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# Defence Diplomacy Is the game worth the candle?

Brendan Taylor, John Blaxland, Hugh White, Nick Bisley, Peter Leahy, See Seng Tan

# The Centre of Gravity series

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The *Centre of Gravity* series is the flagship publication of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) based at The Australian National University's College of Asia and the Pacific. The series aspires to provide high quality analysis and to generate debate on strategic policy issues of direct relevance to Australia. *Centre of Gravity* papers are 2,000-3,000 words in length and are written for a policy audience. Consistent with this, each *Centre of Gravity* paper includes at least one policy recommendation. Papers are commissioned by SDSC and appearance in the series is by invitation only. SDSC commissions up to 10 papers in any given year.

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# Defence Diplomacy: Is the game worth the candle?

## Editor's Foreword

Few Defence topics have been as prominent or invested with as much optimism in recent years as defence diplomacy (also called military diplomacy or defence engagement). In response to the growing security challenges of Asia, scholars, policymakers and practitioners have looked for ways to build confidence, decrease the risk and impact of accidents and encourage peaceful dispute resolution. Defence diplomacy, namely the practice of military and defence officials engaging their overseas counterparts, is increasingly regarded as a vital way to achieve these aims.

Given the importance of this topic, a special Centre of Gravity paper has been created to explore the issue and help guide policymakers. This edition features six short papers, each with a different take and policy recommendation. The authors were asked the same question 'Is the game worth the candle?' and while their answers focus largely on Australia there are lessons and implications from their findings for the entire region.

Brendan Taylor, the head of the Strategic & Defence Studies Centre begins the special edition calling for a stocktake of current efforts, in a bid to understand what has worked and what resources it requires. He is joined by two colleagues, John Blaxland who argues strongly in favour of an expanded defence diplomacy program and Hugh White who urges caution about the strategic influence of the practice.

To complement these views, Nick Bisley, Executive Director La Trobe Asia, highlights the need for realistic ambitions. Lieutenant General (Ret.) Peter Leahy draws on his distinguished career in the ADF to detail how defence diplomacy occurs in practice and why it matters. Finally, See Seng Tan, Deputy Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore provides a regional perspective on Australia's defence diplomacy. The authors of these papers don't agree with each other, and that was precisely why they were invited to contribute. But some common themes are clear. Such as the need for a clear —and public — strategy along with integrating defence diplomacy into the efforts of other parts of government.

Together these six papers provide insight into the practice and potential of defence diplomacy. This special edition also marks a re-launch of the Centre of Gravity Series. While some of the design may change, the focus remains the same: inviting some of the best analysts from Australia and around the world to provide short, accessible papers on the key questions facing Australian strategic affairs.



**Andrew Carr**  
Editor, Centre of Gravity Series  
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# Australia's defence diplomacy: Time for a stocktake

Brendan Taylor

## Executive Summary

- > Defence diplomacy has become increasingly popular in recent years, especially amongst the great powers of the Asia-Pacific.
- > Australia has a long and important history conducting defence diplomacy, but an assessment is needed of the effectiveness and value for money from some of these efforts.
- > Ultimately a stocktake would be the first step to developing a clear strategy for Australian defence diplomacy and its place in national strategic policy.

Once seen as lying towards the softer end of the spectrum of strategic activity in the Asia-Pacific, defence diplomacy has been taking on a much harder edge in recent years. The region's great powers are increasingly using a range of defence diplomatic techniques to advance their strategic agendas.

Speaking at the May 2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a more Asia-centric approach to security and a redrawing of the region's multilateral architecture along such lines.<sup>1</sup> Consistent with this, Beijing is currently developing its own version of one of Asia's leading forums for defence diplomacy, the Shangri-La Dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

Not to be outdone, Tokyo has been loosening longstanding restrictions on the provision of military equipment to other countries – another form of defence diplomacy – to support its assembly of a counterbalancing coalition in the face of China's rise.<sup>3</sup> The United States too is employing defence diplomacy to buttress its own Asian rebalancing strategy, as epitomised by the rotation of marines through facilities in the north of Australia and the training they undertake with regional friends and partners during the course of their rotation.<sup>4</sup>

Australian interest in defence diplomacy as a means for furthering strategic objectives in the region goes back much further than these recent developments. During the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, Canberra provided considerable defence aid to a number of countries in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific.<sup>5</sup>

Yet despite this longstanding tradition, it is far from clear that Australian defence diplomacy has always been sufficiently strategic. Writing in the mid-1990s during the last significant burst of Australian enthusiasm for defence diplomacy, Desmond Ball and Pauline Kerr characterised these efforts as 'presumptive.' They argued that Canberra lacked a clear and coherent strategy to guide them. And they called upon the government to undertake a stocktake of Australia's defence diplomacy with a view to addressing these problems and to ensure that such efforts were constructive in the future.<sup>6</sup>

It seems prudent today to reflect upon the advice proffered by Ball and Kerr, particularly at a time when defence diplomacy is clearly coming back into fashion. The Australian Department of Defence might usefully consider undertaking a stocktake of the kind they suggest.





Such a stocktake could begin by looking at what aspects of defence diplomacy are best serving Australia's interests. One positive example here might be Canberra's commitment to the Shangri-La Dialogue. The benefits that Canberra derives from its prominent participation in this gathering seem relatively clear cut. The Dialogue certainly serves as an exercise in efficiency for Australian defence officials and military practitioners. At the 2011 Shangri-la Dialogue, for instance, the Australian Defence Minister met bilaterally with counterparts from 14 other countries.<sup>7</sup> The Dialogue also provides an additional opportunity for Canberra to coordinate with its allies and to signal common positions. Australia participated in trilateral Defence Ministerial talks with the US and Japan on the sidelines of the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue and issued a joint statement expressing their opposition to the use of coercion or force to alter the status quo in the East and South China Seas.

At the same time, a stocktake of Australia's defence diplomacy could also illuminate enduring practices that are perhaps no longer delivering as well as they could. One area that might warrant closer attention, is the Defence Cooperation Scholarship Program. Under this scheme, funding is provided to support approximately 70 foreign officers while they study in Australia. These scholarships have been taken up across a range of universities where recipients have chosen to study an even broader array of subjects – including Engineering, International Relations, Human Rights Law and Policy, Strategic Studies, Education and Information Technology.<sup>8</sup>

## **A stocktake of Australia's Defence diplomacy could also illuminate enduring practices that are perhaps no longer delivering as well as they could.**

Is this highly disaggregated, demand-driven approach optimal or might Australian strategic objectives be better realised through a more coherent, focused program where scholarship recipients undertake their studies as a single cohort, attending the same institution and as part of a specialised, elite program?

Beyond an assessment of what is and what is not currently working, a stocktake of Australia's defence diplomacy could also identify potential gaps in Asia's evolving security architecture that Canberra might productively fill.

The relatively new ASEAN Defence Minister's Plus (ADMM+) could be a particularly opportune target of opportunity. In particular, it does not yet have a dedicated Track 2 process through which new, fresh thinking from the non-official sector – academics, think tankers, journalists and the like – can be fed up to the official level in a structured way. Many if not most of Asia's other leading multilateral processes have such arrangements in place.

Care would of course need to be taken to avoid any arousing of regional sensitivities here, particularly given the reticence

towards Australia that was created not all that long ago as a result of the Rudd government's ill-fated Asia-Pacific community initiative of 2008.

That said, provided the idea for a new second track grouping was taken forward in close collaboration with other like-minded partners, particularly from Southeast Asia, this is a gap that Canberra might usefully seek to fill. The history of Australian participation in the formation of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) during the 1990s – a grouping which became the official Track 2 analogue for the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) – provides a useful precedent.<sup>9</sup>

The above list of suggestions is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. While it is often claimed that the benefits of defence diplomacy are largely intangible and thus difficult to quantify, the above analysis demonstrates that it is possible to make judgments about which aspects of Australia's defence diplomacy are serving Canberra well, which are not optimal and what more might be done.

The advantage of undertaking a thorough stocktake of Australia's defence diplomacy along these lines is that such an assessment can then also provide the basis for a more coherent strategy of the kind that Ball and Kerr charged was missing during the 1990s.

*Brendan Taylor is the head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University.*

## Policy Recommendation

Australia should conduct a thorough stocktake of its defence diplomacy. A public document with the findings should be published as a way to build domestic and regional support for further defence diplomacy initiatives.

## Endnotes

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# Defending defence diplomacy

John Blaxland

## Executive summary

- > Decades of investment in defence diplomacy resulted in Thailand being the first ASEAN country to support the Australian-led UN-mandated 1999 intervention in East Timor.
- > Australian alumni like PNG CDF Brigadier Gilbert Toropo exemplify the utility in investing in defence diplomacy through scholarships, exchanges and exercises.
- > Military engagement on carefully selected assistance and development projects could generate considerable goodwill between the respective forces, while bolstering mutual understanding, security and stability

If diplomacy is 'the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, typically by a country's representatives abroad', then what does defence diplomacy look like? Perhaps the best way to think about it is to consider specific examples.

Australia's relationship with Thailand, for example, has been of considerable value particularly to Australia's ability to make a significant and useful contribution to regional security. Australia established diplomatic relations with Thailand in 1952 and was a founding member of the now-defunct South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO), headquartered in Bangkok from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s.

Thereafter, as an investment in the relationship, Australia participated routinely in a range of bilateral military exercises designed to foster mutual understanding and greater interoperability for a range of contingencies. Such air, land, maritime and special forces exercises provided opportunities to maintain channels of communication as well as handy benchmarking of each other's capabilities in case of need. Critics may argue that this has been a waste of time and money, making little difference in Thailand's political or domestic behaviour.

Yet it was not accidental that Australia's investment in the relationship resulted in Thailand being the first ASEAN country to agree to support Australia's efforts in East Timor. Bangkok supported Canberra in its hour of need during the dark days of early September 1999. Only after Thailand had committed forces and a deputy force commander, General Songkitti Jaggabatara, did other ASEAN countries agree to participate. Indeed, the Royal Thai Army infantry battalion that exercised alongside an Australian infantry company in Thailand in July 1999, as part of Exercise Chapel Gold, was the same battalion that joined the mission in East Timor a few months later. Such exercises were beneficial for honing the tactical proficiency and regional cultural awareness of Australian forces. They also enhanced Australia's ability to harness regional partners in support of Australian regional security and stability initiatives.



Had it not been for the decades of defence investment in the bilateral relationship through exchanges, scholarships and exercises, Thailand would have been far more reluctant to commit forces to East Timor. In fact more than likely Australia would have been left friendless in its region. Similarly, Australia's longstanding engagement with the Philippines proved its value when that country also contributed forces in 1999.

In the South Pacific, other than New Zealand (with its intimate ties and high levels of interoperability with Australian counterparts), Australia's relationship with Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the most significant. Regular exchanges, shared training and exercises and a range of common interests continue to foster the bilateral relationship with the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF). Although the PNGDF's effectiveness and political reliability has been questioned, the strength of the bilateral relationship has proven particularly useful as a restraining influence on the PNGDF and for facilitating its participation in a number of Pacific-oriented operations notably in Solomon Islands and beyond. This has been defence diplomacy at its best. The new Commander of the PNGDF, Brigadier Gilbert Toropo, for instance, trained in Australia and served as an instructor at Duntroon in the mid-1990s. He is a man who is held in high regard by those who know him. He is the quintessential example of the utility of investing in defence diplomacy through scholarships, exchanges and exercises.

That's all well and good, critics may say, but that was then and circumstances have changed. With the prominence of great power rivalry such efforts may come to be seen as trifling and marginal. I beg to differ.

The two large and new amphibious Landing Helicopter Dock ships (LHDs) coming into service are set to provide some of the most useful platforms for operating in and around Australia's vast coastline and beyond. When at full operating capability, and working alongside complementary ADF elements, they will be versatile platforms for force projection. But short of such dire contingencies, there are creative ways they may be employed to bolster regional security and stability through some creative defence diplomacy.

First of all, the use of the LHDs should be tied in closely with Australia's regional engagement and aid priorities—its flagship defence diplomacy activities. A reflection on US Navy and US Marine Corps experience is instructive. US Navy LHDs routinely conduct focused humanitarian assistance missions in places like Timor-Leste and Indonesia, earning immense goodwill while materially assisting the needy with construction, medical, dental and other support to local communities. These operations also happen to test a wide spectrum of military skills considered essential for complex warfighting, but which equally are valuable for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Australia's experience with the acquisition of the C-17 aircraft is also instructive. Four C-17s were initially purchased for the RAAF and within weeks they were being used to deliver support after Cyclone Nargis in Burma in May 2008. They have also contributed significantly to the resupply of troops in Afghanistan. This demonstrated that by acquiring a new capability, the ADF could undertake relief tasks that simply could not have been contemplated previously. Similarly, with the imminent arrival of the LHDs many good reasons will emerge for having acquired them.

One such reason is that the ADF will be able to focus on projects mutually agreed with regional countries including Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and a range of South Pacific Island states. Engagement on strategically chosen development assistance projects could generate considerable goodwill while bolstering security and stability. With the prospect of increased instability and environmental challenges, short notice calls for such assistance are more than likely.

From now on, when considering response options in the face of a deteriorating security situation in Australia's region, a significantly more flexible and adaptable capability will be available. Conversely, the very existence of Australia's robust amphibious capability will act as a distinct deterrent, particularly in the South Pacific, in the knowledge that extreme action can be counteracted by a significant Australian force that could arrive at short notice. Defence diplomacy at its best.

## A more useful and noble role for the ADF would be hard to find



In the meantime, as Australia looks to engage more closely with Indonesia and other ASEAN and South Pacific neighbours, their engineers, medical and logistic teams should be invited on-board the LHDs and alongside the Australian teams to deploy and carry out agreed-upon constructive tasks. This may well prove ground-breaking, literally and metaphorically. Such a capability is particularly significant when weighing up the security and stability calculus. On balance therefore, defence diplomacy can be expected to feature prominently in future ADF activities. In uncertain times such as these, a more useful and noble role for the ADF would be hard to find.

*Dr John Blaxland is a Senior Fellow at SDSC. His latest book is The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard.*

## Policy recommendation

Investment in bilateral regional relationships through scholarships, exchanges and exercises can generate a surprising array of short and long term dividends in personal relationships and in a willingness to collaborate on challenging operational tasks. Bilateral and multi lateral military engagement on development assistance projects utilising the new amphibious ships should be encouraged, particularly with Indonesia, as well as PNG, Timor Leste and beyond. The effect in terms of enhanced goodwill and mutual understanding could be literally and metaphorically ground breaking.



# Grand expectations, little promise

Hugh White

## Executive summary

- > Defence diplomacy often seems like a great way to soothe strategic tensions and allay mistrust.
- > Sometimes this can work, for example when personal connections between Australian and Indonesian officers helped avoid problems in East Timor.
- > But military to military contacts do little if anything to manage deeper strategic risks, and may induce a false complacency that problems are being managed. History shows that inter-service bonhomie is no bar to conflict

People expect big things of defence diplomacy. There is something intuitively attractive about the idea that many of our international problems—especially those involving security issues—can best be handled through interaction between military people and by contact between armed forces, rather than through negotiation between diplomats, political leaders or others.

It is important to distinguish this kind of defence diplomacy from what we might call ‘strategic’ or ‘security’ diplomacy. Strategic or security diplomacy covers the whole range of diplomatic efforts designed to promote or protect our strategic or security interests, and as such might be undertaken in any number of ways. As a category it relates to questions of ends, not means. The category of defence diplomacy on the other hand relates to the means used, rather than the ends pursued – though in fact most defence diplomacy is directed at strategic or security ends, what makes it defence diplomacy is that it is conducted via military channels.

Why should this idea be so intuitively attractive to so many people? I think there are several reasons. Militaries themselves are naturally happy to claim a major role in keeping Australia safe when there is no fighting to be done. And for the public at large the idea of military diplomacy offers a reassuring model of how armed forces can protect us without actually going to war. Most voters love their armed forces but don’t much like the idea of fighting, and find it hard to imagine that any serious conflict could ever break out. So it offers a palatable and plausible explanation of what their armed forces actually do to keep them secure when there is no war on.

Defence diplomacy appeals to politicians and policymakers for the same reasons, and also because it offers a good story to tell about how they are managing strategic problems which in reality they find baffling. For example Australian leaders have enthusiastically proposed that strategic tensions arising from Australia’s relationships with China and America can be ameliorated by increasing contact and dialogue between Australian and Chinese armed forces.

But behind all these positive attitudes lies a largely unexamined assumption that defence diplomacy works better than other forms of diplomacy to soothe strategic tensions, ease rivalries and facilitate cooperation on security issues.

**We should treat with great caution the idea that friendly contact between services make any significant difference to the underlying essentials of strategic relationships between countries**

This assumption is certainly true in some circumstances, at least to the extent that defence-to-defence contacts can, in some specific situations, achieve results that cannot be achieved in other ways. For example, personal relationships built up over many years between officers directly involved on the ground on both sides made a huge difference to managing the risk of a clash between TNI and ADF forces on East Timor in 1999. Likewise direct service-to-service contact is essential for fostering practical operational cooperation in areas like maritime surveillance and disaster relief.

These examples and many others suggest a pattern: defence diplomacy works at the operational and tactical levels. It is much harder to establish that it works at the strategic level, but this is the level at which it is often thought to be most effective and most important.



Much of the enthusiasm for defence diplomacy is based on the idea that plain-speaking military men, talking soldier to soldier, can resolve differences and build trust and understanding where civilian diplomats and politicians become mired in half-truths, evasions and circumlocutions. This idea is buttressed by others: that military men from different countries have more in common with one another than civilian diplomats and politicians, that they find it easier to see the other side's point and view, and are less prone to get bogged down in what is dismissively called 'politics'. And underlying all this is the agreeable belief that any strategic differences that arise between countries result from misunderstandings which only need to be cleared up by soldierly plain-speaking for the problems to go away.

None of these are true. They are myths and misunderstandings that have arisen over the recent decades in which Australian diplomacy has not had to deal with many, if any, really serious strategic problems. It has been easy to forget that such problems do not arise from simple misunderstandings but from deeper differences in strategy and objectives. Those differences cannot be swept away by plain talk: they are only reconciled, if at all, by negotiation and compromise. There is no reason why military men should not play a role in such negotiations, but equally there is no reason to believe that they are any more suited to them than civilian diplomats.

Above all, we should treat with great caution the idea that friendly contact between services – ship visits, senior officer tours, search and rescue exercises – make any significant difference to the underlying essentials of strategic relationships between countries. We should be equally careful of the idea that this kind of defence diplomacy is an effective and sufficient way to manage the implications for Australia's security of the increasing strategic rivalries in Asia today. Defence diplomacy with China will do nothing to address the immense implications for Australia of escalating strategic rivalry between the US, China and Japan.

History tells us that when a real crisis strikes, goodwill between services is soon forgotten. On 30 June 1914, the Royal Navy's Second Battle Squadron steamed out of the German naval base at Kiel after a festive goodwill visit which was cut short by the sad news of the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand of Austria.

As they left the squadron's commander, Vice Admiral Sir George Warrender sent his German hosts a famously unprophetic message: 'Friends in the past, friends forever'. Within a month he led his Squadron to its war station at Scapa Flow. So much for defence diplomacy.

*Hugh White is Professor of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University.*

## **Policy recommendation**

The key to effective defence diplomacy is to be realistic about what it can achieve. Long cultivated relationships between officers of different countries can pay real operational dividends in a crisis, but fleeting senior officer visits, port calls and highly scripted combined exercises do little or nothing to help address the dynamics of national strategic relationships, and we should not imagine otherwise.

# The Possibilities and Limits of Defence Diplomacy in Asia

Nick Bisley

## 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.

## **We have seen clear difficulties linking the small steps of military to military links aggregating out to larger gains**

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 canvass. 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.

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## 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.





# Military diplomacy

Peter Leahy

## Executive summary

- > In an increasingly complex global security environment military diplomacy adds a new and very useful dimension to traditional diplomacy.
- > Military diplomacy requires an investment in relationships and takes time to develop.
- > The success of military diplomacy provides the lead to new types of diplomacy from the Australian Federal Police and eventually the Australian Border Force.

## Introduction

In international affairs, diplomacy has been the primary means by which countries have advanced their national interests. When diplomacy failed, those interests were most often pursued through the use of military power. In national security terms diplomacy is often referred to as soft power while military power is referred to as hard power. Today the distinction is not that clear cut. Military diplomacy is proving to be an extremely useful means of pursuing national interests short of conflict.

Some might view the concept of military diplomacy as something of an oxymoron, somewhat akin to military intelligence, but in an increasingly complex global security environment it is proving its worth. So much so that recently the Minister for Defence, David Johnston, declared himself to be very strong on military diplomacy.

The Minister for Defence's recent enthusiasm for military diplomacy is no doubt linked to two recent examples demonstrating the clear benefits to be accrued. Chinese involvement in the international search for the missing Malaysian Airlines flight MH370, off Perth, was generous and well received. It also opened an opportunity for further cooperation and dialogue between the two countries. An example is a joint exercise with Australian, US and Chinese forces in the second half of 2014.

**Recently the Minister for Defence, David Johnston, declared himself to be very strong on military diplomacy.**

Following East Timorese independence there were strains in the relationship between Indonesia and Australia. These tensions were eased by the extensive involvement of Australian military forces in relief efforts after the tsunami off Northern Sumatra in 2004. The soldiers of both countries realised that they could work together and patterns of dialogue were re-established between senior military officers. Another example with Indonesia is the development of a broad based alumni association of military officers. At a time of strained diplomatic relationships between Australia and Indonesia, David Johnston's warm reception at the Jakarta International Defence Dialogue in 2014 would certainly have reinforced in his mind the value of military diplomacy.

## Diplomats in Uniform - How does it work?

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is the lead agency pursuing Australia's overseas efforts to strengthen its security and enhance its prosperity. They work together with other departments including the Department of Defence. This is the formal aspect of military diplomacy as military officers are accredited to overseas missions and work at the direction of the Ambassador or High Commissioner. They carry diplomatic passports and have the same rights and privileges as other embassy staff. They are diplomats in uniform.

In this role the Military Attaché and their staff support the formal diplomatic mission through direct diplomacy such as meetings and negotiations, delivering defence cooperation programs, providing advice on capability development options, supporting humanitarian and disaster relief missions and directly participating in evacuation and intervention operations.

Some may be surprised by the involvement of the military in diplomatic activities. They may be wondering how 'rough' military types can behave in a diplomatic or tactful manner. Military officials world-wide share a common culture and professional approach based on directness, precision and common experiences. The military clearly understand the dangers of war and are keen to take every step to foster peace and security and avoid conflict if at all possible. Even adversaries work well together at the task of military diplomacy. As an example, during Konfrontasi with Indonesia in the 1960s, military attachés from both countries remained in place.

Essentially the military talk to each other in both a formal and informal manner. This dialogue strengthens established relationships with allies and friends to support alliances, aid interoperability and build capability by exchanging technology, enhancing training, improving doctrine and sharing lessons from military experiences. It is not only military officers who engage in military diplomacy. Defence diplomacy happens when defence civilians, rather than military officers, work to enhance relationships. An important example of this is when senior civilian officials travel to regional countries to inform them of the contents of defence official documents including Defence White Papers.

Dialogue can also occur with the military of countries where formal diplomacy is poorly developed or undergoing strain. In these instances military diplomacy can help to maintain dialogue and build confidence to avoid confusion, misapprehension and misunderstanding. It also establishes relationships and provides the chance for more formal discussions at later occasions.

Military diplomacy doesn't just happen. But it is not as though it can be planned. It requires a broad based investment, takes time to mature and doesn't work in every case. Often it can develop from attendance at schools or courses or participation in United Nations missions years prior. More recent activities have involved cooperation on the all too frequent humanitarian and disaster relief missions. In this case improved relationships between Japan and Australia can be linked to cooperation on UN missions in Cambodia, East Timor, Iraq and Australian military support to natural disasters in Japan.

A strong example of the long term investment required is the warm relationship between the recently retired Australian Chief of Defence Force David Hurley and his Indonesian counterpart General Moeldoko, who recently attended General Hurley's retirement ceremony in Canberra. As a young cadet at the Royal Military College David Hurley hosted Indonesian cadets on a visit to Australia. His subsequent respect for and interest in Indonesia is well known in Indonesia and has carried forward to include his involvement in frequent and substantive contact with senior Indonesian military officials.

Most of the dialogue is among senior officers but efforts are made to include more junior officers such as through exchanging cadets at respective military colleges. This is an important investment in future relationships. Another example of lower level engagement is the conduct of rifle shooting competitions. The Australian Army's Skill at Arms Competition attracts enthusiastic teams from across the globe, including teams from Indonesia.

Not every investment in military diplomacy will pay off. Everyone leaves the military at some stage, careers paths may change and respective national interests may be so divergent that military diplomacy may not work. But when it works it works well and can be a force multiplier of considerable impact. In my own experience, as a senior Army officer, military diplomacy meant that I was able to talk to foreign colleagues to speed up the acquisition of military capabilities and ammunition for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. I was also able to use personal contact to defuse potential tension over Australian military deployments to East Timor in 2006.

## Military diplomacy doesn't just happen.



It is good that the Minister for Defence is strong on military diplomacy. He would do well to make sure his department knows of his enthusiasm. In an area where the payoff is not immediately obvious there can be a temptation to look for savings. Military diplomacy is not the place to look. If he is looking for a place to reinforce his message he should focus on the Staff College and the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies at Weston Creek. They are model programs of military diplomacy and deliver great benefit to Australia and the region.

## Conclusion

To many the involvement of the military adds a new dimension to diplomacy. To some there are suspicions about its efficacy. Well they better get used to it as it is proving to be a very effective way of improving trust and confidence among countries and enhancing overall efforts to build peace and security. In a globalised world it is clear that the task of diplomacy does not only belong to diplomats. Critics should anticipate the continuing use of military diplomacy and might well anticipate an increased involvement of other 'non-diplomatic' types in diplomatic efforts such as the Australian Federal Police and the about to be established Australian Border Force.

*Lieutenant General (Ret.) Peter Leahy is the Director of the National Security Institute at the University of Canberra. He was Australia's Chief of Army from 2002 to 2008.*

## Policy recommendation

That the Minister maintain his interest in military diplomacy and direct the ADF to seek ways of further enhancing military diplomacy with a focus on the Asia Pacific Region.



# Digging in its backyard: Why Australia should deepen engagement with Southeast Asia

See Seng Tan

## Executive summary

- > Reasons for why Australia should deepen defence engagement with Southeast Asia outweigh those against it.
- > Southeast Asia is important to Australia as a buffer and hedge against a potential China threat and as a region of import to its key ally, the United States.
- > ASEAN and its suite of regional arrangements allow Australia to engage the great powers in high-level security dialogue and defence cooperation beyond what it can do on its own.

Questions are being asked today about the feasibility and effectiveness of Australia's continued defence engagement with Southeast Asia. Defence budget cuts and a new Defence White Paper which the Coalition will publish in 2015 are encouraging uncertainty. Coming on the heels of the region's collective handwringing over whether US rebalancing to Asia could be sustained due also to defence cuts, the Australian debate about DWP2015 has a hint of *déjà vu* about it.

No matter the merits of arguments against the continuation of Australia defence diplomacy towards Southeast Asia, I suggest they are far outweighed by the reasons why Australia should not only continue but deepen its engagement in the region. If anything, Southeast Asia has grown in importance for Australia in recent years and that trend will not be reversed any time soon. In economic terms, the region to be sure pales in comparison to China, the top trading partner of Australia since 2007.<sup>1</sup> In security terms however, Southeast Asia has arguably risen in prominence in Canberra's strategic outlook and not simply because of Indonesia's perennial importance to Australia.

## Buffering and Hedging

Five decades ago, Sir Shane Paltridge, the former defence minister, argued that Australian strategic thinking on Southeast Asia has long been defined by Canberra's acute awareness of the region's relative weakness, an imbalance in economic and security resources, and its uneasiness over China's strategic ambitions vis-à-vis Southeast Asia, both of which hold implications for Australia's security.<sup>2</sup> With the ending of the Cold War and China serving notice on its rising power, an Asia from which Australia had sought previously to protect itself had become the region where Australia can best guarantee its future prosperity and 'seek security *with*... rather than *from* it.'<sup>3</sup>

From a security perspective, Southeast Asia has figured in that paradigm shift as reflected in Australian Defence White Papers of the past three decades. While DWP1987 stressed self-reliance in the direct defence of Australia, DWP2000, mindful of the prospect for rising instability in Australia's near abroad (e.g. East Timor in 1999), rationalised and urged the expansion of Australia's defence diplomacy in the Asia Pacific while maintaining its peacekeeping commitments globally.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, the 'concentric circles' approach

**No matter how  
flawed those bodies  
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among giants.**

of DWP2000 placed Indonesia (together with Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and the South Pacific islands) within the second priority circle, but 'relegated' Southeast Asia to the third or next outer circle. Although the concentric circles approach has more or less been retained within DWP2009 and DWP2013, the place of Southeast Asia however has been 'upgraded' in Canberra's strategic thinking. If anything, Southeast Asia looms large in DWP2013 and has in fact become central to Australia's defence diplomacy efforts.<sup>5</sup> While its sister document, the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*, has been criticized for its relative silence on Southeast Asia and ASEAN,<sup>6</sup> the same cannot

be said about DWP2013. Furthermore, DWP2013 highlights a key challenge for Australia's so-called 'outgoing maritime strategy', for which China's recent assertiveness in regional waters and its formidable Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2AD) capability have understandably proved worrisome. 'Australia is thoroughly enmeshed in a global sea-based trading system, not least as a major supplier of commodities to China', as maritime expert Geoffrey Till has argued. 'A threat to the system's operation represents an indirect threat to Australia's interests'.<sup>7</sup>

With Southeast Asia standing between it and its largest trading partner, Australia cannot afford to ignore Southeast Asia. Deepening ties with ASEAN states – and not just with Indonesia, as Huxley has cautioned<sup>8</sup> – has been critical not only to maintaining the region as a buffer against untoward Chinese ambitions should they manifest, but providing Australia an economic alternative or hedge. As one commentator has acerbically put it, Australia's 'newly found love of regional engagement is all about winning over the half billion souls that live between [it] and China over to [its] way of thinking'.<sup>9</sup>

## ASEAN's suite of regional arrangements furnishes ample regular opportunities for Australia to engage the great powers.

### Walking Among Giants

Australia played key roles in the formation of region-wide arrangements such as the APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Recent policies have indicated strong continued support for the ARF and the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Canberra's intention to 'take a leading role' in the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+).<sup>10</sup> Despite its awkward 'multi-multilateral' character, ASEAN's suite of regional arrangements furnish ample regular opportunities for Australia to engage the great powers in high-level security dialogue and defence cooperation beyond what it can do on its own. 'In no multilateral fora would our Prime Minister sit with the leaders of the United States, Japan, China, Indonesia or any of the states of South East Asia. The leadership of those countries occupied a world beyond us', as Paul Keating once conceded in the context of Australian participation in Asia's evolving regional architecture.<sup>11</sup> If anything, involvement in the ARF, EAS and ADMM+, no matter how flawed

those bodies are, allows Australia to 'walk amongst giants'.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, Australia's partnership with ASEAN and other stakeholder countries becomes even more crucial as they work to render those institutions into 'effective mechanisms to manage regional and transnational security issues and risks arising from rivalries and the possibilities of miscalculation'.<sup>13</sup>

### Region's Importance to America

Finally, Southeast Asia and ASEAN are critical to Australia because the region and the organisation have grown in significance for the United States, Australia's key ally. As US support for Japan's military normalisation has underscored, enhanced burden-sharing among allies has become an expectation from which no one, not least Australia, is exempt.<sup>14</sup> In a recent study on Australian defence diplomacy



prepared by a team of respected analysts, what stood out among a host of policy recommendations on how the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) could enhance its military-to-military engagement with Southeast Asian countries were proposals to enhance ADF contributions in areas where US forces might draw down in the future. For example, counterinsurgency assistance to the Philippines.<sup>15</sup> While such readiness to plug gaps left by the Americans could encourage allegations that Canberra is again playing as Washington's deputy sheriff or poodle in the Asia Pacific,<sup>16</sup> it is clearly in Australia's interest to assist the region and deepen its ties with it.

Arguing that Australia needs Asia more than the other way round, Ramesh Thakur believes that regional engagement is Australia's 'path to salvation from economic marginalization, political loneliness and, ultimately, strategic irrelevance'.<sup>17</sup> Much as Australia should deepen its defence engagement with Southeast Asia and ASEAN for its own purposes, there is no doubt the region also needs Australia's partnership.

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**There is no doubt the region also needs Australia's partnership.**

### Policy recommendation

Australia should actively seek to deepen security ties and defence cooperation with Southeast Asian countries both bilaterally and multilaterally. To that end, the anticipated 2015 Defence White Paper should build on the relevant recommendations called for by its predecessors.



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