
Defence diplomacy as a tool for improving military crisis management

Vasil Stankov

Associate Professor, Lecturer, PhD Degree in Security Studies (2015) and Master's Degrees in Military Studies (1987 and 1992) e-mail: vassilst@abv.bg, ORCID: 0009-0002-5757-1499

Higher School of Security and Economics in Plovdiv, Bulgaria

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Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the theory and practice of defence diplomacy by proposing a comprehensive definition of the concept, identifying its key functions, and establishing the main principles of its implementation.

The author seeks to confirm that further enlargement of the existing knowledge about present day defence diplomacy both as a theoretical construct and an operational concept would improve the capabilities of the armed forces and the civilian elements of the national defence system to affect the foreign security environment in a favourable way.

The research methodology comprises induction, analysis, and generalization of direct empirical knowledge derived from the author's observations and personal experience in defence diplomacy, including 12 years of work in Defence Attaché Offices and Combined Allied Headquarters in several countries in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and South-Central Asia.

The paper suggests an advanced approach to the essence, principles, roles, and scope of defence diplomacy as a non-coercive instrument for military crisis management and conflict prevention. Furthermore, it examines the features of strategic engagement as a non-violent tool for easing tensions and avoiding armed confrontation.

The research results seek to enhance the theory of military crisis management and functionally enable conflict resolution and peacekeeping operations.

Key words: crisis management, impact, military, non-coercive, strategic engagement.

Introduction

The present security environment is characterised by increasing tensions in international relations, shaped by intense and highly dynamic military-political events, including military crises and armed conflict. Driven by the desire to gain military-strategic superiority, a number of states and non-state actors threaten to use military force or actually ignite military confrontations that have a lasting destabilising impact on regional and global security. Important regions of the world have become arenas of geopolitical rivalry, areas of persistent instability have arisen, and the risk of deepening contradictions and escalating existing disputes has steadily increased. Under these circumstances, the probability of using armed forces as a means of defending the interests of opposing parties and forcefully imposing their will remains high.

For this reason, the current situation demands an enlargement of the extant knowledge about the role and purpose of military capabilities in crisis management and settlement of armed disputes. Alongside the debate on the traditional function of the armed forces as an instrument for defence, deterrence, pre-emption, or direct armed intervention, the concept of peaceful and non-violent military activities as a tool of foreign and security policy needs to be developed and implemented further. In addition to combat and other forceful military operations, the armed forces should also prepare for non-forceful, non-conflict, and non-coercive engagements with other states and non-state actors by implementing defence diplomacy. In recent years, the preventive role of defence diplomacy

as a means of achieving foreign policy goals and as a tool for shaping the security environment has grown. When an interstate or intrastate armed conflict needs to be avoided, the influencing country uses its military capabilities to establish various forms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation and interaction with the governing institutions and leadership of the parties involved (states, alliances, coalitions, and non-state actors), thus mitigating conflict potential, preserving peaceful relations between belligerent parties, and creating a more favourable security environment.

Therefore, defence diplomacy implements military cooperation in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way, thus modifying the defence and foreign security policies of the countries involved and reducing the likelihood of armed confrontation in a way that prevents future conflict. It can persuade the parties to agree (temporarily or permanently) not to use their armed forces for hostilities and accept friendly assistance, leading to the improvement of military capabilities, thus turning the armed forces into a factor for a comprehensive improvement of political relations and strengthening common security.

Results and Discussion

A Conceptual Overview

The specific instruments employed and far-reaching effects pursued in defence diplomacy deserve a distinctive theoretical and functional venue among the various other non-combat operations and defence cooperation activities, performed by the armed forces to achieve foreign policy and security objectives. Still, there is no internationally recognized or widespread definition of 'Defence Diplomacy' because of the challenges stemming from the need to position it correctly within the range of all non-violent international engagements of the armed forces. The defence diplomacy activities Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster highlighted in 2004 are still valid, although they may have different purposes depending on the goals pursued:

- 1) Bilateral and multilateral contacts between senior military and civilian defence officials.
 - 2) Appointment of defence attaches to foreign countries.
 - 3) Bilateral defence cooperation agreements.
 - 4) Training of foreign military and civilian defence personnel.
 - 5) Provision of expertise and advice on the democratic control of armed forces, defence management, and military technical areas.
 - 6) Contacts and exchanges between military personnel and units, and ship visits.
 - 7) Placement of military or civilian personnel in partner countries' defence ministries or armed forces.
 - 8) Deployment of training teams.
 - 9) Provision of military equipment and other material aid.
 - 10) Bilateral or multilateral military exercises for training purposes (Cottey & Forster, 2004).
- In addition, defence diplomacy may also include:
- 11) Intelligence cooperation and exchange of information on the military-political situation and other events related to the issues of security and the armed forces of other states.
 - 12) Historical military cooperation and patriotic education (Drab, 2018).

Existing definitions reveal the goals and means of defence diplomacy, but fall short of describing it as a non-coercive interaction involving an engaging impactful player aiming to accomplish specific defence and foreign policy objectives by exerting favourable influence upon a responding party to achieve a mutually beneficial end state of bilateral relations.

Defence diplomacy indeed comprises overseas military operations other than war, conducted to achieve national objectives (Edmonds & Mills, 1998), but such a broad definition does not contribute much to the conceptual completeness of the idea, as it covers a number of various activities and does not reveal the ways and means of reaching the objectives. Moreover, a clear line of distinction is needed between defence diplomacy and all other activities of the armed forces, which, although peaceful and non-confrontational, contain an element of coercing the responding party, even

by demonstrating superiority as an indirect threat. A vivid example is coercive diplomacy, which is a way of protecting foreign policy interests through threat or actual use of military force, or the use of armed force to intimidate in order to impose political interests (Pajtinka, 2016). Beyond doubt, coercion cannot be a defence diplomacy instrument as it creates conditions for forceful interaction and therefore severely limits the likelihood of a mutually acceptable agreement.

Defence diplomacy certainly entails peaceful use of the defence institutions of one country to co-opt the government institutions of another country in order to achieve a preferred outcome. Whether military-political crises management involves third parties, this includes the exercise of soft power practiced by the defence establishment of one country upon the government of another (Winger, 2014). However, we need to take into account that ‘soft power’ still represents forceful behaviour because power, although ‘soft’, is a means of imposing and implementing the will of the actors in international relations.

Therefore, defence diplomacy activities are an alternative to hard power (coercion, threats, sanctions, and embargoes), but they are not entirely equivalent to non-forceful actions; rather, they are a manifestation of another spectrum of forceful behaviour, opposite to hard power, where the methods of achieving the goals of the proactive (leading) party are acceptable and attractive, and the intended outcome is desirable and beneficial for the addressee (the responding party). In defence diplomacy, the will of the engaging party is implemented through inclusiveness and agreement upon shared interests by revealing the mutual benefit of cooperation and establishing an atmosphere of positivity and benevolence in relations. Thus, the active, engaging, and influencing (impactful) country applies soft power to the government of the respondent or addressee country to achieve certain defence and security policy objectives.

In this context, a new understanding of the nature and essence of military cooperation is needed, which should be in line with the tendency to use armed forces and defence institutions to converge and improve political relations with other countries through defence cooperation and security assistance. It should be borne in mind that military cooperation creates defence diplomacy instruments and shapes the operational domain in which they are applied. The military-political dynamics objectively changes the content and direction of military cooperation, which in turn generates the necessary defence diplomacy tools adequate to the new environment. This is why defence diplomacy represents an adaptively evolving system, changing under the influence of the conditions in which it is applied and rapidly developing because of its increasing relevance as an important resource for public governance.

It is difficult to design a universal model for the application of defence diplomacy activities because of the specifics of individual countries – the level of national power, the priorities and guidelines of defence policy, the composition and structure of the armed forces, the participation in collective security systems and military-political alliances, and the status of relations with neighbouring countries (Muniruzzaman, 2020).

In terms of the desired outcome, defence diplomacy most often seeks a peaceful and non-hostile engagement for the sake of easing tensions between opponents and adversaries, which makes it a powerful tool for conflict management, prevention, and resolution. When it comes to military crises management, activities are time-bound because the time factor can be decisive. To that end, the cooperation seeks to achieve a timely impact upon relations in order to ease tensions and pave the way for reconciliation. Hence, defence diplomacy is not simply ‘extended military diplomacy’, but a more wide-ranging and versatile concept, which has the potential to profoundly influence the security environment regionally and globally. For this reason nations with global outreach have positioned defence diplomacy at the core of their national strategy and perceive it as an important alternative to forceful and aggressive behaviour, which most often does more harm than good in defending their global interests.

Furthermore, defining defence diplomacy means presenting it as an institutional process, carried out by the Defence Ministry and the department responsible for defence policy, chiefs of defence, units maintaining international contacts and cooperating in various fields, representatives of

the non-military component of the national defence system, military and civilian personnel participating in international missions and operations, holding positions in Combined Joint Task Forces and in allied and coalition headquarters, taking part in the preparations and visits of military delegations at various levels, working groups, expert talks, consultations, planning and scientific conferences, seminars, joint exercises and training, ship visits, etc.

In an attempt to contribute to the theory and practice of the concept, this paper suggests a comprehensive definition of modern day defence diplomacy as a *system of activities of the Defence Ministry (or an equivalent institution) and the Armed forces aimed at exerting a peaceful, non-conflict, and non-coercive influence on the institutions of military-political entities at the regional and international level (states, coalitions, non-state actors) through various forms of military cooperation in order to achieve foreign policy and security objectives.*

This definition implies that the initiator of these activities, meant to exercise benevolent and non-confrontational influence through various forms of cooperation, is the proactive impactful party. This means that the strategy of responding to changes in the environment, inherent in countries with limited resources, should be combined with a strategy of active engagement. Undoubtedly, the effective implementation of defence diplomacy activities entails close coordination between the Defence Ministry, Foreign Affairs Ministry, the senior armed forces commanders, and other relevant government institutions and services. It is the Defence Ministry's main peaceful instrument to shape the external security environment by implementing a national defence policy.

Defence Diplomacy Functions

Activities related to crisis management and conflict prevention were established in the NATO Strategic Concept, adopted in 2022. These activities are defined as measures to reduce strategic risk, in combination with measures to build confidence, and maintain a predictable security environment through dialogue and mutual understanding. In this sense, if we assume that the main goals of defence diplomacy are to build trust, counter crises, and resolve disputes, we can define the activities intended to achieve these objectives as strategic risk reduction measures. Thus, defence diplomacy helps improve the crisis management process, as it requires a shift from a reactive approach to crisis management, which focuses on responding to a crisis that has already occurred, to a proactive approach that involves actions before, throughout, and after the crisis. In addition to military-political crisis management, defence diplomacy can be used to reduce strategic risk by preventing the occurrence or mitigating the negative consequences of humanitarian crises that may have an impact on regional security.

To reveal the essence and role of defence diplomacy, this paper ventures to define its main functions, which are reflected in the activities carried out in the process of military crises management: *communication, fact-finding and information, coordination, and representation.* These functions have different weights and significance for the outcome, depending on whether they are performed before, during, or after a crisis or armed conflict. Describing these functions aims to trigger the development of new theoretical and operational knowledge, as it makes clear the mission and purpose of defence diplomacy, explains its impact mechanisms, and helps to distinguish them from other similar activities.

Communication Function

Depending on the objectives of defence diplomacy, the addressee, and the impact mechanism of engaging in activities, communication is carried out at two levels: public and individual. Defence policies and diplomacy are generally open and accessible to civil society. Open to the general public are activities meant to create good conditions for understanding the impactful messages of the proactive nation and promoting its defence policy's main principles and priorities. This is similar to the practice of public diplomacy, but there is a clear distinction between the two activities.

Similar to defence diplomacy, public diplomacy is a means of generating a favourable external environment for the implementation of the foreign-policy agenda and its main goals and priorities. A common feature is the fact that in recent years, along with the comprehensive approach towards security threats and the changes occurring within the perception of security, public diplomacy has

moved more into the focus of foreign relations again, as a strategy and a tool to interact, to promote the development of interdependences, and therefore to support overall peace enforcement (Swistek, 2012). Public diplomacy helps create favourable trends and positive attitudes in foreign public opinion, which in turn creates opportunities for indirect influence on foreign policy, as foreign-policy decision-makers are often forced to conform to prevailing public sentiment.

Another similarity is that public diplomacy is a typical manifestation of 'soft power' in the field of international security. A convincing example is the European Union, which imposes its values and principles not by force or propaganda but by dialogue, understanding, persuasion, and appeal. Public diplomacy is practiced through institutional programs and initiatives designed to inform foreign societies and influence public opinion in other countries. In this sense, it performs two main functions – informative and inclusive, which are implemented through the mechanism of public relations and bilateral cooperation in various fields, especially education, science, and culture, organized in joint scientific and education programs, language training centres, and cultural institutes. Impactful messages generally aim to promote culture and values, present results and prospects of cooperation, clarify policy priorities, and engage with them.

In fact, in both types of diplomacy, messages have the same content and, depending on the situation, intend to ease tensions, stimulate dialogue, and build an atmosphere of understanding and trust. However, the targets (respondents) of public diplomacy are civil society, non-governmental organizations, and public opinion, while defence diplomacy primarily impacts the security and defence institutions of other states and international organizations. Moreover, some diplomatic defence activities, such as strategic engagement and intelligence cooperation, are not widely accessible to the public. Impactful messages may be addressed at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels depending on the level at which defence diplomacy activities are performed. In this regard, it is necessary to distinguish between strategic engagement as a task of defence diplomacy, on the one hand, and strategic communications, on the other.

The objectives are almost identical – fostering strategies, mainstreaming policies, and promoting institutional action – but the tools used to achieve them differ. The recipients—that is, the addressees of the messages—are also different. For example, according to NATO, strategic communication includes activities and capabilities designed to support alliance policies, operations, and actions in the pursuit of alliance objectives. The activities and capabilities are as follows:

- 1) Public diplomacy.
- 2) Public affairs: NATO civilian engagement through the media to inform the public of NATO policies, operations, and activities.
- 3) Military public affairs: promoting NATO's military aims and objectives to audiences in order to enhance awareness and understanding of military aspects of the alliance.
- 4) Information operations: NATO military advice and co-ordination of military information activities in order to create desired effects on the will, understanding, and capabilities of adversaries and other NAC-approved parties in support of alliance operations, missions, and objectives.
- 5) Psychological operations: planned psychological activities using methods of communication and other means directed to approved audiences to influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives (NATO Strategic CoE, 2020).

At an individual level, impact is usually transmitted via intellectual and emotional channels, which means that messages need to be well constructed, well-versed, addressed properly, and should be clear, reasoned, consistent, persuasive, and inclusive.

Fact-Finding and Information Function

The external security environment must be continuously studied and analysed to assess threats, plan defences, and build defence capabilities that are adequate for the environment. Defence diplomacy activities can be effectively used to monitor the military-political situation as an integral component of the security environment, identify risks and threats, and provide early warning by

predicting the emergence of military-political crises and military (armed) conflicts with direct or indirect effects on national security and interests.

Defence diplomacy and defence policy are systematic, continuous information and management processes based on institutional decision-making, and the information obtained and processed. Credible, detailed, and timely information on events and trends unfolding in the security environment is needed, with the main focus on risks and threats to national security, on the behaviour of military-political entities, and the opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation based on shared goals and interests. In this regard, information on foreign and defence policy goals, plans, and intentions of states (unions and organizations) that will engage in defence diplomacy is of particular importance. Summarized and structured information is needed on the status and prospects for the development of their armed forces, strategic concepts, defence policy priorities, command and control structures, senior management staff, modernization and rearmament plans, and operational and combat training.

It is useful to note the guiding principle that nowadays information by itself does not necessarily represent knowledge. Data obtained from unofficial sources, and in particular, data from the media, needs to be double-checked, analysed, and compared with data from other sources, as a large amount of inaccurate information circulates in the media, which can curb effectiveness and hinder defence diplomacy initiatives. The information should be used to analyse and assess the capabilities of various components of the respondent country's national defence system in order to identify capability gaps, which will allow looking into possible priorities for defence diplomacy and focusing on activities that will be acceptable and attractive.

Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that defence diplomacy activities receive sufficient information. They should be organized and conducted in close cooperation with intelligence services and, in particular, with military intelligence.

Coordination Function

Defence diplomacy maintains the links between the elements of the international military cooperation system, allowing actors to exert the necessary non-conflict influence to achieve the desired outcome. Planning, preparation, and implementation of the activities requires both close cooperation and coordination between the authorities and the responsible departments of the engaging party, and direct contacts with relevant authorities of the addressee party through authorized representatives.

This function represents an important principle of national security policy: proactivity and coordination between relevant government institutions. Diplomatic activities within international military cooperation correspond to the general context of the security environment and depend on the status of the relations between the parties engaged in defence diplomacy. The priorities of foreign security and defence policies determine the direction and focus of cooperation. Thus, they represent an integrated holistic approach to security.

Departments drafting cooperation plans and coordinating their implementation as well as the personnel directly responsible for the activities face the difficult task of setting in motion the impact mechanisms that will produce the desired result, which would lead to improvements in the external security environment.

Representation Function

The representation function is accomplished through military cooperation events and contacts that constitute the operational environment of defence diplomacy. They serve to reinforce the institutional prestige of the proactive party's armed forces by building respect for and trust in military and civilian personnel. This function is a way of communicating impactful messages transmitted through the defence diplomacy activities.

All diplomatic activities are deliberately used to strengthen the international prestige of the engaging country, its institutions, and armed forces. It is not only about the representational activity of military attaché offices, which operate in accordance with generally accepted representation rules, but also about various forms of communication with representatives of the addressee country

throughout the preparation and implementation of various military cooperation events. For example, according to the concept of defence diplomacy, the work of the military and civilian personnel of the countries that participated in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan and provided various types of training and assistance to the Afghan government, Afghan National Army, and the Security Forces represented defence diplomacy. Participation in the international mission to train, advise, and assist the security forces in Afghanistan was also related to defence diplomacy, as the teams of advisers and instructors interacted with Afghan government institutions, national security forces, and representatives of partner countries and international organizations. This example illustrates that defence diplomacy operations can be conducted separately or as part of peacekeeping or other operations in an allied, coalition, or national format.

The representation function is also carried out through daily personal liaisons and informal interactions.

The concept of defence diplomacy indicates that it is inherent to individual governments, and not to groups of countries (international organizations, military-political alliances, coalitions). The research conducted thus far implies that defence diplomacy activities are carried out by nations according to their national defence policies and in support of their national interests.

Alliances and coalitions implementing a common security and defence policy or a coalition strategy can exert a peaceful, non-conflict, and non-coercive influence, initiate and bring about changes in the security environment, and be proactive and influential military-political actors, using strategic communications and public diplomacy. Defence diplomacy activities performed by member states are usually in line with the strategic objectives of the alliance or coalition; however, they are primarily an outcome of national efforts and are consistent with the national defence policy priorities of a specific country.

Strategic Engagement: A Task and a Tool of Defence Diplomacy

One of the tasks of defence diplomacy in military crisis management and conflict prevention is strategic engagement, which represents a set of military cooperation activities aimed at improving interactions between potential or former military and political opponents and reducing the likelihood of uncontrolled aggravation of relations.

This means that impactful messages address the institutions of specific military-political actors and aim to reduce strategic risk through confidence-building measures through military cooperation. Mutual engagement is not between friendly and allied states, but between states that can generate challenges, risks, and even threats within the security environment. The proactive nation and the respondent one may be geopolitical rivals or regional or global adversaries whose bilateral relations are full of mutual mistrust, instability, and a recurring escalation of tensions.

Strategic engagement is indeed defence diplomacy which leads to the establishment of instruments that allow otherwise adversarial states to manage their relationships with the ultimate goal of diminishing the risk of interstate conflict (Katz, 2020). When strategic engagement is applied to ease strained relations and tensions between opposing states, it may include confidence-building measures (CBMs) to prevent military and political crises and armed conflicts. Owing to the different national concepts and nature of the measures themselves, there is still no consensus among authors on whether CBMs can be defined as defence diplomacy activities and whether they are equivalent to strategic engagement.

Cottey and Forster do not consider CBMs to be a part of defence diplomacy, as well as activities related to arms control and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, according to the Ministry of Defence of Indonesia, CBMs play a central role in defence diplomacy, especially when conducted through bilateral or multilateral engagements (Blake & Spies 2019). This is similar to the view of Spain's Ministry of Defence (Ministerio de Defensa, 2012).

According to Katz, strategic engagement can encompass some CBMs; however, conceptual differentiation is necessary. CBMs are usually embedded in ongoing interactions, whereas strategic engagement can either be ongoing or limited in scope. He distinguished between four categories of confidence-building measures:

- 1) Exchanging information and/or increasing communication between the parties.
- 2) Exchanging observers and/or conducting inspections.
- 3) Establishing ‘rules of the road’ for certain military operations.
- 4) Applying restraints on the operation and readiness of military forces (Katz, 2020).

In the event of a crisis or conflict prevention, when CBMs are the core of strategic engagement, the main goal is the de-escalation of tensions and avoidance of the risk of misunderstandings and clashes between the belligerent parties by strengthening the communication function of defence diplomacy, speeding up the bilateral exchange of information, and increasing predictability in the parties’ behaviour and actions.

Obviously, strategic engagement initiatives aiming to prevent crises or resolve armed conflicts may originate from a third party interested in reducing tensions and settling disputes, which can encourage the parties to cooperate and make the engagement a success.

Strategic engagement as a defence policy tool is applied through military cooperation aimed primarily at improving the climate of relations between the armed forces and strengthening communication between the parties involved. As part of the general national security policy, its main objective (improving bilateral relations) is political in nature and is achieved not only by military means, but also through the integrated use of foreign policy, economics, information, and other tools. The Armed Forces do not act independently or autonomously within the framework of the national security and defence system, and their use, including in strategic engagement, is always subject to foreign policy objectives. Again, there is a two-way relationship, because the results achieved through strategic engagement can influence the content and direction of foreign policy.

In this regard, Evan Resnik’s definition of ‘engagement’ is noteworthy in international relations and foreign policy. He defines it as ‘efforts to influence the foreign policy of the target country by establishing and expanding contacts with it in various fields (diplomatic, military, economic, and cultural)’ (Resnik, 2001). Other researchers define engagement as a strategy for achieving a desired outcome by motivating another party in a positive manner. Engagement strategies are divided into foreign policy, economic, and military (Haas & O’Sullivan, 2000). In the NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions AAP-06, 2019 edition, we see that the term ‘strategic engagement’ is used once in relation to the meaning of the term ‘end state’, which is defined as ‘The political-strategic statement of conditions that defines an acceptable concluding situation to be attained at the end of a strategic engagement.’ This definition shows that strategic engagement has a clear ultimate objective – the creation of an ‘acceptable concluding situation’, which in military crisis management and conflict prevention means to reduce the risk of tensions or escalation of hostilities by reaching a desired state of relations with the other side using military cooperation.

Therefore, *strategic engagement can display the following features:*

First, strategic engagement is a desired outcome of military cooperation and a joint action contributing to the gradual mitigation of factors that give rise to tensions and conflicts in relations between adversaries. It is effective when there are observable and measurable indications that the diplomatic efforts of the proactive party actually contribute to the desired end state of the military-political situation. In this sense, it represents a key task of defence diplomacy.

Second, it is an organized and consistent process of exercising ‘soft power’ upon the addressee, which can be part of a larger plan for preventive diplomacy. This type of defence diplomacy utilises certain properties of military cooperation as an instrument to resolve conflicts.

Daniel Katz thinks that ‘soft power’ is an established concept in international relations theory, but it bears distinctive differences when compared to defence diplomacy and strategic engagement. According to him, soft power is traditionally defined as ‘the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want without coercion or economic inducement...’ via co-optation – where objectives are achieved by getting others to ‘want what you want’. In contrast, defence diplomacy and strategic engagement are more focused on achieving common ground and deploying military and diplomatic assets in the pursuit of conflict prevention (Katz, 2020).

Of course, shared interests and mutual benefits from preserving the peace are extremely strong incentives that bring interacting parties closer together and create favourable conditions for the preventive use of diplomatic and military means to avoid armed conflict.

Still, defence diplomacy and strategic engagement in particular are meant to convince a given military-political entity of the common benefit of reducing strategic risk, to connect and communicate ideas and proposals, to initiate joint actions, to involve the parties in a given line of behaviour or unite them behind an action program, to agree upon a shared view, and ultimately, to engage in non-conflict and non-coercive cooperation in order to achieve a desired end state of the security environment. For this reason, defence diplomacy should be perceived as a useful tool for deliberate proactive change in the security environment, rather than an activity exploiting existing security realities, events, and tendencies. Similarly, strategic engagement is a way of transforming fragile and tense relations into non-conflict, mutually beneficial partnerships.

Third, strategic engagement is a way of using armed forces to exert a deterrent and conciliatory impact at a strategic level on the government institutions of other countries to avoid the possible exacerbation of contradictions between opponents (competitors) and to prevent the outbreak of an armed conflict. Thus, we refer to strategic engagement operations.

This level is strategic for several reasons. First, because of the significance of the objectives set by the engaging party in improving the external security environment, building confidence, and avoiding the likelihood of confrontational relations as a prelude to military conflicts. Second, such an interaction is supposed to influence the military-strategic views of both sides because of the strategic impact on concepts related to the development and use of armed forces. Third, interactions involve institutions for strategic command and control belonging to the national security and defence system.

Cooperation may be carried out not only by the armed forces but also by the participation of non-military defence capabilities – representatives of institutions from the non-military component of defence and other civilians from the national security system, security experts, and representatives of the academic community. The Defence Ministry and the department responsible for defence policy and military cooperation coordinate with the armed forces, the Foreign Affairs Ministry, and other national security institutions.

Engagement is impactful and effective when the proactive and responding parties are willing to seek resolution of the dispute through cooperation aimed at reducing tensions. This kind of defence diplomacy activity produces results when military cooperation is seen as the embodiment of a joint effort to overcome a hostile atmosphere in relations and seek ways to render differences powerless. This type of engagement is practiced mainly by global or regional powers whose national or allied powers allow them to exert decisive influence on the security environment and international relations. However, the so-called small states also have the capacity for strategic engagement and can achieve important goals in the defence of their national interests.

An important feature of military cooperation that makes it suitable for strategic engagement is its ability to overcome mistrust through mutual understanding and rapprochement. The engaging party seeks to control events through a set of non-conflict and benevolent actions that calm the military-political situation and have a restraining or deterrent effect on the other party. For example, bilateral discussions on armed forces development plans, the objectives and tasks of defence policy, and military doctrines help overcome mutual hostility and suspicion, and create conditions for a compromise on problematic issues.

Similar assessments of the security environment as well as the existence of common challenges, risks, and threats both globally and regionally can help identify the mutual interests underpinning cooperation. Joint discussions would have a favourable effect by influencing the other side to modify its doctrinal views on the nature of strategic military threats. Thus, the responding party may be removed from the list of potential adversaries or opposing parties in a future armed conflict.

When practicing strategic engagement through military cooperation, an opportunity arises to change the prevailing sentiments among military personnel of the recipient country. Mistrust can be

overcome by discussing defence planning and capability building as well as the rearmament and modernization plans of the proactive engaging country. The persuasive messages should be constructed and communicated to ‘disarm the mind’ of the other party, i.e. to convince it that no hostile intent exists and that cooperation is mutually beneficial.

Main Principles of Defence Diplomacy

According to Cottey and Forster, an important feature of defence diplomacy is the balance between inclusive and transparent action, on the one hand, and the need for reciprocity, on the other. The question arises as to the extent to which a proactive party should expect reciprocity when honestly and openly discussing with the other party its defence policy and its armed forces in order to gain its confidence. It should be borne in mind however, that reciprocity is a fundamental principle of diplomacy, which symbolizes togetherness, respect, and self-respect in international relations. A balance between openness and reciprocity is always necessary and essential in cooperation between military and political opponents, whose bilateral relations are tense and hostile. A discrepancy in the level of transparency would place the impacting party at a disadvantage, increasing tensions, and potentially having a counterproductive effect.

It is true that the increasing use of defence diplomacy has the potential to narrow the perimeter of traditional diplomacy and ‘militarize’ foreign policy, and that focusing on cooperation and ‘soft power’ could be unrealistic when the lack of reciprocity puts the pro-active party at a disadvantage (Cottey & Forster, 2004). These valid concerns can be overcome by practicing defence diplomacy as a coordinated effort by all relevant institutions. The issue of reciprocity should be addressed on a case-by-case basis, knowing in advance the interests and willingness of the other party to respond constructively to initiatives for cooperation and diplomacy.

Attempting to enlarge the existing knowledge, this paper highlights the following other core principles essential for organizing, conducting, and implementing defence diplomacy:

The principles of *consistency and sustainability* mean that engagement will be achieved through good management, setting clear objectives, careful preparation, detailed planning of specific cooperation activities, coherence of efforts between institutions, and strong support from the political and military leadership.

In the event of an armed conflict threat, nations resort to defence diplomacy for its *effectiveness and efficiency*, stemming from the possibility of achieving the desired outcome at a much smaller loss of resources in comparison to adverse events, which may result in a deterioration of the military-political situation and an increased risk of armed conflict. In the course of these diplomatic exchanges, the proactive party may suggest a preliminary cooperation plan and identify the motivation of the opposing party; on that basis, it may draw conclusions on the most effective forms of cooperation. The intensity of cooperation is also a matter to be discussed depending on the objectives and situation at hand.

The principle of *continuity* implies that it is necessary to study and analyse the experience gained to refine and enrich the theory and practices of defence diplomacy and strategic engagement. The nature, objectives, and basic principles remain constant; however, the changing security environment requires improving the methods, means, and ways of exerting influence to contain strategic risk and reduce the likelihood of armed conflict.

Defence Diplomacy as a Military Operation

Defence diplomacy is an important tool for crisis and conflict prevention, as it involves activities that are constructive, transparent, non-hostile, peaceful, and based on trust, mutual interest, and the willingness to cooperate. Here, it is possible to extend the scope of defence diplomacy to include a range of peaceful and non-violent actions by armed forces, including military operations other than war aimed at de-escalation, arms control, confidence-building measures (CBMs), humanitarian operations, deployment of forces in a manner that excludes aggressive intentions, and bilateral contacts of military personnel.

To better understand how defence diplomacy is used to manage crises and resolve conflicts, we need to see *where it stands within the spectrum of non-combat military operations*. Conducted as a peace support operation, conflict prevention can include either non-coercive diplomatic activities, such as fact-finding, early warning, inspections, and observation, or forceful military operations, such as pre-emptive troop deployment, sanctions, and embargoes.

Diplomatic activities may include strategic engagement, which, in addition to prevention, can contribute to containing conflict, dissolving confrontations, or avoiding further tension. Some peacekeeping activities aimed at resolving existing conflicts are diplomatic and include negotiation, inquiry, mediation, reconciliation, and arbitration. The Armed Forces can organize, prepare, and participate directly in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In the event of an anticipated, imminent, or ongoing armed conflict, the armed forces may mediate in resolving military issues between opposing parties, playing the role of neutral mediators and impartial negotiators. Negotiations are an exchange of information to converge positions and reach an agreement. With the consent of the parties involved and other interested parties, the military and civilian personnel of the proactive party may participate in fact-finding, inspection, monitoring, early warning, and identifying possible escalations of tensions. Organized monitoring, information gathering, and assessment of the situation using established indicators are essential for revealing the emergence and development of a crisis and for implementing appropriate diplomatic activities.

Therefore, all non-violent and non-coercive operations of the armed forces of the proactive party, which engage the parties concerned in political intentions to prevent, mitigate, resolve disputes, or reduce confrontation, represent defence diplomacy. This category should exclude otherwise important and necessary operations, such as the pre-emptive deployment of troops for conflict prevention or peacekeeping, sanctions, and embargoes, because they involve direct or indirect coercion in the process of influencing the parties concerned. In the practice of conflict prevention, defence diplomacy should be seen as a way of avoiding forceful deterrence or coercive containment measures, including various forms of military force demonstration, determination to use force, and concentration of troops in the conflict area.

Defence Diplomacy in Action: Russia and Turkey in Syria

Let us examine how Russia and Turkey seek to prevent conflict between each other by consulting and coordinating their military activities in Syria through defence diplomacy in order to avoid direct clashes and conflicts between the Russian and Turkish military personnel on Syrian soil.

This ongoing operation showcases that the comprehensive implementation of defence diplomacy in crisis management both as a theoretical construct and an operational concept is an effective way of aligning opposing interests, avoiding armed confrontation, and improving strained relations. This example proves that depending on the degree of escalation of tensions and the objectives pursued, strategic engagement as a task of defence diplomacy can be regarded as a positive result of a joint effort leading to conflict resolution or dispute settlement, a process of sending inclusive and non-coercive messages geared towards achieving an acceptable and mutually desirable outcome, and a form of peaceful and benevolent use of military capabilities aimed at preventing potential crises and conflicts.

The two countries are economic partners and, at the same time, geopolitical and strategic rivals; in the case of the conflict in Syria, they are adversaries and opposing parties motivated by circumstances to seek ways of mutually beneficial military cooperation to reduce the likelihood of clashes between them. Mutual strategic engagement involves measures to prevent disagreements, incidents, and other unfavourable situations that may escalate tensions and affect the security and interests of both parties. Defence diplomacy cooperation includes the coordination of joint actions in the crisis areas in Northern Syria, monitoring the situation in the de-escalation zones, joint patrolling along the lines of contact between government forces and the opposition to supervise compliance with the ceasefire agreements in Idlib Province, and protection of humanitarian aid corridors. Other activities are high-level leadership meetings and contacts between various working groups within the

tripartite Coordination Centre (Iran-Russia-Turkey) aimed at coordinating activities in de-escalation areas.

The two parties recognize that their divergent interests and conflicting geopolitical objectives in Syria are serious prerequisites for transforming friendly relations into confrontational ones and are therefore interested in reducing strategic risk as much as possible through preventive engagement. They comply with the principle of reciprocity, realising that a mutually advantageous cooperation requires a non-aggressive and non-coercive approach, broad use of all defence diplomacy functions, and successful implementation of the features of strategic engagement, despite their differences regarding the desired end state of the conflict in Syria.

The case of Syria highlights the theoretical findings presented in this article; moreover, it confirms that the theory and practice of defence diplomacy and strategic engagement are worth exploring further, because they have the potential to contribute significantly to military crises management and conflict prevention. A closer look into the joint operations Russia and Turkey conduct in Syria points to the conclusion that, for them, defence diplomacy is the only mutually acceptable and efficient way to reconcile opposing interests and avoid confrontation on the ground.

Notably, their conceptual and functional approaches are clearly visible in their crisis management efforts:

First, both parties conduct defence diplomacy activities as a joint non-hostile military operation and implement the conciliatory and deterring features of strategic engagement. In such non-conflict bilateral operations, the roles of a proactive party and a responding party are arbitrary. However, the prevailing initiative belongs to Russia because of its bigger goals and greater ambition to fulfil by participating in the Syrian conflict: restoring its status as a world power, expanding Russian influence in the Middle East, and enhancing its military and strategic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's main objectives are no less significant but are concentrated in a specific area and stem from the desire to protect the country's national interests by impeding further territorial-administrative separation of the Kurdish regions in Northern Syria and preventing the interactions between the People's Defence Forces (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Southeast Anatolia.

Second, strategic engagement is based on the shared interests of both parties to achieve their objectives as safely and efficiently as possible, without jeopardizing their partnerships. This is a prerequisite for symmetry of motives, intentions, and approaches. Both sides seem to realise that, in the pursuit of defence diplomacy, clear intentions and reciprocity are essential and unavoidable. This confirms once more that the similarity of motives and intentions based on mutual interests provides a good basis for the positive results of strategic engagement. Direct evidence of the effectiveness and sustainability of engagement is the fact that even serious incidents that occur and have a negative impact on cooperation do not cause a permanent deterioration of relations or instigate conflict. Such was an incident in which the Russian Su-24 fighter-bomber was shot down in November 2015 by a Turkish F-16 in the airspace near the Syrian-Turkish border (BBC, 2015).

Third, the engagement is non-coercive and non-forceful, as it represents voluntary cooperation that reduces the likelihood of direct clashes between the two sides. The non-coercive nature of the interaction is not altered by the fact that Russia and Turkey's attitudes toward the prospects for peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict are largely determined by realpolitik factors, especially their ability to influence the situation on the ground and the balance of power between the opposing parties. For example, Russia relies on its air supremacy over crisis areas established by the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) based at the Khmeimim Airbase. Turkey, for its part, hopes that its support for anti-government groups in North-western Syria and its military operations will provide it with opportunities to influence the allocation of government resources and the post-war restoration of the country. Measures taken at the operational-tactical level do not change the strategic nature of the interaction, which is determined by the scale of the objectives pursued and the implications for the security environment if both sides abandon strategic engagement and resort to armed confrontation.

A different topic altogether is Russia's current capabilities to exercise soft power on a global scale to justify its ambitions to be a global geopolitical centre of gravity, capable of exercising strategic influence in different regions of the world and shaping the security environment. Russia seeks to change the military-strategic balance of power and create a new pattern of international relations in which the role and significance of nations are determined mostly by their military power. It seeks to eliminate the geopolitical advantages of NATO and the EU, which derive from the socioeconomic and technological superiority of Western societies. Russia does not possess the advantages that would enable it to achieve its main strategic goal of restoring its status as a global power. To influence global socio-political trends, a country should send inclusive messages of global resonance related to universal values or principles, such as the preservation of international peace and security, the development of democracy, personal freedom and individual rights, the rule of law, economic and technological advancement, social justice, and environmental protection. Today, Russia does not have a large-scale, globally attractive idea, and that severely limits its capabilities to exercise 'soft power' (Pantev, 2014).

Conclusions

Although defence diplomacy and strategic engagement are not guaranteed to prevent interstate conflict or eliminate the danger of war, exploring them conceptually and theoretically can significantly enhance the instruments available for military crisis management, conflict resolution, and peacekeeping. Expanding the theory and practice of defence diplomacy is essential nowadays, when direct clashes of national interests, diverging foreign policy goals, and irreconcilable differences in values are common phenomena across the security environment.

Indeed, the positive outcome of defence diplomacy depends largely on the balance of power between the two countries, history of bilateral relations, the military-political situation in the region, and the commitment of senior government officials. For example, some countries such as India pay particular attention to defence diplomacy, make serious efforts to build and maintain trust with neighbouring countries, actively cooperate in joint exercises and training of military personnel, and provide humanitarian assistance when necessary. This may not have a decisive impact on the prospects for conflict resolution, but contributes to managing the potential for conflict and reducing tensions in the region (Gambhir, 2021). The conceptual and institutional development of defence diplomacy would further enable state and military leaderships to conduct effective operations in a peaceful, non-conflicting, and non-coercive manner to protect national interests and strengthen regional security and stability.

Defence diplomacy would not alter the main role and primary purpose of the armed forces as an instrument for armed struggle; rather, it represents a significant opportunity to enhance the national defence system's potential and capabilities.

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