

# The Role of Sri Lankan Armed Forces in Public Diplomacy in the Post Conflict Scenario

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*Abstract — This study focuses on building the image of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces with special attention to the post-conflict context. The Sri Lankan Forces featured significantly in a variety of discussions since the culmination of the war. And a majority of these discussions presented a negative image of the Forces. Therefore, an analysis will be made on the negative images propagated and how going forward, the Forces can build their image through the use of public diplomacy.*

*A qualitative research, it utilises secondary data such as newspaper articles, reputed web articles and journal articles and primary data such as discussions with officials from the Armed Forces, the civil and diplomatic services in addition to speeches and strategy documents. It analyses concepts such as soft power, public diplomacy and military diplomacy against the management of image and reputation especially that of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, in the post-conflict context. The objective of this study is to examine how the image of Sri Lanka could be improved through the use of public diplomacy by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. In addition this study identifies how the use of soft power could be constructive in bridging the gap between civilians and military in the context of security.*

*The writer analyses how the development of the image of the Tri-Forces will serve the betterment of the country in the future and the positive impact it will have on their image in ensuring their skills and professionalism are known by the world at large. It also highlights the benefits of presenting the 'soft side' of the armed forces to the world. The study concludes by commenting on the importance of public diplomacy for the Sri Lankan Forces. And by examining this importance, how it will benefit both the country and the military establishments in the future.*

**Keywords:** Military Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, Sri Lankan Armed Forces

## I. INTRODUCTION

There have been many reasons for Sri Lanka to improve its overall image since the culmination of the internal conflict in early 2009. Majority of these criticisms were not only levelled against the government but also towards the Armed Forces which played a major role in this endeavour. Therefore, the military too has a major part in ensuring that they assist in the image building process of the island. In this light, this paper looks at how the military can utilise public diplomacy as a tool to improve the image of the country.

The professional work carried out by the military and the diplomats may appear to be at polar ends, however they are interlinked in nature due to the work carried out by the military (Cruz, 2015). Diplomats, from the head of state to the professional diplomats, remain the face of the country in the eyes of the foreign public, especially in a civilian aspect. However, the military too represent the country in a different context as they very much engage with the militaries of the world. Therefore, the Armed Forces of Sri Lanka become the face of the country, especially in places where there is no civilian interaction for Sri Lanka internationally.

Thus the objective of this study is to examine how the image of Sri Lanka could be improved through the engagement in public diplomacy by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. This is because there is more to military service than merely fighting battles as today's military professionals are actively engaged in public diplomacy on a daily basis (Cruz, 2015). In addition this study identifies how the use of soft power could be constructive in bridging the gap between civilians and military in the context of security, especially in peace-time activities, such as that of Sri Lanka. To this end, the research utilises secondary data such as news clippings from newspaper articles, reputed web articles, interviews conducted by third persons,

institutional and personal videos, photos and journal articles and primary data such as discussions with officials from the Armed Forces, the civil and diplomatic services in addition to speeches and strategy documents.

In this context, an understanding of concepts such as public diplomacy and military diplomacy is required as they will be drawn on to explain the salient points of this paper. It is equally important to comprehend the concept of soft power, as the main argument of this paper is based on its benefits to the Sri Lankan Armed Forces.

#### A. *Soft Power*

Soft power is one of the three forms of 'power' that is being incorporated into national strategies of governments. As per Joseph S. Nye, "it is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (2012). Very broadly defined, power is the ability and capability to influence and affect the behaviour of others to get the outcome one wants. There are several ways to affect the behaviour of others and the use of coercive power or seduction depends on the context in which the relationship exists. One can coerce the target audience with threats or tempt them with payments or convince them to want what you want (Nye, 2012). Therefore influencing a populous via soft means such as attraction may be more effective when seeking to achieve a long term result without the use of inducements ("carrots") or threats ("sticks").

As soft power rests primarily on the ability to shape the preferences of others, there are three resources that shape these. The first is culture which is a collection of values and practices that create meaning for a society. Culture which can be divided into high and popular culture can be appealing to different segments of society, especially when its values and policies are shared by the others. Commercial ties, along with personal contacts, visits, exchanges of students and delegations etc are methods of transmitting culture. Policies both at home and abroad too are sources of soft power. The foreign policy of a government too strongly affects the capabilities of a country's soft power. Unlike hard power, these elements of power cannot always be controlled by a government to achieve the outcome it desires. Therefore, certain elements or activities that are initiated under soft power can attract or repel others.

#### B. *Public Diplomacy*

The term public diplomacy has evolved drastically since its coinage in 1965 by Edmund A. Gullion who explained it as

the means by which governments, private groups and individuals influence the attitudes and opinions of other peoples and governments in such a way as to exercise influence on their foreign policy decisions (Tufts University, undated). It can be further understood as influencing the "public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies" as well as through its "transnational flow of information and ideas" which is central to this concept (Public Diplomacy Alumni Association, undated). Furthermore it can be interpreted as promoting the national interests of a country through "understanding, informing and influencing foreign audiences" (Public Diplomacy Alumni Association, undated). And this is of extreme importance as public diplomacy is the engagement of officials with civilian publics in order to promote the national interest and foreign policy of a country. In this regard, public diplomacy becomes relevant to the military personnel as they engage with civilians in order to safeguard the national interests of a country.

It is equally important to understand as to why diplomats engage in public diplomacy. One of the main reasons as to why countries engage in public diplomacy is to better engage and understand the stakeholders. For according to the Public Diplomacy Council, this can be utilised as a tool to forward the foreign policy interests of a given state. In addition, engagement through public diplomacy can be useful in safeguarding the national interests and national security of a state as well as to further the state's interests abroad. Further, by using a variety of tools, public diplomacy can be helpful in informing and influencing foreign publics of a country, the behaviour of its people, its policies etc. Public Diplomacy is an element of 'soft power' which does not appear to directly threaten a country's security, therefore is perceived more amicably than other forms of 'power'. It is due to these reasons countries invest in public diplomacy for the successful portrayal and interpretation of the country in the eyes of foreign publics.

As a branch of traditional diplomacy that refers to government sponsored programmes and initiatives, public diplomacy transmits certain messages regarding a nation's foreign policy, political aims, economic cooperation efforts or even touristic developments. It is a purely civilian aspect of diplomacy, which aims to inform foreign populations and citizens about the goals of a given country's foreign policy through the use of information and culture. Therefore it is even credited as an important tool for a diplomat to use. As such the Public Diplomacy Council describes it as "... a tool in the diplomat's briefcase, a process in the foreign policy

community” that “impels diplomats and other practitioners to listen, to understand, and to engage before acting”. As products, public diplomacy takes the form of actions (programs, activities, products and deeds) and messages (ideas themes, words, and values). This indicates not only the importance of public diplomacy but also the potential it has in terms of a country promoting its values and policies.

One of the most salient features of public diplomacy is that it is directed at foreign audiences; however, it is increasing in its domestic correspondence and engagement. In this regard, it becomes important to have local communications as well. One of the key features of public diplomacy is its ability to build relationships based on trust with its target audience. It also attempts to generate a mutual understanding on culture.

### C. Military Diplomacy

Also known as Defence Diplomacy, military diplomacy is carried out by the defence attaches who are appointed from the tri-services of a country. They were initially tasked with observing and assessing the military and security developments of the state they were sent to. In addition these men in uniform had to maintain cordial relations with the military elite of the foreign country (Swistek, 2012). Even though not much has changed in their requirements of sharing information on the host country with that of their sending state, the duties and responsibilities of a defence attaché or a military diplomat has significantly expanded. Accordingly, the modern perception of military diplomacy could be identified as the military attachés coming forward to “meet the varied activities undertaken by the Ministry of Defense to dispel hostility, build and maintain trust, and assist in the development of democratically accountable armed forces, thereby making a significant contribution to conflict prevention and resolution” (Swistek, 2012).

Military diplomacy is conducted via several means such as providing training activities for foreign military and civilian defence personnel, providing expertise and advice on issues of democratic control of armed forces, defence management, and military technical areas, exchanges between military personnel, training courses and education programmes, providing personnel to train civilian and military advisers and the appointment of defence attaches which assists and enables a country to carry out many other activities related to defence and military cooperation. These are not limited to creating bilateral and multilateral contacts between senior military and civilian defence

officials, signing bilateral defence cooperation agreements, providing military support and aid with material and equipment, arms control and non-proliferation and confidence & security-building measures. The appointment of defence attaches further assists in organising visits by ships, aircrafts and other military units as well as those by ministers and by military and civilian personnel at all levels. Military diplomacy also enables governments to organise joint exercises and arrange staff talks, conferences and seminars to improve mutual understanding between governments and militaries.

At present, military diplomacy has become a largely peacetime activity with majority of their initiatives geared towards building partnership and partnership capacity. It has also taken to promoting modern foreign and security policies in countries that are transiting towards post-conflict and democratic societies.

This showcases that military diplomacy has evolved drastically over the centuries from an instrument that was beneficial in observing and reporting on the host country to an instrument that is helpful in promoting modern foreign and security policies in countries that are transiting towards post-conflict and democratic societies. This now enables the building of partnerships and partnership capacity. The target audience for this category of diplomacy is mainly military and civil servants of foreign countries and does not target civilians.

## II. DISCUSSION

The earlier sections of this paper provided a descriptive introduction into the concepts that are relevant to this study. Having reviewed the types of diplomacy discussed above, military and public, it is understood that they have overlapping areas of duties and responsibilities in the current foreign and security policies of a country. Whilst engaging to safeguard the national interests of a country, they both influence the foreign policies of a country. Public diplomacy largely works with civilian populations and organises programmes to inform and build trust with those communities. Military diplomacy though predominantly focused on issues related to security, too has evolved to work with civilian populations especially in the security sector on trust building exercises and sensitising officials to security related matters. Working on their separate areas of interest, the two concepts in general do overlap as they seek to inform and influence their specific foreign audiences. And in this regard, they cooperate to enhance the understanding foreign audiences have on their sending

state. It is important that the two concepts have individual areas of interests as well as areas that overlap, as at present, security needs to be viewed from a comprehensive approach as explained by Barry Buzan.

*D. Military Public Diplomacy and its relevance to Sri Lanka*

In this context, it is important to identify what military public diplomacy is and its relevance to Sri Lanka. Military public diplomacy commenced mainly during combat operations in foreign countries. However it has been gradually shifting towards peace time operations and this shift, in the practice, is relevant to Sri Lanka as a country that is enjoying peace. Military public diplomacy can be very effective during peace-building efforts to promote an understanding of the reconstruction efforts, rule of law, and civic responsibilities. In the Sri Lankan context, the Armed Forces contributed immensely in the reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts that took place in the island. This ranged from assisting in infrastructure development and the construction of houses to provide livelihood assistance to encourage education among children (Sunday Observer, 2013). Towards this effort “the Sri Lanka Army took on the responsibility to renovate more than 6,000 houses and construct nearly 7,000 new housing units” in the northern region (Rajapaksa, 2012). Engaging with the public and contributing to efforts that lead to the normalisation of their lives, is a very positive step in enhancing the image of the Forces. This was further highlighted in the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) report, which stated that it noted a “remarkable improvement in infrastructure development in many sectors including transportation, communication, roads, railways and health facilities” (Sunday Observer, 2013). This showcases to the people that the Armed Forces are not merely about fighting battles. The report had further highlighted that the civilians understood the efforts by the military were aimed at helping them return to normal life in a peaceful nation (Sunday Observer, 2013). This type of action promotes and sustains consent for peace-building both within the immediate area where they are most active and the country at large. Further they share a message of peace externally in the region and to the international community at large as well due to the positive image they are projecting.

Security in the present context is increasingly being viewed as being linked with civilian and military means and approaches. This brings to the fore the concept of civil-military relations. Further this interconnectedness ensures that the use of military force remains a last resort. One of

the major vacuums Sri Lanka needs to fill in the post-conflict scenario is to inform foreign audiences of what the country is doing in terms of peace-building. The lack of information and knowledge on the positive activities engaged by the military, triggers misinformation among the target audience, who can then be misguided by elements who are seeking to tarnish the image of the country. Therefore, it is important for the Armed Forces to engage in public diplomacy as a means of influencing the larger audience of the positive work they have been engaged in. To this end, the civil-military partnership that is practiced at General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) is a prime example of the positive image the Forces have created for themselves. KDU has received a very positive response ever since it opened its doors for civilian scholars in 2012 and the fact that it is a military establishment has not discouraged civilians from wanting to follow a course of education in it. To the contrary, the demand for KDU by civilians is increasing as parents perceive this defence establishment provides a sound education along with the development of soft skills and the discipline of their children. This illustrates that the Sri Lankan Armed Forces have a positive image.

Further, in the Sri Lankan context, it is important to recognise the role played by the diaspora in influencing the image of the country, especially in the eyes of the world. The Sri Lankan diaspora are very much concerned and aware of the events unfolding in the island, more perhaps than the average citizen residing within. In this context, Sri Lankan Defence Attaches should seek the expertise of the diaspora who are supportive of a positive change in the island and engage in awareness programmes with their assistance. Therefore engaging in public diplomacy efforts by the military and being transparent in their conduct would help restore the faith and build the image of the Forces. And to this end, it is important that the country initiates a domestic mechanism to address the accountability issues faced by the Armed Forces. For in doing so, Sri Lanka stands to improve its public image immensely in the eyes of the international community.

However, as Sri Lanka is a small country, with limited avenues for engaging in soft power initiatives, those who engage in these efforts on public diplomacy will have to be mindful of the inter-linked nature of the work carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence. Therefore at times, it would be useful for the Armed Forces to assist the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with their work, instead of reproducing the efforts. Instances

such as this are where the activities by the two parties will overlap in nature. As a result it is important to ensure that the messages distributed by the two sources do not contradict one another. Consequently, it is equally important for the communicative efforts to provide information which is inclusive of facts, figures and visual elements. With the advent of communication technology, local messages too are disseminated abroad. Therefore it is important to ensure that the messages generated locally correspond with the public diplomacy efforts carried out internationally.

The role of the military is increasingly being re-shaped with the increase in science and technology as well as various communication methods. This increases the manner in which the governments can correspond with their citizens as well as how citizens and foreign publics can seek and share information. In this context, soft power which has the ability to influence people via attractive elements will take the forefront in encouraging decisions. Nye cites a RAND statement which is confirmatory of the argument above. It states, "In the information age, 'cooperative' advantages will become increasingly important. Moreover, societies that improve their abilities to cooperate with friends and allies may also gain competitive advantages against rivals" (2012). Thus engaging various stakeholders and creating awareness among them about Sri Lanka's position will be immensely beneficial for the island.

As public diplomacy is also about showcasing the softer side to the world the Armed Forces can improve their image by the increased efforts they are taking by engaging in Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief (HA&DR) activities. Internally, disaster relief efforts were seen by the Forces during natural calamities such as the 2004 tsunami, 2014 landslides in Meeriyabedda and Koslanda as well as the 2016 deluge in Colombo to name a few instances. Efforts such as these showcase the professionalism as well as their ability to handle any urgent situation. Furthermore, they play a very crucial role in disaster management activities as well.

The Armed Forces are known to be task oriented and guaranteed that they will complete any assignment to perfection. This quality in their training has a positive impact on the future career of the officers'. Especially upon their retirement to find suitable job opportunities in the civilian sector due to their professional nature and expertise in security related matters.

Another mechanism through which the Armed Forces could improve their image is by showcasing the active involvement of the lady officers. With the proliferation of women in active forces around the world, it is important for Sri Lanka to present the achievements it has made in encouraging women to be part of the security system of the country. It is noteworthy of mention that lady officers are instrumental in bridging the gap between civil-military relations. This is an attractive policy to those who wish to see the progress women are making in a variety of professions.

The augmentation of an image such as that of the Armed Forces is two-fold. The public image needs to be maintained and improved both nationally as well as internationally. A further factor that showcases the Armed Forces have a positive image nationally, within Sri Lanka, is by the fact that there was no public expression for the Armed Forces to be resized in the post-conflict scenario. This portrays that the civilians view the military as a necessary component and have not felt the need to reduce the numbers despite the culmination of the war. This too illustrates the positive perception the Armed Forces have among the civilians, which they need to maintain.

Another means to showcase the positivity of the policies and values of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces is to increase the number of seminars, conferences etc organised in relation to defence and security. These will then be a platform for the military professionals to share their experiences. As the transnational flow of information is central to public diplomacy, it will be very productive for the content of these discussions and conference proceedings to be easily accessible via websites in order to promote dialogue as well as to assist in research and scholarly findings. To this end, the initiation of the Galle Dialogue in 2010 and the Defence Seminar in 2011 were considerable achievements towards developing Sri Lanka's image by sharing knowledge and expertise on the strategies and tactics used to eradicate terrorism from the country. It is not enough to organise such knowledge sharing sessions only in Sri Lanka, inviting foreign dignitaries. It is equally important for Sri Lanka to partake in seminars and conferences abroad, in order to further drive a positive narrative for the country. In addition to the defence dialogues Sri Lankan Defence Attaches participate in, it is important for them to collaborate with the Foreign Ministry officials and present at intellectual forums such as at universities and think-tanks. The objective here should be to educate the

international community in an unbiased, intellectual manner.

Further, the organisation of reality shows and contests such as the 'Ranaviru Real Star' uplifted the image of the military personnel as they were able to showcase their talents, leaving aside arms and ammunitions. Initiatives such as this enable the world to witness the hidden talents within the military and understand that there is a softer, more humane side to these professionals.

An additional rewarding method to increase the positive engagement of the military in public diplomacy is through its exchange programmes. A variety of these programmes such as Military Person Exchange Programmes and military training programmes take place annually, assisting in the long-term building of trust and relationships, especially among mid-career level officers. These are excellent opportunities to establish and maintain relationships of influence with the militaries of other countries. Whilst sharing knowledge these officers are able to create personal experiences on operations and establish deeper friendships. As witnessed from our military history, connections such as these will be able to influence thought processes and actions of foreign militaries.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the use of public diplomacy by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces is an excellent mechanism to improve the tarnished image it has. Attracting the critical elements which propagate the military establishments negatively will be a possibility by showcasing the positive work they have engaged in and are currently engaged in. To this end, the Armed Forces need to ensure certain domestic mechanisms are in place for this image to be further uplifted. This is especially possible as public diplomacy will showcase the military in a manner that is more appealing to its audience as it will address the values they are aware of. Whilst conferences, seminars, reality shows showcase different dimensions of the military, initiatives such as exchange programmes assist in building long-term relationships. This, according to Joseph Nye is "an enabling environment for government policies" (2012).

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