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(Mis)Understandings of defence diplomacy as public diplomacy: Insights from three Spanish elites

Abstract

Defence diplomacy and public diplomacy are two diplomatic practices often treated in the literature as two disconnected realms. While the former focuses on the peaceful and cooperative use of armed forces, the latter emphasizes on the advancement of strategic communication in the international policy of actors. However, it is possible to bridge the differences between the two using the concept of soft power. By doing so, defence public diplomacy can be understood as a set of practices developed by states seeking to influence and attract third states while employing military force within these parameters. This paper contributes firstly to the conceptual debate bridging both types of diplomacies. Secondly, it selects a case study, Spain, to examine the perceptions of three different Spanish elites involved in the formulation and implementation of defence public policy: politicians, the military and defence industry managers. This paper adopts a qualitative methodology, including in-depth interviews, focus groups with experts, and manual content analysis of primary documentary sources. The results show that these elites agree on the importance of defence diplomacy for the achievement of state goals but continue to understand it fundamentally from a classical diplomatic prism. They also discuss the inclusion of new concepts, such as deterrence, as part of a defence public diplomacy.

Keywords**Public diplomacy, defence diplomacy, soft power, defence public diplomacy, military, Spain.****1. Introduction**

The theorisation and practice of public diplomacy are one of the great debates in diplomacy studies (Gregory, 2008; Melissen, 2015, p. 436). Without sidestepping the theoretical dimension of diplomacy in relation to the discipline of International Relations, we focus in this paper on diplomacy as practice. We conceive the diplomatic practice as “directly or indirectly influencing the public attitudes and opinions of actor B to affect a government’s foreign policy decisions” (Hoffman, 1968, p. 30). Public diplomacy finds in the concept of soft power, proposed by Joseph Nye (2008), a theoretical construct on which to build a more solid basis for the exercise of this type of power (Cull, 2008; Nye, 2004, 2011).

Public diplomacy emphasises its contribution and alignment with the objectives of foreign policy beyond the traditional understanding of diplomacy. It is necessary to distinguish between foreign policy and diplomacy, with the latter being regarded as the means

through which foreign policies are implemented (Hocking, 2016, pp. 68–69, 71). Therefore, the different adjectivisations of “diplomacy” would point out to the different practices specialised in these negotiations between international political actors (Hocking, 2016, p. 69).

Its approach from the idea of soft power, together with public diplomacy’s interest in cultural or symbolic aspects, as well as in actions generated by non-state actors (Cull, 2008), has meant that much of this development has not been linked to another type of diplomacy: military or defence diplomacy. This type of diplomacy is more focused on the study of the instruments of forces and its deployment in a peaceful way by state governments, thus constituting a set of diplomatic practices that are differentiated from the rest and not only specialised by the policy area addressed (Muthanna, 2011; Tan, 2016; Drab, 2018)¹. Similarly, other diplomatic practices can also address security and defence issues. Hence, the set of practices covered by defence diplomacy singles out this type of diplomacy.

However, this difference only exists at first glance, from a traditional and restrictive view of military power and an artificial distinction between diplomacy and war; in fact, diplomacy is a necessary part of war, since diplomatic activity is consubstantial with the administration and conduct of war (Barkawi, 2015). On the other hand, the military can also be part of the deployment of soft power, such as training and assistance programmes with other countries or officer exchanges (Nye, 2019, p. 16). Therefore, defence diplomacy is part of the evolution that public diplomacy is undergoing in accordance with new forms of communication and new ways of partnership and alliances with third states (Nye, 2019).

Defence diplomacy employs the military force via cooperation, collaboration and communication. This entails the diffusion of foreign and defence policy preferences, ideas and worldviews, with the ultimate goal of shaping the strategic thinking and institutions of third countries through co-optation (Winger, 2014). Since the end of the Cold War, the growing use of the military in this way has overcome the resistance to the apparent contradiction between diplomacy and the military (Cheyre, 2015), and then between public diplomacy and defence diplomacy.

The potential usefulness of intertwining public diplomacy and defence diplomacy in terms of diplomatic practice is evident for a rising literature that affirms the advancement of a distinctive and specialised diplomacy labelled military or defence public diplomacy (Swistek, 2012; Atkinson, 2014; Karadag, 2016). It is argued that states deploy public diplomacy activities using the armed forces to influence political and social audiences in third states in order to co-opt their political decisions for the benefit of their own defence or foreign policy. This is the reason for the theoretical and policy-oriented relevance of this issue.

Subsequently, it is necessary to first ask what defines this type of diplomatic practice based on an understanding of war, the use of armed force, and international politics in such a way that it constitutes an original and genuine space within diplomacy. Secondly, if it is a new concept identifiable through the practices of states, it is pertinent to ask how policymakers, practitioners or other stakeholders perceive this type of diplomacy *vis-à-vis* traditional diplomatic practices.

Therefore, the aim of this article is twofold. On the one hand, to contribute to that debate in its initial stages about the connection between defence diplomacy and public diplomacy, highlighting the points of convergence between the key ideas of both diplomatic practices, thus enriching the debate on public diplomacy. By doing so, it seeks to answer the question of whether it is indeed possible to consolidate an expanded concept of defence public diplomacy. This is an added contribution that reinforces the underemphasised connection between international and strategic studies –the latter, as a distinguished scholarly field focus

¹ As it is accepted that military diplomacy falls under the umbrella of defence diplomacy (Drab, 2018, p. 59), in this paper the terms defence diplomacy and defence public diplomacy are always used including military diplomacy.

on the study of the use of armed force–, and diplomacy studies as necessarily interdisciplinary area (Rodrigues Balão & de Almeida e Silva, 2021).

On the other hand, this article analyses how defence diplomacy is perceived by three different Spanish elites involved in the decision, formulation, and implementation of public defence policy: politicians, the military, and defence industry managers. Consequently, it asks about the importance given to and understanding of defence diplomacy within foreign policy by these three elites in Spain. This approach also feeds back into the theory in that it studies the views of three types of political actors: policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders, respectively. This second aim is particularly relevant because the scientific literature tends to focus on diplomatic activities and missions implemented, and not on the perceptions of the actors present in the ‘black box’ of these diplomatic practices and policies.

Spain has been selected as a case study, as a middle power reluctant to use military force in a warlike sense as an instrument of its foreign policy, and has found a in the deployment of its armed forces under the umbrella of defence diplomacy a way to use this state’s foreign policy tool. So, the development of defence public diplomacy could constitute an opportunity to reinforce its soft power.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, we address the conceptual framework, in which we explain the interrelationship between defence diplomacy and public diplomacy, the former being embedded within the latter, based on the perspective provided by the theory of soft power. Secondly, we explain the methodological details of this case study and the exploratory qualitative analysis carried out. This consisted of in-depth interviews with members of these three elites, a technique that was reinforced by focus groups. Thirdly, the findings show consensus on the importance of this diplomatic practice, but serious divergences between regarding its conceptualisation. Finally, the conclusions reinforce the concept of defence public diplomacy from the soft power paradigm, and note that policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders can have very different understandings of these diplomatic practices.

2. The conceptual-practical triangle between soft power, public diplomacy, and defence diplomacy

The concept of soft power is characterised by the use of non-coercive instruments based on persuasion and attraction to achieve foreign policy objectives by co-opting other actors (Nye, 2004, 2011). This approach assumes that the communication of ideological visions and policy preferences is at the core of this strategy. The projection of state’s soft power rests on three pillars: political values, culture and foreign policy (Nye, 2015, p. 566). Hence, the connection between public diplomacy and defence diplomacy is established through the idea of soft power: a theoretical construct *vis-à-vis* these practical tools of foreign policy (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2022, p. 6).

Under this logic, public diplomacy is understood as a way of articulating certain means in the service of the state’s objectives, in a purely strategic reasoning. This communicative diplomatic practice can be aimed at shaping the environment in which the state operates in its international policy through the search for impact on key foreign audiences (Reveron, 2007, p. 7). Soft power emphasises the growing role of communication and public opinion as a factor to be taken into account when gauging a state’s influence and power (Torres Soriano, 2015, p. 111). Therefore, it is not merely a projection of culture (Melissen, 2015), but seeks to attract and shape the behaviour of third states. In short, this diplomacy is understood as a vector for the deployment of the state’s soft power. Consequently, it is understandable that public diplomacy has represented an innovation in traditional diplomatic relational practices.

From this perspective, a conceptual would exist between public diplomacy and defence diplomacy, as it is between peace and war. The choice and adoption of communicative practices by public diplomacy, a form of peaceful exercise of international relations, would separate it from the military realm. The latter would be linked to the use of military force, far

removed from such diplomatic uses and linked to hard power. This vision has already been partially superseded because of its reductionism. As Tarak Barwaki (2015) stated, “to think of war and peace as two separate states of affairs, subject to different ways of knowing, is to misunderstand politics” (p. 63). In fact, Nye himself explains different functions of the armed forces that fit with the seminal premises of soft power theory (2004). Similarly, it must be understood that diplomacy plays an essential role in the organisation of a state’s coercive capacities and in the use of force, which requires its intervention across many different domains (Barkawi, 2015, pp. 56–57).

Through the idea of soft power, it is possible to link the two diplomacies and, at a deeper level, suggest that defence diplomacy can be a specific type of public diplomacy. Wallin provides a useful definition of defence diplomacy: “military communication and relationship building with foreign publics and military audiences for the purpose of achieving a foreign policy objective” (2015, p. 2). This connection with the communicative plane is evident again; it does not imply that the task must be one of communication per se, but it does contribute to the construction of a strategic narrative for the interests established. Not so much because of the target audience, which in this case would be the civilian population as opposed to defence, but because of the use of joint tools and public communication that seeks to influence foreign policy.

It targets both governments and civilian populations and thus gives meaning to this Clausewitzian idea (Barkawi, 2015; Drab 2018). In this way, defence policy can also exercise channels of communication that, in the framework of a strategic narrative within a strategy of foreign action and/or national security, and to a greater depth of grand strategy in the sense of “grand principles” (Silove, 2018, pp. 39–42), contributing to such ends.

The aim of both policies is to inform and influence foreign audiences through cooperation-, information-, and trust-building programs (Swistek, 2012, p. 83). Defence diplomacy is primarily a peacetime activity, which is why it has become a core task of armed forces and defence ministries (Swistek, 2012, p. 82). It is logical that this is also the case insofar as military strategic thinking also finds its progress in times of peace in order to avoid war (Mahnken, 2003). Using the capacity of military sources, the state can turn potential adversaries into allies (Cottey & Foster, 2013, p. 70).

Necessarily, military power will move at the strategic level within a broader policy context, even extending to the operational level (Nye, 2015, p. 566). A strict distribution of functions between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence, where the former would be responsible for the exercise of soft power while the latter would exercise hard power, makes no sense because defence policy can also employ communicative practices (Cheyre, 2015, p. 373) –this would be the case of strategic communication–, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deals with security concerns and participate in defence fora.

The separation between military and non-military, war and peace, has then certainly become meaningless. While the military genuinely represents the legitimate armed violence of the state, its range of roles and missions –where there is no use of military force–, has clearly grown, being part of its activities during the Cold War, but specially after this period. For instance, it can be argued that the imposition of sanctions or foreign development aid, according to realist thinker Hans Morgenthau (1962), can be coercive instruments in the hands of governments. These are practices perfectly in line with the premises of realists and strategists, for whom diplomacy can be also aligned with delivering threats in international politics (Barkawi, 2015, p. 55).

Several examples can be cited. Public diplomacy had a great development in the construction of strategic narratives and the construction of agendas in the war in Afghanistan (Blannin, 2017). Indeed, asymmetric wars, new ways of waging war through hybrid strategies (Giegerich, 2016; Laruelle & Limonier, 2021) or conflicts that move in the grey zone (Jordán, 2021) open the possibility for new practices that do not necessarily involve military armed force –or not its kinetic use– but can serve defence and foreign policy objectives.

Furthermore, new practices and uses in the international arena, such as disinformation, lead to an understanding of the use of tools other than hard power that are also used for coercive or co-optative purposes by actors (Manfredi-Sánchez, Amado & Gómez-Iniesta, 2022). Even the use of memes, in what has come to be called ‘memetic warfare,’ can become a tool of public diplomacy in war (Horbyk & Orlova, 2022).

Therefore, public diplomacy embraces the military element as part of its communication functions to influence foreign audiences. That initial gap is but a remnant of past logics, both in the diplomatic sense and in the very stagnation and quasi-specialisation of functions between the administrations themselves and the activities they carry out. However, the triangle formed by soft power, public diplomacy, and defence diplomacy has also been consolidated because defence diplomacy itself has undergone a singular evolution from its more classical activities. These tasks were attributed to military attachés, whose missions are *par excellence* categories of practice for defence diplomacy (Barkawi, 2011, p. 598). These military representatives saw their roles transformed with the end of the Cold War, as did that of the armed forces themselves, favouring interaction between the military and diplomatic spheres (Cheyre, 2015, p. 370).

Thus, defence public diplomacy could encompass a wide variety of initiatives, described as military diplomacy, but which fit perfectly into this logic as instruments of soft power: advisory work on human rights, civilian control or institutional modernisation; bilateral cooperation agreements; joint exercises and manoeuvres; military attaché officers; military education, training, and troop training programmes; military base deployments; officer exchanges; participation in institutional fora; promotion of the national defence industry; provision of military equipment; visits to military units; or training of military and civilian defence personnel (Cottey & Foster, 2013; Atkinson, 2014; Winger, 2014; Allen *et al.*, 2020; Kennedy, 2020; Muthanna, 2011; Karadag, 2016; Pajtinka, 2016). Obviously, many of these activities involve the engagement or active participation directly or indirectly of non-governmental and/or non-state actors, as a means of reaching larger audiences, influencing individuals or projecting various facets of the country.

3. Methodological framework

To analyse how defence public diplomacy is understood among various elites, a single case study has been selected: Spain. This European country has been defined as a prototype of a middle-range power according to quantitative criteria and as risk-adverse international political actor (Bueno & Testoni, 2021, pp. 168-169), marked by a strategic culture that is reluctant to the use force in its foreign policy (Arteaga, 2013). The modernisation process of the Spanish Armed Forces after the democratic transition has been characterised in its external dimension by the internationalisation of its tasks and missions. Its bilateral relations with Latin America, participation in operations within the framework of security sector reform, and deployment of units abroad can be comprehended as part of a defence diplomacy practice, including the Defence Diplomacy Plan (PDD, for its initials in Spanish) published in 2011 by the Spanish Ministry of Defence (IEEE, 2016; Bartolomé, 2017; Bueno & Gallego-Cosme, 2021).

Nonetheless, the first reference to this diplomatic tool appeared in the Strategic Defence Review (2003), but without further policy formulation. It was not until the 2008 National Defence Directive (DDN, for its initials in Spanish) that it was first stated as a defence policy objective to be developed “with neighbouring countries and areas of strategic interest” (DDN, 2008). Regarding this policy-oriented document, it must be appreciated that, at that time, General Sanz Roldán was serving as Chief of Defence Staff, a military officer who, a decade before, offered one of the first definitions in the national strategic community as a Spanish approach to defence diplomacy: “the employment, without duress, in time of peace of the resources of Defence to achieve specific national goals, primarily through relationships with others” (Roldán, 2000, p. 520). Although the 2012 Defence Policy Directive –a strategic-policy

document ranked below DDN– stated the need to develop a new defence diplomacy plan, it was never realised. The next reference was established in the 2020 DDN, where this tool is advocated in order to “promote confidence and solidarity” (DDN, 2020).

The National Security Strategies (2011, 2013, 2017 and 2021) and latest foreign action strategy (2021) have not recognised defence diplomacy as part of state action. However, the 2015 Foreign Action Strategy (p. 75) did highlight the contribution of defence diplomacy to foreign policy through mutual confidence-building and cooperation programmes. Despite this, Spain has implemented several activities under this framework, such as the training of foreign personnel, courtesy visits, exchanges of military personnel, expert groups, and the promotion of the defence industry (Andreeva, 2020, p. 221). To keep up with other countries that have included civil-military cooperation activities or projects such as the Afghan Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), this type of missions could be added to its defence diplomacy background. Additionally, direct collaboration with Spanish companies, such as the public shipyard *Navantia*, should be taken into account.

This article’s starting hypothesis is that these three Spanish elites, politician, military officers, and defence industry managers have not incorporated this innovative mindset of new diplomatic practices. The case study also reinforces the exploratory nature of the hypothesis, as there are few empirical studies analysing this practice and policy in Spain (Bueno & Gallego-Cosme, 2021). To tackle this, a qualitative methodology was developed, which employed three research techniques. Firstly, a manual content analysis of official military and national security documents at the political-strategic level, as primary sources, was conducted, enabling the examination of political practice and contrasting it with the perceptions of the three elites.

Secondly, under the framework of the research project “Rethinking the role of the Spanish Armed Forces in the face of new security challenges”², 60 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted during the second half of 2021 with members of the three aforementioned elites: parliamentary spokespersons of the defence committees of the Spanish Congress and Senate; managers/CEOs of different Spanish companies from different sectors of the defence industry; and admirals and generals assigned to the staffs of the three armies (Army, Navy and Air Force), to the Defence staff and to the Ministry of Defence. The inclusion of defence industry managers/CEOs is relevant both in relation to the role that military attachés can play and in the consideration of activities deployed by non-state actors.

They are policy actors with various responsibilities in the formulation and implementation of defence policy, who respond to three different profiles: policymakers (with the possibility of having been or being decision-takers), practitioners, and stakeholders, respectively. Within a broader interview script, there was a question specifically dedicated to defence diplomacy and its development, including the conception and perceived usefulness of defence diplomacy as an instrument of Spain’s defence and foreign policy.

Finally, as part of that research project, a series of expert workshops took place in September 2022. A total of 18 experts from the defence industry, the media, university and the armed forces participated in the workshops, which, as focus groups, were organised around three dimensions: civil-military relations, foreign policy, and technology, industry and defence economy³. In the logic of these workshops, with more open questions for generating debate, the role of military attachés was specifically addressed; given that it is a classical defence diplomacy institution, these contributions are included as data. Regarding this issue, possible contributions from experts other than the three elites were considered as additional data coming from outsider experts.

² It addresses the opportunities and adaptation needs of the Spanish armed forces to the changing definition of risks and threats to Spanish and European security.

³ For the interviews, only the elite group to which the interviewee belongs is mentioned and a correlative number was assigned. In contrast, in the workshops, the “Chatham House” rule of non-attribution of comments was followed.

4. Findings

Discrepancies or the lack of prioritisation of objectives can be observed in the analysis of the different political-strategic documents published by the Spanish government. Furthermore, politicians, military officers, and defence industry managers agree on the importance of diplomatic tools to achieve defence policy goals. However, there are major differences in what “diplomacies” mean. Many members of these three groups believe that diplomacy and defence belong to different realms due to their distinct goals, structures, and administrations. For instance, the incorporation of communication as a key element of defence (public) diplomacy is not appreciated.

The analysis of the interviewees’ responses focuses on the understanding of defence itself as being at odds with defence diplomacy and thus the dichotomy with war, contrary to what has been argued in the theoretical framework. In addition to this starting point, there are several aspects that deepen this difference between diplomacies: firstly, the competition and distance between bureaucracies, i.e., between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence. Secondly, and in agreement with this point, there is the insistence, especially among military officers, that this diplomatic practice should contribute to the exercise of deterrence.

Thirdly, the role of military attachés is important, ranging from their traditional functions of communication between states to being commercial agents linked to the external promotion of the defence industry. The preponderant position of the military attachés within defence diplomacy is perceived as such among the Spanish elites.

Fourthly, training and education activities, as well as humanitarian missions, appear as privileged spaces of diplomacy and the most closely linked to this “public” dimension of diplomacy. Finally, there is a very particular question about the outcomes of these practices in Spanish foreign and defence policies that fits very well with the results obtained in the analysis of the documents.

4.1. *An almost neglected “toolbox” in the Spanish strategic planning*

The Defence Diplomacy Plan, as political-strategic document, identified the transformation of the international scenario towards greater inter-state interdependence as the main challenge for the Spanish foreign policy, for which the development of this type of diplomacy is essential. From this perspective, defence diplomacy was defined by the PDD (2011, p. 18) as

the set of international activities based mainly on dialogue and cooperation that the Ministry of Defence carries out at the bilateral level with [the] allies, partners and friendly countries to promote the fulfilment of defence policy objectives in support of the state’s external action.

Regarding the content of the PDD, on one hand, the activities it established aimed at conflict prevention, security sector reform, and the reinforcement of security and defence structures of third countries. A plethora of actions smaller than those theoretically determined and very much in line with the international operations that the Spanish Armed Forces were already carrying out. The PDD showed a strong preference for providing an institutional response to the State’s security deficits.

On the other hand, the PDD sets as its goals the enhancement of dialogue, the creation of a peaceful global order, the consolidation of democratic frameworks as a form of conflict prevention, and support for the national defence industry (PDD, 2011, p. 19). Such objectives are problematic from a conceptual and policy point of view, but they are in line with the usual establishment of “milieu goals” in Spanish foreign and security policy (Bueno & Testoni, 2021).

Firstly, only collaterally can one infer the pursuit of impact on third country audiences as a form of influence and co-optation from the prism of soft power. Secondly, apart from the confusion between ways and ends (i.e., dialogue as an end and not as a means to achieve a

goal), the objectives are ambiguous and open, with a clear commitment to bilateral relations and where the industrial goal is the best-defined objective.

According to some of the experts interviewed, “Spain does not have a military diplomacy strategy, since what exists are bilateral agreements” (manager 15). Underlying this is the idea that various pre-existing missions have formed a bottom-up process but have not been articulated on the basis of specific strategic planning. That hesitant zigzagging approach, according to official documentation, shows its problems of articulation with strategic planning and how not all these activities have been included as part of the PDD planning and following DDNs.

Analysis of these sources shows that there is a complete lack of dialogue with the principles of public diplomacy. Although activities that could produce similar outputs or outcomes are recognised as part of the Spanish efforts, the underlying problem is that these political-strategic documents do not prioritise objectives or areas of interest, nor do they determine the means, nor they think about communication practices. Their goals are not aligned with prospective works on Spanish national defence planning such as the *Operating Environment 2035* (Colom-Piella, 2021).

Moreover, their declaration in some directives, but omission in others, may indicate that this policy suffers from a partisan bias in its thrust. Indeed, the 2008 and 2020 directives were issued under social democratic governments, while the 2012 directive was issued under a conservative one. Spain seems to have developed more of a toolbox for a defence diplomacy policy than a doctrinal reflection on the matter (Bueno & Gallego-Cosme, 2021).

4.2. Convergence and divergences between three elites

Almost all the Spanish elites interviewed –parliamentary spokespersons, senior military officials and defence industry company managers– agreed on the importance of defence diplomacy for the achievement of defence policy objectives⁴. Consequently, there is a clear consensus on the potential usefulness of this tool.

Only two politicians rejected the idea that it was a valid instrument for achieving the aims of this policy. They reduced military capability to the use of armed force as a tool of violence. This completely clashes with the theoretical approach to the deployment of soft power, as they confuse the strategic sense of public diplomacy with diplomacy as a mere peaceful negotiation, thus distancing it from the essential characteristics of soft power. One of them rejected that the military and the diplomatic instrument can go hand in hand, while the other asserted that

I see ‘defence diplomacy’ as a self-contradiction. Diplomacy, as long as there is conflict prevention, as long as good offices mechanisms are used, is positive. The word ‘defence’ raises doubts. I don’t know if it has a more deterrence character, [if] it is mechanism of action. I prefer ‘diplomatic relations,’ not so much in terms of defence, but in political and diplomatic matters (politician 5).

However, the consensus on the relevance of defence diplomacy is weakened by very different understandings of what constitutes this practice. A view shared by members of the three elites is that of defence diplomacy as a sphere of traditional diplomacy linked to military affairs, in terms of possible prior military negotiation to prevent and manage an escalation of conflict: defence diplomacy as “one more part of the diplomatic task in general where there is greater coordination” (military officer 3); “part of national defence and [armed forces] missions” (politician 12). The idea of defence public diplomacy is far removed from these conceptions.

The vision of defence diplomacy as a political relationship in the international sphere, a classic practice of states, is eloquently reflected in the opinion of a manager (6): “when defence

⁴ Two of the company managers and one of the military personnel interviewed were unwilling or unable to assess the importance of this policy.

diplomacy is exhausted is when one has to basically use the resources one has. And [...] the will to use them.” In the opinion of several of the politicians interviewed, this diplomacy has “the tools of words and dialogue” (politician 3) to “facilitate negotiations” (politician 4). These opinions imply the idea of traditional diplomacy and not soft power strategy, as explained above. The elites thus maintain the dichotomy between soft power, i.e., public diplomacy, and defence diplomacy.

In the event of the failure of such diplomacy, it would be armed deterrence that would prevent a potential war between states. Armed forces therefore have a “diplomatic effect” (manager 9). This understanding of defence diplomacy as a tool for deterrence is shared by many military personnel, who also highlight the importance of defence diplomacy in generating mutual knowledge between armed forces and states and building trust: “it can help mitigate potential conflict through the exchange of information and military, political and economic contact” (military officer 2). While this approach is not fundamentally inaccurate, it does, again, completely sidestep the conceptual considerations of defence public diplomacy as a soft power practice.

This idea contains interesting implications. For some military officers and politicians, defence diplomacy serves as a confidence-building measure and a link to manage possible escalations, and thus has an essential role in generating deterrence. It is interesting because this idea is situated between the quintessential task of the armed forces –and therefore a classic mission: “defence diplomacy is a preliminary step to deterrence” (politician 9)– and the task of communicating “the ability to confront and reinforce a situation” (manager 14). Undoubtedly, the communication of intentions and capabilities is a fundamental component of the deterrence exercise.

This opens up the possibility of considering defence public diplomacy as part of a soft power practice that reinforces the state’s hard power. This practice of international public communication demands its own understanding. Deterrence, according to strategist Colin S. Gray (2000, p. 256) is a relational variable, so whether conventional or nuclear, it is embedded in pure hard power logic. Thus, soft power does not reject the logic of competition between actors in since it wants to influence the posture of the other to adopt a position desired by the actor.

As a result, that understanding entails maintaining traditional bureaucratic structures, in which the Ministry of Defence, the armed forces and the military would lead the diplomatic task of negotiation in the first place, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs remaining at a different level. This would maintain specializations in different diplomacies. This conceptualisation does nothing to contribute to the supposed influence and co-optation of foreign audiences through strategic communication, that is, it maintains the gap between public diplomacy and defence diplomacy. However, some interviewees expressed concern about coordination between administrations and competition in decision-making and implementation, pointing to the difficulty of determining which ministry should be ultimately responsible.

The meaning given to defence diplomacy has a logical and material extension. Some elites perceive this diplomatic practice as involving military advice to diplomatic practitioners. It is understood “[that] the diplomat goes first, and the general comes behind” (manager 7); “[as] a military advisory role for the diplomat” (military officer 1) and “support for national diplomacy” (military officer 6). Again, it is a classic view of the functions of each bureaucracy and the functions of the military attachés. Related to that, when specific areas of development of defence diplomacy are identified, reference is made mainly to the functions of military attachés, who would fulfil the aforementioned tasks, and where the commercial dimension is added: “it is also important for establishing commercial relations in defence materials and, therefore, strengthens the defence industry” (military officer 18). This is because it is understood that “commercial, diplomatic, and military relations are interrelated” (politician

2). An idea also held by several of the businessmen interviewed, who demonstrate that the role of this figure has been consolidated as a representative of the national defence industry.

This was the issue that the expert workshops addressed in relation to defence diplomacy and its international business component. One expert complained that the attachés were mere commercial agents of the defence industry sector –a critique that revolted against the idea of military officers serving private interests–, while on the other hand, it was stressed that this is normal and usual practice on the part of military attachés. Two criticisms were made of Spanish policy in this regard: on the one hand, the need to establish greater coherence between commercial and defence policies; on the other, the fact that Spain does not know how to make the most of the economic benefits of its military effort.

Another area of activities that was stressed by several of the elites interviewed was training and education missions for other armed forces: “defence diplomacy improves security, above all it strengthens its cooperative element” (military officer 18). From a strictly institutional point of view, it has to do with the generation of more robust and capable armed forces and thus generating security spaces in Spain’s environment and projecting stability that will later have an impact on Spain’s own security. This is a clear example of a soft power mission linked to the pursuit of the national interest.

Not far from this line, another position was expressed by a manager (7), who underlined the humanitarian component that defence diplomacy adds to the instruments of coercion and that, therefore, it can be a way of bringing the civilian world closer to the military sphere. This idea does further redound to that postulate of public diplomacy to impact wider audiences, in this case, to bridge a potential civil-military gap.

In general, the public and communicative dimension of defence diplomacy is not considered within the consensus that it does generate. Only a few interviewees pointed to concepts and terms that fit well with a soft power strategy in the state’s international policy. Thus, one interviewee asserted that “it goes beyond the military by transmitting our way of thinking to other societies and other armed forces [to] extend Spain’s influence” (manager 2). Defence diplomacy should therefore be deployed in “zones of influence [where it is assumed that Spain would have areas of influence per se] and areas of direct Spanish interest” (military officer 4). Following this logic, it should focus on neighbouring countries, as is done with the international missions of the armed forces (military officer 6). Therefore, Spain’s security cooperation and security sector reform missions in its southern flank should be understood as pure defence public diplomacy missions. These ideas fit best with the explained theorisation of this type of diplomatic practice.

As a last point, various military and political interviewees are concerned about the outcomes of that policy. Some start from the inference that “Spain’s influence is minimal” (politician 3). Others hypothesise that “in the bilateral sphere, [defence diplomacy] may be less useful”; but this is exactly the kind of relations promoted by Spanish Ministry of Defence. Among these military personnel, there is a perception that defence diplomacy, as a tool, is underused despite its potential usefulness.

For one of them, the main problem with this policy is that conceptually it is a good tool, but its complexity lies in its practical implementation (military officer 8). If we look at the controversies that emerged in the interviewees’ responses between public diplomacy and defence diplomacy, between the administrations responsible, the tools and objectives of these practices, as well as the roles of the actors involved, the complexity of defence public diplomacy originates in its earliest stages.

5. Conclusions and avenues for further research

Defence public diplomacy can contribute to the country’s international policy objectives by targeting audiences in third countries to co-opt their governments’ decision-making processes, using military force as an instrument of strategic communication. The plethora of

possible activities to be carried out under this practice is very broad because what is decisive is the use of armed forces as a vehicle of influence and attraction, and not the nature of this instrument itself. The bridge between public diplomacy and defence diplomacy through the paradigm of soft power determines that we can speak of defence public diplomacy as valid concept.

The findings confirm the initial hypothesis regarding the selected case study: political, military, and business elites generally assume the importance of defence diplomacy for achieving foreign and defence policy objectives. However, they do not understand it under the communicative paradigm of public diplomacy as a strategy of state's soft power but rather in the more traditional terms of diplomatic practice. This finding is common to all three groups. For these elites, military diplomacy is a sectoral diplomacy within the country's diplomacy, where the armed forces and the Ministry of Defence play a greater role in conducting negotiations or providing military advice to diplomats. In this sense, it is another tool in conflict management and prevention, and in the development of bilateral relations with other states.

The figure of military attachés continues to be central, with a commercial and industrial promotion dimension added –even highlighted– to their classic functions. Together with this facet, for Spain, the preponderance of missions abroad aimed at training other armed forces, under the label of security sector reform, is critical. Regarding its formulation, we conclude the strong path dependence of this policy, given the strong institutional inertias, both in its design and in the conceptualisation of the tool itself, as well as on the military operations that the Spanish armed forces have deployed abroad in recent decades. A related consequence is the continued strong bureaucratic specialisation of the administrations involved.

Beyond the convergence around its importance, the lack of understanding about its nature or the strategic prioritisation of its goals, and how soft power would ultimately serve the state's foreign policy goals, is an evident reality. Progress in improving this diplomatic practice will require multi-sectoral work among the various stakeholders involved. Future defence diplomacy plans, embedded within a rational strategic planning framework, should appreciate both the need to bring together these different actors and the divergent points of view from which they approach this issue.

Based on the interviewees' statements, a theoretical discussion point emerges from this research about the inclusion of deterrence as a specific object for defence public diplomacy. Deterrence, whether nuclear or conventional, is a classic term in strategic thinking; representing hard power, it implies the threat of the use of military force. In this vein, defence public diplomacy can be a vehicle for communicating armed capabilities; that is, strategic communication to influence foreign audiences as a means of co-optation rather than direct coercion. At a time of current debate on the evolution of the international system towards an asymmetric multilateralism of competition between great and regional powers, defence public diplomacy opens up new avenues of research that connect diplomacy studies with strategic studies within the broader framework of international security studies.

Other future lines of research may also be oriented towards deepening the dynamics between the different stakeholders involved in these diplomatic practices and the policy networks they could establish between them. Thus, the study of new private actors who, in addition to developing their own diplomacy, cooperate with the state in the exercise of this diplomacy, could be explored. For instance, the underlined case of the Spanish naval public company, *Navantia*, could highlight this interconnection also with the private sector and the potential dialogue between "corporate diplomacy" (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2018) and the public diplomacy strategies of state defence diplomacy via public-private cooperation in the international scenario.

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