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## **BENIGN DEFENCE DIPLOMACY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC PROGRAMME FOR SENIOR MILITARY OFFICERS**

*What is defence diplomacy, and to what extent does it achieve its aims? Competition associated with its activities may undermine their intended cooperative effects, requiring that such activities be cautiously crafted, as exemplified by the Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers, or APPSMO. **CHANG JUN YAN** makes the case.*



APPSMO: creating a spirit of camaraderie to build and strengthen trust among militaries. Images by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies; montage by Rachel L. Choo.

On the face of it, defence diplomacy or defence cooperation, defined by Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster as “the peacetime cooperative use of armed forces and related infrastructure (primarily defence ministries) as a tool of foreign and security policy”, is meant to build trust and confidence among different countries with a view to lessening the possibility of armed conflict.

Defence diplomacy activities include military exercises or exchanges and defence cooperation agreements or defence aid, besides a whole range of multilateral military operations such as peacekeeping or humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

As Singapore's then second minister for defence, Chan Chun Sing — a major-general in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) before joining politics — put it during a [speech](#) at the 2014 Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers, the “job of the military is to preempt crises and not just manage crises”. He observed, the “military community has the unique advantage of growing up together and knowing each other for many years, often for more than the number of years that political leaders get to know each other”, which enables “added channels of communication for the political masters” to “reduce misunderstanding”.

Such cooperation in defence diplomacy allows trust to consolidate and enabling norms and regimes of security cooperation to strengthen and proliferate.

In this manner, defence diplomacy is not quite the paradox the phrase itself implies in merging cooperation with the conventional coercive role of the military in defence, deterrence, compellence, and swaggering. Singapore's [defence policy](#) is thus predicated on “the twin pillars of deterrence and diplomacy”, in developing both “a strong and capable SAF and a resilient Singapore”, alongside “establishing strong and friendly ties, through extensive interactions and cooperation, with defence establishments and armed forces in the region and around the world.”

If defence diplomacy is not an oxymoron, the question then becomes, to what extent does it work?

Where mistrust, rivalry, or misperceptions already exist, defence diplomacy clearly has a steeper hill to climb. At the same time, defence diplomacy activities may also be cut to signal displeasure. When relations between the United States and China further soured following US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, one of Beijing's first reactions was to cut military cooperation with Washington. Trust and confidence are evidently not easy to build, therefore necessitating iteration and transparency.

Furthermore, defence diplomacy activities may not be solely cooperative or seen as totally benign. Rather, they may also serve or signal competition and coercion. For instance, China condemns the AUKUS multilateral security agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States as provocative and destabilising.

Fundamentally, defence diplomacy activities also illustrate a military's capabilities, whether as a show of force or a means of boosting a country's standing. They may also be intended to learn more about another military to be able to exploit such knowledge in any potential conflict.

To be sure, this is not to say that defence diplomacy is only a front for such nefarious purposes of competition. Clearly, the main objective of defence diplomacy is to build confidence “through military exercises and exchanges which facilitate information

sharing and enhance transparency”, as well as to “build up personal ties amongst regional militaries and reduce the likelihood of misunderstanding or miscalculation”, as Singapore’s defence minister, Ng Eng Hen, highlighted in his [speech](#) during the 2011 International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue.

Instead, the point here is that on top of cooperation, defence diplomacy involves competition too, which may then generate the unintended effects of reinforcing norms and regimes of competition, thereby undermining cooperation.

This then implies that to effect the intended trust and confidence building, defence diplomacy activities have to be carefully considered and crafted to minimise the incentives for competition in shows of force, swaggering, and secrecy. For example, in the case of HADR missions, the foremost principle should be the most efficient way of doing the most good in a transparent manner, rather than other accompanying interests like building reputation.

A case in point is APPSMO, an annual forum for military officers from the Asia-Pacific and beyond, organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and its component Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), which is arguably a defence diplomacy activity *par excellence*.

APPSMO, in its 23<sup>rd</sup> iteration this year, enables leading senior military officers to meet and establish personal relationships, as well as share knowledge about military and security developments of professional interest. This is done through various activities: lectures on matters of international relations and strategic studies by established experts, renowned academics, and prominent practitioners; informal discussions on these lectures to further facilitate dialogue on defence and security-related issues; and social and networking events to accelerate such pan-regional interaction and relationships in a relaxed atmosphere.

These activities create a spirit of camaraderie to build and reinforce trust and confidence among the participants of APPSMO, curtailing the traditional coercive or competitive impetus of armed forces.

Ultimately, defence and diplomacy often go hand in hand, just like using traditional forms of diplomacy to reduce insecurity when defence is boosted, to circumvent the archetypal security dilemma. Defence diplomacy is likewise as much about defence, as it is about diplomacy. To realise its intended benefits, its activities need to be judiciously balanced in favour of cooperation rather than competition.

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