-to-surface ballistic missiles and drones to Russia; on the other hand, Turkey provided Bayraktar drones to Ukraine. Both Russia and Ukraine tried to manage and secure the strategic weapons they needed for their war effort; NATO and Western efforts to support Ukraine is part of a bigger defence diplomacy framework. So, it would be naive to think that defence diplomacy is only a peacetime effort to maintain peace and non-violence.

Mr Hassan then discussed the geopolitical connection of defence diplomacy. A conflicting perspective of norms, rules, and order is observed upon examining the Indo-Pacific region. On the one hand, the US and its alliance have established an Indo-Pacific strategy. China, possessing its unique global vision, is attempting to integrate the East and the West through the Belt and Road Initiative. On the other hand, the liberal order and multilateralism solidified in the post-Cold War period have been going through a strenuous situation due to the recent rise of minilaterals. Multilateralism has failed to address numerous multilateral concerns, such as maritime security issues that emerged from the geopolitical competition and maritime boundary disputes among

the Indo-Pacific countries. Therefore, the minilaterals have emerged where member countries are revitalising their security and defence cooperation under the aegis of minilaterals such as AUKUS and QUAD in anticipation of looming future conflicts in the region. Defence diplomacy has been playing an integral role in terms of defence technology transfer, increasing defence capability and interoperability among the partner armed forces as well as conducting joint military exercises.

Mr Hassan highlighted the growing influence of maritime chokepoints, ongoing base-building activities and possible flashpoints for conflicts in the Indo-Pacific region and surrounding region of Bangladesh. He argued that Bangladesh, along with other littoral and landlocked nations of the region, it has strategic dependence on the vast maritime space of the Indo-Pacific region, which facilitates the international trade of goods and energy. The Indian Ocean region has long been the primary artery for pumping oil from the Persian Gulf into the global economy. If any of these chokepoints shut down abruptly or even if there is a potential risk of conflict, any resultant commotion will severely impact the global economy.

Under such a volatile condition, growing militarisation in the Indo-Pacific region is another concern that a developing country like Bangladesh needs to consider. He argued that World military spending continued to grow in 2023, reaching an all-time high of US\$ 2.1 trillion. This was the seventh consecutive year that spending increased. The top five also hold 51 per cent of the global economy. South Asia and Southeast Asia are regions with the highest boots on the ground; as per the global firepower of the 11-military strength ranking, five are in Asia (China, India, Japan, Pakistan and South Korea). All the powers are in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR), China, India, Japan, Pakistan, and South Korea, with territorial possession as well as disputes in the Himalayas and the South China Sea. Many of the Indo-Pacific nations have commenced their defence modernisation program. This has created two sets of trouble for many developing countries. Firstly, such massive modernisation and increased defence spending might undermine the security of many developing nations, primarily those that are preoccupied with development. Secondly, the acquisition or the transfer of strategic defence weapon systems such as submarines, missiles, and ballistic missile systems often can trigger an arms race, which in turn undermines regional security.

Amidst such a capricious future, Mr Hassan pointed out Bangladesh's foreign policy priorities which stems from its constitution, and there is a second important document, the Indo-Pacific Outlook. Both documents talk about multilateralism, keeping faith in international institutions, and maintaining a balanced and neutral foreign policy. In such a context, Bangladesh's Forces' Goal 2030 wants to modernise its armed forces so that it can deal with brewing challenges in the region.

Table 1: Bangladesh's Defence MoUs since Independence (1971- April, 2024):

Countries	Defence/Security/Strategic Dialogue & Defence MoUs	
	Signed	Pending
1. Australia	-	01
2. China	01	02
3. France	02	01
4. India	05	06
5. Japan	01	01
6. Kuwait	01	-
7. Qatar	02	-
8. Russia	02	05
9. Saudia Arabia	01	03
10. Turkey	03	03
11. United Kingdom	01	02
12. United States	-	03
Total	19	27

Source: Bangladesh Armed Forces Division

To elaborate on Bangladesh's defence diplomatic endeavour, Mr Hassan presented the Armed Forces Division data, which shows that since independence, Bangladesh has signed 19 defence-related MoUs with 11 countries, and the number of pending MoUs in discussion is 27. He argued that in recent years, many of the major regional and global powers expressed their interest in strengthening their defence relations with Bangladesh. For example, since 2018, Bangladesh and India have started to hold regular defence dialogue. Bangladesh and Turkey had their third military dialogue in 2023, which started in 2015. In 2022, Bangladesh had its first defence dialogue with the United Kingdom. The major tag words that came out of all these defence dialogues and multilateral exercises are interoperability, maritime domain awareness, capacity building in HADR, counterterrorism, peacekeeping, technological enhancement, and maritime security, which hints towards the growing concerns due to brewing geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region.

Table 2: Major Defence Purchases 2018-2023

Country	Articles
China	Light Tanks, Surface to Air Missile (SAM) System, frigate and various types of Chinese missiles and accessories.
France	Air Defence Radar system
Germany	Primary trainer aircraft
Italy	Fixed Wing Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)
Singapore	Automatic Grenade Launcher (AGL)
South Africa	Semi-Automatic Grenade Launcher (SAGL)
Spain	Fixed Wing Medium Utility Aircraft
Turkey	Otokar Kobra II infantry mobility vehicles (IMVs) and mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles, Otokar Kobra I light armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs), RN-94 armoured ambulances, TRG-300 Tiger MLRS, TRG-230 surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs), Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs, Oerlikon Skyguard radar system, ground surveillance radars, portable jammer
UK	MK-5 aircraft

Source: Presenter's compilation from Open-Source Data



Furthermore, Mr Hassan pointed out a dominant trend of diversification in major defence purchases from 2018 to 2023 for Bangladesh (see Table 2). In the past five years, Bangladesh has endeavoured to procure essential items to enhance its defence capability while maintaining a balance in the source countries for purchasing these items. These items bolster Bangladesh's defence capabilities and hold significance for its UN peacekeeping missions. Bangladesh has successfully cultivated interest among major regional and global partners by fostering a balanced defence cooperation. Additionally, Bangladesh is actively augmenting its indigenous defence industry.

Mr Hassan concluded his presentation by raising two concerns for Bangladesh. The first concern is striking a balance between major powers, a challenge that affects not only Bangladesh but also other small and middle powers. The second concern pertains to the level of strategic autonomy Bangladesh can achieve within this polarised world order because of the potential for regional conflict due to the continuous existence of flashpoints and militarisation in the Indo-Pacific region. Bangladesh must prioritise the security of maritime space, given its significant oil and gas reserves in the sea and Bangladesh's aspirations to harness the blue economy. For its development aspirations and national security, it is crucial to secure both Bangladesh's shipping lane and maritime space.

PRESENTATION THREE

DEFENCE DIPLOMACY IN UNITED NATIONS AND OTHER OVERSEAS MISSIONS: HORIZONS TO EXPLORE



**Major General (Retd) Main Ullah Chowdhury, SUP,
OSP, afwc, psc**

Former Deputy Force Commander (DFC)

*United Nations Mission In South Sudan (UNMISS) and Acting
Force Commander (A/FC), United Nations Mission for the
Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)*

Major General (Retd) Main Ullah Chowdhury started his speech by arguing that, unlike the general belief that conducting ‘diplomacy’ is the task of the career diplomats and the ministry-concerned, diplomacy, in the changing world system, is no longer confined to the domains of the career diplomats or to one single ministry. Military power constitutes an integral component of national power and plays a significant role in implementing state policy. It generates various capacities for foreign policymaking. It is an essential element of diplomacy in the broader context. Hence, defence diplomacy has been and is always a branch of broader diplomacy that aims to use the Armed Forces coherently and in a non-coercive manner to achieve foreign policy goals through a set of tools, including high-level military officials’ visits, joint military exercises, security

and defence dialogues, participating in peacekeeping missions, providing assistance to other countries in the form of humanitarian aid relief during the crisis time and disaster management. In the United Nations peacekeeping missions, Bangladesh has long been playing a significant role in maintaining peace, tranquillity and stability in the conflicting states and around the globe. Bangladesh's military footprint has been widely seen from East Timor up to Haiti. As such, almost all the continents were touched by the Bangladeshi army personnel under the aegis of the UN.

The area of diplomacy is systematically expanding, taking a departure from strictly political issues. Contemporary diplomacy focuses on the problems of trade, economic, scientific, or military context. Therefore, an enhanced understanding and appropriate comprehension have become essential to realise the foreign policy objectives of any country. It has thus proved to be a specialised instrument of foreign policy. It needs to be integrated into the system of cooperation between the states and international organisations, either bilaterally or multilaterally.

Bangladesh's military officers are always trained to achieve their respective tactical proficiency and operational goals. In addition, they all are groomed with progressively more strategic outlooks as they climb the ladder. The rank of the Bangladesh Armed Forces officers remains universal, and they have equal status everywhere in the world. They can talk to their counterparts whenever they need to. In addition, there is an added advantage that the Armed Forces members of every country are similar in terms of their language, gesture, posture, and transparency. Thus, they can understand each other better. Once utilised appropriately, they can bring an effective result for the country in achieving either the defence diplomacy goal or the foreign policy objective.



About the advantage of the United Nations platform, Major General (Retd) Chowdhury said that the UN has been there for a safer world since 1948. About the UN peacekeeping missions, he quoted Dag Hammarskjöld, “Peacekeeping is not a job for soldiers, but only soldiers can do it”. He informed the audience that the number of peacekeeping missions since 1948 is 71, and the ongoing number of missions is 11, except for Mali. In these missions, all the people, including the uniformed ones, get the opportunity to mingle, work, and understand each other much better by taking the UN platform. To him, this is one of the major advantages of working in the UN platform.

Regarding Bangladesh's role in the UN platform, Major General (Retd) Chowdhury said that Bangladesh was born half a century ago. The Father of the Nation endorsed Bangladesh's commitment towards global peace and extended our friendship to our global partners. The Bangladesh flag was further taken to different parts of the world when it undertook the journey under the flag of the UN in 1988—the year in which Bangladesh first stepped into the UN effort. Bangladesh first embarked in 1988 under UN missions, and the following story was the Gulf War in 1991. In the subsequent years, Bangladesh sent troops to Operation Kuwait Punargathan (Reconstruction), and they have been there since 1992. Immediately after the Gulf War, Bangladesh was called upon in the other UN missions because of the dedication, commitment and service that the Bangladesh Armed Forces rendered.

For around 36 years, the UN Peacekeeping Operation has been nothing but Bangladesh's success story. Bangladesh consistently remains the number one troop-contributing country in the UN to date. While talking about defence diplomacy, bringing this into perspective is necessary. He then referred to the fact that Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) management in the Rohingya camps is a success story of Bangladesh. Because of the military, the people living there are safe and secure. On the call of the government, the military stepped in, distributed relief in the initial three months, and managed more than 700,000 FDMNs who came by one or two nights. He mentioned this as the way that defence can play a good role in taking the country's name into the different parts of the world. To complement his argument, Major General (Retd) Chowdhury talked about his experience of commanding two UN peacekeeping missions where people of 71 and 57 countries were involved. All these people were commanded by Bangladesh and they came to know about Bangladesh. Referring to this example, he said that this is the way that the Armed Forces can harmonise themselves into the international platform. Apart from the military officials, civilians and police also remain involved in those missions and they all work together. It has the potential to influence any activities and bring effective results.

The soldiers of Bangladesh armed forces work for the social upliftment of that particular mission area. They are well-accepted by the local people. In this regard, Major General (Retd) Chowdhury cited the examples of Sierra Leone, Liberia, South Sudan and Western Sahara. About South Sudan, he said that, because of the presence and the pursuance of the people in South Sudan and the

leadership of Bangladesh, it was possible to send a battalion in the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA). This is a glaring example of defence diplomacy and the success of Bangladesh. The President of that country has called Bangladeshi officers and told them that if Bangladesh wants, it can open a consulate or an embassy there. It was possible because of the soldiers from Bangladesh who were working there and were accepted by South Sudan's people.

Major General (Retd) Chowdhury at that juncture referred to one statement of the UN Secretary General, Mr António Guterres where he said that a peacekeeping operation is not an army or a humanitarian agency endeavour rather it is a tool to create the space for the nationally-owned political solution. Hence, defence diplomacy is not an independent action but a substantive force driving the country's foreign policy. He also informed the audience that UN peace support officers usually perform tasks based on a particular mandate and are quite complex. He also introduced a new idea known as 'the triple nexus' or 'PHD' (peace and security, humanitarian aid and development cooperation). For him, to run the UN missions based on peace, security, humanitarian act and development are essential. During difficult missions, it is imperative to get involved in development activities and support the humanitarian agencies in the country; otherwise, implementation of the mandate will be difficult.

About the contemporary challenge of peace support operations, Major General (Retd) Chowdhury said that the world is becoming quite complex, encompassing a range of issues, including climate, global peace and security, terrorism, domestic issues, and the role of non-state actors. As such, the UN missions are quite multi-challenging and multi-dimensional. The dynamic world environment is also changing for several reasons, including the ongoing wars around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic recession, the rise of new superpowers, and the growing multipolarity that is creating complexities for UN missions. All the individuals who are involved in the UN missions have to have appropriate knowledge of these issues before their deployment. The UN deals with these situations by setting specific priorities. There is an idea known as A4P, which means Action for Peacekeeping, where there are specific priorities. These priorities are interchangeable, and by changing the priorities based on situations, UN missions will probably be able to cope with the challenges.

Major General (Retd) Chowdhury then talked about how the UN military components operate in the diplomatic role. He informed that the military components are not purely in the military role nowadays; rather, they are equally playing the force protection role, active fighting role, negotiating role with the government and also supporting humanitarian aid agencies. In South Sudan, the military covers every movement of civilians or human rights agencies. As such, it is now imperative to discuss defence diplomacy in support of foreign policy since it is essential to have situational awareness and a very proactive role. This is not a one-day affair but requires a long-term investment. There is a need to set priorities and have greater coordination among

the agencies that are taking foreign policy forward. There is a need for a strategic mindset to do that. Meaningful engagement with the countries where our military footprints are available needs to be ensured. Many armies have foreign area officers to maintain foreign liaisons. Developing something of that nature will enable better deployment of defence diplomacy. Joining the agency-sponsored programmes will also be advantageous as they can assist the people.

In conclusion, Major General (Retd) Chowdhury said that nothing is linear in this complex world where issues including political, military, economic, social and information coexist together. These issues are spiralling and becoming complex. As such, understanding one's own situation correctly and developing one's own strategy based on the situation is a must.

PRESENTATION FOUR

EXISTING PRACTICES OF DEFENCE DIPLOMACY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS: THE CASE OF BANGLADESH



AVM (Retd) Mahmud Hussain, BBP, OSP, ndc, psc, acsc, GD (P)

*Distinguished Expert, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
Aviation and Aerospace University (BSMRAAU) and former
Ambassador of Bangladesh to Brunei*

AVM (Retd) Mahmud Hussain, BBP, OSP, ndc, psc, acsc, GD (P) presented on the topic 'Existing Practices of Defence Diplomacy and Future Directions: The Case of Bangladesh'. In his presentation, he spoke about different aspects of defence diplomacy. He said that when diplomacy fails, the war begins. Political philosophers or strategists have highlighted the importance of peace and the exigency of war. So, it is found that diplomacy is an essential component of national power. AVM Hussain highlighted that there are four elements of power: diplomacy, information, military and economics. Diplomacy embraces all the other three aspects of power. To understand diplomacy, one must also understand the national interest and the strategic environment in which one operates. For that, one must constantly assess one's own weaknesses and the other's strengths. So, for a military commander to become a diplomat, intellectual depth and practitioner insight are



needed, thus combining both theory and practice. Without a blend of this, operating as a diplomat wearing a uniform would be difficult. There are excellent examples of military diplomats in the world. One of the finest was probably Douglas MacArthur. He was the one who is said to have formulated the constitution of Japan. The fact that Japan would not fight a war and would have a force which would primarily be defensive in nature was included in the Japanese constitution under his persuasion. Here, it can be seen that military generals can offer the services of diplomats.

At this stage of his presentation, AVM Hussain argued that arbitrary advocacy of peace and rejection of war is too naïve in theory. If the problem of the state were only building peace, then the solution to it would not be at all difficult or problematic. The real task or challenge of the military commander as a diplomat is how to struggle for peace that protects and ensures national interest and the pursuit of national security. Because we live in an anarchical society with no supranational authority, the most essential thing to survive in this situation is to understand the value of self-help. So, the power of the military forms an instrument of diplomacy of a state in its relationship with the external world. The sources of diplomacy are rooted in realism or realpolitik. Henry Kissinger recognised this but he also said that its outcome lies in the hope for idealism or liberalism. So, both become part and parcel of the theoretical models of idealism and realism.

AVM Hussain shared a few concrete examples to support his diplomacy discussions. He expressed that he considers the Singaporean model to be a unique one in that it tries to protect its national interests through the advocacy of diplomacy. Because its foreign policy and defence policy are built upon two pillars. One is diplomacy, the other one is deterrence. Deterrence means that one should be able to effectively handle the threats emerging from outside, both in the localised

context and in the context of regional resilience. Singapore has a powerful military force and this is also one of the reasons that they have a robust strategic posture and this posture impacts certain aspects of their application. The rest is peacekeeping, humanitarian relief operations and humanitarian intervention. These are part of soft power diplomacy. Jane's World Air Forces say that Singapore's Air Force is Southeast Asia's most powerful and capable air arm. Nobody will deny this. Singapore holds its Airshow once every two years. In this year's Airshow, they invited almost 100,000 people. They also have one of the finest aerobatic teams. The attendees were military commanders, diplomats, and even businessmen in that particular airshow. This Airshow inspires other countries through the aerobatic display and gets them into procurement contracts in which Singapore is one of the vital components.

Defence diplomacy is also an application of non-violent and non-coercive strategies. Here, AVM Hussain shared his experience of operating in Chittagong Hill Tracts for six or seven years with the Bangladesh Army and other parliamentary forces. He expressed that this chapter of Bangladesh's defence diplomacy is underrated. The way the Army and other paramilitary forces held their ground in protecting the national interest and strategic security interests by guaranteeing Bangladesh's nationhood is an example worth imitating by different countries. However, there is not much talk about this contribution of the Army to Chittagong Hill Tracts preservation in security literature. Rather, some essays or articles have contributed to understanding non-traditional security threats as the main component of strategic issues. AVM Hussain expressed that he thought that was wrong.

On the point of Peacekeeping Operations, AVM Hussain referred back to how Sierra Leone adopted Bengali as the official language. It is only because of the contributions made by the peacekeepers to keep security in that particular country. The country has adopted it since 2002. This is a source of pride for the nation, which the military has been able to gain in the cultural aspect. This is an example of defence officers who are involved in promoting diplomacy in other countries of the world.

Referring back to the discussion of Air Power, AVM Hussain shared that Air Power is also used for diplomatic purposes. The Red Arrows, that is, the aerobatic team of the Royal Air Force, act as diplomats. They travel from country to country. They not only display their aerobatic skills, but behind those aerobatic skills, they also become an inspiration for other Air Forces to emulate them, the way Bangladesh's Peacekeeping Forces have sold both their hard ways and soft ways to the rest of the world in emulating the best practices of Bangladeshi peacekeepers. Next, he shared that gunboat diplomacy is something in which Bangladesh has been involved for quite a long time. Bangladesh Navy's involvement in deploying ships in Lebanon is a heroic and very encouraging initiative.

At this stage, AVM Hussain talked about the future directions for defence diplomacy. Geostrategic location is very unique. He referred to the previous speakers, saying that Bangladesh is in the confluence of South Asia and Southeast Asia and crowned by the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean



region. From that point of view, it needs a strong military force, particularly a strong Navy. Without a strong Navy, the sea lanes of communication of Bangladesh will be vulnerable. When the SLOCs are vulnerable, the shore will also become vulnerable. Both the Army and Navy need to be strong enough to deal with the enemy, and the Air Force also needs to be equally equipped so that the three forces can have a robust deterrent posture.

At this point of his deliberation, AVM Hussain shared some insights from his practical experience. For about four years as Brunei's High Commissioner, he had the experience of dealing with migrant workers. Their state is extremely miserable from the point of view of coordination because of the lack of information. He felt that the defence intelligence units and other security intelligence units would be able to provide necessary information and intelligence to the missions so that the migration process ultimately becomes stable, safe and secure, which is a commitment on the part of the government. He thought the DAs could provide a lot of help in this regard by working closely with the National Security Intelligence and the Director General of Forces Intelligence.

Next, he discussed the Myanmar issue. He talked about the troubled relations with Myanmar. Rohingyas have already become a security issue. He insisted on having a robust deterrent posture that can only come through by having a strong military, particularly the Bangladesh Army and other border security forces. However, there is a need on the part of these military commanders to have frequent exchanges in communication with the Myanmar government and Bangladesh must recognise the fact that political diplomats do not administer Myanmar. Military generals administer them and they only understand the language of the military. The language of the military is always hard, and in this case, that is needed because defence diplomacy does not talk only about soft

power capabilities; it also takes into cognisance the hard power and material capabilities of a state. He expressed that to deal with Myanmar, we should deal with them with an iron fist.

As part of the future directions, AVM Hussain suggested that military diplomats and the Heads of the Missions should cooperate closely and understand. He recommended that the embassies in Southeast Asia must have either a defence wing or some connectivity with the defence wing, which is centred on a bigger mission. The High Commissioners and Ambassadors need the threat analysis of the area. He brought up the issues regarding the militarisation of Indo-Pacific space and the shifting of alliances. The Defence advisor or Military Attaché can best provide this information. That is why the defence wing is a must when the Indo-Pacific strategy is becoming so important, particularly for the Western countries. Because of the continuously changing perspectives on the Indo-Pacific, there should be both a participatory role in strategic and defence dialogues between the foreign office and the defence department. While preparing diplomats, particularly the Military Attaché for serving in foreign missions, they need to have a good grounding in Artificial Intelligence, cybernetics and other areas of knowledge related to higher warfare sciences.

As part of his recommendations, AVM Hussain expressed that the most challenging task is how to appropriate the goods of defence diplomacy for use by the foreign office. One must remember that the world is changing. In 1989, the era of the Cold War between the East and the West had come to an end, and the bipolar world order, which was defined by the United States on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other hand, was no more. There was only one single power with all the material capabilities. In that particular environment, the US could shape the world's geopolitics. But then, gradually, things changed. China started rising, and China started competing with the US, particularly in the global economy and geo-strategy, as well in the Asia-Pacific. Since 2003, there has been a gradual decline in the US's strategic power application. The world is multipolar now. This multipolar world order also has implications for South Asia. In South Asia, it is India, which is central to geopolitics, but China is also trying to make an outlet through South Asia to dominate the Asia-Pacific. Hence, South and Southeast Asian countries are under these two great powers' constant push and pull. Under this transformative global international environment, there is a need for rethinking our security challenges, and it is there where defence diplomacy comes into account very strategically and imminently in the national interest. He thanked BISS for organising the seminar which has been graced by no less than the Chief of the Army Staff and several former senior military officers and diplomats.

As AVM Hussain reached the end of the deliberation, he emphasised that there is a need for greater coordination between the defence department and the foreign office. He concluded by saying that military power is an essential element within foreign policy instruments. The success of the state's diplomacy lies in using the moral precepts of the foreign policy with the material capabilities of the military doctrine and guiding the direction of its international relations.

OPEN DISCUSSION



Ambassador Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury, Bir Bikram

Former Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh

Ambassador Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury, Bir Bikram said that Bangladesh's military diplomacy worked best in two cases, and it's now broadening. First is the bilateral one that Bangladesh had with Sri Lanka when Sri Lanka faced some serious internal problems. At that time, the Bangladesh Army ran special courses at the School of Infantry and Tactics (SI&T) and selected Captains and Majors in the Sri Lankan Army in very large numbers. It established a huge amount of goodwill for the Bangladesh military as well as for Bangladesh in Sri Lanka, which continues today. Sri Lankan military

officials now often participate in courses in the Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA), Staff College, and National Defence College (NDC).

Secondly, he mentioned that Bangladesh has achieved significant name and fame through the UN peacekeeping missions. However, he identified that less has been talked about Bangladesh's strategy for military diplomacy. Instead of focusing solely on historical elements, he suggested focusing more on the Bangladesh strategy. He suggested that Bangladesh should cater for a bilateral relationship with the African countries where Bangladesh has enormous goodwill. He also proposed setting up military liaison officers as a part of the diplomatic missions and helping them with capacity building. It would benefit Bangladesh's diplomatic efforts, diplomatic presence, and increasing visibility in Africa.

Thirdly, he mentioned that Bangladesh has historical defence cooperation with India and that it is perhaps a more decisive one. Regarding the issue of establishing military diplomacy in the African countries, he suggested using the 'Kuwait Punargothon' as a template for continuing or strengthening bilateral relationships with countries where there are successful peacekeeping missions. In this regard, he mentioned that South Sudan is a classic example. Lastly, he talked about trade and noted that the global trade routes are now threatened by geopolitics and piracy. For him, this is going to be intensified now that the Suez Canal is almost a forbidden area. If Iran gets deeply involved in the Gaza situation, then the Strait of Hormuz will also become vulnerable. To protect the trade routes through which the traders of Bangladesh go to European countries, he suggested the deployment of the Bangladesh Navy.



Ambassador Md Abdul Hannan

Former Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva and Vienna

Ambassador Md Abdul Hannan suggested Professor Ali Ashraf to consider accommodating the relevance of Bangladesh in the context of transformational development. Bangladesh is leading to a smart economy, which is possibly a niche position in the global arena, and it has been highlighted by the recent book edited by Dr Sreeradha Datta. In that book, Bangladesh and its quest for a niche in the global context has been well argued by the Americans, Australians, Dutch, Indians and other scholars. Thus, he thinks Bangladeshi scholars can also look into it and

can seriously consider the transformational development of Bangladesh.

Ambassador Hannan reminded the audience that diplomacy itself, by definition, is an evolving process. The concept of the Asian pivot is destabilising the overall geostrategic order of the globe, and the things that are shaping and reshaping the mechanisms include the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), AUKUS (The Trilateral Security Partnership Between Australia, UK and US), Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), QUAD+ and AUKUS+. Given this context, he raised the question of whether Bangladesh is ready to integrate defence diplomacy into the overall architecture of national diplomacy. He also suggested thinking about the involvement and engagement of Bangladesh in the bilateral, regional and multilateral security architectures.

About the UN peacekeeping missions, Ambassador Hannan said that the whole nation must be proud of these tailored contributions of the defence forces as they are highlighting the country's image at the global level. He agreed with the speakers that besides the defence element, there are a lot of issues, like humanitarian issues, where the peacekeepers need to get involved. For him, this is the hallmark of diplomacy and friendship. Ambassador Hannan finally highlighted the need for developing skills that need to be resourceful in terms of capacity building and understanding the complexity of the security situation.



Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) Shahadat Hossain, psc

Consultant of China-Bangladesh Relations

Lieutenant Colonel (Retd) Shahadat Hossain argued that for Bangladesh's future strategy, now is the time that Bangladesh seriously thinks of having a Research Centre, which may be coordinated or guided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) or Armed Forces Division (AFD). Bangladesh needs to have a serious think-tank which will support the government at a very high stage. In addition, he also suggested formulating a complete department to study defence diplomacy. To supplement his argument, he brought some examples of China, where a separate research organisation gives

inputs to serving military, political, and government officials. He also referred to Yunnan University, where there is a complete department for studying the BIMSTEC.

Major General (Retd) Muhammad Abdul Matin, ndu, psc

Former Director General of BISS

Major General (Retd) Muhammad Abdul Matin informed the audience that the present government, from 1997 to 2001, had started the initiative of defence diplomacy as a part of the process and focused on the immediate neighbour, Myanmar. It was a part of breaking the ice between the two countries' military relationship. Unfortunately, it was discontinued later, which should have continued. If continued, the crisis that Bangladesh is currently facing with FDMNs could have been dealt in a better manner.





Professor Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir

Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka

Professor Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir said that for him, winning a war without fighting a war would have been a proper definition of defence diplomacy. In this regard, he highlighted two points. Firstly, South Asia is witnessing higher military spending than the GDP in certain countries, indicating a very high militarisation degree. Secondly, tensions are mounting in the region itself, which points to a core point of having deterrence and that too requires a kind of serious discussion on why we point out the hardware component of deterrence. But that also requires a serious understanding of the

soft power of deterrence, which is defence diplomacy. That requires a profound and thorough knowledge if we were to prosper and have a peaceful, secure, prosperous Bay of Bengal.

Major General (Retd) A M S A Amin

Chairman, Centre for Security and Development Studies (CSDS)

Major General (Retd) A M S A Amin said that the issue of defence diplomacy needs to be discussed and the process should continue almost as a permanent feature of the studies. For him, it is not possible to separate military or defence diplomacy from other forms of diplomacy. Along with political and economic diplomacy, there is the involvement of defence economics. At the same time, there is cultural diplomacy. These all are combined and help bring up a national strategy both for security and development. He suggested establishing a Defence Studies department in universities like Dhaka University since these subjects have been highly neglected. In addition to that, he also talked about the recent issues between Bangladesh and Myanmar. He argued that the problem is not subsiding, and Bangladesh now should have people who can play a vital role vis-à-vis the military junta of Myanmar.





**Lieutenant General (Retd) Sabbir Ahmed,
OSP, SGP, ndc, psc**

Former Chief of General Staff, Bangladesh Army

Lieutenant General (Retd) Sabbir Ahmed raised the issue of IPS and the BRI. He said that, given the current global environment where IPS and BRI are contesting each other, it is very precarious for Bangladesh to get an exact position in this regard. He asked how Bangladesh would sail through these two and maintain its own standing.

Secondly, Lieutenant General (Retd) Sabbir said that BISS took the initiative to establish a peacebuilding centre a few years back. There was an office at Agargaon

and when it started, he was among the people who were deeply involved. Given Bangladesh's success in the UN, it is required to consider forwarding the knowledge to the next generation. The next generation, he said, should know how the defence personnel of Bangladesh competed, presented themselves and made their credentials. He regretfully said that the initiative of BISS suddenly came to a standstill, and he requested that BISS look into the matter and reinvigorate it for the sake of the country. For him, it will further the benefit of resource development.

Finally, Lieutenant General (Retd) Sabbir requested the respected Chief of Army Staff and the Chief of General Staff that if it is possible at this stage to have a department in the Army Headquarters that will observe, coordinate and accumulate the best practices and the way that Bangladesh's participation can increase more. He added that Bangladesh has increased its involvement with the UN manifold times and through these experiences, Bangladesh has gathered some knowledge and best practices. Given this fact, the establishment of such a department will be beneficial for the future endeavours of Bangladesh in this regard.



Lieutenant General (Retd) M Harun Ar Rashid, BP, rcds, psc

Former Chief of Army Staff, Bangladesh Army

Lieutenant General (Retd) M Harun Ar Rashid, Bir Protik thanked BIIS for organising this seminar since it is the first of its kind in the country. Though it is one of the significant and vital issues of the country, he argued, it took 43 years to realise the need for defence diplomacy. For him, the Bangladesh Army's peacekeeping efforts in the hill tract and saving the country at that time brought Bangladesh to the present day's expertise on the UN peacekeeping operations. He added that the military not only fights a war but also prevents a war. There have been many examples of the military preventing war.

Lieutenant General (Retd) Rashid, BP, then said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, and Armed Forces contribute to the national interest in different fields individually. Defence forces have been participating in the peacekeeping operations from East Timor to Haiti. So, all continents have been travelled by the Bangladeshi troops and Bangladeshi personnel. A similar scenario is found in the cases of trade and commerce as nowadays Bangladeshi products can be found anywhere in the world. But he pondered whether Bangladesh could have done better. From his experience, he argued that the service providers lacked coordination among themselves. As a result, a coordination cell was established between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Army Headquarters. From the Army Headquarters, the Director of Military Operations and the Director of the UN wing were in charge. Both the directors used to have coordination meetings every month, and if needed, at any time with 24 hours' notice. At that time, Bangladesh started contributing troops one after the other. There were about 11 missions worldwide that the Bangladesh Army Headquarters had to control. For example, he mentioned that deployment in Haiti had to be done in 72 hours, and it happened under the effective leadership of the Bangladesh Armed Forces. In 72 hours, troops were flown out from Bangladesh for Haiti. He marked it as an achievement. In this regard, he added that even the American Army had to take the protection of the Bangladesh Army to get away from Somalia. The American Army could not have boarded the ships without the Bangladesh Army. So, Bangladesh took pride in protecting the American forces. Bangladesh could do it because Bangladesh achieved the confidence of the Somalis that Bangladesh was not against the Somali interest.

At that juncture, Lieutenant General (Retd) Harun, BP, raised a question that Bangladesh is contributing in so many fields, yet the achievements are not being followed up. For example, in missions where Bangladesh has participated, it was seen that other contributing countries like

India depend on the Indian supply system for logistics. The United Nations also encourages nations to have their own supply system so that ethnic requirements are fulfilled. The food and dietary demands of Bangladeshi soldiers could not be met unless there was a Bangladeshi contractor. However, Bangladesh was not able to do that. Still, if Bangladesh had started building that logistic system when Bangladeshi forces went there, probably today, Bangladesh would have a better business environment in those areas. Unfortunately, the businessmen have failed. He identified this as a vacuum. In this regard, to increase the follow-up, he thinks there is a need for a national coordination body to bring all these together and the adjourned results for the national objectives can be achieved better.





Lieutenant General Waker-Uz-Zaman, OSP, SGP, psc
Chief of General Staff, Bangladesh Army

Lieutenant General Waker-Uz-Zaman stated that he has dealt with defence diplomacy for more than three years. One of his primary responsibilities was conducting defence diplomacy with other countries. Regarding defence diplomacy, he assured that as Principal Staff Officer (PSO) in the Armed Forces Division (AFD), he always had intimate connections and liaisons with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

He said that there might be some misunderstanding about defence diplomacy, but there is no doubt that our diplomats do very well understand the necessity and importance of defence diplomacy. Whenever diplomats were sent abroad, they would visit his office to discuss various issues and coordinate with foreign missions on defence diplomacy, including procurement. They used to communicate that they would procure military hardware from a specific country to achieve some diplomatic leverage from it. Diplomats used to visit his office very frequently if there was any problem concerning other diplomatic issues as well. He mentioned that the AFD used to have very close communication with foreign countries and diplomats, and the ambassadors visited his office frequently. He noted that Bangladesh conducts joint exercises with many countries, including the US, India and China. He stated that Bangladesh has an excellent relationship with India, the US, China and Russia. He mentioned that Bangladesh is doing an excellent balancing job from the AFD. Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, framed Bangladesh's foreign policy as 'friendship to all, malice towards none'. This is Bangladesh's strength, and Bangladesh has been doing a great job in balancing its relations with these great powers. It is said that Bangladesh has made tremendous achievements in UN missions because the troops have performed admirably in many African countries, particularly in South Sudan and Sierra Leone. Unfortunately, the momentum could not be kept up as many opportunities have been lost concerning investment potential, particularly in Africa, in getting the economic benefits from it. Nevertheless, he further stated that Bangladesh is doing great concerning defence diplomacy as Bangladesh's diplomats understand the necessity and importance of defence diplomacy, he concluded.

SPEECH BY THE CHIEF GUEST



General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed, SBP (BAR), OSP, ndu, psc, PhD

Chief of Army Staff, Bangladesh Army

General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed, SBP (BAR), OSP, ndu, psc, PhD, the Chief of Army Staff (CAS), Bangladesh Army, greeted the audience and expressed that he was delighted to be present in the seminar. He shared that when he was invited to be the chief guest by the Director General (DG) of BIISS, he took the opportunity for two reasons. First, because of his association with this institution as he was a Director General of BIISS. Second, since it is on defence diplomacy, he thought it would be a learning platform for him as the Chief of Army Staff.

He thanked the DG and the Chairman of BIISS for their kind invitation to be the Chief Guest. He also took the opportunity to thank the honourable Prime Minister, who has vested him with the responsibility of Chief of Army Staff, as such he could enjoy this honour today. But he felt blessed and expressed his gratitude to the Almighty for keeping everyone healthy and allowing everyone to be together in this environment and exchange ideas on important issues.

General S M Shafiuddin Ahmed also took the opportunity to pay gratitude to the Father of the Nation, the main architect of Bangladesh's independence—Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for his lifelong sacrifice for our independence. At the same time, he paid tribute to all the three million martyrs for their supreme sacrifice for the country. He expressed gratitude to all the valiant freedom fighters for their contribution. He also paid a special tribute to all the fallen members

of Bangladesh Defence Forces who not only laid their lives during the Liberation War but also thereafter on different occasions at home and abroad. He expressed his deepest condolences for the families and prayed that the Almighty grant them the divine heaven. The Chief of Army Staff thanked DG, BISS for selecting a topic for the seminar which really raised interest and is very pertinent. He thanked all the speakers for their scholarly contributions and for educating everyone on a topic that a military person always looks forward to learning more about.

At this stage, he shared one of his experiences related to military diplomacy and the United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping Missions. He expressed that he was fortunate to participate in UN Peacekeeping Operations several times. The most challenging and rewarding one for him was to be the pioneer Deputy Force Commander in one of the missions in the Central African Republic (CAR) when it was in its embryonic stage. He shared that he went to the mission in 2014 in September. On 09 October 2014, he was ambushed over there and for the first time, fortunately, he had an armoured car. Since it was a bulletproof vehicle, he survived even after being shot and grenade being lobbed. But unfortunately, some soldiers from other countries lost their lives. Few got injured, including Bangladeshi peacekeepers, because all the vehicles were not bulletproof. In this situation, the focus was actually to protect oneself first and then materialise the mandate given.

In 2014, Mr Joseph Yakete was the defence minister and Mr Faustin-Archange Touadera was the President of the CAR. General Shafiuddin shared that he could grow good relations with them as he was there for about two years. Some of their military officers are being trained in Bangladesh and the initiatives started from there. Within a few weeks, Bangladesh handed over a few thousand



spare uniforms to the Central African Republic for the Army and other support to ensure that the government remained friendly to Bangladesh. He narrated that, during his tenure, a lot of effort was put in, both diplomatic and non-diplomatic. Being a Bangladeshi, it is in his core interest to facilitate the presence of Bangladeshis in the mission area.

The CAS shared that Bangladesh's foreign policy objective is clearly articulated in the foreign policy dictum propounded by the Father of the Nation, 'friendship to all, malice towards none'. Hence, to maintain friendship, we need to continue friendly engagements with all countries. He stated that he is quite sanguine that all the government organs are doing everything congruent to implement this foreign policy.

The CAS expressed that the military has multifaceted and a whole range of engagement. He shared that, in his understanding, diplomacy is an effort by any member of a country to interact with a foreign country to achieve national interest. It can be defined in many ways: sports diplomacy, economic diplomacy, dollar diplomacy, gunboat diplomacy, etc. He shared his experience about his meeting with the Chief of Staff of Qatar Armed Forces. He invited him to Bangladesh to be the Chief Guest at the Military Academy's passing out parade. Through this, the CAS wanted to demonstrate the competence of the Bangladesh Army. Qatar is a country which employs foreigners in different fields. So, having a good relationship with Qatar, is in the interest of Bangladesh. Later, when the Chief of Staff of the Qatar Armed Forces visited Bangladesh, he was so happy that he gave 18 Arabian horses. Those are needed for the Bangladesh Army in the Military Academy. He shared that in terms of Bangladesh's national interest, the priority is sustained economic development while maintaining national security. This is the prime national interest and we will do everything to achieve this.

The CAS noted that the Bangladesh Army performs five tasks or five roles. First, the armed forces must defend the motherland and maintain the sovereignty of the country. Bangladesh Army remains prepared for that. Second, in aid to civilian administration, the Bangladesh Army performs nation-building activities. Third, the Army carries out disaster management activities and these disaster management roles sometimes go beyond national boundaries. There was the scope of contributing to disaster management in China, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Philippines, Kuwait as well as recently in Turkey. Fourth, in aid to civilian administration, the Bangladesh Army fulfils internal security duties in Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as some other districts of the country where it is needed. And the fifth is overseas employment. Though most of the overseas employment is in the UN Peacekeeping Operations, we also have other engagements beyond the UN.

For instance, in Kuwait, more than five and half thousand personnel are employed, although not all of them are from the military. A good number of civilians have been employed in Kuwait. Police, Navy and Air Force personnel are also employed there. This also contributes to achieving national interest, which can be termed as military diplomacy. General Shafiuddin expressed that he is not fond of defining it in many ways. He referred to a definition presented by Professor Ali Ashraf that

a civilian or a military person engaging in military issues becomes military diplomacy. Moreover, the CAS enquired about what happens when a military person engages in non-military affairs. He referred to examples of non-military affairs, such as finding business opportunities and manpower export. These things are not military affairs but are often fulfilled by military contingents or military leaders. These can also be considered a part of military diplomacy.

At this stage of the deliberation, General Shafiuddin discussed Bangladesh's role in UN Peacekeeping. Bangladesh is the largest troop contributor in the UN Peacekeeping Operations and out of all UN peacekeepers, more than 90 per cent are from Bangladesh Armed Forces. During interviews with the contingent commanders and conversations with contingents, one statement is quite common in the advice for the peacekeepers at any level, i.e., "Remember, while you are doing this mission, you are also an ambassador of Bangladesh. So, do not do anything which defame Bangladesh. Do everything that brings name and fame for Bangladesh". This is soft power and it helps subsequent engagement with the country for the benefit of Bangladesh. The Defence Policy of Bangladesh, which was formulated by the Father of the Nation in 1974 and finally articulated in 2018, has given a clear guideline for engagement in achieving national interest, which might be called defence diplomacy. Here, General Shafiuddin recalled his visit to the UN headquarters. He felt honoured and proud of the Bangladeshis working there, who are also recognised as the premier peacekeepers of the globe.

The CAS also shared his views on strategy. He stated that military strategy is not formulated in isolation. Rather, it derives from the national interest or national strategy. The CAS referred to Lieutenant General Sabbir's comment about the peace institute and the appropriate authority to



whom this institute should be entrusted. The CAS noted that many initiatives were undertaken but could not be finished. There could be a body to ensure a concerted effort that when an initiative is undertaken, it is being implemented and followed up. Think tanks like BISS, with the lessons learned from this seminar, can also suggest a modality to relevant stakeholders. There is no denying that all the government organs are working to achieve national interest, and it is better to seize the opportunity to create a conducive environment in which to work together.

At this point, the CAS discussed international and global engagement that has been significantly contributing to military diplomacy. The Indo-Pacific Armies Management Seminar (IPAMS) was conducted by the Bangladesh Army in 2022. In 2023, it was held in India and 2024, it will be organised in Australia. The USA always co-host the event and bears most of the budget. The USA is spending a good amount of money to enhance its engagement, influence, and cooperation areas. If Bangladesh wants to do the same, we need to increase our capability by allocating resources and budget. We know how to do it, but at the same time, we need the resources to do so.

The CAS also addressed some other comments and queries raised during the open discussion session. Regarding the suggestion to engage more with Myanmar military leaders, the CAS mentioned that the Bangladesh Army has its engagement with the Myanmar military leaders and initiatives are being taken to continue that engagement. However, as some of the Myanmar military leaders have international sanctions upon them, we need to be cautious about this. He also addressed the suggestion of whether the Army Headquarters can have a directorate to deal with foreign affairs only. He stated that there are directorates that deal with overseas operations, military training and staff duties in the Army Headquarters. They engage with foreign missions and coordinate multinational joint foreign exercises and other foreign visits. There are designated people who work for this engagement with friendly countries. However, he shared that this suggestion will be kept in mind while restructuring and reorganising the Army Headquarters.

General Shafiuddin also shared his view regarding the proposal to have a think-tank dedicated to the issues of military diplomacy in Army Headquarters or other places. He expressed that institutions like the National Defence College (NDC) and Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC) would probably be better places as people should be working on these issues for a long time. But that is a challenge considering the frequent posting of defence officers. However, civilian and retired people may be employed and the National Defence College is already doing it. It can also be done in the Staff College and MIST and other places as well. These people can work with the institution and carry out relevant research. Subsequently, they may produce research reports which can be processed through Army Headquarters for subsequent foreign policy or any policy implementation.

The CAS shared that Bangladesh Army has indigenously produced some remotely operated vehicles which is a good innovation for the Bangladesh Army. This saves a lot of foreign currency as these are imported earlier. Some of these are going to be handed over to the Peruvian Army

very soon. This will help in growing relations, especially in the context of UN peacekeeping. This gives an insight that Bangladesh is capable of contributing not only in the form of peacekeeping troops but also in other forms. General Shafiuddin shared that we also did the same with Gambia. We have agreed to give some of the equipment to the Gambian Army. Thereby, in future we will have joint forces comprising Gambia and Bangladesh Army working together in UN peacekeeping operations. Bangladesh has also handed over a few military vehicles to the Maldives' Army. These things are done regularly, and the CAS expressed that we are on the right track in discharging our duties.

As General Shafiuddin approached the end of his deliberation, he reiterated that a military person does not only learn how to fight a war but also how to prevent or avoid war to achieve national interest. National Defence Courses in NDC are not aimed at teaching the art of warfare but rather how to avoid war or enhance diplomatic capabilities. It is never forgotten that the main role of the military forces is to protect the sovereignty of the country. He stated, "You are my friend today; what happens if you are not my friend tomorrow? So, we should be capable of defending our national interest, our motherland. But the main foreign policy dictum has set the tone for us. We are doing everything". The CAS reassured that the Bangladesh Army is also doing everything to achieve the foreign policy. He concluded by stating that "wherever there is an opportunity, we avail that and do everything so that it only fetches benefit for Bangladesh and Bangladesh becomes 'Shonar Bangla' as dreamt by our Father of the Nation".

CONCLUDING REMARKS



Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker
*Chairman, Bangladesh Institute of International and
Strategic Studies (BISS)*

Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker said that this seminar, and particularly the speech of the Chief Guest, has made it amply clear that military diplomacy is crucially important for Bangladesh. He added that it started from the very beginning with the Father of the Nation's call for independence and freedom.

Ambassador Sarker said defence diplomacy has become more important now. First of all, for upholding Bangladesh's primary requirement of peace and stability in a world of uncertainties and then for maintaining an ecology of friendship, international understanding and cooperative relations. It allows Bangladesh to pursue its national goals, including global integration and national development, particularly in the context of evolving and often disruptive geopolitical developments, as well as emerging new domains of diplomacy and defence such as cyber, data, information, international politics of debt, public diplomacy, strategic application of economic policy, technology, culture and soft power. With its limited resources, the government has used defence diplomacy as a specialised tool of national diplomacy and has attained some successes. The world today is witnessing emerging and unconventional threats and conflicts, exposing the vulnerabilities of developing countries like Bangladesh. Asymmetric warfare, hybrid conflicts, cyber-attacks, non-state and proxy forces' involvement, forcible displacement, brinkmanship, and

destabilising rhetoric—all these new issues help realise the need for more integration of defence diplomacy into our foreign policy along with the economic diplomacy that Bangladesh has been focusing for years. These provide a new context and necessity of Bangladesh's defence diplomacy and pursue one of the foreign policy goals thereby. Bangladesh needs to harness the full potential of military diplomacy as it is not merely an option but a strategic imperative.

About the seminar, Ambassador Sarker said, it has given some crucial recommendations and ideas along with some strategic suggestions. These include enhancement of soft power and outreach as defence diplomacy is an essential component of national soft power to shape its narratives and enhance its positive impact. In that context, Bangladesh will be developing mechanisms and pathways for effective defence diplomacy, civil-military collaborations, and synergy for greater efficacy of defence diplomacy in particular. He assured the audience that BIIS will compile the recommendations and suggestions coming from this seminar and will submit them for consideration by the authorities.

Bangladesh's forward thinking will crystallise and help find concrete ideas, means, mechanisms, and strategic initiatives to spearhead the defence diplomacy in Bangladesh's foreign policy and national interest. By revamping existing tools, adopting new techniques and acknowledging defence diplomacy as an area of expertise, Bangladesh can safeguard its sovereignty, promote peace and contribute to global security better. Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's diplomacy is comprehensive, and practice is pragmatic and suitable to needs within the foreign policy construct given by our Father of the Nation, "friendship to all and malice towards none".



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The Editorial Team thankfully acknowledges Farzana Fatima, Former Research Officer and Tahsin Binte Hasan, Research Interns for their assistance in preparing the proceedings.



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