
Defence Cooperation With India's Neighbours

Vijay Oberoi

Introduction

Security relationships between countries are an evolving process, driven by a changing geo-political landscape, multipolar dynamics in an age of uncertainty and increasingly sophisticated threats. Such relationships enhance regional stability by adding flexibility to the concerned nations' ability to respond to regional crises. In today's complex threat environment, such flexibility is an essential tool for security planners.

Defence cooperation is also essential for the concept of "preventive defence," which has assumed great importance in today's globalised world. This concept is dependent on engagement with other nations, especially those which comprise part of our area of interest. Engagement provides the capability to prevent conflict by addressing conditions that could lead to one. It also builds confidence in each other's abilities and develops goodwill, which in the long-term improves relations between nations. As the Cold War baggage is no longer an inhibiting factor, engagement with the maximum number of countries can be sustained on a long-term basis. The strategy of maintaining strong bilateral links would also facilitate multilateral progress in dialogues pertaining to security.

Globalisation and inter-connectedness are propelling the concept of security in new directions. Sovereignty is no longer sacrosanct in most cases and, hence, the nuances of security may not be purely national, as other states, especially neighbours, are greatly interested in what is happening within states in their area of interest. On account of inter-connectivity between states, transparency provided by the electronic media and the inter-mixing of people around the world, every conflict tends to have global and regional repercussions.

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Historical Perspective

Defence cooperation, also referred to as defence diplomacy, has always been an important tool of statecraft. The entire imperial structure of Britain as well as other European countries was based on active defence diplomacy, commencing in the 17th century. However, after our independence in 1947, our political leadership and their bureaucratic advisers, shelved defence to the background. Thus, the military had practically no role in policy formulations, diplomacy and using the important defence tool in many situations, where our interests would have been better served. Let me cite just three examples. Firstly, India approaching the United Nations in 1948, when the Indian military had the situation in Kashmir firmly in control and had both the plans and the will to drive out Pakistan completely from Kashmir. Secondly, the Tashkent Declaration after the India-Pakistan War of 1965, when crucial areas captured by us were handed back to Pakistan, with nothing in return. Thirdly, the Shimla Agreement of 1972, when our major catch of over 93,000 Pakistani prisoners was frittered away, again with nothing in return.

There were many reasons for this state of affairs, including the thinking of our political leadership that India being a peaceful and pacifist nation needed only a token military. Even after the debacle of 1962, while the defence forces were expanded, their role in foreign and even defence policy formulations remained the same. This was in the face of what other major countries were doing. During the long confrontation between the Soviet Union and the Western nations, better known as the Cold War, the militaries of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact countries played an active role in formulating policies, confidence-building measures (CBMs), arms limitation negotiations, and so on. However, our mandarins took no or little notice of such events.

The little interaction the defence forces were permitted to have with militaries of other nations was confined to the field of training, wherein some personnel, mostly from Third World countries, attended training courses in some of our training establishments. However, funds for the same were allocated, controlled and disbursed by the Ministry of External Affairs. I presume that the system continues even today, 60 years after our independence!

There was, fortunately, a better appreciation of the professionalism of the Indian defence forces in foreign countries. This resulted in military training teams being sent to a number of countries, not only in our neighbourhood like Nepal and Bhutan, but also further afield to countries like Iraq, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Botswana, Angola, Malaysia, and so on. We all know how much time it has taken

for the India-USA military relationship to develop, from the time the so-called Kicklighter proposals were first mooted and how they are progressing now. These and similar other cases lead us to the following conclusions:

- The obvious delays in our decision-making processes.
- Keeping the military completely out of the loop while formulating policies which are fundamental to security.
- Compartmentalisation of our decision-making apparatus.
- The hedging our bureaucrats are adept at, to cover themselves from all angles, thus, delaying finalisation of important decisions – a case of paralysis by analysis!

Defence Diplomacy

Let me now give you my definition of “defence diplomacy”, a phrase I prefer to term as “defence cooperation”. Essentially, it is an extension of foreign policy, as security and foreign policies are inter-linked and the nation’s objectives can only be met when they are in sync. Relations between nations are forged in many ways, the traditional ones being political, diplomatic, economic, military, social or societal and cultural. Each of them has a role to play.

The next issue is that of methodology or the means available for conducting defence diplomacy. These include joint exercises, exchange programmes, training courses, exchange of visits at various levels, equipment-related cooperation and a new one added recently, viz provision of services like use of firing ranges, manoeuvre areas, air bases, transit facilities and so on. I would like to specifically focus on India’s neighbouring countries and discuss the extent and methodology of military-to-military cooperation with them.

A few general remarks first. We cannot and should not have one template for all our neighbours. We need to carry out an assessment or analysis of each, to include what their strengths and weaknesses are, what challenges they are facing and which are the areas where both sides can be of assistance to each other, or learn from each other. At the outset, we must understand that in

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defence cooperation no country should consider itself superior or inferior to the other. It is a process of sharing knowledge and expertise so that if an occasion arises for the militaries of the two countries to act in concert with each other, it is carried out successfully, in a friendly manner and without any strains.

Neighbouring Countries

Let me now shift gear and deal with our neighbouring countries, which is my allocated subject. I propose to discuss the countries involved in two parts – the first part comprising our immediate neighbours and the second those which are once or twice removed. Our area of interest goes much beyond South Asia. At the cost of repetition, let me specify the area of our interest, which I call the Southern Asian region. In the west, it starts from the eastern coast of Africa, going to the Gulf of Hormuz, and on the east, it encompasses every country and area west of the Malacca Straits, and includes Iran, the Central Asian Republics (CARs), Afghanistan, China, Myanmar, all the countries of Southeast Asia and the northern Indian Ocean. I do not propose to discuss each country; some are well known to you and there is a certain commonality of approach amongst a few.

Pakistan

Let me first deal with Pakistan, which today finds itself in an unenviable highly unstable state, where the dark forces they themselves created, equipped and trained, have carried out a U-turn and have risen against their former mentors. It also needs to be noted that we are in a peace process mode, even though the process has not really moved in the last year or so, on account of Pakistan's preoccupations with its internal troubles. Despite four years of this peace process, in the military field nothing has changed, except that a ceasefire between the troops on each side of the Line of Control (LoC) and the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) continues. The reason for lack of forward movement is that Pakistan wants to have its cake and eat it too! At this stage, defence cooperation is a distant dream and will remain so till Pakistan abjures all aspects of the proxy war it continues to wage against India, in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) as well as in other parts of India. My recommendations vis-à-vis Pakistan are as under:

- We must continue to engage with the Pakistani military, as we have been doing.
- We must not forget that in Pakistan the military continues to be all powerful and is likely to remain so even when there is some kind of a democratic government installed.

- In policy formulations relating to Pakistan, our defence forces hierarchy must always be in the policy formulating loop, unlike on earlier occasions when we have lost out on account of keeping the military out.
- We must respond, offer and provide humanitarian assistance during natural and other calamities.

China

We next come to China, which everyone who matters calls “a long-term threat” to India. China has set its sights on becoming a superpower and its economy is growing rapidly. Despite dire predictions by the Western think-tanks, the system of authoritarian governance continues and though there are reports of undercurrents of dissent and political freedom, the rulers of China are managing and governing the country well. At the same time, it has not allowed its military to stagnate. On the contrary, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is modernising rapidly, unlike the Indian military that is being starved of funds.

We are engaging with China too and in effect, the peace process with China predates the one with Pakistan. As part of the process, peace and tranquility prevails along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), between the two countries and talks have been going on for many years to resolve the long standing border problem. The two countries are interacting in other fields too and the volume of trade is increasing at a fast pace. However, India has a number of major concerns in the security arena, which tend to dampen the relationship and forward movement. These negatives include consistent assistance and support to Pakistan in the nuclear and missile fields; fostering close military relations with practically all countries around India in a bid to strategically encircle us; unnecessarily delaying the solving of the border problem; sporadic incursions across the LAC, in both the western and eastern sectors; adding new dimensions to its territorial claims; attempting inroads into countries like Nepal and Bhutan, which have traditional links with India, and the rapid Hanisation of Tibet, as well as the attempts to isolate the Dalai Lama and run down the Tibetan diaspora, especially in India.

Despite the above, there has been forward movement at the military-to-military level. This has manifested itself in cordial border post meetings,

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exchange of high level visits, attendance of an officer from the PLA on the National Defence College (NDC) course and the recent joint exercise, albeit at the sub-unit level, in Kunming, with an agreement of a similar or bigger exercise in India this year, keeping reciprocity in mind. At the same time, we need to take note of what can only be called the bullying tactics of China, like protesting the visit of our prime minister to Arunachal Pradesh recently and not being represented at this year's Defence Expo. We must not take these slights lying down as we are prone to, otherwise, China will continue with these tactics and will also enhance them.

Military engagements should be continued and even enhanced, for they fit in with India's overall foreign policy goal of maintaining equilibrium amongst the major powers. A word of caution needs to be added here. In statecraft, diplomacy and *real politik* appeasements rarely work. Power is respected by power. Some analysts think that it is "soft power" that will enable India to rise and that "hard power" need not be emphasised. I am completely against such views and thinking. Nations like India, which are on the growth path of becoming major powers, need to project both "soft" and "hard" power. In sum, while engagement with China must continue, we have to become militarily powerful, rapidly improve our infrastructure in the border areas, which we have neglected, despite repeated projections by the army, and change our policy of appeasement or acting from a position of weakness. It is also essential to add a major offensive capability in our current military posture against China.

Bhutan

We have excellent relations with Bhutan, especially at the military level, which paradoxically has many times been resented by our diplomatic colleagues! Our training team, IMTRAT, enjoys a very high degree of respect and we should continue to enhance their role. Our Border Roads Organisation is also doing excellent work there. The bulk of officers of the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) have been trained in India and both officers and men of the RBA attend training courses in many of our training establishments. The present king is also an alumnus of the NDC. Most weapons and equipment of the RBA are provided by India. This close relationship must continue.

Nepal

With Nepal too, we have a special relationship. It has had its ups and downs, but the military-to-military relations have been sustained, even when there was some strain in relations in other fields. We had an army training team in Nepal, but it was wound up a couple of decades back. The tradition of conferring honorary

generalship between the chiefs of the two countries has continued even during the upheavals of the last few years and earlier occasions of strained relationship. The Indian Army also has over 30,000 Nepali Gorkhas serving in our Gorkha regiments and there are a large number of Gorkha veterans and their families in Nepal. These have resulted in continuing goodwill and good relations between the two militaries. However, with China making overtures of all types and offering many inducements to Nepal and the Maoists' demand of getting their cadres absorbed in the Royal Nepal Army (RNA), the Indian military, particularly the army, needs to refine its plans vis-a-vis the RNA. The budget for personnel of the RNA to attend training courses in India is being periodically enhanced. As opposed to Rs. 103.62 lakh allotted in 2005-06, the allocations for the next year, viz 2006-07 were enhanced to Rs. 124.81 lakh.

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Bangladesh

There is no external threat to Bangladesh, but its relations with India are at a low level. There are a number of irritants including illegal migration, Indian insurgent groups taking shelter in Bangladesh, water management of some rivers flowing from India and the fencing of the border by India. Bangladesh has an adverse land to population ratio and it remains a poor, overpopulated and ill-governed country. It is surrounded from three sides by India, the fourth side being on the Bay of Bengal. This does give a feeling of encirclement to Bangladesh, which can only be diluted by much closer engagement. During the last few years, Bangladesh has become a safe haven for Islamic fundamentalists. The infamous Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan is actively aiding anti-Indian insurgents and militants, with the Bangladesh authorities turning a blind eye. At present, the army is governing the country, albeit from the background.

There has been a steady influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh to India, which is changing the demographic structure of the Indian states in northeastern India, but the Government of Bangladesh has always refused to

acknowledge this.

Military-to-military relations between India and Bangladesh can be characterised as normal or routine, whereas they should be at a much higher level. Although the training courses budget for Bangladesh, under the ITEC programme has been doubled from Rs. 11 lakh in 2005-06 to Rs. 23 lakh for the year 2006-07, it needs to be much more. There is need for more frequent exchange of visits at higher echelons of the military and we need to assist Bangladesh in coping with their frequent natural disasters.

Myanmar

Myanmar is a resource rich country, which is governed by a long-standing military dictatorship. It is plagued by inefficient economic policies and large-scale poverty. There is no external threat to Myanmar, but there are many insurgent movements in the country, despite the military neutralising many of them. The country has been under sanctions imposed by many countries, including the USA, European Union and Japan, for suppressing democracy. However, assistance from China in all fields, including the military, is sustaining the present regime. China is also tightening its hold on Myanmar by improving communications links, improving ports and installing surveillance devices in the islands of Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal, including the Coco Island, close to India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

From the military angle, Myanmar is of great strategic importance to India, especially as China has been steadily increasing its influence there. From the energy angle too, India would like to have access to the hydrocarbon resources of Myanmar, for which China too is competing. India has a working relationship with Myanmar and the military-to-military relations are good. Besides training, the Indian and Myanmar's armies are cooperating in operations launched against insurgents along the border. Our Border Roads Organisation is also involved in road construction within Myanmar from our border. We need to expand our training assistance to Myanmar and offer weapons and equipment to offset or reduce the influence of China.

Sri Lanka

This island nation, over 65,000 sq km in size and with a population of over 19 million (July 2002 estimate) has been embroiled in an internal insurgency for nearly three decades, with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who have been fighting for an independent homeland for the Sri Lankan Tamils, in the northern and eastern parts of this island nation.

The primary role of the military is to conduct counter-insurgency operations, targeting armed groups within the country, most notably the LTTE and earlier the former nationalist insurgent group, the Janatha Vimukhti Peramuna (JVP). Internal security continues to be the main threat to the nation.

The Sri Lankan military gets its weapons from many countries, including China, Britain, Pakistan and Israel. India is in an invidious position on account of its Tamil population, a majority of which supports the LTTE. However, India cannot support a separatist movement like the LTTE, on account of its adverse effect within the country. Although Sri Lanka is extremely keen to involve India in the resolution of the conflict with the LTTE, India is unable to take any overt action.

Military-to-military relations between India and Sri Lanka have been strong, especially in the field of training and provision of weapons and equipment. However, they have had their ups and downs on account of the changing policies of the different political parties and personalities of Sri Lanka. After the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) experience, India is unlikely to get physically involved in the Sri Lanka-LTTE confrontation, but support in other fields continues.

Let us now proceed to those countries which are in our sphere of interest, but are not contiguous to India in geographical terms.

Iran

We could start with Iran. Although India and Iran have had historical relations, they have had their ups and downs in recent years. The strained relations of the 1980s have now given way to engagement in a number of areas. These include energy, policies towards the CARs and close interaction over events in Afghanistan. Iran is well placed geographically to act as a conduit for the oil and gas from the Caspian Sea area, as well as the CARs. The Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline could become a reality if India's concerns about price and uninterrupted supplies are met. As Pakistan is not permitting a land route to Afghanistan from India, we are constructing a road linking the Iranian port of

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Chhah Bahar to western Afghanistan. This would also enable us to have a road linkage to the CARs in the future. In the field of training, there has been little interaction between India and Iran. This needs to be increased. Apparently, Iran has the desire and the inclination to become a nuclear power, but reports about its capabilities and plans are confusing at present. Whatever be the case, it is not in India's interest to have another nuclear-capable power in our neighbourhood.

Although we consider Iran an important country, our military-to-military relations have not really taken off. Even in the innocuous training field, not many military personnel from Iran have attended training courses in India in recent years. I feel we need to make a special effort to increase defence co-operation with Iran and not let China be the major player in this respect.

Afghanistan

The government in Kabul continues to be mired in uncertainties. Ethnic groups and warlords continue to operate in their areas and the writ of the central government runs only in a few areas. The reconstruction process is continuing, although the USA and other Western nations, that had made many promises, have been extremely slow. NATO forces have taken over the operational responsibility and are fighting the resurgent Taliban and Al Qaeda cadres, but their successes have been limited.

India has vital stakes in Afghanistan. It wants a peaceful, stable, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan. India has extended aid of \$650 million, of which half the amount has already been spent on a number of development projects in the fields of health, education, community development; agriculture research; rural development, power and other infrastructure development. The most symbolic contribution is the construction of the Parliament building in Kabul.

My major recommendation at the military level relates to the training, arming and equipping of the Afghan Army. Mere allotment of vacancies to Afghan military personnel will not do. Ultimately, it would be the Afghan National Army that will fight the Taliban or other insurgents. Foreign troops cannot stay their forever. The Indian military has the capacity to not just train but create a large part of the Afghan Army. We need to bite the bullet in this respect and not be satisfied with only low level military assistance.

Central Asian Republics (CARs)

The CARs comprising five states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, were earlier part of the Soviet Union. These states were demarcated arbitrarily, thus, creating pockets of ethnic discontent. The CARs are

very rich in natural resources, which include largely untapped oil and natural gas. Kazakhstan has a quarter of the world's known uranium deposits. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have huge potential of hydro power. The region produces vast amounts of cotton, and it has the dubious distinction of being the largest producer of poppy. The CARs are landlocked and, hence, dependent on ports of other countries. These countries inherited a large number of strategic assets, when the Soviet Union collapsed. These include missile bases, a nuclear testing range, cosmodrome, uranium enrichment plant and very large air bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

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The major weaknesses of these countries are lack of access to the sea; many ethnic groups; lack of institutions; mono crop agriculture; shortage of trained manpower; autocratic leadership; and generally weak security structures. The threats to the CARs include Islamic fundamentalism, despite a Sufi and secular culture; political instability; pan-nationalism and migration of minorities.

A number of organisations have been set up in these countries, with varying influences. These are:

- The China-inspired Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This is the most important regional organisation.
- The Turkey-sponsored Economic Cooperation Organisation.
- The Iran-inspired Caspian Sea Organisation.
- The Russian-promoted Eurasian Economic Community.
- The Commonwealth of Independent States.

NATO has promoted a Partnership of Peace (PIP) and has organised a Central Asian Battalion for rapid deployment for peace-keeping. China has emerged as a key player. Its main interest is on the need to contain Uighur militancy in Xinjiang. In addition, it has settled most boundary disputes, improved infrastructure, enhanced trade and has laid a gas pipeline.

India has historical ties and a shared secular heritage. India wants a stable CARs region, devoid of fundamentalists and narco-terrorism, by playing a meaningful role in their economic development as well as cooperation in the military field. The latter can be in joint training, cooperation in disaster management and peace-keeping. Some spares for our Russian equipment can be procured. There is scope

for joint research participation in space, aviation and weapons production fields. The present military representation in our embassies in these countries is thin, with presence in only two countries. We need to augment this.

The armed forces of the CARs are being built up. India can and should provide assistance by provision of training facilities, assistance at the conceptual level in formulating doctrines and concepts and in the field of sale of arms and equipment. As our defence forces have been using Soviet-made equipment, we have the experience in both their use and maintenance. We also know their capabilities and limitations. This could be shared. India already has a military foothold in the region, in terms of the Ayani air base in Tajikistan, which has been upgraded with various infrastructural improvements at some cost. This base needs to be expanded, with a permanent presence, including of a joint rapid reaction force, trained for peace-keeping and related roles. I also recommend the setting up of a multi-discipline academically-oriented facility, perhaps at Tashkent in Uzbekistan, as this country has the largest military and paramilitary forces and is well connected. It could generally be on the lines of the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies at Honolulu in Hawaii, which is doing a lot of good work in fostering cooperation and carrying out studies on security-related issues, for the overall benefit of the region.

Southeast Asia

It is a relatively stable and calm region, especially from the viewpoint of ethnic violence and fundamentalism, although Islamic fundamentalists are making inroads in countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. The small countries of this region have always looked up to the USA for their security. While the influence of the USA continues, in recent years, China has been successfully making inroads in the region. The countries of this region have become stronger by organising themselves into an association called Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN. These countries have high growth rates and they conduct a large volume of trade with China. The Chinese diaspora in these countries plays a major role in the economies of these countries.

In the security arena, these countries are wary of the burgeoning military capability of China. In this respect, India provides a viable alternative counter-balance to China. On account of other “soft power” attributes, historical reasons, cultural bonds and India’s “Look East” policy, India can play a major albeit quiet role in ensuring that a balance of power is maintained in Southeast Asia. Military-to-military relations of India with these countries are at fairly high levels and need to be sustained, including in the maritime environment.

