

Conceptualising an Air Diplomacy Framework for Air Strategy of Small Air Forces to Strengthen Foreign Policy Aspirations: Sri Lankan Perspective and Way Forward

MADCK Wijetunge^{1#} and HWN Wanasinghe²

¹No 06 Air Defence Radar Squadron, Sri Lanka Air Force Academy, Sri Lanka

²No 01 Flying Training Wing, Sri Lanka Air Force Academy, Sri Lanka

#chamarawijethunga@gmail.com

Abstract— The term air diplomacy first came into limelight in the first half of the 20th century amidst the advent of air power. The air diplomacy is the employment of air power elements in support of the foreign policy. The study explored how an air diplomacy framework could be incorporated into the air strategy with object to strengthen country's foreign policy aspirations; further, it is benefitted to bolster the tangible and non-tangible capabilities of the SLAF. The contemporary world has seen regional/global air forces have been attempting to leverage air power in quest of protecting national interests and human capital beyond its seashores. Although, it is observed that Sri Lanka has not been exploiting the air diplomacy to the fullest extent, in quest of attaining foreign policy aspirations irrespective of the governments in power. Hence, it is imperative to bridge this gap and employ the air diplomacy in order to attain desired ends while supporting the regional stability/cooperation. Researchers have derived the conceptual framework based on the review of theoretical studies. The exploratory study accustomed with inductive approach and interpretivism research philosophy while conducted as a qualitative study. Eventually, researchers have developed an air diplomacy framework which could, schematically be imbedded into SLAF's air strategy, whilst aiming to support country's foreign policy aspirations, subsequent to recognised current government's foreign policy imperatives, where the air diplomacy could be employed. The two spheres of SLAF's engagements within the air diplomacy spectrum explored as kinetic and non-kinetic engagements.

Keywords— *foreign policy, air strategy, air diplomacy*

I. INTRODUCTION

"The ability to get what you want through attraction and not coercion"

- Joseph Nye

The dawn of 20th century had seen numerous advancements in technological perspectives. Besides, Wright brothers invented powered aircraft namely 'Kitty Hawk' in 1903 made its first flight in North Carolina which rooted to advent of air power. Air power created a significant impact on warfare and aviation industry which abetted to increase connectivity between regions/continents, due to its unique ability to operate in third dimension alongside with speed and reach. Meantime, aviation has invariably facilitated diplomats to exercise diplomacy swiftly and the term 'air diplomacy' first came into existence in 1920s along with the Lindburg's transatlantic flight.



Figure 3. Charles Lindburg with Spirit of St. Louis

Source: www.space.com

The VUCA world demands states to be aware on potential of air power's attributes to furthering national objectives. It is apparent that air power has been incorporated into foreign policy aspirations by many regional and global states in the contemporary world, particularly during the Covid 19 pandemic. The current government's policy framework which

based on 'Vista of Prosperity and Splendour' aiming to march the nation ahead on the path of socio-economic growth while seeking to fulfil its citizens' legitimate aspirations. The foreign policy entails an integral part in this regard beside air power can be exploited optimally to enable the foreign policy aspirations as a supplemented tool in the country's foreign policy with its unique core characteristics of speed, height and reach.

The SLAF has abetting country's economic growth by generating foreign revenue through United Nation's Peace Keeping Operations (UNPKO) since 2014. According to SLAF annual report 2018, UNPKO have been yielding substantial amount of foreign revenue USD 10.3 million, which accounted for 0.0125% from the GDP.

Besides, SLAF has outstretched its capabilities in support of country's foreign policy in the recent past even though it has not been methodically imbedded in the foreign policy of the country along with the air strategy. Namely, SLAF conducted Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) operations twice to assist Nepal government during earthquake in 2015, carried essential needs to Pakistan during flood and earthquake 2010/15, Male water purification crisis in 2014 and resupply missions to African continent in 2016 to sustainment of SLAF's aviation contingents were few of the notable missions conducted in the recent past. However, it is pertinent to state that the SLAF has not been able to extended its fullest support to the country's foreign policy mainly due to capability/capacity constraints. The prevailing gap between foreign policy execution and air diplomacy needs to be bridged whilst air diplomacy being employed as a tool of country's foreign policy.

A. Significance of the Study

The study will certainly add knowledge to the existing literature and will abet to bridge the gap between foreign policy aspirations and employment of air diplomacy. Further, this study would significantly develop an air diplomacy policy framework for future air strategy of the SLAF in par with the dynamics of the air power while probably the first kind of study in the SLAF and Sri Lanka.

B. Problem Statement

Foreign policy of a country is the tool which links its national interests with other state and non-state actors (Wijetunge, 2020). Meantime, air power is the tool that is readily available option for government to use irrespective in peace or war time (IAF, 2012).

It is evident that Sri Lanka's foreign policy has been invariably abetted to strengthen the SLAF's potential throughout its history of 70 years. However, insights have not been given prominently to augment the foreign policy through effective air diplomacy which opted the researchers to study the observed phenomenon.

Although, air diplomacy has been employed by many Air Forces in the region in support of respective governments' foreign policies whereas Sri Lanka does not practice or conjectured in a well-thought-out manner. The IAF has outstretched its contribution during the pandemic by airlifting tons of oxygen from all over the world which could be fitted into Covid diplomacy and health diplomacy. However, it has been noted that in the recent past, particularly post conflict era has seen SLAF's capabilities have been stagnated and inflicting a critical gap between its aspirations and available resources. In turn SLAF's presences had been critically hampered during the pandemic, to support government's foreign policy whereas the national carrier stood in the quest of the same. Particularly, during repatriating thousands of nationals from all over the world.

According to Wijetunge (2020), the significance of the Indian Ocean (IO) has felt ever than before and power rivalry continues to expand over the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) between global powers (China, USA, India, Japan and Australia). China's BRI and US Indo-Pacific strategy along with the Quad have implicated such rivalry and same have severely effected on regional stability as well. In this backdrop, air diplomacy could act to endorse regional stability through cooperation, confidence building and working on a common doctrine between Air Forces, intensely in the new normalcy.

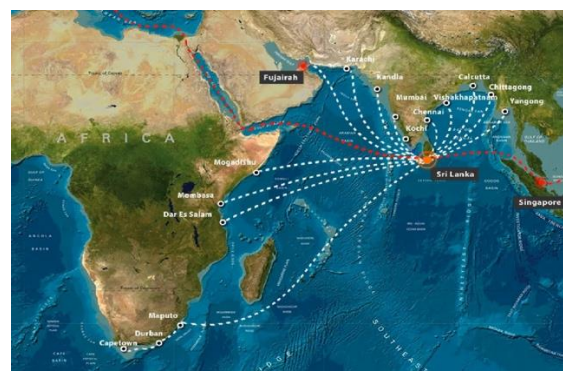


Figure 2. Sri Lanka's geo-strategic location in the IOR

Source: www.lankamarine.com

It is to be noted that the term air diplomacy is relatively novel to the SLAF personnel even though it has been exercised on and off. Thus, it is noted that affinity of air diplomacy not being inculcated among Air Force Officers has resulted in lack of research on the subject by SLAF Officers. Hence, SLAF personnel have not properly understood the broad concept of air diplomacy, as most of middle grade Officers do believe only air operations can be exercised within the spectrum of air diplomacy. Therefore, it is prudent to identify other components fall within air diplomacy umbrella. According to Cooke (2021), underscored five areas to ponder in an air diplomacy policy such as bilateral engagement, multilateral engagement, research and training, diplomacy dialogue and Air Chief's conclave. Thus, it is essential to identify relevant aspects of air diplomacy which could generate opportunities and benefits to the foreign policy as well as the SLAF.

Therefore, if the gap could able to be filled between foreign policy aspirations and application of air diplomacy, certainly it would yield new opportunities to the country, foreign policy and bolster SLAF's potential. Hence, it's imperative to formulate such a foreign policy embedded with air diplomacy in order to open new windows in support of government's policy framework.

C. *Aim of the Study*

To develop an air diplomacy framework to be incorporated into SLAF's air strategy in order to bolster country's foreign policy and SLAF's potential in a new normal epoch.

D. *Objectives*

- i. To ascertain foreign policy aspirations that could be supported by air diplomacy.
- ii. To identify the roles that SLAF could execute within the spectrum of air diplomacy.
- iii. To explore the benefits that could be generated through air diplomacy towards Sri Lanka, and SLAF.
- iv. To identify ways, means and ends to implement an air diplomacy framework in line with SLAF's air strategy and the foreign policy.

II. Literature Review

This segment encompassed theoretical studies, books, newspaper articles, internet articles, air power doctrines of regional/global Air Forces and

journal articles in respect of the field of study. Further, same has schematically organized in accordance with study objectives.

A. *Air Diplomacy and its Correlation with Foreign Policy*

General Charles De Gaulle (1960), underpinned the link between diplomacy and employment of military while underscoring Armed Forces' role in foreign policy. He emphasised military's role to support country's foreign policy. In par with these lines Lespinois (2012), had defined air diplomacy as use of air assets to support foreign policy. Meantime, Lowther (2010), penned air diplomacy as a proactive approach to prevent conflict by use of air power in non-kinetic operations as an instrument of national power. IAF Air Power Doctrine (2012), rationalised military power's applicability in diplomacy to converse both intent and credibility during negotiations whereas remained as a critical enabler. Thus, researchers learned that air diplomacy as an integral component in a state's foreign policy whereas could be employed as an instrument of national power as well. However, researchers argued that the extent which air diplomacy could be extended by an Air Force is proportionate to its capabilities and capacities.

B. *Foreign Policy Aspirations and Air Diplomacy*

President Rajapaksa (2019), underpinned the paramount importance of national security and considered as the pinnacle of his policy framework. Cooke (2019), underpinned necessity of security remains critical as protecting of air/maritime boundaries from external interferences are core in this regard. Thus, researchers have understood that current government has given top priority to the national security as it constitutes pillar of national stability and growth in 'Vista of Prosperity and Splendour'. Hence, it is to be noted that invariably the SLAF has a pivotal role in this regard. Therefore, SLAF requires to be maintained its operational readiness constantly and same has identified as a core competency of the organisation as well. However, researches argued that SLAF needs to build capabilities and capacities in view of achieving such object.

President Rajapaksa during his sworn in ceremony (2019) and state visit to India has signified India first policy on strategic and security affairs which underlined Sri Lanka will not be a security concern to India. According to Vista of Prosperity and Splendour

(2019), Sri Lanka aims to work closely with India, SAARC and BIMSTEC nations towards regional security. Cooke (2018), underscored air diplomacy policy as an integral component in country's foreign policy which would yield basis to enhance Sri Lanka's interconnectedness with principally regional and strategic players. Thus, researches have explored that air diplomacy could be employed in quest of government's interest on strengthening ties in the region towards stability and cooperation.

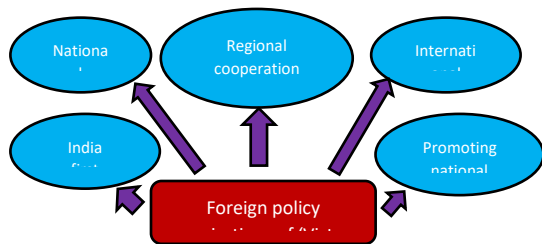


Figure 3. Sri Lanka's salient foreign policy aspirations

Source: Vista of prosperity and splendour (2019)

C. Application of Air Power in Air Diplomacy

Poss (1994), argued that air diplomacy eternally has several gains compared to Naval and Army diplomacy due to air power's core characteristics of speed, reach and height. Owing to this Lowther (2010), underpinned the roles that USAF can play in the spectrum of air diplomacy such as public, humanitarian, military, commercial, traditional, preventive, coercive and deterrence.

BAF (2014), has elucidated three distinct roles in air power's peace time application whereas disaster relief and promoting IR has given more prominence. IAF (2012), has underpinned the importance of assisting foreign friendly governments in disaster situations where air power's speed and reach permitting government to outstretched its goodwill swiftly. Followings can be underpinned as significant air roles which abetted to augment foreign policies of respective governments.

i. BAF took part in post-earthquake operations to India in 2001 and Pakistan in 2001 and 2005.



ii. BAF and IAF both conducted HADR operations in post-Tsunami 2004 to affected countries in the region.

iii. IAF delivered aid and supplies to USA during Katrina Hurricane in 2005.

iv. IAF launched 'Operation Cactus' in support of Maldives government to ensure not been overthrown.

v. IAF airlifted Covidshield vaccines to Mauritius and Seychelles in 2021.

Correspondingly SLAF (2018), underscored its extensive support had been yielded to friendly nations during disaster situations.

i. Airlifted relief and supplies to Pakistan during flood and earthquake respectively in 2010 and 2015.

ii. Airlifted rescue and relief contingents to assist earthquake hit Nepal in 2015.

iii. Assist Maldives during water purification crisis in 2014



Figure 4. SLAF's No 2 Squadron airlifted medical contingent to assist Nepal's earthquake victims

Source: www.airforce.lk (2015)

Thus, researchers have explored that assisting foreign friendly governments at the need of hour in disaster situations more prominent among Air Forces which reflect government's goodwill towards

those affected nations. Hence, researches opined such operations form an integral part within the spectrum of air diplomacy to strengthen state's foreign policy ties. However, researchers argue that strategic reach of SLAF needs to be boosted in this regard despite possessing the regional reach.

D. Covid Diplomacy and Air Power

| INDIAN AIR FORCE FIGHT AGAINST COVID 19 (Till 0800hrs, 09 May) | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|---|----------------------|
| INTERNATIONAL | | DOMESTIC | |
| O ₂ CONTAINER AIRLIFT | MED EQPT + PERSONNEL | O ₂ TANKER AIRLIFT | MED EQPT + PERSONNEL |
| Sorties | | | |
| 54 | 16 | 435 | 66 |
| Flying Hours | | | |
| ~ 242 | ~ 82 | ~ 629 | ~ 114 |
| Total Load (T) | | | |
| 619 T | 134 T | 5419 T | 145 T |
| Total Air Miles (Nautical Mile) | | | |
| 101537 NM | 36360 NM | 272004 NM | 39199 NM |
| No of Containers / Tankers | | | |
| 77 | | 316 | |
| Countries | | | |
| Australia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, UAE, Israel, France, Germany, UK & Belgium | | | |
| Total Flying Hours | Total Number of Sorties | Total O₂ Tankers + Containers | Total Load(T) |
| ~ 1067 | 571 | 316 + 77 | 6317 |
| | | Total Air Miles (NM) | 449100 |

Vidanage (2020), signified that Covid diplomacy becomes increasingly popular among states as the global pandemic badly hit the world. Recently concluded G 7 summit signified that G 7 leaders are eager to assist developing countries for recovering from the Covid 19 through providing vaccines and other medical apparatus (G7UK, 2021). Bhalla (2021), stressed IAF's role during the Covid 19 in quest of government's needs by airlifting tons of Oxygen from all over the world to Delhi during their recent Oxygen crisis and extending great support to friendly nations during the pandemic by delivering vaccines and other medical necessities symbolising the Indian government's vaccine diplomacy.

Thus, researchers explored that necessity of integrating air power in quest of Covid diplomacy which being highly applicable to the Sri Lankan context as well. The SLAF could outstretched to assist government's foreign policy aspirations in relation to Covid 19. However, it is to be noted that SLAF's capabilities have to be critically analysed in this regard. Researchers have identified No 2 Heavy Transport Squadron's role is vital for the same along with arrival of overhauled Yankees



Figure 6. IAF's transport fleet supporting the fight against Covid 19

Source: IAF (2021)

E. United Nation's Peace Keeping Operations (UNPKO)

BAF (2014), rationalised BAF's contribution towards preservation of international peace through participating in UNPKO over the last few decades. SLAF (2018), underscored SLAF's participation in UNPKO in South Sudan and Central African Republic invariably act as an augmenting tool to strengthen ties between Sri Lanka and the UN. SLAF Annual report 2018, underscored that SLAF's Mi 17 Aviation Contingents have generated foreign revenue of USD 10 millions in year 2017. However, recently SLAF (2021), announced cease of its operations in South Sudan w.e.f. June 2021 upon completion of ongoing mission's tenure. Thus, researchers have understood that take part in UNPKO by SLAF being benefitted to the country in two facets. First, generating foreign revenue and secondly enhancing ties with the UN. Employment of UN Staff Officers (UNSOs) also is pivotal in this regard since they do help to enhance the ties with the UN while generating foreign revenue. Therefore, authors explored that SLAF should be endeavoured to increase no of UNPKO as well as UNSOs appointments whereas SLAF alone cannot be afforded. This endeavour demands government's involvement through an effective diplomacy with the strategic and operational levels of the UN hierarchy.



Figure 7. SLAF Aviation contingents in Central African Republic and South Sudan

Source: SLAF Basic Doctrine (2018)

F. Promoting National Pride



Figure 8. SLAF Blue Eagles aerobatic team

Source: www.airforce.lk (2018)

According to IAF (2012), promote national integration and national pride are an essence in a multi-ethnic state. Further, participation in air exercises regionally and globally would strengthen mutual cooperation whilst augmenting the national pride in the international forums. IAF's aerobatic/diplay teams regular participations in aerial displays in foreign skies underscored the trans-continental diplomacy. This was more notable during SLAF's 70th anniversary flypast in Colombo 2021.



Figure 9. IAF's Suryakirans over Colombo skies 2021

Source: www.airforce.lk (2021)

Lowther (2010), also underpinned USAF's trans-continental diplomacy where USAF take part in numerous air exercises with allied nations. SLAF (2018), penned necessity of take part in air exercises and hosting such exercises among regional Air Forces. Further, it stressed such involvement would increase cooperation, build partnerships among Air Forces. Thus, researchers have explored that SLAF too has to be given more insights in this regard, where SLAF could promote the national pride in such forums. Albeit, it is deemed necessary to boost SLAF's capabilities in view of such roles. i.e. Blue Eagles aerobatic team's capabilities/capacities. However, foreign Air Forces' air displays in Colombo

skies have implicated political paradox in the country where opposition political parties had been opposed such efforts through wrong interpretations to gain political advantages. Therefore, SLAF needs to have a consensus approach between politico-air leadership to alleviate critical political aspects while propagating the right image to the population.

G. Bolstering the Conceptual Component of SLAF

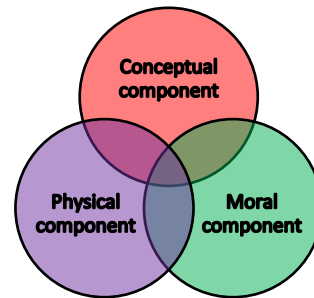


Figure 10. Components of fighting power

Source: British Army Doctrine Publication (ADP)- Operations (2010)

According to ADP (2010), conceptual component constitutes an integral fragment in fighting power which illustrates knowledge, understanding and application of doctrine to fight. Thus, professional military education (PME) is essential to bolster the conceptual component. Cooke (2021), penned necessity of yielding foreign staff courses to SLAF Officers, other technology know-how programmes in turn giving opportunities to the global/regional Air Officers to undergo local military/air educational programmes, which would enhance interaction between Air Forces. Thus, researchers underscored that air diplomacy could be abetted to obtain foreign PME opportunities to SLAF Officers where the regional interaction and confidence building would be enhanced. Further, invariably this would be abetted to strengthen foreign relations while enhancing the regional stability in a post pandemic era as well.

H. Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Engagements

British Air and Space Power Doctrine (AP-3000,2009), has enunciated application of kinetic and non-kinetic air power roles within the spectrum of conflict as well as in peace time. Authors have noted that kinetic air power roles invariably imbedded with attack, bombing and other air operations while non-kinetic air power roles

have opposed to kinetic activities. However, Lowther (2010), has rationalised air diplomacy as a proactive approach to prevent conflict through use of air power in the form of non-kinetic operations. Therefore, researches have explored that air diplomacy roles have fallen within the spectrum of non-kinetic air power. However, researches have recognised that, within these non-kinetic operations, two tiers of engagements could be underpinned. Thus, engagements which aircraft being employed and aircraft not being employed, where the researchers have presented as kinetic engagements and non-kinetic engagements in the spectrum of air diplomacy.

III. METHODOLOGY

This segment has discussed the methodology of the study and aided to derive the conceptual framework from the theoretical framework developed through literature review. The operationalisation of the derived conceptual framework discussed subsequently. The qualitative study has used thematic analysis as the tool of analysis. Further, the research design of the study as follows.

Research Approach- Inductive approach has been used in the study in order to find solutions to the observed phenomenon.

Research Choice- The study accustomed as a qualitative exploratory study.

Research Philosophy- Researchers have used interpretivism as the study philosophy in order to interpret reasons and meanings to the observed phenomenon.

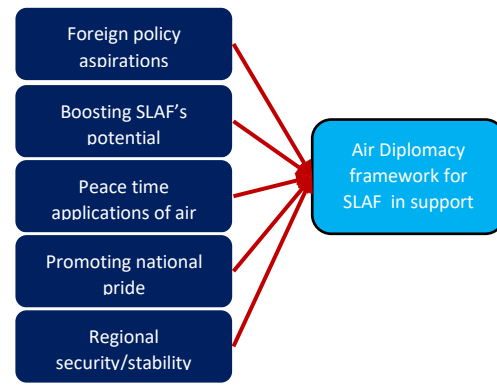
Research Strategy- The study encompassed grounded theory strategy to develop an air diplomacy framework for SLAF's air strategy.

Time Horizon- Cross-sectional time horizon employed.

Technique and Procedure- Data collection and analysis are the technique and procedure of the study.

A. Conceptualization

The conceptual framework of the study has illustrated, what the researchers expect to explore through this study. Following conceptual framework has been developed in line with the four exploratory research objectives which aims to work as the blueprint of the study.



Independent Variables

Dependent Variable

Figure 11. Conceptual framework

Source: Author (2021)

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study determined to ascertain knowledge in relation to the prevailing gap between Sri Lanka's foreign policy aspirations and air diplomacy. Subsequently to reshape SLAF's air strategy by developing an air diplomacy framework. Thus, researchers have depicted the findings in line with the study objectives.

A. Foreign policy Aspirations of the Government that could be supported by the Air Diplomacy

Current government's foreign policy basis on President's election manifesto -2019 'Vista of Prosperity and Splendour'. According to the respondents, researchers have noted following imperatives which could be supported by air diplomacy.

- National security
- Regional cooperation/stability
- International interaction
- Promoting national pride
- Covid diplomacy

i. **National security** termed as the top priority of the current government. Air power invariably remains pivotal in national security. Albeit, authors explored according to the respondents air diplomacy could be outstretched to boost maritime security which constitutes predominant segment in national security. As the nation endeavours to thrive as a maritime hub in the IOR, maritime security should be bolstered by the two main stake holders, SLN and SLAF. It was found that maritime surveillance, maritime air defence (MAD), maritime search and rescue (MSAR) and collective information sphere are

the salient areas that SLAF could exploit air diplomacy. Sri Lanka's seaspace is nearly 27 times bigger than her land mass. Thus, identifying critical capability gaps to counter transnational crimes within own seas (i.e. human trafficking, drug trafficking, sea piracy etc.), secure sea line of communications (SLOCs) and facilitate MSAR services within the AOR is necessary. Therefore, researchers underpinned that air diplomacy would be a great catalyst in this regard where the regional Air Forces could be extended air partnerships in view of establishing collective information sphere to secure such common maritime interests within the IOR. Thus, researchers have derived following model while correlating the air power roles and maritime security which could be imbedded with air diplomacy.

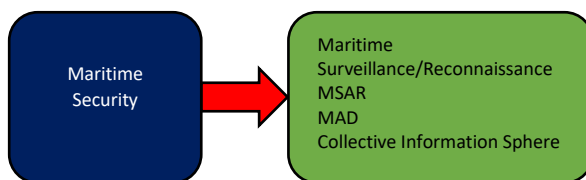


Figure 12. Maritime-air collaboration for maritime security

Source: Author (2021)

ii. **Regional Cooperation/Stability** is a vital area that the government aims to work closely with India and other regional organisations such as SAARC, BIMSTEC in quest of regional security. Thus, authors opined that maritime security posed an integral part in relation to the regional security as well. However, it was explored that regional Air Forces yet to implement such mechanism in view of regional security despite having dedicated organisation like Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). It is prudent to have a military cooperation approach imbedded with air diplomacy in these regional forums to promote regional cooperation/security. Cooke (2021), underpinned importance of conducting Air Chief's Conclaves to strengthen the regional cooperation aided by air diplomacy. Although, a novel notion to SLAF, it is already practicing by several regions such as ASEAN Air chief's conference (AACC), African air chief's symposium (AASC), System of Cooperation among the American Air Forces (SICOFA) etc. Thus, researchers opined that SLAF could take initiative to host such conference aiming on regional cooperation which would unarguably be abetted to boost regional

cooperation with air diplomacy. Further, it was found that Sri Lanka yet to explore air partnerships with foreign friendly Air Forces. Researchers opined that existing regional bilateral partnerships could be explored into the sphere of air partnerships whereas SLAF be benefitted to boost its capabilities and capacities. Thus, researchers have derived following model to boost regional cooperation/stability through the non-kinetic engagements which could be imbedded with air diplomacy. Further, it was understood that such model would immensely benefitted to host/participate combined air/military exercises and sharing of expertise knowledge.

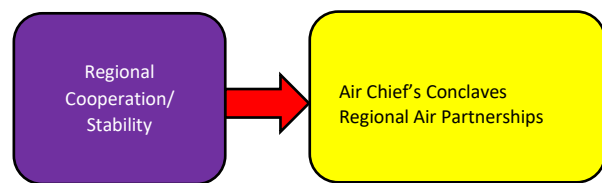


Figure 13. Air diplomacy for regional cooperation/stability

Source: Author (2021)

iii. The government seeks to increase **International Interaction** from a standpoint of equality. The Covid 19 pandemic has curtailed the global connectivity though new windows to be opened to keep alive the global interaction in new normalcy. Authors have identified following kinetic and non-kinetic engagements could be employed to maintain international interaction amidst of the pandemic in view of promoting air diplomacy to strengthen ties.

- HADR- To assist foreign friendly governments in disaster/crisis situations.
- UNPKO- To assist UN to preserve global peace and security.
- Air dialogues- To enhance global cooperation among Air Forces in view of multilateral cooperation.
- PME/Aviation education(Avi-Tech) - To explore newest developments in air power concepts and its related technology.

Further, researchers have recognised SLAF's involvement in UNPKO has a direct relationship with government's economic interests since, it yielding substantial foreign revenue to the national economy. Thus, authors opined to increase SLAF's participation in UNPKO. However, it is to be noted that, vice-versa SLAF needs to avail required

capabilities and capacities in order to meet such demands. Following depiction has illustrated SLAF's contribution towards national economy through UNPKO during 2018-19 period. Further, researchers opined non-tangible benefits generated by the SLAF's UNPKO would predominantly aid to promote country's image and strengthen the ties with the UN.

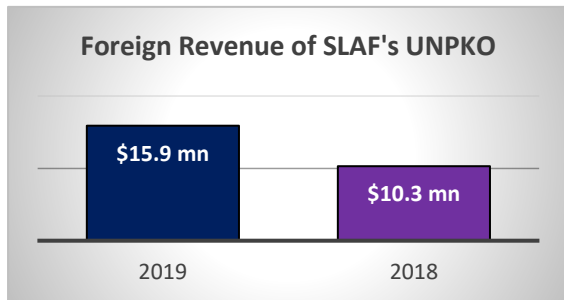


Figure 14. Foreign revenue generated from SLAF's UNPKO

Source: SLAF Annual Performance Reports (2018 & 2019)

Moreover, authors opined that increase the no of UNSOs also would be benefitted in two forms such as bolstering ties with the UN and generating foreign revenue. Hence, researchers have developed following theoretical model to enhance international interaction through the kinetic/non-kinetic engagements which could be catalysed with air diplomacy.

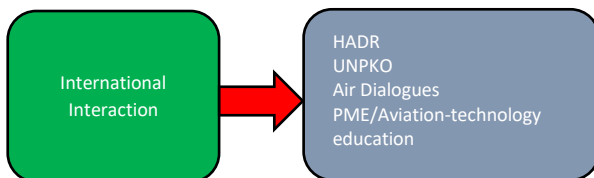


Figure 15. Air diplomacy for international interaction

Source: Author (2021)

iv. **Promoting National Pride** identified as a key pillar in current government's foreign policy. It was found that numerous Air Forces have been employing air power to promote national pride in national and international forums. The SLAF could invariably share its experiences in relation to application of air power in counter insurgency operations (COIN) as the only succeeded Air Force in the COIN context. The SLAF would be inculcated these unique expertise knowledge in foreign PME programmes. SLAF's presence in global/regional air displays could be underscored as another way of

promoting the national pride, particularly in the regional forums. The SLAF aerobatics team 'Blue Eagles' capabilities/capacities have to be augmented in view of endeavoring such afford. Wahid (2021), underpinned IAF's Suryakirans role in this regard which being the premier aerobatics team in the region. Further, it was revealed that SLAF could extend its presence in regional air exercises by employing own air power assets and experience pilots, and SLAF could host such air exercises with involvement of regional/global Air Forces which would be immensely benefitted to the SLAF's pilots and other operational crew to have such exposure in post conflict era. Thus, researchers learnt that the air diplomacy framework would generate positive impact in view of promoting national pride in global/regional forums.

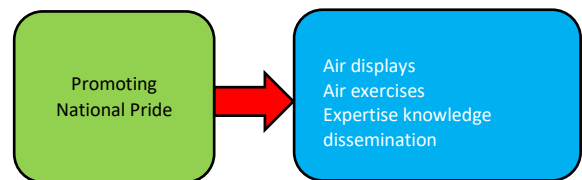


Figure 16. Air diplomacy to promote national pride

Source: Author (2021)

v. **Covid Diplomacy** increasing as the pandemic on the verge of critical level. Country's foreign policy executioners along with health officials endeavoring all efforts to acquisition of required quantum of vaccines and medical apparatus. Wahid (2021), underscored IAF's role being played in this regard with object to support India's foreign policy imperatives at the need of hour. Thus, authors opined that SLAF could be a responsible stakeholder in view of Covid diplomacy being a supportive element to the foreign policy in view of air transportation of required medical assistance. Further, it was underpinned by the respondents that expats who live beyond seashores have been severely affected due to the pandemic. Thus, air diplomacy could be outstretched by the SLAF to repatriate those expats when needed. Hence, airlift operations would be employed by the SLAF with available limited resources. Further, these type of operations invariably symbolised the SLAF's presence in the new normalcy and constant readiness to undertake such national requirements.

A. Constraints, Challenges, Opportunities and Way Forward

The study has identified following constraints in view of implementing an air diplomacy framework in respect of the SLAF.

i. Capabilities/Capacities, the existing fleet is necessary to modernise in accordance with the preceding objectives. Thus, it is imperative to augment surveillance capabilities considering the strategic depth of the maritime domain while enhancing the strategic airlift capabilities to conduct trans-continental flights. Further, it is deemed necessary to develop/transform the 'Blue Eagles' into a robust aerobatic team since present platforms constitute concerns with its reach despite attractive performances.

ii. Financial constraints, are most common pitfall that small Air Forces experiencing in contemporary world. Prevailing pandemic has further deepened fiscal constraints as the country's economy has been severely contracted by -3% according to the President Rajapaksa (2021). Thus, acquisition of new platforms at this critical juncture would implicate socio-political criticisms against the government as well as the SLAF. Thus, in turn the government would loss popular support while creating a political gain on opponents. Hence, perception management of the public and effective communication of politico-air intents to the public is essential. Albeit, SLAF should schematically project acquisition/modernisation of platforms while prioritising the requirements into a timeline. Further, management of socio-political implications is vital whilst circumventing loss of popular support.

iii. According to the respondents, researchers have identified the IOR power rivalry is the principal challenge before Sri Lanka. Emerging power competition between the Quad and China's BRI has constituted a significant impact on geopolitical sphere concerning to Sri Lanka, despite the country adapting a neutral foreign policy. Moreover, this has serious implications on acquisition of new platforms and technological advancements for developing economies since, the aviation technology within the purview of few developed economies. Particularly the Western technology whereas the Government needs to extend balanced foreign relations. Kainikara (2019), all small Air Forces are rely on external assistance to maintain its technical sophistication and efficacy. However, researchers opined that effective foreign policy execution would ease the circumstances and open new windows. Further, it is pertinent to reveal that SLAF should

start focusing on indigenous industry outlay in view of sustenance in long term.

iv. Sri Lanka's geo-strategic location remains pivotal as the Island located equidistant from the African and Australian continents. Present Commander of the Air Force then Director Air Operations Air Marshal Sudarshana Pathirana underscored Mattala airport as the ideal location to establish 'Combined Air Task Force Hub' in Colombo Air Symposium 2018. Researchers also opined that Jaffna, Trincomalle, Hambanthota and Katunayake too equally significant since all geographic locations could act as connectivity hubs considering the air/land/sea connectivity, strategic importance and depth. Further, researchers opined to establish a regional MSAR centre in Sri Lanka considering the extensive maritime domain and congested sea traffic within the region. It is to be underscored that domestic political consensus approach also highly essential prior to establish such military partnerships. Else wrong socio-political manipulations could be propagated in view of attaining a political compensations.

v. Therefore, authors opined that considering the preceding facts is highly essential to develop an air diplomacy framework. Former US state secretary Henry Kissinger (2020), underpinned that the world order will not be the same in a post pandemic epoch. This implicated the balance of power would be shifted in a post pandemic era whereas Sri Lanka needs to appreciate its pros and cons and to exploit such paradigm shift in favour of the country's future aspirations. Thus, authors foresee the necessity of an comprehensive air diplomacy policy framework imbedded into the SLAF's air strategy with object to achieving SLAF's vision 2025 as well.

B. Air Diplomacy Framework for SLAF in Support of Foreign Policy

Researchers have scematically developed the air diplomacy framework based on the conceptual framwework. Researchers have identified the current government's salient foreign policy aspirations and the imperatives which could be supplemented by the employment of air power. Moreover, researchers have explored and underpinned that two tiers of engagements within the spectrum of air diplomacy where the SLAF could be engaged. First, kinetic engagements, where the aircraft operations being employed while non-kinetic engagements where the aircraft are not being employed. Hence, researchers opined that defined air diplomacy framework could be incorporated into

the air strategy of the SLAF which would support the government's foreign policy imperatives. Further, it would aid to enhance the regional cooperation/stability while bolstering the SLAF's capabilities/capacities.

INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

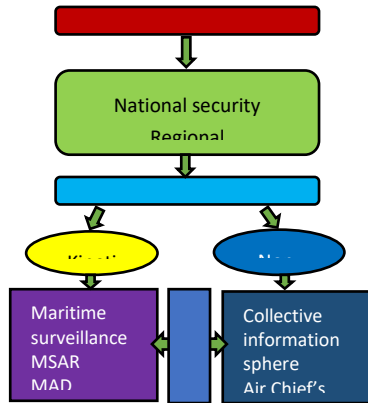


Figure 17. Air diplomacy framework for SLAF

Source: Author (2021)

V. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In a densely globalised world exerting soft power increasingly become a viable option in the statecraft in order to furtherance of national objectives. Thus, diplomacy has emerged as the first option for both power projection and conflict resolution. It was identified that air power's core characteristics of speed, reach and height allow to be employed in discern situations to exert state's soft power through the air diplomacy. However, it was noted that the notion of air diplomacy is still being a novel to the SLAF which demands extensive study and comprehend about its implications.

Authors, subsequent to the extensive study and discussion following recommendations have made in accordance with the study objectives and findings.

A. *To establish air partnerships with regional air forces with object to yield effective maritime security mechanism in the IOR.*

The necessity of a common maritime security mechanism to protect maritime interests of countries within the IOR has emerged due to the hike in transnational crimes such as drug trafficking, human trafficking etc. Further, these partnerships should be encompassed a collective endeavour to yield maritime surveillance, MSAR, and MAD.

B. *To establish a regional combined MSAR centre in Sri Lanka to facilitate MSAR services to aircraft/ships in distress condition within the IOR.*

Considering the geo-strategic location of Sri Lanka and the strategic depth, the Island ideally suits to establish a regional MSAR centre through collaboration with regional Air and Naval Forces. Considering the connectivity identified locations for such coined centre are, Hambanthota, Trincomalee, Jaffna and Katunayake. Although, considering the depth, reach and proximity to the vast maritime domain, Hambanthota could be underpinned as the ideal location.

C. *To increase no of UNPKO to SLAF in view of generating substantial foreign revenue, strengthening ties with the UN and to promote country's image in global forums.*

SLAF's aviation contingents have already yielding a substantial foreign revenue to the national economy and increase the no of contingents and UNSO appointments, would be boosted the foreign revenue share by the SLAF. However, viability study needs to be done on required human and physical resources in view of meeting such demands.

D. *To establish a collective information sphere among regional Air Forces with object to alleviate transnational crimes and maritime related disasters.*

Common information sharing mechanism among regional Air Forces within the IOR and adjacent seas is essential in order to take swift and prompt actions in order to circumvent such activities like transnational crimes. Absence of such mechanism in present context invariably curtailing swift participation of the Air Forces into the situation.

E. *To augment capabilities and capacities of SLAF air power in view of maritime security, Covid diplomacy and participation in air displays/exercises.*

Acquisition of new platforms very much debatable at this critical juncture as the country's economy has been already contracted by -3% due to the pandemic and same would likely to inflict socio-political implications in the country as well. Albeit, SLAF needs to appreciate required quantum and type of platforms in view of aerial diplomacy. Thus, researchers opined that acquisition plan in line with aerial diplomacy objectives to be articulated with object to acquire within a stipulated timeline.

F. *To host Air Chief's Conclave among regional/global Air Forces whom have common*

interest in the region in view of confidence building, mutual cooperation, regional cooperation/stability.

This would allow SLAF to share a common forum with the participation of foreign Air Commanders in view of laying the foundation to articulate and implement an air diplomacy policy. Further, annual conferences would see the progress of given directives and end results. Particularly to bridge the existing gaps in the maritime security domain.

G. To disseminate SLAF's expertise know-how in relation to application of air power in the COIN context in global/regional air forums and enhance PME/Avi-tech education programmes with foreign friendly Air Forces.

The knowledge sphere in military or aviation field is deemed necessary to keep Airmen's cognition and conceptual ability at a higher level. Thus, enhance the conceptual component of Air Forces invariably high demanded task in the modern day. Dissemination SLAF's know-how in foreign air forums vice-versa would generate opportunities to augment SLAF's conceptual component. Further, availing of foreign PME/Avi-tech education programmes for its human capital through air diplomacy also could be underscored.

H. To induct a consensus political approach between the government and oppositions prior to establish air partnerships and exploit country's strategic assets for air diplomacy in order to circumvent unnecessary socio-political manipulations.

A consensus approach is deemed necessary to circumvent socio-political implications against intended air diplomacy aspirations. The current socio-political environment saw numerous manipulations and adverse implications on political stability due to absence of an agreed approach between the government and oppositions. Further, effective communication is essential to convey right politico-air intents and its benefits to the public accurately while projecting right image of the SLAF.

V. CONCLUSION

Advent of air power created a significant impact on warfare and aviation industry which abetted to increase connectivity between regions/continents, due to its unique ability to operate swiftly in the third dimension. Lindburg's transatlantic flight in 1920s symbolised the emergence of then novel concept of air diplomacy. This study endeavoured to conceptualise an air diplomacy framework which

could be incorporated into the air strategy while enhancing the country's foreign policy and boosting the SLAF's potential.

Air diplomacy policy as an integral component in country's foreign policy would yield basis to enhance Sri Lanka's interconnectedness with principally regional and strategic players. The study has identified that air diplomacy could be employed in quest of government's salient foreign policy aspirations in two spheres of kinetic and non-kinetic engagements in the new normalcy. National security, international interaction, regional cooperation/stability, promoting national pride and the Covid diplomacy have been underpinned as salient foreign policy imperatives which air diplomacy could be imbedded. Eventually, the researchers underpinned that an effective air diplomacy framework would be integrated into the air strategy to bolster the SLAF's capabilities/capacities and enhance the foreign policy while extending air power in quest of government's foreign policy aspirations.

REFERENCES

- Bhalla, A., 2021. *IAF pressed into action for Covid management: Oxygen, equipment, medical personnel airlifted to Delhi.* [online] India Today. Available at: <<https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/iaf-pressed-into-action-for-covid-management-oxygen-equipment-medical-personnel-airlifted-to-delhi-1793627-2021-04-21>> [Accessed 18 May 2021].
- British Army, 2010. *Army Doctrine Publications - Operations.* 3rd ed. Shrivenham: Royal Army, pp.2-3 to 2-5.
- Colombage, D., 2020. *Foreign policy of Sri Lanka.*
- Cooke, G., 2018. *Strategising Sri Lanka's foreign policy: The scope of air diplomacy | Daily FT.* [online] Ft.lk. Available at: <<https://www.ft.lk/opinion/Strategising-Sri-Lanka-s-foreign-policy--The-scope-of-air-diplomacy/14-666439>> [Accessed 24 March 2021].
- Cooke, G., 2021. *An Air Diplomacy Policy for Sri Lanka.* *Daily FT*, [online] Available at: <<http://An-Air-Diplomacy-Policy-for-Sri-Lanka-Daily-FT-Columns>> An-Air-Diplomacy-Policy-for-Sri Lanka> [Accessed 4 March 2021].
- BAF, 2014. *BAF's Basic Doctrine.* 1st ed. Dhaka: AFHQ, pp.5-7.
- Gaulle, C., 1960. *Memoires de guerre. T. III: Le salut (1944-1946).* *Population (French Edition)*, 15(3), p.565.
- Fernando, A., 2021. *Air forces explore neighbourhood security mechanisms.* [online] The Sunday Times Sri Lanka. Available at: <<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/181028/news/air-forces->

explore-neighbourhood-security-mechanisms-317702.html> [Accessed 24 March 2021].

2012. *IAF Basic Air Power Doctrine*. 12th ed. New Delhi: IAF HQ, pp.117-124.

Kainikara, S., 2019. *At the critical juncture*. 2nd ed. Canberra: APDC, pp.76-82.

Lespinois, J., 2012. What Is Air Diplomacy?. *ASPJ Africa & Francophonie*, 4(3), pp.67-77.

Lissitzyn, O., 1940. *The Diplomacy of Air Transport*. [online] JSTOR. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20029053>> [Accessed 24 April 2021].

Lowther, A., 2010. Air Diplomacy: Protecting American National Interests. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, [online] 4(3), pp.2-14. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26269785>> [Accessed 5 May 2021], pp.2-14.

Morgenthau, H., 1946. Diplomacy. *The Yale Law Journal*, [online] 55(5), p.1067. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/792754?seq=1>> [Accessed 2 May 2021].

Poss, J., 2014. *Air Power: The Gunboat Diplomacy?'*. [online] dtic.mil. Available at: <<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA279474.pdf>> [Accessed 18 May 2021].

Promises in "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour" policy statement will be honoured- President assures in Kurunegala - Presidential Secretariat of Sri Lanka. [online] Presidentsoffice.gov.lk. Available at: <<https://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/index.php/2020/07/27/promises-in-vistas-of-prosperity-and-splendour-policy-statement-will-be-honoured-president-assures-in-kurunegala/>> [Accessed 18 April 2021].

RAF, AP-3000., 2009. *British Air and Space Doctrine*. 4th ed. Swindon: RAF, pp.30-31.

Rajapaksa, G., 2021. *The future of Asia*.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A., 2018. *Research Methods for Business Students eBook*. 8th ed. Harlow: Pearson Australia Pty Ltd.

Sekaran, U. and Bougie, R., 2016. *RESEARCH METHODS FOR BUSINESS*. New York: Wiley, pp.240-42,245-47,256-60.

SLAF, 2018. *SLAF's Basic Doctrine*. 1st ed. Colombo: AFHQ, pp.179-181.

SLAF, 2018. *Annual Performance Report*. Colombo: SLAF, pp.155-156.

SLAF, 2019. *Annual Performance Report*. Colombo: SLAF, pp.169.

Wijetunge, K., n.d. *Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy Orientation: Towards non-alignment*. Masters. Kotelawala Defence University, pp.14-50.

BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS



Author is a fighter controller presently serving as the Officer Commanding Operations at No 06 Air Defence Radar Squadron of Sri Lanka Air Force Academy. He has followed Defence Services Command and Staff Course at DSCSC Sapugaskanda in 2020 with Masters degree in Defence & Strategic Studies from Kotelawala Defence University. Currently he is reading for a Bachelor's degree in IT at University of Colombo. His research area includes Foreign policy, Air Strategy and Air Diplomacy.



Co-author is a fighter pilot and qualified flying instructor presently serving as Chief Instructor Basic Flying Training at No 01 Flying Training Wing of Sri Lanka Air Force Academy. He has earned his Bachelor's Degree in Management and Technical Sciences from Kotelawala Defence University in 2008 and Masters in Human Resource Management in University of Colombo in 2020. His research area includes Air Strategy, Air Diplomacy and Air Defence.