The Possibilities and Limits of Defence Diplomacy in Asia

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Executive summary

- Many Asian states perceive defence diplomacy to be the most useful and effective form of the recent wave of security multilateralism in the region.
- Defence diplomacy is thought to have the potential to manage tensions, improve information flows and build trust and a sense of common cause in Asia.
- Defence diplomacy’s inherent political qualities define the limits of its potential. It has no distinctive attribute that will allow it to overcome Asia’s deep seated political cleavages.

The past twenty years has seen a remarkable growth in security focused multilateralism in Asia. Until 1994, there were no multilateral efforts to address the region’s many security challenges. The creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum sparked a proliferation of bodies and mechanisms each with its own acronym and purported work program. This has been driven by the sense that the strategic setting is in a period of transition, the widening out of the range and form of threats caused by globalization’s cross-cutting networks and the perception that the spectrum of threat has been widened to now include non-traditional sources, such as transnational criminal networks or infectious disease. What is driving demand for greater cooperation is reasonably clear. On the supply side, experience in Asia has been decidedly mixed.

In many cases soon after establishing a new institution or forum, members show little interest in moving beyond platitudes of comprehensive security and a shared future. But not all recent activity suffers such builders’ remorse. Cooperative efforts that are narrowly focused on defence and security concerns enthuse participants and are seen by Asia’s states as having considerable promise. The diplomacy of defence is perceived to be much more effective, at least judging by energy, investment and innovation, than more expansive forms of security cooperation in the region.

Defence diplomacy, understood as a specific subset of broader forms of Asian security cooperation, is a remarkably dynamic creature. Some of the more notable examples include the IISS-run Shangri-La Dialogue, the ADMM+, the RIMPAC exercise and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. If one includes more mini-lateral efforts and bilateral military-military links there appears to be an almost limitless range of defence diplomacy in the region.

Asia’s states are investing in this endeavour and many are making it a key part of their longer range strategic policy. But is this enthusiasm well placed? Are they right to think defence diplomacy can deliver better results than the rather underwhelming experiences in Asian security cooperation of the past fifteen years?

Curiously, one of the appeals of defence diplomacy is that it provides a less controversial means to work collaboratively on security issues than traditional diplomatic methods. HADR activity is the usual point of departure here. It is difficult to argue against the benefit of doing more on this front and the logic of such work providing stepping stones to wider and deeper forms of cooperation is self-evident. Beyond operational interactions having broader security spinoffs, there are three other main benefits that defence diplomacy has the potential to deliver.

First, it can reduce tensions and help manage crises. Having defence personnel, both uniform and civilian, working in non-coercive ways traditionally associated with diplomats provides the opportunity to take the heat out of points of friction and to keep crises from escalating.

It has long been thought that bad strategic decisions derive from poor information and misperceptions. Defence diplomacy’s second benefit is that it can improve information flows and enhance the mutual understanding of states’ capabilities, interests and where their ‘redlines’ actually lie. It is often argued that Iraq invaded Kuwait because Saddam Hussein believed that the US had implicitly said it would not respond. By getting those defence personnel most directly
associated with these issues together, so the argument goes, they can be in a position to make better decisions on questions of security and strategy. Third, defence diplomacy can improve the strategic environment by building high-level trust and a sense of common cause through regular dialogue and the development of personal links among senior defence officials. With all this on offer, it is hardly surprising that defence diplomacy is seen as having a particular appeal in Asia’s current strategic environment.

Two of the most significant developments in Australian foreign and defence policy have been the development of much closer relations with both Japan and the US. While built on long term relationships, the real impetus for this tightening came from operational interactions. The current links with Japan, involving a wide range of security related agreements and activities, would not have been possible without the connections developed through collaborative work in post-invasion Iraq and the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami.

Equally, the development of the never-better strategic relationship with the US rests heavily on the extensive links forged during the deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. For Australia, defence interaction at the operational level has plainly translated into broader strategic policy. And it is tempting to think this can be replicated in other circumstances. But it must be emphasised that this was work among allies and friends who share interests and values and amongst whom there have been no meaningful strategic differences.

If one looks outside that narrow context, the experience of using defence diplomacy is rather more mixed. In particular we have seen clear difficulties linking the small steps of military to military links aggregating out to larger gains. Equally, ambitious larger scale efforts have struggled to shape the strategic order. Indeed perhaps the largest and most influential example of defence diplomacy, the Shangri La Dialogue, illustrates the inability of these mechanisms to overcome the underlying problems that beset broader forms of Asian security cooperation.

The Dialogue, now in its thirteenth year, has become a regular feature for set-piece communication on strategic policy. At its sidelines it also allows regional defence officials to meet in a controlled environment. It has undoubtedly improved communication among the Asia’s defence ministers and officials but it has not tangibly improved the underlying sense of common cause in the region. Indeed at the 2014 meeting it became a venue for what some have described as strategic grandstanding as the Japanese PM, Defence Minister as well as the US Defense Secretary explicitly and very publically increased rhetorical pressure on China. Rather than being a forum to exchange views and improve relations it reflected and indeed magnified the underlying cleavages between a rising China that feels its potential and rights are being constrained by the US and its allies and a US-led regional order that seems in no way disposed to make any meaningful adjustments to existing arrangements.

Shangri-La represents only the tip of the defence diplomacy iceberg, other more low-key and low-profile examples do lack the media glare and grandstanding that goes with this. But it illustrates the bigger challenge facing defence diplomacy and one that is often not recognized. Defence diplomacy is popular in Asia because it is focused on concrete concerns and values the practical and the technical over the abstract and political. Yet all who think about defence diplomacy must recognize that while it may be technical in means it is inherently political in its ends. It is about using defence personnel and assets to communicate, negotiate and more generally manage relations between states.

This means that its potential to contribute to Asia’s changing strategic setting is contingent on the participants’ capacity to adjust their positions, compromise, and more generally find mutually acceptable agreements about their many differences. In many of the more complex issues in the region, Asian states show little interest in taking these steps. There is no silver bullet that defence personal and operational activity can bring to overcome these political constraints.

When trying to determine the role of defence diplomacy in one’s broader strategic policy recognition must be paid to the underlying limitations it faces when trying to grapple with the large scale strategic forces. It is most useful when defence expertise is applied to build political capital at the lower level that can be used to develop specific bilateral relationships as part of a broader strategic effort.

Defence diplomacy is an important part of the regional setting; we should be ambitious for it and creative in the way we use it as part of a broader strategic canvas. However, ambition and innovation should be tempered by a recognition of the limits its political qualities impose in a region in which strategic cleavages are deep and longstanding.

This submission was originally part of the Centre Of Gravity paper #17 “Defence Diplomacy: Is the game worth the candle?”

Policy recommendation

Australian defence diplomacy programs need to have realistic ambitions. Its promise is greatest in practical activities providing foundations for improving specific bilateral relationships that are part of a larger strategic picture. Grandiose plans to foster a new regional order or improve regional trust will fail in the same way that other such efforts have.