Grand expectations, little promise

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Executive summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Policy recommendation**

The key to effective defence diplomacy is to be realistic about what it can achieve. Long-cultivated relationships between officers of different countries can pay real operational dividends in a crisis, but fleeting senior officer visits, port calls and highly-scripted combined exercises do little is anything to help address the dynamics of national strategic relationships, and we should not imagine otherwise.