

**India's Military Conflicts and Diplomacy:
An Inside View of Decision Making**
by General V. P. Malik, HarperCollins India,
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Historian-diplomat George Kennan once said, 'You have no idea how much it contributes to general politeness when you have a quiet, little force in the background'.¹ This statement succinctly sums up the role of defence in the foreign policy of a country. In the book *India's Military Conflicts and Diplomacy: An Inside View of Decision Making*, General V.P. Malik postulates this statement through India's experience with military diplomacy during his tenure. The author provides a comprehensive account of the major operations of the Indian Army and India's military ties with its neighbours that have defined its international posture.

The book discusses India's relations with its neighbours and other major powers such as the United States, Russia, Israel and China meticulously. It focuses more on Nepal and Myanmar due to their proximity and strategic importance in the region. The discussion highlights the role of the military in India's foreign policy. The author describes instances where political ties did not reap as many benefits as desired, for instance when some media reports

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were published against the Royal Family of Nepal after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, when Nepal's Royal Family was massacred and when Myanmar's democratic leader Aung Saan Suu Kyi was arrested. Diplomacy during those times relied heavily on military ties to propagate the bilateral relationship. The author also highlights India's delayed diplomacy with Myanmar and Israel. India established formal ties with Israel only in 1992. India lacked the realpolitik strategy to cooperate with Myanmar and was politically lethargic with Nepal as well. As Kanwal Sibal, former Foreign Secretary of India, stated, 'India, in the past, has also been seen as limiting in providing military assets to nations in civil unrest, which inevitably paved the way for other powers to increase their influence in its neighbourhood'.² Thus, the author explains how China has used its military strength optimally.

The chapters that concentrate on specific Indian Army operations explain the chronological evolution of India's military diplomacy. Starting with military intervention in Sri Lanka (Operation Pawan), followed by saving the legitimate government of Maldives from a coup, then winning the Kargil War against Pakistan (Operation Vijay) and becoming a nuclear power shortly after, the author scrutinises these operations and provides readers with an in-depth analysis. He addresses the international and domestic political decisions that resulted in a high number of casualties during Operations Pawan and Vijay. Since General V. P. Malik was himself a part of these operations, the book has an exclusivity in its perspective. Through these chapters, the author draws a trajectory of lessons learnt from every operation and how India's military diplomacy has matured over the decades.

The author also throws light on policy gaps in defence management and India's peacetime military diplomacy in his concluding chapters. As General Norman Schwarzkopf said, 'The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war',³ circumspection of defence capability is important. The author goes on to address the organisational and political constraints in India's military policy. The book discusses the lingering impact of Nehruvian policy on India's military diplomacy and how hard power became an anathema for the Indian approach for a long time. It also takes a detailed look at wider defence management, which includes R&D in defence, defence exports and imports, civil-military relations and bureaucratic hold over the military. With India's current focus on 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', these discussions have become even more pertinent. Through these discussions the author raises deeper questions, which this book review discusses further.

POLITICO-MILITARY INTERACTION

While penning down his experience of Operation Pawan, the author underlines the isolation of the military from decision-making and important political developments that concerned the military. He even mentions that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had signed the accord with Sri Lanka and 'approved the request to send India Peacekeeping Forces without consulting any military chief'.⁴ He further writes, 'The military was kept in the dark about political happenings and relied mostly on media reports'.⁵ This depicts the government's intention to keep the armed forces aware and updates about the political developments. This finally resulted in a high number of casualties and the unfortunate demise of the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The Sri Lanka crisis is also an example of instances where politicians prioritised domestic vote banks and compromised strategic interests for them.

Even while addressing the broader issues with defence management, the author observes that the insulation of the military from decision-making is a major concern. He cites Operation Parakram as another example where the army was directionless due to lack of communication from the leaders.

Thus, the problem is not that decision-making power does not rest with the military, but that India's civilian leaders do not know how to optimally use the nation's military might. Even India's nuclear policy reflects the civilian leaderships' desire to keep the armed forces out.⁶

The political inertia to interact with the military has resulted in bureaucratic control over national security, and due to the bureaucratic representation of the military, defence diplomacy with Nepal and Bhutan was limited to only exchange of visits. All this results in the military's input in defining India's security objectives being restricted.

ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

The author writes a comprehensive review of his experiences and analysis of India's policy towards its neighbours and the contribution of the military. He specifically discusses Myanmar and Nepal as he has personal experiences there. He also underlines the impact of domestic politics on India's neighbourhood policy since foreign policy cannot be understood without studying domestic politics.⁷ In fact, the importance of India's Look East policy lies in the development of North-Eastern states of India. Even India's reason to intervene in Sri Lanka lies in the domestic politics of Tamil Nadu and India's paranoia of foreign interference in the region.

Myanmar's army failed to integrate Myanmar's tribal population living on the periphery with the national population.⁸ The military personnels enjoyed a lavish lifestyle while civilians dwelled in poverty.⁹ This resulted in tribal insurgencies in Myanmar and insurgents crossing the porous India–Myanmar border, leading to instability even in Indian states and an influx of conflict-affected refugees. India recognised the importance of military-to-military relationship and shifted to *realpolitik*. Joint military operations were carried out to intercept drug traffickers, arms smugglers and insurgents. This is an example of where military cooperation preceded political sync. This also shows the strength of finding common interests, which India and China failed to do. Both countries recognised Taliban's radicalism as a threat but were more focused on resolving the LAC issue and missed the chance to cooperate.

Similarly, India–Nepal relations have been embraced due to the Gurkha regiment and the military relations have sustained even through political strain. Gurkha regiment plays a vital role in Nepal not only presenting itself as a mere job opportunity but also giving the deserved respect to troops. Designated areas in Nepal have quarters for Gurkha regiment soldiers and the Army allocates generous funds to facilitate the families livelihoods and pensions. Thus, Gurkha regiment has a significant role in sustaining India–Nepal cordial relations. However, Nepal's political tilt towards China has outweighed its military cooperation with India. Therefore, highlighting that military relations cannot flourish without adequate political affinity. The author also discusses the impact of public opinion on military ties while mentioning an incident when a high-level visit from Nepal was cancelled due to an adverse media report.

SELF-RELIANCE

Throughout the book the author is consistent about the importance of self-reliance in defence. Self-reliance became a prominent motto of the Government of India, especially since 2014, with initiatives such as 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and 'Make in India'. Although these initiatives are not defence industry specific, they certainly affect the sector. Development of a robust defence industrial base is important for any country so that it does not fall into the vicious cycle of acquisition and procurement processes. The defence industry is different from other industries where production is quick and prices of previous models fall with progress in technology.¹⁰ In defence, production and acquisition are time consuming processes and yet the cost of

previous technology does not fall. This is where a strong defence industrial base plays a vital role in foreign policy.

The author discusses self-reliance in different facets of defence be it technology, industry, research or decision-making. A major percentage of ammunition is imported, thus reflecting the capability of the defence industry and calls out the need for technology-sharing and joint production rather than off-the-shelf acquisition. Furthermore, the investment made by the government and private players in R&D is inadequate. Thus, DRDO is not able to deliver as per the military's expectations. The author also explains how the Ministry of Defence maintains a monopoly by forcing products made by defence public sector units. Therefore, the private sector is not given the opportunity to compete.

The book is for students and those interested in military and security issues of India. The author highlights the philosophy behind the strategic culture of India and backs it with his own personal experience and academic research. Having said that, the book leaves scope to discuss historical factors and policies such as nationalisation, which played a role in the underdevelopment of the defence industrial base in India, specifically the private sector.

The section of the book that discusses Operation Shakti and extols India's independent stand on nuclear power does not share the scholarly critical analysis of it becoming a nuclear power. Rajagopalan critiqued India's nuclear policy and even stated that 'India's decision to become a nuclear power has only hobbled its capacity to react to Pakistan's provocation'.¹¹ Thus, the impact of India's nuclear policy is mooted, which could have been discussed at length in the book.

Apart from the contents of the book, the writing style of the author is also quite impactful. The author shares his personal experiences in every chapter, which keeps the reader engaged. It gives the book an interesting flow than mere description and critical analysis of incidents. Even the pictures included in every chapter give a personal touch to the writing. As this book is written using simple language, it would be suitable for non-academic readers as well.

NOTES

1. Frederick Kagan, 'Power and Persuasion', *Wilson Quarterly*, 2005, pp. 57–65.
2. Kanwal Sibal, 'The Role of Military Diplomacy in India's Foreign Policy', *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2019, pp. 24–37.
3. Roby Thomas, 'Indian Defence Diplomacy: A Handbook', Monograph, Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, Delhi, 2021.

4. V. P. Malik, *India's Military Conflicts and Diplomacy: An Inside View of Decision-making*, Harper Collins India, 2019, p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
6. Shashi Tharoor, 'Reasons of State: A Lot is Still Needed on the Defence Front', *Daily Mail*, 19 April 2012, available at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2132351/A-lot-needed-defence-front.html>, accessed on 21 August 2023.
7. Achin Vanaik, 'National Interest: A Flawed Notion- Explaining the Shift in Indian Foreign Policy in the Age of Neo-liberal Globalisation and Its Implication for WANA Region', in *India and West Asia*, New Century Publications, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 10–24.
8. V. P. Malik, *India's Military Conflicts and Diplomacy: An Inside View of Decision-making*, n. 4, p. 214.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
10. David Greenwood, 'Economic Constraints and Political Preferences', in John Baylis (ed.), *Alternative Approaches to British Defence Policy*, Macmillan Press London, 1983, pp. 31–61.
11. Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'India's Nuclear Policy', in *Major Powers' Nuclear Policies and International Order in the 21st Century*, National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, 2010, pp. 95–111.