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Defence Diplomacy in a Fragmented World

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SYNOPSIS

*In a multipolar world where geostrategic tensions could result in a fragmented international order, diplomacy has taken on renewed importance. Corollary to this realisation is the necessity of maintaining defence diplomacy. **MUHAMMAD FAIZAL BIN ABDUL RAHMAN** traces the emergence of defence diplomacy and evaluates how it should be sustained in the Asia-Pacific region.*

COMMENTARY

“Diplomacy is more important than ever to navigate the tensions of our emerging multipolar world. Dialogue remains the only way to find joint approaches and common solutions to the global threats and challenges that we face.” These were critical points that the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres made during a [press meeting](#) ahead of his travels in September 2023, which includes his attendance at the ASEAN-UN Summit in Indonesia.

He underscored the importance of diplomacy in an increasingly multipolar world where “multipolarity in itself does not guarantee peace and stability” but “could be a factor for escalating geostrategic tensions, with tragic consequences”. Indeed, unfettered tensions could result in a fragmented international order where the inevitability of competition turning to conflict looms large.

Fragmented World

In a fragmented international order, multilateralism would become more demanding than ever. Major powers would promote competing visions of regional order, international trade, technology, and cyberspace. The gap between the Global North and Global South may widen as developing countries choose non-alignment on the war in Ukraine and major power competition, and grow weary of actions they perceive as disrespect or double standards by the West. The exercise of power in different but intersecting spheres of influence would overshadow post-World War II rules and norms that multilateral institutions had built to ensure international peace and security.

Still, this troubling outlook for the world creates a renewed importance for diplomacy. Corollary to this realisation is the necessity of maintaining defence diplomacy. After all, both civilian diplomats and military officials are vital in preventing and resolving conflicts. While civilian diplomats contest with words, it is soldiers whose fingers are on the kinetic and digital triggers.

Defence Diplomacy in Asia Pacific

A Necessity

Defence diplomacy was not always known as the policy instrument it is today. Literature [review](#) indicates that this instrument was known earlier in the 20th century as military diplomacy and had a far narrower definition. Military diplomacy focused more on military envoys observing the armed forces of countries they were stationed at, partly due to distrust that existed even among allies. An [example](#) is Edwin T. Layton, who served as a naval attaché at the US embassy in Tokyo in the 1930s. His insights proved useful when he later served as Admiral Nimitz's principal intelligence officer during the Battle of Midway in World War II.

While military diplomacy prioritises intelligence activities, defence diplomacy prioritises building relations and partnerships and conducting cooperative activities. According to a [research paper](#) by the War Studies University in Warsaw, defence diplomacy is a term that emerged in the post-Cold War era and is defined as a “crisis prevention instrument” whereby the “peaceful (non-confrontational) use of armed forces and related infrastructure (primarily defence ministries)” is employed “as a foreign policy and security tool”. Clearly, defence diplomacy focuses on “minimising hostility and building trust between states” and “strengthening confidence and understanding in international relations”.

In Asia Pacific, ASEAN drives defence diplomacy in the region through open and inclusive multilateral platforms, namely the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus. These platforms provide space for dialogue and cooperation in areas of mutual interest between ASEAN member states and other regional countries who are friends or potential adversaries. [Activities](#) supported by these platforms include exercises and workshops on non-traditional security issues, information-sharing initiatives, and training and education exchanges.

Valuable Despite Limitations

It was never an easy journey for ADMM and ADMM-Plus as trust issues and political sensitivities limit defence cooperation to less contentious areas. Thus, these platforms have been pragmatic by focusing on "low-hanging fruits", organising dialogue and capacity-building activities in areas such as military medicine, cybersecurity, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and counter-terrorism.

Nonetheless, the professional relationships and lines of communication that these platforms and activities have built up over the years are even more crucial today to preserve peace and stability. The Asia Pacific is facing intractable challenges in which irreconcilable views on geostrategic issues, greater defence spending, and hard power projection increase the risks of armed conflict. Furthermore, Southeast Asia lies in the centre of this region. Other regional countries should continue participating in these platforms to acknowledge the interests and agency of ASEAN member states instead of viewing regional challenges only through the lens of major power competition.



In an increasingly multipolar world, platforms such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus are important for countries to dialogue on areas of mutual interest and participate in capacity-building activities in order to sustain defence diplomacy. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Re-emphasise, not De-emphasise, Diplomacy

What would be of first concern in the region is defence diplomacy taking a backseat while hard power and coercive influence assume primacy in geostrategic issues. This development could upset the balance between deterrence and diplomacy. Second is the exploitation of defence diplomacy channels to advance [political agendas and misinformation](#) that are at odds with the principles of international law, such as territorial sovereignty and the commitment to protect human rights under the ASEAN Charter. Third is the persistent perception that ASEAN cannot deliver concrete outcomes for regional challenges.

Together, these developments could reduce confidence in the value of defence diplomacy and fragment the regional security architecture. It is deleterious for the region if potential adversaries stop talking to each other, win-lose logic spreads, and defence diplomacy reverts to the old military diplomacy, where intelligence activities are prioritised.

Regional security requires both deterrence and diplomacy. Instead of de-emphasising defence diplomacy when multilateralism faces a crisis of confidence, countries should maintain momentum in cooling geopolitical temperatures by continuing to invest in complementary diplomatic efforts.

An example of such efforts is the Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers ([APPSMO](#)), which is an annual forum organised by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore. Its activities provide a private and neutral space to enhance mutual understanding in geostrategic issues and national interests and promote cooperative instincts among various armed forces. This year, the 24th edition of APPSMO will encourage participants to explore issues relating to competition and conflict in a fragmented world.

Ultimately, armed forces should never give up on diplomacy, especially in a fragmented world, as peace is better than conflict. The high cost of war should serve to remind us that conflict is best resolved through diplomacy.

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