

Military Diplomacy and Small-State Agency: India's Security Partnerships and the Geopolitics of South Asia

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Abstract

India's geographic position and material capabilities make it a central actor in South Asian security, but its neighbours retain their own interests and policy choices. Military diplomacy—such as defence dialogue, military training, joint exercises, capacity-building, and maritime cooperation—can support communication and practical collaboration, yet its political effects cannot be inferred from the existence of an agreement alone. This paper examines how small-state agency shapes the context in which India's security partnerships operate. It asks how Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh manage security relations with India while retaining options in a region affected by China–India competition. The study uses a qualitative, exploratory comparison of three cases, drawing on peer-reviewed research and publicly available official documents. It applies the concepts of small-state agency and strategic hedging, with realism providing context for asymmetric power and security competition. The paper argues that regional military diplomacy is a negotiated process: India's capabilities create influence and incentives for cooperation, while recipient governments interpret, adapt, and sometimes diversify relationships according to domestic priorities and external constraints. The cases differ significantly, so hedging should be treated as a proposition to assess rather than a uniform description of all three states. The paper concludes that sustainable partnerships require consultation, clear mutual benefits, institutional continuity, and respect for the independent policy choices of neighbouring states.

Keywords: Military Diplomacy, Small-State Agency, South Asia, India, Strategic Hedging, Regional Security

1. Introduction

South Asia is marked by unequal distributions of material power and dense cross-border relationships. India has extensive security, economic, and political connections with its neighbours, while its strategic environment is also affected by China's growing regional presence. For smaller South Asian states, relations with India are important but rarely constitute the entirety of foreign policy. Their governments must weigh security needs, economic opportunities, domestic political preferences, sovereignty, and relationships with other external powers.

Military diplomacy is used in this paper to describe defence-related engagement conducted through institutional and professional channels, including defence dialogue, military education and training, joint exercises, defence exchanges, and security capacity-building. Such instruments may improve communication and interoperability, but their broader diplomatic effects depend on context. A training programme or joint exercise can be understood by one government as practical cooperation and by another as carrying implications for dependence or strategic alignment.

The analytical problem is that an India-centred account can overstate the extent to which a stronger state's intentions determine regional outcomes. Small states may bargain, diversify, accept cooperation in selected areas, or seek to avoid exclusive alignment. Lim and Mukherjee's analysis of the Maldives and Sri Lanka conceptualises hedging as a trade-off between material benefits from cooperation and the autonomy costs that can arise from dependence [1]. Paul similarly examines how South Asian states have sought benefits from both India and China without automatically entering either power's strategic orbit [2]. These arguments do not imply that small states possess equal power; they show that asymmetry does not eliminate agency.

The main research question is: How does small-state agency shape the context and limits of India's security partnerships in South Asia? The paper considers three subsidiary questions: what forms of agency are visible in the security relationships of Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh; how do geography and domestic priorities shape their choices; and what implications follow for India's military diplomacy?

The central argument is that military diplomacy in South Asia is best understood as a negotiated process rather than a one-way projection of influence. India's material advantages and institutional relationships matter, but durable cooperation also depends on recipient-state priorities, political legitimacy, and perceptions of mutual benefit. The paper uses three cases to develop this argument, while recognising that the cases differ and cannot represent the entire region.

2. Related Research Work

The first relevant strand of scholarship concerns power asymmetry and small-state behaviour. Structural realism emphasises how states respond to the capabilities and intentions of stronger actors. Yet small states can exercise agency by exploiting competition, diversifying partners, and bargaining over the terms of cooperation. Paul argues that competition and economic interdependence between India and China have created opportunities for smaller South Asian states to obtain benefits from both, while cautioning that intensified strategic rivalry could narrow this room for manoeuvre [2].

A second strand concerns strategic hedging. Lim and Mukherjee argue that hedging should be understood through the simultaneous rise of cooperation benefits and autonomy costs, and test their framework through the Maldives and Sri Lanka [1]. Hedging is not equivalent to neutrality: it can include cooperation with more than one power, avoidance of binding alignment, and measures to reduce exposure to uncertainty. It is also not a label that should automatically be applied whenever a state maintains diverse relationships.

A third strand examines the foreign policies of individual South Asian states. Johny's study of Nepal argues that Nepal has sought to avoid exclusive alignment with either India or China and has used a hedging strategy alongside a stated commitment to non-alignment [3]. Herath's 2025 comparative policy study examines Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka using a framework that looks for avoidance of rigid alignment, contradictory measures to manage risks, and inclusive diversification [4].

These studies establish that small-state agency and hedging are not new or unstudied subjects. The narrower contribution of this paper is to connect these debates to the practice and limits of Indian military diplomacy. It asks how military and security relationships should be interpreted when recipient governments retain independent preferences and may diversify external ties. Given the exploratory design and reliance on published material, the paper does not claim to establish a wholly new theory or prove a causal relationship between a specific military initiative and a recipient state's foreign policy.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Small-State Agency

Small-state agency refers to the capacity of a state with fewer material resources than a major power to pursue preferences within structural constraints. It can be expressed through diplomatic bargaining, selective cooperation, diversification of partnerships, domestic debate over agreements, and the choice to delay or revise initiatives. Agency does not mean that smaller states can dictate outcomes; it means that their preferences and decisions help shape the form and limits of cooperation.

3.2 Strategic Hedging

Strategic hedging provides a way to examine why a state might cooperate with competing powers without making an exclusive commitment. It can be used to reduce uncertainty, maintain alternatives, and balance the benefits of engagement against the risks of dependence [1, 4]. In this paper, hedging is treated as an empirical question. A state's simultaneous relationships with India and China do not by themselves prove a deliberate hedging strategy; the interpretation requires evidence of policy intent, diversification, or risk management.

3.3 Realism and Asymmetric Relationships

Realism provides the wider context of power competition, geography, and security uncertainty. In asymmetric relationships, a stronger state may possess greater capabilities, while a smaller state may still have bargaining options arising from location, domestic legitimacy, or its ability to cooperate with multiple partners. The combined framework therefore considers three dimensions: India's security objectives and diplomatic instruments; the recipient state's choices and constraints; and the wider regional competition that shapes the value of alternative relationships.

4. Research Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, exploratory comparative-case-study design. The source base comprises peer-reviewed academic research and publicly available official documents, including government statements on defence cooperation. The analysis distinguishes between official descriptions of a relationship and independent evidence of its political effects. Official sources are useful for identifying declared policies, exercises, and institutional arrangements, but they may present cooperation from the perspective of the issuing government.

Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are selected to provide variation in geography and regional position. Nepal is landlocked and shares extensive cross-border connections with India while also engaging China. Sri Lanka's island location makes maritime security and Indian Ocean relations salient. Bangladesh has a long land border with India and substantial geographic, economic, and security interdependence. The cases are illustrative rather than statistically representative.

The analysis proceeds by identifying documented forms of security engagement, considering published evidence about each state's external-policy choices, and comparing how geography and domestic

priorities affect the scope for agency. The study does not include interviews, original fieldwork, or a systematic dataset of defence agreements. It therefore cannot measure the causal effect of individual military-diplomatic initiatives. Claims about the motives of governments are framed cautiously and linked to published analysis rather than inferred solely from the existence of bilateral cooperation.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Military Diplomacy as a Relational Practice

India's defence relationships with neighbouring states include formal dialogue, military exchanges, training, exercises, and practical security cooperation. For example, India's Ministry of External Affairs records regular India–Nepal military exercises and training, while its bilateral brief on Sri Lanka describes annual defence dialogue, the SLINEX naval exercise, the MITRA SHAKTI army exercise, maritime capacity-building, and training opportunities [5, 6]. These official records establish that military cooperation exists; they do not by themselves prove that it produces political alignment or greater Indian influence.

The same activity may carry different meanings for the parties involved. India may view training or maritime cooperation as contributing to regional stability, while a partner may value it for professional development, operational capability, disaster response, or other national priorities. A careful analysis must therefore distinguish the existence of an instrument from the recipient government's interpretation and the outcome of the relationship.

5.2 Nepal: Close Ties and the Pursuit of Flexibility

Nepal's relationship with India is shaped by geography, people-to-people links, trade, and longstanding defence ties. India's official annual reporting records recurring joint military exercises, training for Nepalese military personnel, and reciprocal honorary ranks for the two armies' chiefs [5]. These arrangements indicate institutional depth. They should not, however, be treated as evidence that Nepal's broader foreign policy is determined by India.

Johny's analysis argues that Nepal has sought to avoid exclusive alignment with either India or China and to preserve policy flexibility [3]. This supports an agency-centred interpretation, although the specific motives and durability of Nepal's choices require attention to domestic political developments and the terms of particular agreements. Nepal's case suggests that proximity and longstanding defence links can facilitate cooperation without removing the smaller state's interest in maintaining independent options.

For India, the implication is that military diplomacy should be based on transparent arrangements, regular consultation, and practical mutual benefit. A relationship may remain institutionally close while political preferences differ on particular issues. Recognising this distinction is more analytically useful than interpreting every act of diversification as a rejection of India.

5.3 Sri Lanka: Maritime Security and External Options

Sri Lanka's position in the Indian Ocean gives it strategic importance in maritime security. India's official bilateral brief records annual defence dialogue, the SLINEX and MITRA SHAKTI exercises, maritime surveillance cooperation, and assistance relating to a maritime rescue coordination centre [6]. These are concrete examples of defence and security engagement, but the official record alone cannot establish the extent to which they shape Sri Lanka's wider foreign-policy orientation.

Lim and Mukherjee's comparative analysis of Sri Lanka and the Maldives offers a framework for understanding why a state may value cooperation with India while also managing the benefits and

autonomy costs associated with other external relationships [1]. The framework cautions against assuming that engagement with another power necessarily represents an anti-Indian choice. Sri Lankan policy must also be understood in light of domestic priorities, economic conditions, and the practical demands of maritime security.

The case suggests that India's military diplomacy is likely to be more sustainable when it addresses Sri Lanka's stated security needs and is conducted through predictable and consultative mechanisms. The strategic significance of Sri Lanka's location should not obscure the fact that Sri Lankan decision-makers have their own policy objectives.

5.4 Bangladesh: Security Cooperation and Independent Priorities

Bangladesh's geographic proximity to India creates shared interests in border management and regional stability, while its foreign policy also reflects domestic political priorities and relationships with other external partners. Official India–Bangladesh documents describe cooperation in security-related matters, including information-sharing and arrangements involving coast guards [7]. These documents establish formal areas of cooperation but should not be read as proof of permanent strategic alignment.

Herath's comparative study identifies Bangladesh's foreign-policy behaviour as including elements associated with hedging, while noting that the strategies of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka differ [4]. This supports a differentiated rather than uniform account of small-state agency. Bangladesh's choices need to be assessed against its own economic, political, and security objectives; they cannot be adequately explained as simple reactions to India's preferences.

For India, durable cooperation depends on reciprocity, institutional continuity, and sensitivity to the domestic context in which security arrangements operate. The existence of a formal agreement is only one stage in a relationship; implementation, public legitimacy, and continued political support also matter.

5.5 Comparative Assessment

The three cases illustrate that geography shapes, but does not fully determine, the ways in which smaller states engage India. Nepal's landlocked position and close social and economic ties create a distinct context from Sri Lanka's maritime location. Bangladesh's relationship with India is shaped by border interdependence and a range of domestic and external priorities. The cases therefore should not be collapsed into a single model.

A second finding is that diversification can provide options but does not guarantee autonomy. Relationships with multiple partners may reduce reliance on one state while creating other forms of dependence. Whether a policy constitutes hedging depends on evidence of risk management and deliberate avoidance of exclusive alignment, not merely on the number of partners [1, 3, 4].

A third finding is that military diplomacy is relational. Exercises, training, defence dialogue, and capacity-building create channels for cooperation, but their political effects depend on recipient-state priorities and interpretation. The available sources support the existence of institutional cooperation and scholarly arguments about hedging; they do not permit a definitive causal claim that any one military-diplomatic initiative caused a particular foreign-policy decision.

6. Implications for Indian Military Diplomacy

First, consultation should be treated as a substantive part of military diplomacy. Security initiatives are more likely to be sustained when partner governments can identify their practical value and have a role in shaping their implementation. Second, assessment should distinguish outputs—such as exercises held,

personnel trained, or equipment provided—from outcomes such as trust, interoperability, or political influence. The latter require separate evidence.

Third, India should avoid interpreting every relationship that a neighbouring state develops with another power as a zero-sum loss. Smaller states may seek alternatives to manage uncertainty while continuing to value cooperation with India. Fourth, institutional channels can help maintain communication through political changes, but defence cooperation cannot independently resolve broader disputes involving trade, water, migration, or domestic political contestation. Military diplomacy is most durable when it complements wider diplomacy and responds to partner-defined needs.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined India's security partnerships through the concept of small-state agency. The evidence and literature support an interpretation of South Asian military diplomacy as a negotiated process shaped by asymmetric power, recipient-state choices, and the wider China–India strategic context. Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh demonstrate different settings in which cooperation with India coexists with national priorities and, in varying degrees, efforts to preserve external options.

The study does not establish that all three states follow an identical hedging strategy, nor does it prove that military diplomacy by itself determines their foreign-policy choices. Rather, it shows why the recipient state's perspective should be incorporated when assessing the objectives and results of Indian security partnerships. For India, consultation, transparent arrangements, institutional continuity, and mutual benefit are important conditions for durable cooperation. Further research using interviews, detailed agreement-level evidence, and longitudinal comparison would be needed to evaluate the causal effects of specific military-diplomatic initiatives.

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