

India-Pakistan Relations: Military Diplomacy vs Strategic Engagement

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Military diplomacy has not figured significantly in India-Pakistan relations with ample reasons. Military to military engagement between the two states is confined to CBMs of varying significance. Even as both militaries have several regional and extra-regional engagements falling under the rubric of military diplomacy, the ones between the two are restricted to the routine exchanges of military advisors in respective missions in national capitals. However, there is a case for expansion in military diplomacy between the two. The main argument is that there are asymmetric benefits for India from engaging Pakistan. Therefore, the several dimensions of India's engagement with Pakistan need supplementing with engaging its military directly. It states that initiation of a strategic dialogue, independent of the peace process, as a 'solution'.

Introduction

Military diplomacy has not been a prominent feature of India-Pakistan relations and with ample reason. Military to military engagement between the two states is confined to Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) of varying effectiveness. Even as both militaries have several regional and extra-regional engagements falling under the rubric of military diplomacy, the ones between the two are restricted to the routine exchanges of military advisors in respective missions in national capitals. However, there is a case for expanding military diplomacy between the two. The argument made in this commentary is that there are asymmetric benefits for India from engaging Pakistan. Therefore, the several dimensions of India's engagement with Pakistan need supplementing with engaging its military directly. India's efforts so far have paid limited dividends. Since the Pakistani army is at the core of the establishment in Pakistan, engaging it directly may help. In case there are reservations in terms of engaging with the Pakistani military at the risk of sidelining the civilian set up in Pakistan, then any such engagement can be expanded from being narrowly military to include both the civilian and military components of the respective national strategic establishments. This is one way of getting around the problem of engaging the Pakistani military directly. This commentary recommends the initiation of a strategic dialogue, independent of the peace process, as prelude to a 'solution'. The commentary first dwells on the

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debate on military diplomacy in India and thereafter makes the case for a strategic engagement with Pakistan via a strategic dialogue - as a first step.

The debate

It is commonly accepted that the Pakistani military's hardline stance towards India is at the root of the strained relations between India and Pakistan because this is in the corporate interest of the praetorian Pakistani military. With India seen as the threatening 'other', the Pakistani military is able to access state resources and remain atop the power pyramid. In view of this - the argument goes - there is little to gain from engaging the Pakistani military.

There are several other good reasons to keep the Pakistani army at arms length. It is with the government that India does business, regardless of its complexion. If the military are in power, then as in the Zia and Musharraf years, India engaged with Pakistan, the state but not the army. It is in India's interest that democracy succeeds in Pakistan so that the dividend of 'democratic peace' can be harvested in South Asia. Direct contacts with the military would not only undermine civilians but also empower the army, further skewing civil-military relations in Pakistan.

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Secondly, the Pakistan army has launched proxy war through its instrument the ISI. Since these forces have directly attacked the Indian army and exacted casualties, it would be strange for the Indian army to have contacts with the Pakistani army even as it suffers casualties. This situation would be feasible when terrorism ceases. Cessation of terror by Pakistan has long been an Indian condition for engaging Pakistan in a peace process. The peace process not having evolved to levels permitting military diplomacy, it would be premature to engage in this when the peace process is itself in abeyance.

Thirdly, military diplomacy is a barometer of healthy relations between states. It is practiced between states that share a strategic perspective, a friendship or at worst a non-threatening relationship. It is not feasible when a state continues

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with its unfriendly actions, such as sending armed infiltrators; training, inducting and controlling terrorists; spreading disaffection; and interfering in India's internal affairs. By this definition Pakistan is currently outside the ambit of military diplomacy. Where adversarial relations are the order of the day, confidence building measures and conflict avoidance measures need to be put in place. These are strictly speaking outside the sphere of military diplomacy, narrowly defined. Given the past record of crises with Pakistan and the potential for escalation, engaging with the Pakistani military in terms of CBMs and escalation control measures, not amounting to military diplomacy, makes eminent sense.

Lastly, there is a less obvious reason that exists at the junction of strategic culture and bureaucratic politics. The nature of Indian civil-military relations is such that the Indian military ('allegedly' to some) does not have a significant decision making presence and weight. Military diplomacy would empower the military at the expense of the civilian- read bureaucratic, component. This may skew the balance more in favour of the military and away from the bureaucrats in both the ministries of defence and external affairs. There are also concerns that even as the Indian military may influence the Pakistani military positively, the reverse is equally possible. This may not be in the interest of democracy. Also, operational details may get compromised through such interaction either by omission or commission.

Given this dominant thinking, there is little possibility that a case for military diplomacy will make much headway. However, examining the argument for it may help arrive at whether it is, in the first place, desirable. Its feasibility can be worked on, once the idea is found acceptable in principle. What are the arguments in favour?

The first argument is based on the understanding that the Pakistan army's adverse posture towards India, in addition to its corporate interest is also due to the realist perspective ascribed to armies in general and the Pakistan army in particular. In this perspective, the Pakistan army sees the adverse military strength ratios as a threat to Pakistan. This leads to its realist-inspired policy of trying to tie down India's military strength in a proxy war. India's military dominance is a result of its size and the necessity of India to cater also for the China front. Therefore, while there is little that can be done about capability, much can be done with regard to intent. Communication of non-threatening intent is possible through military diplomacy. Strategic communication regarding India's deterrent strategic posture

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Secondly, the Indian military's professional subordination to the civilian executive is the regarded as the best model of civil-military relations in the developing world. Pakistan on the other hand has not permitted civilian structures to develop. Interaction with the Indian military could have the beneficial effect of bringing home to Pakistan this facet of military professionalism. It may well be argued that the extensive ties of the Pakistan army with the US, another model democracy, have not reduced its propensity to unseat civilian heads in Pakistan, so it is unlikely that India's model of democratic civil-military relations can be influential. The counter is that the US has used the Pakistan army to further its strategic ends in the region at the expense of democratic civil-military relations. India can provide a suitable contrast for the Pakistani army to emulate through greater exposure and interaction with the Indian military.

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Thirdly, increased interface with the Indian military would strengthen the secular-rational forces in the Pakistan military. There is also a component of the Pakistani military that is conservatively inclined and fundamentalism inspired. Both sections of Pakistan army presently have an anti-India stance. For the rational component of the Pakistani military this is realist philosophy inspired in which states are seen to be in a power tryst. For the fundamentalist inclined component, adversarial relations have origin in primordial reasons as civilisational identity, religious difference etc. The former can be reasoned with, since a shared understanding of power can be arrived at. The second component is would prove a challenge, due to the millenarian myths it subscribes to.

It is in India's interest that the former prevail in internal Pakistani army power equations. This can be done by an increased political and diplomatic engagement with Pakistan, through military diplomacy. This is in keeping with the long standing Indian diplomatic intent of increasing interaction with democratic forces in Pakistan. Since the Pakistani army also has such a component, interacting with the army would not only strengthen this component but also reduce the misunderstandings, perhaps wilfully, nursed by the right wing element.

Lastly, while CBMs and counter escalation measures are rightly in place, these cannot work as desired in an atmosphere of distrust and ill will. To dispel such negative under-currents for the CBMs to work better, greater opportunities for trust building interaction need to be created. Military diplomacy provides an option for doing so.

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Given the possibilities of another Kargil or Mumbai occurring due to machinations of forces possibly outside of control of the Pakistani establishment, communications channels and CBMs would need to be kept honed and clutter free. This implies an overlay of trust built by military engagement going beyond CBMs into military diplomacy. There is no point in having these measures if they do not work when and as desired. Making these work, implies a wider engagement. Such engagement though initially with minimalist intent could have a wider ripple effect in a positive direction.

The second order debate is in each side refuting the case of the other, even as it presents its arguments. The major argument on this plane is theoretical: whether military diplomacy follows better relations or can it create the conditions for betterment of relations? While current theory is favour of those against military diplomacy, theory itself is a product

of practice. Therefore, those in favour of military diplomacy argue that theoretical insights can follow practical initiatives in South Asia. The remainder of this article weighs in on the side of military diplomacy arguing that hidebound adherence to theory could result in lost opportunities.

Necessity and Contours

Improving relations with Pakistan is in Indian interests. India is very much alive to this and has made considerable efforts in this direction. Wanting a stable neighbour at peace with itself and its neighbours has been repeatedly stated as Indian policy. Yet, the Indian strategy has not been able to translate the intent into reality. India has been stymied by Pakistani stonewalling on the issue of the rolling back of terror infrastructure since the Pakistani army sees this as a force multiplier. This implies that Indian strategy has hit a roadblock because of the Pakistani army's control of the state and security policy. It needs to find a way round this without compromising its democratic values. India has tried to increase economic and people to people contacts. It has made political overtures at Shimla, Lahore and at Agra. Despite this if relations have not improved significantly, introspection is warranted. Is the Indian menu of strategies lacking an ingredient?

Realising the necessity for good relations is first. This has not been registered adequately in the strategic debate in India. The dominant refrain is that a friendly Pakistan is desirable, but not necessary. India can manage Pakistan, howsoever unfriendly, and its record over the past two decades speaks of its increasing finesse in doing so. However, even if true, this understanding is myopic. If India takes the

challenge of China as a more salient one over the long term, clearly getting Pakistan along side and on board is essential. For this, South Asia needs to be perceived as a single strategic space, as was the case earlier of the Curzonian vision from Calcutta and Delhi.

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Towards this end, if military diplomacy can lend a hand then it must be tried. If military to military engagement is not considered desirable from the civil-military relations point of view in both states, then the engagement can be at the level of the strategic establishments. Such forums, of necessity, would include both civilian and uniformed members but in differing proportions for obvious reasons; in that military dominant Pakistan would presumably have more uniformed members.

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One suggestion is the operationalising of the promise of Lahore. The declaration and Memorandum of Understanding were visionary and aptly so in reflecting the transition to the nuclear era. The point of engaging on nuclear questions such as doctrine etc had figured in the MOU. This however has not been taken to its envisaged levels. This was so even during the pre Mumbai 26/11 period of a relative opening up during the Musharraf regime. Presently, despite the greater necessity for such an engagement in view of the escalatory possibilities of future crises, it stands relegated. The recommendation is for a delinking of the security situation from the strategic dialogue. This idea takes on board reservations on military diplomacy but also takes into account the need to progress on the Pakistan front.

The strategic elites of the two states can institute a mechanism for discussing their respective positions. It need not result in a consensus or convergence, but a mutual understanding would be useful. There are several issues that the mechanism can deal with. It can be set up pursuant to, and with the authority of the Lahore declaration. It can fulfil point six of the MOU on nuclear related dialogue. It can have as its members functionaries of the security establishment, but be headed by perhaps a deputy national security advisor. Since this would be off the arc lights, it would be politically feasible. It could with time expand its dialogue from nuclear doctrines to strategic postures. This could eventuate in arms control -and when feasible disarmament - not only in the nuclear but also in the conventional field. This amounts to doctrinal balancing preceding strategic balancing. The mechanism would be additionally available for crisis management and escalation control.

The trust and momentum generated can over time pave the way for joint ventures as demilitarisation of Siachen, joint patrolling and later demining of the Line of Control etc. Along side more traditional military diplomatic initiatives such as exchanges of officers and cadets on training courses, sports and adventure etc can be included. This appears (and indeed is) somewhat futuristic but that in itself is indicative of the distance yet to be covered, that is necessary to cover and will have to be covered eventually. The suggestion here is, that a beginning be made. This idea attempts first to arrive at a shared security perspective through a strategic dialogue that is independent of the vagaries of the peace process. The reverse, of having traditional military diplomacy, creates an environment conducive to higher order issues as strategic dialogue, which is also a candidate route. But given the security situation and internal political reality in terms of civil-military relations in both states, this may not be possible; therefore, this theoretical innovation in terms of widening the arc of military diplomacy to include strategic engagement.

Conclusion

As a concept 'military diplomacy' creates images of military to military engagements between states that have no problem with each other. This limits the relevance of military diplomacy to deepening ties rather than also enabling or widening them. Instead, there is scope to be ambitious within reason about military diplomacy. This may not be practicable in the current South Asian setting. A 'solution' envisaging substituting 'military diplomacy' with 'strategic engagement' has been proffered here. A 'strategic dialogue' does not fall strictly under the rubric of military diplomacy. However, since it involves the military in a diplomatic exercise, it can serve the purpose in the straitened conditions

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obtaining in South Asia. Since the South Asian case even after over a decade of being referred to as a nuclear 'flashpoint' continues as one, it demands a theoretical innovation.

India has no problem in engaging the Pakistani state, regardless of the complexion of the regime. However, it rightly has reservations

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in direct interaction with the Pakistani Army. The reality is that that Army controls Pakistan. If interacting with it helps further Indian interests, then doing so requires finding a way out of the current bind. The 'way out' is in getting into a strategic huddle with the Pakistani security establishment and speaking the language the military understands, of threats, power differentials and force ratios. Since the military will be broadly represented on both sides, it amounts to military diplomacy by the back door. Military diplomacy may yet prove to be the key.

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