

# Defence Attachés

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**What is a defence attaché (DA)?**

**What are the origins of the position, and how has it evolved?**

**What are the main roles of the DA today?**

**How do different countries approach the DA position?**

**How have countries gone about reforming the DA system?**

**Where is more information available?**



**Geneva Centre for the  
Democratic Control  
of Armed Forces**

This document is part of the DCAF Backgrounder series, which provides practitioners with concise introductions to a variety of issues in the field of security sector governance and reform.

**What is a defence attaché?**

A defence attaché (DA) is a member of the armed forces who serves in an embassy as a representative of his/her country's defence establishment abroad and in this capacity enjoys diplomatic status and immunity. DA is a generic term that covers personnel from all branches of the armed services, although some larger countries may appoint an attaché to represent an individual service branch, such as an air force or naval attaché.

The DA is usually responsible for all aspects of bilateral military and defence relations. Some countries also deploy attachés to work on other security issues, such as migration or police and justice matters.

Members of a country's armed forces may also serve as part of a military mission to a regional organisation such as NATO, the EU, ECOWAS or the UN. These persons are usually designated "military advisors" or "heads of mission". Such assignments are mainly multilateral in nature, whereas the DA system centres on the bilateral relationship between military establishments. It is on this category that this backgrounder focuses. This backgrounder also looks mainly at Western European approaches to the DA position.

## **The Diplomatic Status of the DA**

The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 18 April 1961 provides immunity to persons according to their rank in a diplomatic mission. It defines the legal status of the DA in article 7:

*Subject to the provisions of articles 5, 8, 9 and 11, the sending State may freely appoint the members of the staff of the mission. In the case of military, naval or air attachés, the receiving State may require their names to be submitted beforehand, for its approval.*

Hence, under the Convention, DAs are considered as members of the diplomatic staff enjoying full immunity.

### What are the origins of the position, and how has it evolved?

The DA emerged during the seventeenth century at the time of the Thirty Years' War when the Duke of Richelieu dispatched military officers abroad to liaise with allied powers, monitor military developments and gather intelligence. In the eighteenth century, the practice of assigning DAs to embassies was initiated. By the nineteenth century, most countries were using DAs, a trend encouraged by the emergence of national defence establishments and the building of colonial empires.

The twentieth century brought dramatic changes in the number and background of DAs. As the century unfolded, the need for attachés was reinforced by the growing number of states, the increasingly complex nature of their weapons systems and the enhanced importance of intelligence gathering. In 1961, the rights and responsibilities of diplomats were codified in the Vienna Convention, and DAs were given the same status.

Changes in the security environment since the end of the Cold War have made the DA's role considerably more challenging and given him/her a key role in national defence diplomacy. In addition to more traditional tasks, the DA may now have to contend with issues as diverse as

- defence reform and security sector reform in democratising countries,
- complex peace support and civil emergency operations, and
- terrorism.

The attaché's range of relationships and task load have broadened accordingly, and the demands on his/her technical expertise and political skills have grown. There is every reason to expect that these trends will continue in the future.

Against this background, many countries are in the process of reviewing their DA systems, rethinking such matters as how the position is managed, how the defence attaché is trained for his/her duties as well as where and how

deployments are made. The challenge is to adjust the defence attaché system to contemporary requirements while at the same time observing budgetary constraints, which can be considerable.

#### Defence Diplomacy

The main feature of defence diplomacy is the combined use of diplomatic and military tools. Defence diplomacy activities include:

- providing military advice and assistance to countries reforming their defence sectors;
- establishing mixed civilian and military missions in conflict and post-conflict theatres;
- developing new arms control, disarmament and security- and confidence-building measures, also mainly in response to the demands of conflict and post-conflict theatres.

Defence Diplomacy emerged in large part owing to the requirements of the countries of the Western Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe, but later came to play an important role in other regions as well.

The UK was an early champion of defence diplomacy, first mentioning the concept in its Strategic Defence Review of 1998 and addressing the role of the attaché in this regard. After the attacks of 11 September 2001, the UK revisited its Strategic Defence Review and developed what it termed the "New Chapter." This highlights the importance of Defence Diplomacy in addressing the causes of conflict and terrorism as well as the benefits deriving from the broad approach that is at its core. Through their role as Defence Diplomats, UK defence attachés are important players in their country's counterterrorism policy.

### What are the main roles of the DA today?

The main roles of the DA are as follows. He/she

- 1) is an advocate for his/her country's military and security interests,
- 2) represents his/her country's military authorities and liaises with those of the host country,

- 3) provides a security-policy and military network capable of operating even in times of troubled or reduced bilateral relations,
- 4) acts as a military and/or security advisor to his/her ambassador and embassy staff,
- 5) observes conditions in the host country with a bearing on security and reports on them to home country authorities,
- 6) oversees and manages activities in the area of military outreach, defence diplomacy and security cooperation, both in bilateral exchanges and through multilateral programmes such as NATO's Partnership for Peace,
- 7) promotes, in some instances, the home country armaments industry and
- 8) may play a role in spearheading emergency response and relief efforts when crises arise.

### How do different countries approach the DA position?

The scope and structure of each country's DA system varies as a function of its security priorities and available resources. A given country embassy may have no attaché, a single DA responsible for all military relations, or several attachés representing different branches of the armed forces. The latter is usually the case of the United States' representation. Its DA system is the largest in the world, with hundreds of attachés operating in 135 embassies. Switzerland, on the other hand, employs a total of 17 attachés that conduct bilateral relations with 72 countries.

*How are DAs selected, supervised and managed in different countries?*

When a DA post opens, recruitment takes place through open recruitment or through the nomination of candidates by their specific branch of service. The military rank of a typical candidate varies by country, ranging from lieutenant colonel or junior colonel to major general. Qualified candidates often possess relevant language skills and country knowledge, but neither is necessarily

a prerequisite for the position. Social competence, professional competence, and intellectual curiosity are highly valued.

After the field of DA candidates has been narrowed, the final phase of selection begins. In Switzerland, the DA is appointed by a selection commission consisting of representatives from eight different government departments. Among these is a representative from the Foreign Ministry, whose input carries significant weight in the final decision. In other countries, such as Austria, France, and the UK, the Foreign Affairs Office wields little or no influence, as the decision lies with the Ministry of Defence. The appointment may also be subject to the approval of Strategic and/or Military Intelligence, joint staff, and/or the relevant ambassador at the embassy where the DA will serve.

Locally, the DA is subordinate to the country's ambassador and fills the second-, third-, or fourth-ranked position. In countries such as Austria, the ambassador may directly assign tasks to the DA. This is not typical, however, as most attachés receive their orders from the Defence Ministry. The attaché reports back to the home country DA office as well as to Military Intelligence at regular intervals. The DA may be recalled at any time if he/she is judged no longer suitable for the position.

*What kind of training do DAs receive?*

DA training generally consists of three main components:

- specialised language training, which ranges from several months to a year. The necessary level of proficiency in the local language depends on the country of deployment, as conducting effective relations with the recipient country's military may require as little as survival-level skills (combined with advanced English) or as much as near-native fluency;
- training relevant to his/her job functions, such as defence and security policy, intelligence, protocol, the structure of the armed forces, arms control, arms export controls and specialized computer training;

- cultural training to acclimatise the DA to the country of assignment; in some countries - France, Switzerland - this can include the spouse and other family members.

After settling into the post, the DA usually has opportunities for further language training. Additional learning opportunities also emerge through periodic meetings with defence staff in the home country and through attendance at yearly defence attaché conferences.

Traditionally, training for DAs tended to be carried out on a strictly national basis. However, some multilateral training programmes have become available in recent years. One example is the annual Defence Attaché Training Module conducted by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. The four-day session brings together DAs from more than twenty countries (more information can be found at [www.gcsp.ch/e/training/Short%20courses/DA%20Module/index.htm](http://www.gcsp.ch/e/training/Short%20courses/DA%20Module/index.htm)).

### The DA's Role in Lebanon during Israel's Military Operations in 2006

In crisis environments or emergency situations, DAs may be directly involved in operational management tasks such as non-combatant evacuation. During the Israeli military campaign of summer 2006, the French DA in Lebanon was the interface between the French Embassy, the authorities of other Western countries, the Lebanese Army and French military staff as he implemented security and evacuation plans for the civilian community. In efforts to locate isolated individuals and bring them to safe gathering points, the attaché exercised direct command over French troops and other assets. He was also in charge of establishing logistical supply points for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the French Embassy in Beirut in coordination with Lebanese staff.

*How long do DAs tend to be deployed?*

A DA's deployment typically lasts three years. As in the case of civilian diplomats, this aims to strike a balance between the need to become

acquainted with the situation on the ground, the need to feed lessons learned back into the system and the need to ensure that the DA does not "go native". While there is the possibility of extensions and second tours, these are not the norm in DA deployment. The position is usually not seen as a career path in itself, but rather as a one-off opportunity in a military career.

### How have countries gone about reforming their DA system?

Two main approaches can be identified. First, there are countries whose DA systems have remained largely unreformed since the end of the Cold War. This includes countries that tend to continue to use the system first and foremost for intelligence-gathering. Second, there are countries whose focus has predominantly been on reviewing and reshaping their DA systems. Most NATO and EU countries are in this category. Some countries, like Austria, have taken a gradualist approach, relying on an ongoing review process; others, like Switzerland, have attempted to overhaul the DA system in one go.

The main shifts that can be identified in the reform efforts of this second group are the following:

- **from bilateral attachés to multilateral military advisors:** some countries have reduced bilateral posts and increased multilateral positions in the regional military missions of the EU, UN, or NATO or at their headquarters, as a great deal of cooperation and information exchange takes place in these contexts. These multilateral officers perform many of the same duties as bilateral DAs, but are flag officers falling under a separate division within the Ministry of Defence;
- **from the developed world to the developing world:** some countries have moved from traditional deployments in neighbouring countries to deployment in countries that have assumed new strategic importance. For example, strong links between the militaries of EU and NATO countries have greatly reduced members' need to exchange bilateral attachés. Western European countries are thus establishing

## Approaches of certain Western European countries to the DA position

	Austria	France	Germany	Switzerland	United Kingdom
<b>Which office(s) appoint(s) the DA?</b>	MoD and General Staff	MoD and Joint Staff	MoD, but accredited by Ministry of Foreign Affairs	A commission representing 8 different governmental departments	Director of Defence Diplomacy (a military officer) and the head of Policy and Defence Relations (PDR) in the MoD (a civilian)
<b>Which office(s) does the DA report to within the MoD?</b>	Chief of Defence, Directorate for Security Policy and Defence, Attaché Division	Deputy Chief of Joint Staff for International Relations and Military Intelligence Agency (DRM)	All reporting goes first through the ambassador, then to other offices	Operational reports go to the Defence Attaché Office; intelligence information goes to the Strategic Intelligence Office	PDR directorate for professional issues; Department of Defence Diplomacy for administrative issues; reports go to the MoD
<b>What is the career situation of an applicant before the first defence attaché deployment?</b>	Lieutenant Colonel to Brigadier General from MoD position or staff position in the higher command structure	Lieutenant Colonel to Major General with Joint Staff experience and/or in-country and intelligence experience	Senior Lieutenant Colonel to Brigadier General	Career officer, or reserve officer employed by the MoD; reserve officer from private industry	No typical background, but officers must be well-rounded and experienced
<b>How long is the DA's deployment?</b>	4 years, with the option of two more; extension if replacement cannot be found or in case of emergency	3 years	3 years	3 years, with an option of a 4th year	Accompanied tours are 3 years while unaccompanied (a small number of countries, such as Iraq) are 1.5 to 2 years; 1-year extensions possible with approval
<b>What kind of education and training does the DA receive?</b>	No standard training programme as of yet; a new course will combine one year of language training with six months of security policy	Language proficiency course; 3-month course on security policy; 1-week course on social protocol for spouses	Language course followed by 5- to 6-month defence attaché course	11 months of pre-deployment training encompassing all aspects of training, including some training for spouses	Standard package for all attachés to familiarise them with security issues; language training ranges from survival skills to specialist level, depending on country of deployment

new DA attaché posts in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia while eliminating posts in neighbouring countries;

- **from bilateral accreditation to multiple accreditation:** some countries have switched from a system of separate attachés stationed in two or three different countries to one in which a single DA conducts bilateral relations with both or all three countries. The attaché is based in one country in the region and travels frequently to the other country or countries of accreditation. Similarly, two or more attachés may be based in one country in order to conduct bilateral relations with six or seven countries in the region. While these approaches make efficient use of scarce resources and can help provide a regional overview, they can limit the DA's country awareness and range of contacts;
- **from in-country deployment to home country base:** a few countries have replaced resident attachés with itinerant attachés that conduct bilateral relations with more than one country. The distinction is that while the resident attachés are based regionally, itinerant DAs operate out of their home countries. The main advantage of this system is cost savings. However, the system entails numerous disadvantages, including a lack of regional awareness and a lack of depth in the network of contacts as well as possible constraints on the DA's availability, as he/she is required to perform additional duties at home;
- **from permanent to temporary:** some countries have moved from permanently stationing DAs in the recipient countries to deploying them on a temporary, as-needed basis when an emergency situation arises. This approach also reduces the attaché's knowledge of local circumstances and personalities, and can severely diminish his/her effectiveness;
- **from "defence attaché" to "security attaché":** parliaments in some countries have requested that the DA position be renamed "security attaché." This may more accurately reflect the broad security-policy approach

of the sending state, but it is impossible for one person to deal with the entire range of security sector issues. Moreover, as a DA's effectiveness correlates directly with his/her ability to establish bilateral military relations with the receiving country, a less-specialised "security attaché" may prove incapable of ensuring quality relations with members of the defence establishment.

The approach to the DA system has traditionally been developed by individual countries, acting in isolation. Bringing together different countries' attachés as well as the officials who manage and train them could offer important benefits. In particular, it could provide a forum for sharing best practices and exploring new ways to tailor the DA's role to contemporary security priorities.

### Where is more information available?

Publications dealing with the DA system are rare. The only full-length study was published in 1959, a Swiss doctoral thesis entitled *Der Militärattaché, seine völker- und landesrechtliche Stellung mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Schweizer Verhältnisse*.

DCAF is preparing a policy paper that will offer a more detailed comparison of the defence attaché systems of Austria, France, Switzerland, Germany, and the UK. This document will be available online at [www.dcaf.ch](http://www.dcaf.ch).

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Material for this Backgrounder has been contributed by representatives of five countries who met in Geneva on 15 May 2007 to discuss their national approaches to the DA position. Katie Meline and Oksana Myshlovska assisted with the preparation of this meeting and have provided editorial assistance with this document. David Law is the editor of the Backgrounder series. Other Backgrounders are available at [www.dcaf.ch/publications/backgrounders](http://www.dcaf.ch/publications/backgrounders)

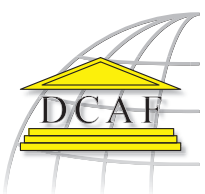
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