

Preventive Diplomacy, Defence Cooperation & the Pursuit of Cooperative Security: The Indian Experience

Swapna Kona Nayudu*

This article is an exploration of the effectiveness of defence cooperation as a means of preventive diplomacy. The paper begins by suggesting that both defence cooperation and preventive diplomacy are concepts rooted in cooperative security. For the purposes of this paper, cooperative security is understood as an overarching concept that comprises alliances, collective security and preventive action. The fundamental claim of the article is that defence cooperation has more to offer than its own immediate benefits. The paper discusses how that value can be exploited towards a larger project of preventive diplomacy. As an illustration of these possibilities, the Indian experience of defence cooperation in the context of South Asia is also discussed.

Understanding Preventive Diplomacy

In 1995, Joseph Nye argued that the present era was one of dramatic power transitions. He said that the nature of power and the ways in which power is exercised play important roles in causing or preventing conflicts.¹ He also said that the nature of power transitions makes military conflict between the great powers highly unlikely. Nye's thesis pivoted around the US, Europe and Japan, citing them as examples of democratic powers with shared values and interlocking institutions. He was less optimistic about other parts of the world.

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In the post Cold War-era, Russia and China posed serious challenges to regime-friendly diplomacy. Although efforts at engaging these states had seen some limited successes, inter-state, territorial and border conflicts in these regions seemed intractable. The situation was not very different on the Indian subcontinent. The importance given to the arms build-up in the region owed itself not only to bilateral disputes, as in the case of India and Pakistan, but also to the opposing strategic patterns of external powers and major players in the region such as the US and China. Such situations of security deficit required an effective toolkit, both for the prevention of future conflict, as well as for the management and resolution of pre-existing conflict.

*Swapna Kona Nayudu is a Research Associate at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi.

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The practice of diplomacy in this era was required to adapt and innovate more than ever before. In the post-World War, post-Cold War, post-post-Cold War times, diplomacy was not meant to learn its lessons from military battlefields. Instead, it was conflict in more exacting circumstances that would define the function of diplomacy in the twenty-first century. Water sharing, border patrolling, migration and trade became areas of contention. Increasingly, a state's progress depended more on the prevention of conflict than ever before.

Thus far, states had built alliances with other states and militaries had joined forces against common threats. In the 20th century, cooperation amongst states had been predicated on the use of force. Ironically, this led to security dilemmas in most parts of the world. The actions or inactions of states had led other states to fear them. The unpredictability of a nation's behaviour was being seen as a threat in itself. History had laid bare the hegemonic intentions of bigger powers, causing panic amongst smaller and middle powers.

While the Kantian concept of peace through a group of like-minded nations had resulted in the League of Nations and later the United Nations, which continues to remain significant, new security threats required newer definitions of cooperative security. Security arrangements had evolved from unilateralist action to multilateral alliances and further to collective frameworks. The move from a single state; to two or more like minded states; to a community of states taking action against a state that was breaching international codes of behaviour seemed like a reasonable state of affairs. If a state were to renege on its social, political, legal, even ethical contract with the comity of nations, it would be penalised suitably.

However, this approach could not solve the problem of preventing such a situation in the first place. States behaved in undesirable ways out of paranoia, simply because they feared that other states would behave towards them in a similar manner. So, greater transparency in general and assurances about state behaviour in particular could break this vicious cycle of conflict. If states could be convinced of the absence of any real dangers to their security, they could be dissuaded from adopting a pre-emptive militaristic approach to their national security. This would greatly improve regional and global security in the long run.

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As a method, preventive action could prove highly valuable. It is not possible, at any stage of conflict to completely and ultimately avoid an undesirable outcome. But, it can be claimed that certain actions have mitigated the conflict from becoming unmanageable or irresolvable. The single-most daunting challenge identified in preventive action is the need to translate political and rhetorical commitment into effective preventive action in the field². While methods such as mediation and reconciliation were much in use, leaders such as Boutros Boutros Ghali were of the opinion that preventive action in diplomacy, could be regarded as “the most desirable and efficient employment of diplomacy”. Preventive diplomacy would become a

means to “ease tensions before they result in conflict or if conflict breaks out, to act swiftly to contain it and resolve its underlying causes”³.

Today, preventive diplomacy is broadly defined as an international effort at de-escalating conflict before it becomes unmanageable. It works within very wide conceptual parameters, but with more specific operational methods. A large part of this framework is based on comprehensive and efficient cooperation and coordination in the security and defence of states. Methods such as information gathering, fact-finding, preventive deployment, demilitarised zones, intelligence-sharing arrangements and security information exchanges are aimed at confidence-building. Thus, preventive diplomacy can establish a correlation between the management and resolution of existing conflicts and the prevention of any conflicts that might arise in the future.

Redefining Defence Cooperation

Defence cooperation is the sum of many defence-related actions, collectively aimed at furthering one’s national interests through active cooperation with friends and the building of consensus with foes. In peacetime, this could contribute to conflict transformation and to the removal of traditional hostilities through trust building. Defence cooperation has traditionally been used for the realpolitik purposes of strengthening allies against common enemies. The most visible component of defence cooperation in peace time is military-to-military cooperation with friendly foreign countries to secure support in times of war.

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In more recent times, the scope of defence cooperation has widened considerably, moving away from an insecurity-propelled-militaristic approach to a security-motivated-cooperative approach. Increasingly, states, especially liberal democratic states, have used defence cooperation for a range of new purposes. These include strategic engagement with former or potential enemies encouraging multilateral regional cooperation, supporting the democratisation of civil-military relations and assisting states in peacekeeping capabilities.

Participation in exercises for defence cooperation does not alter a state's behaviour entirely – the motivation for unilateral behaviour is still very strong. But, engagement with other states reduces the risk of conflict – a state that engages in defence cooperation becomes more likely to move away from an offensive posture to a context of mutual restraint. By their very nature, collective security arrangements function on the basis of membership, consensus and multilateralism. Thus, defence cooperation furthers the cause of cooperative security by ensuring bilateral and multilateral security arrangements.

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In the process, it involves the conduct of negotiations between states in order to diminish chances of conflict between them. In doing so, it mirrors the agenda that preventive diplomacy set out for itself.

Defence cooperation is based on an essentially realist understanding of state behaviour. It follows that a heightened emphasis on alliances and military-to-military contacts is essential for defence cooperation. But it also offers a space for partnership, where the scope for negotiation exists. The symbolic value of negotiation is evident, especially for countries that are just breaking into global power status. In many ways, the place that India occupied on the global scene after she embraced non-alignment is illustrative of the situations countries might find themselves in - these situations often leave little or no room for manoeuvre in the absence of alliance-building.

One could claim that India is still very reluctant to forge alliances and looks to euphemise any sort of partnership with multiple caveats that for safeguarding of its sovereignty. Fears over the erosion of India's sovereignty have been proven unfounded with the passage of time. India's traditional security policy was induced by fear and paranoia, that led to a complex web of regional hostilities. Further complicated by global pressures, India's perception of other states and their behaviour was shrouded in apprehension. Being the largest power on the Indian subcontinent, this fear psychosis has pervaded its bilateral relations.

But, it has become increasingly possible for India to move away from that state of being. In more recent times, this worldview has been tempered with a coming-

of-age. On the regional and global scenario, the Indian state is less isolated and is engaging in expanding its politico-strategic influence, both with traditional partners and with potential ones. This is vital in the new world order that is characterised by ever changing poles of influence and requires a skill set essential for survival amongst them all. Tools of statecraft such as diplomacy, defence and offence represent alternative courses of action. The use of defence cooperation combines the advantages of the first two and prevents the third, it is an ideal tool to promote India's national interests. By its very nature, defence cooperation is thus, an offshoot of preventive diplomacy.

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The need for cooperative security has given defence cooperation a new role. To meet its security needs, India has traditionally preferred bilateral relationships, such as with the erstwhile USSR.

Institutional mechanisms to enhance cooperative, multilateral security, have had negligible impact as is the case with SAARC. Bilateral relations have fared better in the South Asian security environment. But they have not translated into successful regional security arrangements. On the contrary, at times, they have cost a nation dearly in terms of other relationships, since they are exclusive by nature. It is not very often that a successful bilateral relationship is expands into a trilateral or multilateral relationship.

In the case of India, this problem is very evident. Defence cooperation can be a useful tool as it acknowledges the primacy of state interests, the reality of territorial defence and the inevitability of competition between nations. It also recognises the value of existing bilateral and balance of power arrangements and makes way for new ones within the existing structure. As a system, defence cooperation also translates well into a basis for the pursuit of cooperative security. For states such as India, it is easier to have many successful bilateral relationships, especially in one region and merge them into one larger collective. An incremental approach has its advantages.

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A Short Overview of India's Defence Cooperation

Due to their geo-strategic importance, South Asian states have been beset with problems since they gained independence from the British. These problems were

further complicated by military alliances forged in the wake of independence. The political liabilities of aligning themselves, or as in the case of India, the consequences of non-alignment were numerous and wide-ranging. One could argue that the equation between foreign policy and national security was incredibly innovative and as Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, would have had it, it was also unprecedented. India was active under the United Nations banner, participating in various overseas operations and contributing large manpower to other areas of conflict. In terms of military-to-military cooperation, major bilateral defence cooperation was either with the United Kingdom or with smaller regional states such as Nepal. There was a brief period of openness in the 1960s when a major defence cooperation initiative was undertaken between India and the United States, opening floodgates for American assistance in training personnel and equipment transfer. This ended in 1974, after India conducted its first nuclear tests. After the abrupt downturn in relations with the US, India focused its attention on its commitment to the UN, assuming new roles in UN Peacekeeping operations - even providing training assistance to African nations.

The 1970s started a new era in India's defence outlook - it brought the Soviets into the fold. From 1971 to 1991, the Indo-Soviet defence relationship was at its peak. This relationship loomed large in these years, forming the basis for many more such developments in the Indo-Russian equation. Also, in 1988, India undertook its first military assistance exercise on foreign territory when Indian forces entered the Maldives. In terms of defence cooperation, this was a consequential step signalling India's entrance on the strategic scene, not only as a deliberative democracy, but as an affirmative military power. In the meanwhile, Indian troops were deployed as part of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka and training programmes for Sri Lankan officers in India opened India up to one more power on its periphery. From far out, Africa and other parts of Asia, such as Afghanistan, personnel were shipped to India, for received training. The gamut of defence cooperation had broadened considerably at this point.

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In 1991, with the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, India's defence relations with the United States thawed and the ex-CIS states and Eastern European countries also came to India for defence equipment requirements. In 1993, India's Look East Policy demystified Indian thinking on the Far East. This was quickly supplemented in 1997 by the Gujral doctrine, wherein under erstwhile Prime Minister I K Gujral, India enunciated its policy towards its neighbours. This was a crucial period also for India's ties with bigger powers such as Israel, South Africa and France. This period could be identified as the turning point where the leap from defence cooperation to defence diplomacy took place. Not only was India cooperating widely with nations across the globe, it was also using this cooperation

to further its own diplomatic agenda. In the longer term, it looked as though India was poised to further her national interests through the effective use of defence diplomacy.

All these overtures were stalled when in 1998, India tested again, inviting widespread condemnation and a slew of sanctions. Defence cooperation with the United States, Australia and many other countries ceased. Matters remained suspended until post 9/11 when the United States and its allies embarked on the

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War on Terror, and identified India as an important geopolitical partner thus indicating the need for a larger strategic partnership - hinting simultaneously at a more intense defence cooperation.

In the last decade since then, there has been a paradigm shift in Indian thinking on defence cooperation and the benefits of it. In some relationships, such as with Russia one, there has been a shift from a client-patron relationship to a more symbiotic one. Also increasingly, there has been a greater focus towards balancing great power relationships with smaller and medium power

relations within the South Asian region. Neighbours like Bhutan have also been inducted into the defence cooperation schema. These developments are important, especially in the context of Asian power politics. The United States has a strong presence in the Asia-Pacific region and is still an external power with the most anchoring in the region. The rise of China, the coming to prominence of India, the consolidation of Russia's position in Asia and the economic rise of Japan along with the emergence of other nations in the region ensures that the bilateral, multilateral and external interactions between Asian powers, especially in the field of defence, are prone to constant revision.

The Pursuit of Cooperative Security

A lot of this new thinking on defence cooperation can be traced to security sector reforms and lessons learnt from the reorganisation of their armed forces by European states. The paradigm shift that is now occurring in India is a consequence of the end of post-Cold War, following which West European nations identified new roles for their armies. A minimum credible force was inevitable and while armed forces had to be maintained, their traditional war roles were now a long-term possibility with next to no certainty. This occupational vacuum was filled by security sector reform where civil-military

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relations, post-conflict rebuilding, reconstruction, peacekeeping became central to the military agenda. This new role had two aspects: first, that this was not distinct from national security or any the lesser for it; second that this new role was not territorially restricted – if the threat or the damage was elsewhere, the armies were deployed, not as war troops but as security assistance forces.

India's armed forces also experienced this role revision. Comprising military-to-military training, strategic dialogues, peacekeeping, peace enforcement, disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, intelligence cooperation and defence-related trade and commerce, the gamut of defence cooperation is over-arching. Within this, the role of military-to-military cooperation is narrower, but it is fundamental to the other components of defence cooperation. It signals the move away from

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realpolitik and towards the redressal of security concerns, real or perceived, leading to a less-hostile security environment and enlarging the scope for peacetime developmental activities. The armed forces were, thus, were reoriented away from their traditional role of maintaining a “negative peace” towards a more positive and proactive role. So far, the armed forces have only been leveraged to further a vision for the future based on balance of power realpolitik. This view is now changing, within defence establishments and outside them. The role of military assistance in times of need to countries in one's periphery or sphere of interest (not only influence) is now part of a wider effort to further

one's national interests in another's territory. This is being done not through unilateral action or intervention, but through cooperation and assistance. India's role in the crisis situation in the Maldives in 1988 is illustrative in this regard.

Defence cooperation is not an easy agenda to fulfil nor is cooperative security an easy goal to achieve. Indeed, it is still elusive in many parts of the world and is a work in progress even where it has achieved successes. But it has found acceptance as an alternative vision of security that moves away from realist notions of nation-states and moves towards simultaneous broad-based institutional security (such as with the NATO) with distinct elements of human security (as in the case of UN rehabilitation programmes)⁴. All this was achieved, most importantly while respecting those very same notions of national sovereignty that had shaped the world order and foreign policy behaviour. This broader notion of security co-opted national security and its inclusive nature made it all the more convincing. Undoubtedly, this programme was led by the powers of the trans-Atlantic – in many ways. NATO set the agenda for what could be achieved through the practice of “hard power” for the pursuance of hitherto “soft issues”.

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The pursuit of a cooperative form of security through defence cooperation is a lofty objective and there have been hiccups in its implementation. In South Asia, however, the issues are much more fundamental because hostilities, rivalries and basic issues of insecurity still exist. Border issues, refugee influxes, illegal immigration, cross-border terrorism, illicit trafficking of drugs, arms, money – the issues are many - and the platforms for

redressal are missing. The task is two-fold – first, to ameliorate conflict where it is occurring and second, to prevent future cycles of conflict. An increase in the use of military as an instrument of building cooperative relations with former or potential adversaries would be very useful. India's relations with China are a fine example of how defence cooperation is not only desirable but also inevitable.

One might also speculate to the contrary here as to how India and China remain at loggerheads on many sensitive issues, such as territorial claims and the issue of Tibet. But at no point does defence cooperation require a completely stable or friendly relationship. On the contrary, when it is placed in the larger context of preventive diplomacy, defence cooperation precludes any convivial relationship – it presumes hostility and strain. The Sino-Indian relationship, for instance, can be reactionary, with military forces on both sides of the border and with Kashmir, the China-Pakistan relationship and Tibet always issues on the table. It is clear that unless issues of insecurity between the two powers are laid to rest, cooperation in other fields will always be superficial and hostage to a stable security environment⁵.

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Naturally, this paper does not claim that the practice of defence cooperation will put an end to all insecurity and that a state of passive coexistence can be achieved through defence cooperation. However, it does suggest that states will move away from mutually directed insecurity, requiring arms build-up and deflection from development activity. The threat perception will be based on an audit of a state's own capabilities vis-à-vis that of the other state, in a competitive but not necessarily hostile relationship. The India-China relationship could make for an interesting study in this regard.

Conclusion

It is clear that preventive diplomacy and defence cooperation are critical components of the cooperative security agenda. However, both the processes as

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well as the end objectives of this agenda are fragile and hard to secure. It remains to be seen if constant revision of the contours of preventive diplomacy will help bring about cooperative security in South Asia. There are many indications that this may be already be in the offing. At this point in time, India's potential for cooperative action is probably peaking. If there were a time for defence cooperation to be given a boost in the arm, it is now. It is essential to carefully study the security context in which these processes might culminate.

As we have observed with China and with Pakistan, where there are the deepest fissures, other leaps of faith might have to preface military-

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to-military contact. But, with other states, there is optimum opportunity for cooperation. It is in India's interest to maximise returns on its investments in regional security by maintaining its successful bilateral relationships and by salvaging others.

Defence cooperation is a suitable course of action in both cases. It is also a suitable investment in the larger scheme of preventive diplomacy. Together, they make cooperative security a distinct possibility.



Notes:

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4. Lund, Michael S., *Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy*, Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1996.
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