



# THE SKIP ZONE OF DEFENCE DIPLOMACY: THE SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** The South Asian defence diplomacy spectrum distinctly falls short of expectation in conflict prevention. Some of the regional countries display ‘smoking gun’ evidence blaming to each other, often increasing mistrust. The nuclear neighbours India-Pakistan’s archrivalry and inimical attitude are the prime hurdles in flourishing defence diplomacy in the region. Apart from Kashmir Conflict, Sino-Indian border conflict, Rohingya crises, and turbulent Afghan crisis are the most complex agenda on the defence-diplomatic table. There is no option, but to foster and nurture strategic and moralistic trust in bilateral and multilateral relations amongst the countries of South Asia. They should craft the activities carefully and explore issues of common interests. Disaster management, search and rescue operation, counter insurgency operation, anti-drug drive, anti-terrorism operations, anti-trafficking of human, PKO, pandemic management etc. are the untapped potential sectors of defence diplomacy of the region. South Asian countries need to take a leap of faith and put forth trust even at the cost of risk. Mistrusted partners need opportunity to display that they are reliable and trustworthy. Strategic trust and fair political commitment in a form of defence diplomacy still may kindle light of hope at the end of the long dark tunnel of South Asia.

**Keywords:** *Defence Diplomacy, Realpolitik Orientation, Strategic Trust and Confidence, Thucydides Trappe, Disarmament of Mind, and Political Control of Armed Forces*

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## INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka drew unremitting attention whereof its Armed Forces played a truly professional and diplomatic role rescuing the nation from dire political crisis.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The unprecedented Sri Lankan crises (2022) in Sri Lanka were a politic - economic deadlock owing to the power struggle between President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the people of Sri Lanka. It was further aggravated by the anti-government protests and demonstrations by the public due to the economic crisis in the country.*

India and China withdrew troops from heavily contested military sites in the high hills of Western Himalayas.<sup>2</sup> In a similar scenario, India and Pakistan signed an agreement of ceasefire on 25 February 2021 agreeing to stop firing to each other at disputed high mountains of Kashmir.<sup>3</sup> The breakthroughs were the sigh of relief and the outcome of an incessant defence diplomatic persuasion between military commanders and diplomats from the nuclear armed neighbours. The 'Pagong Tso Accord' and the 'Director General of Military Operation' level diplomatic efforts defused border tension but could do nothing to the Sino-Indian conflict over 2,200 miles long border dispute and longstanding Kashmir Conflict. The Indo-Pak subcontinent, the heart of South Asia, is also sitting in the heart of the VUCA (Vulnerable, Uncertainty, Complex and Ambiguity) world. The geographical frame of South Asia is bounded by Indian Ocean (IO), Himalayas and Afghanistan. The Arabian Sea borders Pakistan and India to the west, the Bay of Bengal borders Bangladesh and India to the east. Modern definition of South Asia consists of the countries of Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. It is a region defined in both geographical and ethno-cultural terms. Diplomacy is intensely and exponentially related to geo-politics, as such, the subject inevitably demands a critical analysis on the neighbouring countries and regions. The spillover effect of countries like China and Myanmar, and regions like Indochina and Indo-Pacific will come into often discussion of diplomacy.

The realpolitik orientation of defence diplomacy in the Post-Cold War era which is incessantly exercised by many of the western democratic countries radiate light of hope in conflict prevention, albeit the picture appears uncanny in South Asia. The defence diplomacy seems fell into a 'Skip Zone' or 'Zone of Silence'.<sup>4</sup> The island countries; Sri Lanka and the Maldives, impoverished landlocked countries; Nepal and Bhutan, and archrival India and Pakistan are entangled into multifaceted diplomatic strains. Again, Nepal and Bhutan are being sandwiched between their giant neighbours; India and China, add another dimension of diplomatic challenge into the region. Bangladesh's geostrategic location is too significant to the world and regional powers. On western front, Afghanistan, the live volcano of power politics has been struggling through a deadly consequence, keeping South Asian region on red alert, and defence diplomacy at bay! The broader spectrum of defence diplomacy of South Asia also represents a paradoxical narrative. The cooperative activity is directed at the strategic and moralistic trust in one hand, and on the other hand, it pursues hidden national interest. With such unscrupulous and complex feature, South Asia displays an ominous front of defence diplomacy owing to the archrivalry

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<sup>2</sup> On 11 February 2021, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said in the parliament, "our sustained talks with China have led to an agreement on disengagement at the North and South banks of the Pangong Lake".

<sup>3</sup> This agreement was penned at Director General of Military Operations (military diplomates) level.

<sup>4</sup> A skip zone, also called a 'silent zone' or 'zone of silence', is a region, where a radio transmission cannot be received. The term used as title of the subject as it has similar inefficacy of defence diplomacy in South Asia.

between India and Pakistan, disputing Sine-Indian border, and extra-regional influence of the global powers, especially, China. The paper endeavors to geopolitically analyze the defence diplomatic dynamics of South Asia, the design and typical features, prime and sensible impediments and ways forward for efficiency of defence diplomacy in South Asia.

## **THE GEOPOLITICS AND DEFENCE - DIPLOMATIC DESIGN OF SOUTH ASIA**

The stereo-typed defence diplomacy experienced a paradigm shift in the Post-Cold War era. Western democratic countries have been exercising defence diplomacy as the peacetime cooperative use of armed forces, and related infrastructure as a tool of foreign policy and security policy.<sup>5</sup> Geopolitically, it is imperative to analyze the strategic dynamics of South Asia before embarking into the subject. Sir Mortimer Durand drawn Afghanistan-Pakistan border has been a perineal source of conflict since its inception.<sup>6</sup> Pakistan did not remiss the opportunity and has been trying to interfere into internal politics with the overwhelming influence of the Pathans across the border. It explored ancient connection and legacy of ethno-cultural influence throughout. Soviet's invasion into Afghanistan in 1979, embroiled the geopolitics of South Asia once again, and India extended diplomatic support to Moscow. Pakistan was prompt to help the U.S and Saudi Arabia to arm, train and pay for the Mujahedeen to fight the USSR. Afghanistan, appearing at the muddle of overlapping and conflicting interests of the regional and international power politics and also unfolding an era of uncertainty and instability. The U.S led coalition forces withdrawal triggered a race for influence amongst regional and international powers from Turkey to China. Turkey got involved into the Afghan gamut, seeking to exploit any potential opportunities to engage with regional countries like; Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China.<sup>7</sup> Taliban's ascendancy in power likely to trigger refugee influx into the neighbouring countries. It is feared to confront a surge of drug, human trafficking, and terrorist activity in South Asia.

Geographically, Pakistan repleted with security challenges having India in the east and Afghanistan in the west. The maritime front always poses unpredictable issues particularly on the coastal waters - stretched from Persian Gulf in the west and IO in the east. With the contested waters, Pakistan comprehends to evolve two-edged defensive strategy of countering the challenge, and project credible deterrence to keep the threat at bay. Security

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*5 The masterpiece on defence diplomacy written by Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster is "Reshaping Defence Diplomacy, New Roles for Defence Cooperation and Assistance".*

*6 Sir Mortimer Durand drew the Afghanistan – Pakistan border in 1893 and was annulled by Afghanistan Government in 1949.*

*7 Turkey has been providing security of the Kabul airport after the U.S withdrawal with a view to showing NATO its value as a major-Muslim member state by establishing relations with and exerting some influence on the Taliban regime. Turkey also hosts some 120,000–600,000 Afghan refugees.*

analysts suggest, two-fold approaches: firstly; indigenization - prompting industrial level production of the relevant weapons, ammunitions and equipment, and secondly; acquisition of advanced military hardware and technology from western countries. To address these military objectives, defence diplomacy appears as a prudent means for engaging those desired countries with advanced military hardware.

The Al Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden was located in a military garrison town of Pakistan.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the U.S considered this act as perfidy and carried out special operation to kill Osama bin Laden. This killing mission was a breach of sovereignty, which tantamounted humiliation to the military and government of Pakistan. The argument of the U.S went on, "if you don't know he is there, you are incompetent; if did you are complicit".<sup>9</sup> The political and security alignment between Pakistan and the U.S plunged into a deep sea, and Pakistan's choice of potential partners has become significantly narrowed down. At this juncture of nerve-racking pressure, Pakistan had to revise and redirect its defence-diplomatic alignment towards China.

India initiated its defence diplomacy in South Asia in consonance with the 'Look East' policy to focus upon its eastern sealines and secure its strategic interest in the IO area. Apart from containment strategy for China and Pakistan, the defence diplomacy of India has not made notable progress because of its bureaucratic and political inertia, and absence of strategic culture. India psychologically feels, a vast geographic area for its diplomacy, but appropriate apparatus has not been developed to explore the national interests. In 2011, K. Sankar Bajpai, the then chairmen of India's National Security Advisory Board said, "the instruments of state action have become dysfunctional ..... India's strategic interest extends from the Suez to Shanghai..... But we have neither the manpower nor the strategic thinking to handle these challenges". Harsh critique even opined, "though British left India in 1947, it has not even outgrown the British legacy". At this juncture, India's strategic interests in South Asia and Southeast Asia trigger the urgency to have a clear-cut policy for defence diplomacy.

Nepal, a landlocked and typically sandwiched country between powerful neighbours, somehow manages and augments its vital national interest. Historically, Nepal has been experiencing a peculiar relationship with these countries with mixed feelings of cordiality, tension, and manifold threats. In this oscillated manoeuvre, defence diplomacy played a vital role as a subset of foreign policy. Nepal's constitution stipulated its foreign policy goal is 'to enhance the dignity of the nation by safeguarding sovereignty, territorial

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<sup>8</sup> *Al Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden was identified in a hideout at Abbottabad, Pakistan on 02 May 2011.*

<sup>9</sup> *The Former U. S Secretary of State Colin Powell anguished Pakistan on discovering Osama bin Laden's presence in Pakistan.*

integrity, independence, and promoting the economic wellbeing and prosperity of Nepal'.<sup>10</sup> King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of Nepal mentioned that the country as a 'yam' between two stones, and he underscored the need of maintaining friendship with China and Britain diplomatically. Nepal supported British East India Company to suppress the 'Sepoy Mutiny' and aptly drew the British sympathy to enhance Nepal's national security. As a bounty, the British (Raj) observed a policy of strict non-interference in the internal matters of Nepal. In another move, a tripartite treaty signed by India, Nepal, and Britain in November 1947, in which, both Britain and India were permitted to recruit Gurkhas for their armies. In return, India agreed to meet the defence requirements of Nepalese Army. Nepal also capitalized this diplomatic tie and changed its foreign policy as required to protect the national independence and sovereignty. Even, when the bilateral relation between India and Nepal reached at the lowest ebb, still they continued the defence- diplomatic impetus. Amid the economic blockade imposed upon Nepal in 2015, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) visited India and could convince the Indian political leaders, which prompted lifting of the economic blockade. It was regarded as a great defence-diplomatic hour of the contesting neighbours.<sup>11</sup> The unique reciprocal awarding of honorary COAS between India and Nepal is another diplomatic architecture of India - Nepal defence-diplomatic relation.

Bhutan, a kingdom on Himalaya's eastern fringe, is known as monasteries fortresses and a dramatic landscape. China Pictorial, a Chinese magazine, published a map showing Bhutan within China's border in 1958. The Tashogdu, the National Assembly of Bhutan vehemently protested the matter and requested India to take up the issue with China on Bhutan's behalf. The Indo-Bhutanese Treaty, 1949 stipulated that India does not interfere in the internal administration of Bhutan, when the later agreed to be guided by the Government of India for the issues of the external relations.<sup>12</sup> The Armed Forces of Bhutan consists of Royal Bhutan Army, Royal Bodyguards and Royal Bhutan Police. Being a landlocked country, it does not have navy and air force. In recent years, India helped Bhutan in developing its military through donations and training. Presently, Bhutan has 8,000 personnel in its army. The King of Bhutan is the Supreme Commander of Royal Bhutan Army.

Centering the 70th Anniversary of Sri Lanka Air Force, air chiefs of India, Bangladesh, Commander of the U.S Pacific Air Force, and Chinese Defence

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*10 Nepal's Constitution Preamble - "We, the people of Nepal, in exercise of the sovereign powers inherent in us embracing the sovereign right of the people and the right to autonomy and self-rule, by maintaining Nepal's independence, sovereignty, geographical integrity, national unity, freedom, and dignity."*

*11 The 2015 Nepal blockade, which began on 23 September 2015, was an economic and humanitarian crisis, severely affected Nepal and its economy. India has denied the allegations, stating the supply shortages have been imposed by Madhesbi protesters within Nepal.*

*12 India-Bhutan Agreement, 1949 determined India is responsible for Bhutan's military training, arm supplies and air defence.*

Minister visited Sri Lanka.<sup>13</sup> It seemed to be a crucial use of Sri Lankan defence diplomacy to augment and strengthen its national interest. Building the image of Sri Lanka Armed Forces in post conflict context is a priority agenda of this island country.<sup>14</sup> Experts opine, dovetailing defence diplomacy with public diplomacy would foster the national interests of Sri Lanka in a multi-dimensional approach. Amid the image crisis, Sri Lanka ventured for the 'public diplomacy', encompassing its Armed Forces contribution in reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. It includes infrastructure development, livelihood assistance, and even encouraging children education.<sup>15</sup> One of the major challenges - otherwise a patent vacuum, Sri Lanka needs to fill in the post conflict scenario is to abreast foreign audience of what its Armed Forces are doing in terms of peacebuilding. This rehabilitation package at home, well regarded as defence diplomacy has started convincing the target audience in Sri Lanka's favour. The civil-military partnership practiced at General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) is another benchmark initiative of Sri Lankan defence-diplomatic initiative.<sup>16</sup> The small island nation re-shaped its defence diplomatic orientation towards civil-military cooperation. The post conflict era agenda include disaster management programme, participation in the UN Peacekeeping operation (PKO), security dialogue, and even organizing reality shows and contests like 'Ranaviru Real Star' etc. to promote its Armed Forces image leaving aside their arms and ammunitions. The renewed interest of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) also known as the QUAD, looks to consolidate its presence and firm position in South Asia.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, China is eagerly expecting Sri Lanka on its way to One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. Standing at the strategic crossroad, Sri Lanka's location is quite significant, as it sits in the middle of the IO. Sri Lanka cautiously notes that it is not the only country focused for the purpose. A smart response to the call and attending it before others is the most challenging dilemma now on the defence-diplomatic table of Sri Lanka.

In 2022, Sri Lanka passed through a wide-spread concern of military intervention in politics and finally it had a sigh of relief with its Armed Forces dynamic diplomatic role. The Sri Lankan Armed Forces has been enjoying enormous power in Sri Lanka, but never openly intervened and dictated the politicians. It maintained a balance between the government and opposition

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*13 Sri Lanka Air Force was founded in 1951, and it had even played a major role throughout the Sri Lankan civil war.*

*14 The Sri Lankan Armed Forces levelled with the stigma of genocide and not free from harsh critique.*

*15 The Sri Lankan Army implemented projects to renovate more than 6,000 houses and constructed nearby 7,000 new housing units in the conflict-hit Northern region. Sri Lanka's initiation of the Galle Dialogue (2010) and the Defence Seminar of 2011 were the considerable achievements of its defence diplomacy.*

*16 General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) was established in 1981, and subsequently it was elevated to university status in 1988, empowering it to award Bachelors' and Postgraduate degrees in Defence Studies.*

*17 The QUAD is a strategic dialogue between the U.S, India, Japan, and Australia that is maintained by talks between member countries. It was initiated in 2007 by Japan.*



supporters when the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled away in an air force plane. Despite having close connections to the government, the Armed Forces of Sri Lanka did not openly come to the aid of the Rajapaksa regime. The military was deployed in the capital city and order was given to shoot on sight by the president. But the military did not use its power to quell the demonstrators. The Chief of Defence Staff and the Commander of the Army General Shavendra Silva, refuted the allegations that the Armed Forces was poised to shoot at the public to provoke them. Prime Minister Mahindra Rajapaksa was rescued by the military only when his residence was attacked by the protesters on 10 May, 2022. In such a political impasse, General Shavendra Silva appealing all Sri Lankans to support the Armed Forces and police to ensure that peace has been maintained in the country mentioning that it was an opportunity of resolving the crisis in peaceful manner. The top official of defence ministry, Kamal Guarantee said in a press conference, “None of our officers have a desire to take over the government. It has never happened in our country and it is not easy to do it here.” In fine, the professional and matured handling of the situation by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces received loud appreciation adding laurels to defence diplomacy.

Bangladesh has been drawing unremitting attention for its multidimensional socio-economic development trajectory. Bangladesh Armed Forces, which was born during the Liberation War, has been performing with high note and loud appreciation. At the nascent stage, it successfully fought a full-blown insurgency (1977-1997) and achieved its military objective through the politically directed Counter Insurgency Operation (CIO) in the Chattogram Hill Tracts. Military history records this CIO as one of the few successful CIOs of the world. Active participation in the Gulf War of 1990, intense PKO, and innumerable disaster management operations at home and abroad received worldwide recognition and appreciation. Accepting and subsequent sheltering of 1.1 million Forcibly Displaced Myanmar National (FDMN) and managing this huge and unprecedented human disaster by Bangladesh have been once again applauded by the world community.<sup>18</sup> Bangladesh Armed Forces’ pro-people and positive engagement has earned an extraordinary international reputation with political and diplomatic mileage. They have glorified the country on the global stage through their brilliant participation in PKO in which, Bangladesh is a brand name and often secures the top position of the Troops Contributing Countries.<sup>19</sup> The US Army General Charles A. Flynn said: “The Bangladesh Army is known for its leadership globally because of its contributions to UN peacekeeping operations. Its peacekeeping campus and training center are not just known within the region, they are known internationally. There are many, many things that the US Army and so many

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*18 Myanmar forcefully pushed 1.1 million Rohingyas inside Bangladesh territory on August 25-26, 2017.*

*19 Bangladesh is the highest TCC with (7373) Peacekeepers as on 25 January 26, 2023. It participated in 54 PKO in 40 countries.*

other armies can learn from the experiences of Bangladeshi Army in their international and global commitment to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations.”<sup>20</sup>

Acknowledgment and loud appreciation have once again proved that Bangladesh Armed Forces are the potential and exponential tool of defence diplomacy of Bangladesh. In the recent times, Bangladesh underscores the need of triggering defence diplomacy to pursue its national interest. The great and gala event of Bangladesh’s defence diplomacy has been revolving around the Indo-Pacific region. The region is spotlighted as the world’s economic and strategic center of gravity and the IO is viewed as the epicenter of important geo-strategic play. Bangladesh, historically, has been part of ancient Indo-Pacific connectivity. The Indo-Pacific region comprising around 40 nations covers more than half of the earth’s surface, accommodating 60% of the world’s population contributing 60% of global GDP and two-thirds of current global growth. By 2030, the overwhelming majority (90%) of the 2.4 billion new members will be entering the global economy. Seven of the world’s 10 largest armies are in the region where border disputes and sovereignty concerns are headline events. The 46th Indo-Pacific Armies Management Seminar (IPAMS)-2022, was co-hosted by Bangladesh Army and US Army Pacific (USARPAC) in Dhaka.<sup>21</sup> IPAMS-2022 was one of the largest military diplomatic platforms for land forces in the region which was a conference for the senior military leadership of Indo-Pacific regional ground forces to exchange views and opinions on peace and stability. IPAMS- 2022 was participated by senior officers of the military forces of 24 countries. The theme was “Possibilities and Challenges for Maintaining Peace and Security in the Indo-Pacific Region with especial focus on robust peacekeeping, women empowerment, and land power in regional cooperation. Other broad issues were peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, leadership development, countering transnational crime, and empowering women. While addressing the opening ceremony of the seminar, the Honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasian said, “The IPAMS can create a sense of friendship and warmth so that peace and stability prevail in the region.” Charles A. Flynn, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Pacific, assured that the US will cooperate with Bangladesh and other Indo-pacific countries to ensure the security of this important region.

The daunting achievement of Bangladesh defence diplomacy was focused upon the FDMN issue. A delegation of IPAMS- 2022 consisting of top military officials from 24 countries, including the U.S, Canada, Australia, Japan,

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*20 The US Army General Charles A. Flynn made this statement in the opening session of the 46th IPAMS in Dhaka on 12-15 September, 2022.*

*21 The IPAMS is a U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) initiated conference aimed at facilitating and enhancing interactions among the armies of the Indo-Pacific region.*



Indonesia, India, China, and Vietnam, visited the FDMN camps at Cox's Bazar. The FDMN expressed their desire to go back to their home country of Myanmar's Rakhine State and not to any third country. The team sensed and developed a clear perception of the gravity of the refugee crises and the need for their repatriation to Myanmar. Immediate after the seminar, some of the participating countries expressed their desire to accept a little number of FDMN in their countries including the US. In fact, this conference ushered a unique opportunity for Bangladesh to connect with the world's militaries to foster partnerships and cooperative relationships in bilateral, regional and global issues. Bangladesh has stipulated defence diplomacy as one of the pillars of its National Defence Policy.<sup>22</sup> Centering Golden Jubilee of independence and the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh Navy organized a milestone defence diplomatic event of ever first International Fleet Review (IRF) at Cox's Bazar.<sup>23</sup> The four-day IFR-2022 was colourful with the participation of navies and maritime organisations from 28 countries including the USA, UK, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, India, China, Korea, Indonesia, Turkey, the Netherlands and the host Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina formally inaugurated the IFR. The IFR served as an ideal platform for world navies to showcase their prowess, naval diplomacy, goodwill and cooperation in the international arena. Mere appreciation, recognition, connectivity, and policy framing will not be purposefully useful because; these vibrant efforts were not carefully knitted with the causes of the national interest. Again, sometimes, ripe benefit of achievements was not duly focused referring security grounds. The unstructured Bangladesh defence diplomacy without dovetailing into national diplomacy is unable to tape the potentials of national interest.

The Maldives occupies a critical strategic position in South Asia, gradually drawing attention of the regional and world powers. The signing of a defence agreement with the U.S in September 2020 was a landmark event in the Indo-Pacific region. This tie was duly welcomed by India, which views the Maldives as a strategic friend in its IO backyard. Both India and the Maldives used to enjoy friendly ties and their geographic proximity has been featured with political trust, economic cooperation, and coherent diplomatic relation. Their relationship has a sharp bend between 2013-2018 when former Maldivian President Abdullah Yameen Abdul Gayoom leaned towards China.<sup>24</sup> China views the Maldives as a key to its Maritime Silk Route project in the IO, as it has already acquired Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and Djibouti - the 'Horn of Africa'. Bringing in an extra regional power into South Asian political periphery triggered significant geopolitical anxiety. The QUAD members clapped for this

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*22 Three pillars of Bangladesh's Defence Policy are; Deterrence, Defence Diplomacy, and Defeat Hostile Design.*

*23 The IFR – 2022 was held at Inani Sea beach, Cox's Bazar on 06-09 December 2022.*

*24 Abdullah Yameen Abdul Gayoom leaned towards China to throttle his country's democratic policy. His strategic direction sitting at IO raised eyebrows of New Delhi.*

agreement, as it could curve extra-territorial influence of China in South Asia's maritime boundary. Solih's Government came into power in 2018, quickly reverted to 'India First' policy, and enhanced defence and strategic cooperation with India.<sup>25</sup>

India promptly embraced the Pro-Indian move of president Solih and signed couple of agreements to further strengthen and invigorate the traditionally strong and friendly relations. India even offered US \$ 800 million line of credit, and budgetary support to pay off partial Chinese investment in the Maldives.<sup>26</sup> In 2019, both countries signed another agreement on sharing 'White Shipping' information between Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force.<sup>27</sup> India gifted a patrol vessel to the Maldives and jointly inaugurated the Composite Training Facility of the Maldives National Defence Force. They also established Coastal Surveillance Radar System by remote link. The Maldives resumed India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives National Security Advisor level tripartite talk in 2019.<sup>28</sup> The constructivists argue that the shared ideas shaped up mutual understanding between India and Maldives, embedding strategic trust and mutual confidence. Skeptical view suggests that the Maldivians may always re-establish closer tie with China if any of the future governments drift from the 'India First' strategy. In defence-diplomatic prism, the Maldives can influence regional power dynamics involving both India and China on the vast waters of IO.

## **WHY AND HOW SOUTH ASIAN DEFENCE DIPLOMACY IS IN A SKIP ZONE?**

The ultra-complex geopolitical frame of South Asia represents an ominous and frustrating black cloud and never had a silver line around it. During the corona debacle, India only accepted few ambulances as support from the 'Edi Foundation' of Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> India and Pakistan usually do not engage in defence diplomacy in any meaningful form. The bone of contentions and prime hurdles in flourishing defence diplomacy in South Asia are:

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*25 Soon after the September 2018 election, Solih's Government's quickly shifted to 'India First' policy even with the liabilities of \$3 billion Chinese loan.*

*26 Indian US\$ 800 million line of credit includes 1000 education scholarships over 5 years from 2018. US\$ 100 million for connectivity projects.*

*27 Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih jointly inaugurated a Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS) built by India, and a composite training facility of the Maldives National Defence Force on 08 June 2019.*

*28 The National Security Advisor (NSA) level talk initiated in 2011 in Maldives. This trilateral meeting has served as an effective platform for cooperation among IO countries. It had been stalled for 6 years because of the worsening India - Maldives relations during president Mamun Gaydom's term.*

*29 The 'Edi Foundation' is the largest Ambulance Service of the world. The foundation is a non-profit social welfare organization was founded by Abdul Sattar Edhi in 1951.*

● **India and Pakistan are at Loggerhead.** ‘Modern Pakistan and India were borne in fire; next time the fire could kill them.’<sup>30</sup> Neither India nor Pakistan wants the other one around.<sup>31</sup> They already fought four major wars and innumerable skirmishes. India views Pakistan as impoverished, volatile, and splintering, while India considers itself as an emerging world power with growing economy. Leaving aside the bone of contentions, India and Pakistan both wishfully harbours following similarities:

- None except and expect other around.
- Despite Kashmiris’ strong desire of independence, both India and Pakistan dream to have control on it, agreeing the fact - they cannot have it.
- The conspicuous geostrategic issues dictate Pakistan will involve itself in Afghanistan, so will India.

Differences between them are many and ocean apart. Being ostracized by the U.S, Pakistan tilted towards China heavily. In 2015, both China and Pakistan agreed a \$46 billion MoU for building a superhighway of roads, railway, and pipelines running 1,800 miles from Gwader to Xinjiang.<sup>32</sup> This China-Pakistan economic corridor will offer China a direct access to IO and beyond, in which India is awe-shocked and threatened at point blank.

● **Fixed Mindset.** A fixed mindset of civilian bureaucratic control on the military matters spoils the diplomatic objectives. Citing example from Indian military intervention into Sri Lanka, known as ‘Operation Pawan’, Ved Malik highly criticized this fixed mindset.<sup>33</sup> He opined that the constant attitude of the political masters to keep the military leadership out of the loop of strategic decision making, and yet using military power, has been the prime hurdle to Indian defence diplomacy. On the contrary, the Pakistan Army highly controls its states’ diplomacy. Centering the Kashmir crisis, both countries dangerously concluded that there cannot be any settlement on Kashmir. Similar fixed mindset also upsets India in handling the neighboring countries diplomatically, especially Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives with a wide expectation of subservient demand.

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<sup>30</sup> Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography*, Pp - 192.

<sup>31</sup> *The Thucydides Trap* is a term popularized by American political scientist Graham T. Allison to describe an apparent tendency towards war when an emerging power threatens to displace an existing great power as a regional or international hegemon.

<sup>32</sup> China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a collection of infrastructure projects that are under construction throughout Pakistan since 2013. The value of CPEC projects rose to worth \$62 billion as of 2020.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Operation Pawan’ was the codename assigned to the Indian PKO Force to take control of Jaffna from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

● **Realpolitik Orientation of Defence Diplomacy.** The liberal defence diplomacy looks for the following objectives:

- Dispel hostility, build, and maintain trust.
- Assist in the development of democratically accountable armed forces.
- Contribute towards conflict prevention and resolution.

The realpolitik orientation of defence diplomacy contests with all-above objectives. In the lanes of the South Asian defence diplomacy, India is less likely to accept anything from Bhutan, but continue with 'India First' policy. So is the untold case for Nepal, and the Maldives. Geostrategic Afghan front is always highly contested ground for both India and Pakistan as determined by geography.<sup>34</sup>

● **Thucydides Trap.** American political scientist Graham T. Allison describes 'Thucydides Trap' as an apparent tendency towards war.<sup>35</sup> In South Asian influence dynamics, emergence of QUAD, and extraterritorial influence of China on the waters of the Pacific and the IO have tremendous impact in power politics of South Asia. The economic conflict and contest between India and China have become an open secret issue. Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives are the countries, where both India and China having spiral and conflicting interests. On the western boundary, the turbulent Afghanistan is another front, where India and Pakistan are head on for their respective strategic interests. The South Asia, a hotspot of world power politics, conforms and confirms Thucydides gospel, "right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the stronger do what they can and the weaker suffer what they must".

● **Double Standard Defence Diplomacy.** The former Maldivian President Yameen's favoritism towards China and dispatching naval fleet in South Asians territorial waters in 2018 raised tension in the region.<sup>36</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry attempted to justify its behaviour by saying, "what is happening inside the Maldives is the internal affairs of the country." On the eastern front, the tough enemies India and China at Sino-Indian border are tightlipped in Rohingya issue, because of their geoeconomics in Myanmar. India has a heavy investment in Myanmar.<sup>37</sup> China is even heavier, and the highest Foreign Direct Investor in

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<sup>34</sup> *Afghanistan is now at the climax of its turbulence after the re-in of Talibans.*

<sup>35</sup> *This term is primarily used to focus upon the multidimensional conflict between the U.S and China.*

<sup>36</sup> *Reuters reported that a Chinese fleet composing of eleven destroyers sailed into the east IO, amid a constitutional crisis in the Maldives in February 2018 embroiled the strategic stabilization of the region.*

<sup>37</sup> *Indian embassy in Yangon reports on 03 February 2021 that currently, there are about 100 Indian companies in Myanmar with investments over 1.2 billion.*

Myanmar.<sup>38</sup> This transpicuous double standard role is patently observed in South Asia, posing tough hurdle in flourishing defence diplomacy in the region.

● **Labyrinth of Afghanistan.** To thwart each other, both India and Pakistan desire to shape the government and politics of Afghanistan to their liking. Soviet's invasion in Afghanistan in 1979 was diplomatically supported by India. And Pakistan was too quick to support Mujahedeen to fight the Red Army. In so doing, Pakistan may explore the situation in Afghanistan to alleviate domestic pressure to retaliate over Kashmir through proxy operations in Kashmir. OBOR - the Chinese dream roadmap is routed through central Asia depends on durable stability in Afghanistan. China is eager to protect its investment in the region, especially, along China-Pakistan economic corridor. China's another concern about Tibet-led Afghanistan may become a safe sanctuary for Uyghur separatists and the East Turkestan Movement (ETM) likely to destabilize the region of Xinjiang.<sup>39</sup> Russia's influence in Afghanistan, by and large, is aligned with China and Pakistan. The Russo-China understanding over OBOR and South Asia, Pakistan appears as an important partner keeping India at bay! India already invested \$ three billion in aid and reconstruction activities in Afghanistan and now need to prepare for tumultuous times. The Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship dam) in western Afghanistan on the Hari River was struck in August 2021.<sup>40</sup> India withdrew 50 diplomats and security personnel from its consulate in Kandahar. Terror groups inimical to India like Laskhar-a-Toiba and Joish-e-Mohammad may take advantage and heighten level of insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. The Pro-Taliban situation in Pakistan is growing stronger. The dynamics of India-U. S-Iran relation is in a critical condition. For instance, 'Chabahar Port' located off the Gulf of Oman in Iran's south-eastern province of Sistani-Baluchistan is regarded as lifeline of Afghanistan to reinvigorate its trade and commerce. India too needs it for its access, a major obstacle for critical trade between Afghanistan and India. The political roadmap and a sustained solution to Afghanistan without a national consensus seems to be a remote possibility in Afghanistan.

## WAYS FORWARD – THE FREQUENCY ADJUSTMENT

The defence diplomacy activities in South Asia does not show light of hope in conflict resolution. The untapped potentials even were not duly focused

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*38 China has been one of the largest sources of FDI for Myanmar which reached USD 21 billion as of March 2020.*

*39 The ETM is a political movement that seeks the independence of East Turkestan, a large and sparsely-populated region in Northwest China. It is the homeland for the Uyghur people. The region is currently administered as a province-level subdivision of China.*

*40 The 'Salma Dam', is a hydroelectric and irrigation dam project located on the Hari River in Chishti Sharif District of Herat Province in Western Afghanistan. Afghan Government named it as Afghan-India Friendship Dam in a gesture of gratitude to strengthen relations between the two countries.*

for exploring the corporate interest of the countries except a few bilateral issues. A threadbare analysis and evaluation suggest following means for effective defence diplomacy in the region:

● **Strategic Trust and Fair Political Commitment.** It works like a magic wand; reassuring model of how armed forces can protect the national interest without fighting each other. Bilateral de-targeting agreement, proposals for improved notification of conflict, and greater mutual transparency would foster strategic trust. To bag asymmetric benefits, both India and Pakistan need to engage in one-on-one direct military engagement (peace talk). Strong political will stands as a precondition to buildup strategic trust and confidence. Neighbouring countries should feel and contemplated security assurance, and insurance from their mighty neighbours. Landlocked Nepal and Bhutan should be able to exercise their sovereign power without neighbours' unscrupulous interference.

● **Stabilizing Afghanistan Turmoil.** Withdrawal of the U.S troops from Afghanistan and re-in of Taliban made Afghanistan one of the hottest spot of the world, heading towards a deadly and ominous end. Pakistan is confronting an unprecedented challenge in it. Fighting a war was tough for Taliban, but winning the narrative is the toughest agenda of Pakistan. The Pakistan COAS and senior military official's visits in Afghanistan before Taliban's victory could not bring viable solution. Meanwhile, fencing Pakistan-Afghan border was questioned by the Afghans. In the Iranian front, the mushroom growth of various terrorist groups, especially 'Desh Khorasan' brought both Iran and Pakistan in a closer loop to fight the notorious terrorist groups.<sup>41</sup> Pakistan's former COAS General Qamar Javel Bajwa's meeting with Iranian President Ruhani and signing military and defence cooperation with Tehran was a bold initiative. Centering the Afghan crisis, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) appears as a vibrant organization to counter QUAD. In its last summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the commencement of procedures to grant Iran full membership in the SCO. Iran's ascension to SCO was widely seen to be a vital strategic move for South Asian defence diplomacy.<sup>42</sup>

● **Redirecting Defence - diplomatic Orientation.** The conventional defence diplomacy with hidden objective of states has been producing deep frustration in South Asia. The realpolitik diplomatic agenda hardly could break through the complex issues. The states focus only on the stated objectives, but never disclose the hidden ones. In recent days, Sri Lankans speak and think of the

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*41 Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) is the Islamic State's Central Asian province and remains active three years after its inception. The Islamic State announced its expansion to the Khorasan region in 2015, which historically encompasses parts of modern-day Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.*

*42 The SCO Founded in 2001, is a security bloc led by the strongest countries on the Eurasian continent, Russia and China. It aims to set a strong precedent of cooperation between the Central Asian states and other regional actors to counter QUAD.*



non-alignment foreign policy.<sup>43</sup> The former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced, 'Sri Lankan neutrality', which was different from non-alignment and a new foreign policy concept for the country. Sri Lanka pledged to follow a neutral foreign policy with no affiliations to any particular country or power bloc." The oven-fresh alignment with neutrality, Sri Lanka necessitates to draw a pushback policy towards the U.S and China. On the contrary, India desires to have its influence over Sri Lanka. Similar kind of intention also prevails in countries like the Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan. This kind of policy shift leaves behind a strong hurdle for flourishing the defence diplomacy in the region.

● **Free from the Paws of Constructivism.** The constructivism view directs shaping and reshaping the inter-state relationship upsetting the pre-existing norms and understanding. The traditional Maldives and India regional partnership may be strengthening to closer ties as the Maldives by choice has reverted to 'India First' policy immediate after President Solih came into power in November 2018. Sidelining former Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom's pro-China policy, Solih's 'India First' policy triggered a defence diplomatic package deal for the Maldives. The defence agreement between the U.S and the Maldives in 2020, and couple of agreements were signed between India and the Maldives involving \$ two billion deal. Agreement on 'White Shipping Information', training activities to build the capability of the Maldives National Defence Force, resuming of India-Sri Lanka-Maldives National Security Advisor level talk etc. were the notable defence-diplomatic growth in India-Maldives relation. With a positive nod, the Maldives promised to remain sensitive to India's security and strategic concern.<sup>44</sup>

● **Political Control of the Armed Forces.** Most of the South Asian countries are heavily influenced or backed by their respective armed forces. Depoliticizing of military and establishing political control over the military is the pre-condition of successful defence diplomacy. It refers to unambiguous chain of command, strict control of higher defence organization, provisioning of crystal-clear security policy, defence budgeting, and strict accountability of the military towards political masters. Functionally, Pakistan Army has an overwhelming influence and control over Pakistan. It functionally hinders Pakistan's political masters to negotiate strategic Kashmir issue with Indian counterpart. On the contrary, Indian Armed Forces has a little or no space in the decision-making process of the geostrategic matters. Harry S. Truman, the 33rd President of US issued the executive order Number 9877 stipulating functions of the Armed

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<sup>43</sup> Former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa made this declaration in September 2020, at the United National General Assembly."

<sup>44</sup> The most noticeable difference between neutrality and non-alignment is that the former is well defined status under International Law. The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 stipulates strong military connotation and forbids neutrals from aiding any party in a shooting war.

Forces on 26 July 1947. The first and foremost mission of the Armed Forces are:

- To support and defend the constitution of the US against all enemies, foreign and domestic.
- To maintain by timely and effective military action, the security of the US, its possessions and areas vital to its interest.
- To uphold and advance the national policies and interest of the US.

The US enjoys an enviable and unbroken record of civilian control of the Armed Forces. It upholds the constitution and are accountable to the nation through the President and the legislature-reflecting a robust institutional character. The relationship came under tremendous strain during US former President Donald Trump. Donald Trump appointed General Mark Milley, the then Chief of Army Staff, as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) against the advice of his Defence Secretary. During the turmoil, General Milley's response to Trump was truly professional. "Mr. President, our Army is here to serve you. Because, you are the "Commander in Chief", and Mr. President you are going to be making the decisions. I am going to give you an honest answer and as long as they (the decisions) are legal, I will support it." Virtually, this relationship guides the conduct of both vital organs of a state. General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the former Chief of Army Staff, Pakistan in his farewell speech criticized anti-military narratives and urged upon political leadership to set aside to move forward for nation's sake. He said, "A major reason for this (harsh critique) is the Army's interference in politics for the last 70 years which is unconstitutional. .... The Pakistan Army has decided that it would never interfere in any political matter. I assure you we are strictly adamant on this and will remain so."<sup>45</sup>

● **Rule of Law, Justice and Human Rights.** Armed Forces respect, absolute submission towards civil-political authorities is badly needed in the South Asian countries. The Tatmadaw subdued every aspect of rule of law, justice, and abused brutally the democratic system. Push in of 1.1 million FDMN inside Bangladesh was a state organized atrocity, and unprecedented human right's violation that led to an ethnic cleansing. It is even branded as a gruesome and state-sponsored war crime showing thumb at the democratically elected government of Aung San Suki.<sup>46</sup> The NLD Government had no option but to dance with the tune of the Tatmadaw. Desperate efforts of Bangladesh and its defence diplomacy could not kindle light of hope at the end of long dark tunnel!

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<sup>45</sup> General Qamar Javed Bajwa , the former Chief of Army Staff , Pakistan Army made this comment during his final address at the Defence and Martyrs day ceremony , held in the General Headquarters, Rawalpindi on 06 September, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Myanmar's Military (Tatmadaw) seized control of the country, detained the country's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and declared a state of emergency on 01 February 2021.

The finest tool of defence diplomacy is useless in such a militarily overwhelmed state mechanism.

● **Military to Military Direct Communication.** Direct military communication was found very effective. Sino-Indian border conflict in 2020 - 2021 and Indo-Pak border conflicts were settled by the military diplomats at operation level. The latest conflict on Sino-Indian border was surfaced on 09 December 2022, near Tawang in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, where soldiers sustained heavy injuries.<sup>47</sup> Military commanders of both sides settled the issue in accordance with structured defence diplomacy. Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, Pakistan, and China arrange bilateral meetings at operational, tactical, and even sub-tactical levels and explore good dividend in their border management system. Archrival India and Pakistan may weigh out defence-diplomatic parlance by one-on-one direct military communication. There is heap of successes in their credit. This needs to be placed at the military strategic table and spoken in a language they do realize and understand.

● **Regional Security Platforms.** In Southeast Asia, there are several effective military platforms like ASEAN Chiefs of Army Multilateral Meeting (ACAMM), ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Force Informal meeting (ACDFIM) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM). These multilateral arrangements around ASEAN have strengthened the regional security arrangement and augmented defence-diplomacy in a prosperous way. Vis-à-vis, the picture of South Asia is not encouraging. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) constitutes five South Asian countries namely - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Militaries of BIMSTEC countries arranged a weeklong antiterror exercise in Pune.<sup>48</sup> It focused on boosting inter-operability amongst the member states and exchanging best practices to contain and lower the terrorist activities in the region. ‘Shantir Ogrosena’ a 10-days multilateral military exercise was participated by four countries of the region namely - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka having the observers from the U.S, UK, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.<sup>49</sup> The objective of this exercise was to strengthen defence cooperation and enhance inter-operability amongst neighbouring countries for ensuring effective PKO. Interesting to note, the prevailing defence diplomatic platforms do not constitute with all the member countries of South Asia. SAARC could be one of the viable platforms if revived for diplomacy. Otherwise, keeping some countries aside, the regional defence diplomacy will be a nose driven initiative in South Asia.

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<sup>47</sup> Indian media reported around 20 Indian soldiers and much higher on Chinese side were injured.

<sup>48</sup> In a first initiative, militaries of BFMSTEC members organized this week-long exercise in Pune, India in September 2018.

<sup>49</sup> “Shantir Ogrosena” - a multinational exercise was organized in Bangladesh on 4-12 April 2021.

● **Long Term and Creative Investment.** Successful records of defence diplomacy calls for a long-term investment. Decadelong mistrust between India and Pakistan, Sino-Indian border conflict etc. are the longstanding issues. Australia made long-term investment in 1960s -70s in the East Asian countries, and reaped benefits long afterwards in East Timor in 1999.<sup>50</sup> The conflicting issues of South Asia demand innovation and creativity in defence diplomacy. Again, Australia, after its benchmark achievement in East Timor, resorted to creative defence diplomacy in manifold implications. South Asian complex issues, perhaps need to be crafted on the following key considerations:

- Hardcore issues like ‘Kashmir Conflict’ should be addressed with political and strategic trust and confidence with a promise that no one will fire a single round to each other. It is to be viewed and treated as a political conflict. However, defence diplomacy may have a patent and prudent role as a soft power.
- Without promoting military transparency, mutual trust, confidence, and disarmament of mind, the hardcore issues cannot be resolved.
- Identifying the grounds of common interest like fighting terrorism, drug, and human trafficking, exploring offshore resources, enhancing both bilateral and multilateral connectivity, visit at strategic level leadership, and other military and security cooperation to foster congenial regional environment.
- Socialization amongst militaries of South Asia should be carried forward for corporate and security interest of the respective countries. Mutual exchange of training, multinational exercise even games and sports competition etc. will pay heavy dividend in shaping the proactive defence diplomacy in the region.

● **Civil Society Engagement.** The engagement of the civil society in South Asia’s defence diplomacy is likely to be an instrumental initiative. This engagement includes research on conflict resolution, think-tanks observation, advocacy, and defence media etc. Southeast Asia is quite vibrant on the security dialogue, seminar, and symposium. The Shang ri la dialogue is one of the iconic and flagship platforms, provides an outstanding diplomatic platform of the world. The South Asian region yet to launch some effective security forum for the purpose.

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<sup>50</sup> *Australia made long term investment in Thailand in 1952. Thailand was the first country to support Australia in East Timor. Professor Blaxland said, “had it not been for the decades of defence investment in the bilateral relationship, the East Timor would not be a success.”*

● **Disarmament of Mind.** Proponent of this concept and the architect of the British Defence Diplomacy George Robertson opined that without disarmament of mind military issues are impossible to settle down. There must be new sense of urgency in the process of defence diplomacy to realize the goal of moving to a common security understanding. Robertson argues that both India and Pakistan should sign the CTBT for their security insurance.<sup>51</sup> Disarmament of mind only leads to a policy of minimum deterrence. The commitment to minimum deterrence will usher agreements on 'No First Strike' of nuclear weapon, de-targeting, greater mutual military cooperation etc. In fine, such measures can foster an environment of strategic trust and confidence.

● **Silverline around Blackcloud.** Amid frustration in South-Asian defence-diplomatic environ, Dushanbe Security Summit radiated hope of ray in regional security situation.<sup>52</sup> India and China signed an agreement extending cooperation for mutual benefits. Sino-Indian border conflict of 2020 was followed by a marked improvement. Following the visit of the Chinese former Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Delhi, the Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaisankar was quite laud in his statement, "the Sino-Indian bilateral relation is quite warm since the border conflict of June 2020, and the military commanders are doing too well". In response to the concern expressed by the US Pacific Commander General Charles Flynn's visit, India remained tight-lipped indicating India's intent in furthering congenial bilateral relation with China.<sup>53</sup> Sino-Indian relation finds following concern of India in market economy:

- India's medium and small industries are largely dependent on China.
- Chinese defence budget is four times larger than India.<sup>54</sup>
- Seagoing 55% Indian goods reach to the world market through South-China Sea and Malacca Straits.

Above reasons appear strongly insisting India and China to maintain a healthy bilateral relation. In so doing, defence diplomacy plays a pivotal role. The Dushanbe also held a two days meeting on Afghanistan.<sup>55</sup> Representatives from China, India, Iran, Russia Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan discussed the issues of Afghanistan's security, economy, governance, politics, and humanitarian assistance. Afghanistan's absence though was a harsh critique, yet it yielded tangible expectation on regional security of South Asia.

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<sup>51</sup> Robertson suggested that both India and Pakistan should sign CTBT for their respective national interest.

<sup>52</sup> The Security Conference was held at Kokchi Somon, Dushanbe, Republic of Tajikistan on 06-09 June, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Pacific Commander General Charles Flynn paid his visit in India on 08 June 2022. He expressed concern and said that some defence infra being set up by China near its border with India was alarming.

<sup>54</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institution reports that Chinese defence budget of 2021 was 293 US \$ billion and Indian's one is 76 US \$ billion.

<sup>55</sup> The Regional Security Summit on Afghanistan was held in Dushanbe on 26 - 27 May 2022.

## CONCLUSION

The South Asian defence diplomacy distinctly falls short of a promising future in conflict prevention. Some of the regional countries display ‘smoking gun’ evidence blaming to each other, and often increasing mistrust. The nuclear neighbours India-Pakistan’s archrivalry and inimical attitude are the prime hurdles in flourishing defence diplomacy in the region. India-China border dispute, Kashmir Conflict and turbulent Afghan crisis are the most complex agenda on the defence diplomatic table. Aforesaid countries compete in show of force, swaggering, and secrecy, when engaging in defence diplomacy activities leaving aside its typical cooperative aspects. This paradox of defence diplomacy deepening mistrust between India-Pakistan and India-China relations. On the other hand, island countries Sri Lanka and the Maldives, typically landlocked country Nepal and Bhutan have been struggling, rather oscillating to augment and maintain their respective national core values and interests. In fine, the overall picture of South Asian geopolitics represents an uncanny and hopeless canvass.

Amid deep frustration, defence diplomacy may still reinforce existing mutual cooperation. However, if the relation between neighbours is of rivalry or enmity, defence diplomacy alone will not beam rays of hope. India-Bangladesh conflicting bilateral issues are benign, but India-Pakistan bilateral issues are the toughest having no hope for settlement! There is no option but to foster and nurture strategic and moralistic trust in bilateral and multilateral relations amongst the countries of South Asia. They should craft the activities carefully, where defence diplomacy would be an exponential and prudent instrument to play with. Issues of common interests like; disaster management, Search and Rescue operation, counter insurgency, antidrug drive, antiterrorism operations, antihuman trafficking, and PKO etc. are the untapped potential sectors of defence diplomacy in the region. These windows of opportunities demand an explicit consensus that the primary consideration should be the most efficient use of resources rather than interest-based politicking. Sadly, and oddly enough, Indian Covid debacle offered a unique opportunity of defence diplomacy. Vaccine production and sharing among the regional countries was a wide opportunity to respond the call. In fine, South Asian countries need to take a leap of faith and put forth trust even at the cost of risk. Mistrusted partners need opportunity to display that they are reliable and trustworthy. Still, defence diplomacy is one of the most viable and effective instruments to score the goal in South Asia.

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Brigadier General Shamim Kamal served with blue helmet in Kuwait, Liberia and South Sudan. He is a widely travelled person. He has visited about 35 countries for education, training, official purpose in Asia, Europe, Africa and America. Brigadier General Shamim Kamal has moved on self-retirement on 15 November 2022.

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