

India–Egypt Defence Cooperation

Continuity and Reset

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India–Egypt relations are gaining momentum once again. Back-to-back high-level exchange of bilateral visits in the past few months have set the tone for India and Egypt to strengthen their ties. India’s Defence Minister Rajnath Singh visited Egypt in September 2022 and India’s External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar visited it in October 2022. Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi was the Chief Guest at India’s Republic Day in January 2023.

During President El-Sisi’s visit, both sides agreed to elevate their ties to the level of Strategic Partnership.¹ This elevation in ties covers political, security, defence, energy and economic aspects. India, as it currently holds the G20 presidency, has invited Egypt to participate in the G20 Summit, which will be held in India in September this year.

While the year 2022 marked the completion of 75 years of diplomatic relations between India and Egypt, ties between these two civilisational states are centuries old. According to Indian Ambassador to Egypt Ajit Gupte, relations between India and Egypt go back to the era of King Ashoka and the Pharaohs.² These ancient ties have continued in the modern era as well. India as a country colonised by the British supported independence of other colonies, which included Egypt. Indian leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru expressed their solidarity with Egypt’s independence

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movement. In 1931, while returning from England to India, Mahatma Gandhi's ship docked at Port Said, Suez Canal for a day, during which he was greeted very enthusiastically by the Egyptian public as Egyptians greatly admired Gandhi's leadership in defying the British rule in India.³

The two countries that found common ground in anti-colonialism continued their ties in the post-colonial era as well. Post-independence, India and Egypt, under the leaderships of Jawaharlal Nehru and Gamal Abdel Nasser respectively, became the leading advocates of the Non-Aligned Movement. As a result of their strong ties, the two countries signed a Friendship Treaty in 1955.

The warmth in the India–Egypt relations waned to a certain extent in the 1970s and 1980s as their foreign policies took different directions. Egypt's establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel in 1978 and India's tilt towards Saudi Arabia and the UAE to secure energy supplies resulted in India–Egypt relations losing impetus.

However, since the past decade India and Egypt have been showing increasing enthusiasm in rekindling old ties. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has visited India twice before: once in 2014 on a bilateral visit and again in 2015 to participate in the Third India–Africa Forum Summit. While India and Egypt are exploring deepening their ties in various areas such as trade and investments, climate change, cyber security and counter-terrorism cooperation, it is defence cooperation that is driving this reset and giving momentum to the bilateral ties.

DEFENCE COOPERATION: THE CONTINUITY FACTOR IN INDIA–EGYPT RELATIONS

Defence cooperation has become the base that is rekindling India–Egypt ties. It would be pertinent to note that defence cooperation formed the cornerstone of the India–Egypt relations back in the 1960s when bonhomie between the two countries was at its peak. The air forces of the two countries were engaged in the development of a fighter aircraft in the 1960s. Indian Air Force pilots also trained Egyptian pilots from 1960 to 1984.⁴

In a way, India and Egypt are picking up their ties from where these had been left during a period of lull in the 1980s through to the 2000s. The revival of engagements in the defence sector was discussed 10 years back during Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's visit to India. During his meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, both sides agreed to initiate military exchanges and defence cooperation that would

include military navigation, electronics and maintenance as priority areas.⁵

Acceleration in India–Egypt Defence Cooperation

India and Egypt have followed up on their agreement to accelerate defence relations through a series of high-level visits from both sides. In 2017, Egyptian Defence Minister General Sedki Sobhy visited India while in 2018 Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman visited Egypt. India's Chief of Air Staff V.R. Chaudhari visited Egypt in November 2021. Egypt's Air Force Chief Mahmoud Fouad Abdel El-Gawad visited India in 2022. In October 2021, Indian and Egyptian air forces participated in the first-ever joint tactical air exercise Desert Warrior.

These visits and exchanges set the momentum for India and Egypt to expand the scope of their cooperation in the form of military exercises and defence manufacturing. During the present Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to Egypt in September 2022, India and Egypt signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to strengthen ties in the defence sector.⁶ India and Egypt are also exploring possibilities of joint manufacturing, transfer and localisation of technology to exploit capabilities and infrastructure available in the two countries.⁷ Both countries are also working to boost cooperation in the areas of training, rehabilitation and joint exercises. Concomitant to the push to defence cooperation, Indian and Egyptian special forces participated in a joint military exercise in January 2023. The joint exercise 'Exercise Cyclone – I' was held in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan.⁸

Egypt has expressed interest in procuring defence equipment from India such as Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas, Akash missiles, Defence Research and Development Organisation's (DRDO) Smart Anti-Airfield Weapon and radars.⁹ Further, India invited Egypt to participate in Aero-India 2023 at Yelahanka Air Force Station, Bengaluru in February. On its part, Egypt invited India to participate in Exercise Bright Star in Egypt in September this year. These are joint training exercises led by United States and Egyptian forces.

Diversification of defence ties with Egypt is also giving a major push to India's indigenous defence manufacturing and allowing India to expand its defence exports. Considering the geopolitical challenges surrounding Egypt in the region—the Middle East and North Africa—President El-Sisi is looking to strengthen the Egyptian military. According to Global Fire Power,

Egyptian military is ranked first among the militaries of Arab and African countries.¹⁰ This makes defence cooperation with Egypt an imperative as India gets to engage with the top military force in the Arab world as well as the African continent.

WHY IS RESET IN TIES WITH EGYPT IMPORTANT FOR INDIA?

Strengthening India's diplomatic outreach

As India seeks to reset its ties with Egypt, defence cooperation is not only accelerating this process, but is also playing a major role in the diplomatic outreach. Defence diplomacy is emblematic of the way India's foreign policy has been shaped in the recent times on two counts. One, in addition to strategic cooperation becoming an integral part of India's external engagements, it is also becoming a pivotal aspect. Two, India's diplomacy is increasingly focusing on reaching out to the less-engaged countries and regions. While Egypt is not a neglected entity, it has certainly been on the sidelines for the past few decades. By renewing ties with Egypt, India is also strengthening its outreach to Africa, which has been a less focused area in India's foreign policy.

Deepening engagements with the Arab world

India's accelerated outreach to Egypt is associated with its diversification of ties with the Arab countries. The past decade has witnessed India carefully strengthening its engagements with the Arab countries, especially with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with whom ties have grown and diversified. India has been successful in developing ties with the Arab countries beyond oil trade and remittances from the Indian diaspora in Arab countries. The diversification is evident from the fact that India elevated its ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to the level of strategic partnership.

In 2017, during the visit of Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan to India, India and the UAE signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement to give impetus to two-way flow of investments, counter-terror cooperation and defence ties.¹¹

In 2019, India and Saudi Arabia elevated their ties by signing an agreement on Strategic Partnership Council during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Saudi Arabia. This agreement focused on strengthening of cooperation in the areas of trade and investment, defence and security and counter-terror mechanism.¹²

As India resets its ties with Egypt, both countries have enhanced their relations to the level of strategic partnership. Under the framework of strategic partnership, India and Egypt are set to strengthen their cooperation in the political, defence, security, energy and economic areas.

After the UAE and Saudi Arabia, India's signing of strategic partnership with Egypt further builds upon its deepening engagements with the Arab countries.

For a long period of time, India's ties with the Arab countries were primarily transactional in nature and were defined by energy, economy and expatriates.¹³ However, India has diversified and elevated its engagements with the Arab countries, in particular Saudi Arabia and the UAE by entering into strategic partnerships. Similarly, a strategic partnership with Egypt would allow India to deepen engagements with the Arab world.

Counter-terror cooperation

Reset with Egypt is not just concomitant to India's drive to increase its footprint in the Arab world, it also implies greater cooperation on common challenges. Counter-terror cooperation is an important component in India's strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. India is not only a country that has faced radicalisation and terrorism but has also been successful in countering terrorism since more than three decades. With terrorism being a transnational threat and terror networks employing sophisticated communication technologies to spread their radical thought, it is imperative for India to seek greater international cooperation against this security threat. Strategic cooperation with Egypt certainly enhances India's efforts towards greater cohesiveness to tackle the threat of transnational terrorism.

During President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's visit to India in January this year, India and Egypt agreed on working towards combating terrorism. Both sides expressed concerns over the global spread of terrorism and termed terrorism as the greatest threat to humanity. India and Egypt also agreed to exchange information and intelligence on terrorism. Among the Islamic countries, Egypt enjoys the reputation of being a moderate country and has a history of countering radicalisation. It is pertinent to note that Egypt under President El-Sisi has been in the forefront in taking action against the Muslim Brotherhood, a radical Islamic organisation.

Post the Arab Spring in 2013, Mohammad Morsi became Egypt's president. During his rule, the Muslim Brotherhood gained prominence, leading to rise in radicalisation and religious extremism. The rise of the

Muslim Brotherhood also paved way for ISIS to expand its base in Egypt, particularly in the Sinai Province.

In specific context of India–Egypt relations, cooperation on counter-terrorism is important since the Muslim Brotherhood has presence in India as well. The organisation has been adopting sophisticated and indirect ways to spread its radical ideology among Indian Muslims. This is done mostly through forming various NGOs and social organisations.¹⁴

When Abdel Fattah El-Sisi became president in 2014, his government led a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. These measures included eliminating members of the organisation as well as handing over death penalties and lengthy prison sentences to a number of people associated with it.¹⁵ The El-Sisi government also took action against the ISIS and to a great extent has been successful in reducing terror attacks in Egypt.

At international forums, notably in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Egypt has not supported Pakistan's position on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Further, Al Azhar University, an important seat of learning in Egypt, is known for its moderate thinking and has issued fatwas denouncing terrorism and religious extremism. This implies that Egypt is taking a multi-pronged approach to tackle the threat of radicalisation, which includes security measures as well as a counter-radicalisation drive.

Cooperation on other non-traditional security threats

Along with counter-terror cooperation, India and Egypt are cooperating on other non-traditional security threats such as cyber security and climate change, which presently are transnational in nature and require concerted efforts between different stakeholders to find a solution.

During President El-Sisi's visit, both countries signed several MoUs in the areas of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and cyber security.

This included an MoU between the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team and the Egyptian Computer Emergency Readiness Team in the area of cyber security. This is a significant development since safe cyber space requires cohesive efforts between different countries. As a part of strengthening security mechanisms for cyber space, India is on its way to implement The National Cyber Security Strategy, which aims to secure, strengthen and synergise the existing environment and create an eco-system of safe cyber space.¹⁶ Egypt, on the other hand, is one of the 20 largest countries that are most vulnerable to cyberattacks.¹⁷ Also, there is a shortage of professionals trained in cyber security in Egypt. Egypt's National Telecom

Regulatory Authority (NTRA) in collaboration with the Egyptian Computer Emergency Readiness Team is working to establish training centres. Under the MoU on cyber security, India could work with Egypt to train professionals and provide expertise on cyber security.

Climate change is another major non-traditional security threat that India and Egypt are working together on. India has been one of the leading countries in the world working to address the challenge posed by climate change. India is also a strong advocate of the Paris Accord on climate change and is working towards energy transition. On its part, Egypt is also projecting itself as a major power in the field of green hydrogen. Besides, Egypt hosted the 27th Conference of the Parties (COP 27) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Sharm El-Sheikh in November 2022.

India and Egypt have stated their firm commitment towards climate action as per the UNFCCC principles and the Paris Climate Accord. Acknowledging India's expertise in the field of renewable energy, President El-Sisi expressed deep interest in working with India.¹⁸ Climate change being a transnational challenge, it calls for joint efforts between various countries. It is important to note that climate change, renewable energy and energy transition feature prominently in India's diversified engagement with other Arab countries as well.

Increasing India's outreach in the Indian Ocean Region

With the geopolitical construct of the Indo-Pacific Region gaining prominence, its geographical expanse has come to include an increasing number of countries and regions. The Indo-Pacific Region covers the Asian-African-Australian-American maritime-littoral space.¹⁹ India's own vision of the Indo-Pacific Region extends to the eastern shores of Africa. Egypt is strategically an important country in the Indo-Pacific Region as the Suez Canal connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. The latter is an inlet and one of the choke points in the Indian Ocean Region. Indian Navy's document 'Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy' (2015) describes the Red Sea as one of the areas of primary maritime interests for the Indian Navy.²⁰

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) for the Indo-Pacific Region should lead to greater engagements between India and Egypt in the maritime domain. The maritime cooperation between the two countries is already gaining momentum.

In September 2021, Indian Navy Ship (INS) Tabar and Egyptian Navy Ship Alexandria participated in a maritime partnership exercise in the Mediterranean Sea. In July 2022, INS Kochi visited Safaga in Egypt and participated in PASSEX with the Egyptian Navy.

Egypt was one of the participating countries in the Second India–Africa Defence Dialogue held in Gandhinagar, India in October 2022. During this dialogue, India’s Defence Minister Rajnath Singh highlighted India and African countries as important stakeholders in maintaining a safe and secure maritime environment, especially in the Indian Ocean Region.

Egypt’s posturing as a facilitator and connector to African, West Asian and European markets complements India’s own outreach to the Middle Eastern countries and in the Western Indian Ocean.²¹

Growing engagements with Egypt aid strengthening India’s outreach in the Indian Ocean Region. India has regarded the Indian Ocean as its maritime sphere. China’s increasing footprint in the Indian Ocean Region is an important driving factor for India to formulate a strategy for greater engagements in the region.

India’s engagements in the Indian Ocean Region are conditioned by two constraints. First is India’s limited capacity as compared to China.²² Second is India’s acknowledgement of regional and extra regional powers’ interests in the Indian Ocean Region, which include China.²³ To overcome these constraints, it is necessary that India works in partnership with the countries in the region. As the concept of Indo-Pacific Region has gained currency, India’s vision of this region extends from the eastern shores of Africa to the west coast of the United States. As India’s engagement with the Quad is growing, the other three members, the United States, Australia and Japan, are focused more on containing China in the Pacific region of the Indo-Pacific.²⁴ In order to counter China’s influence in the Indian Ocean Region, it is imperative for India to foster partnerships in this region, which includes African countries. Hence, India has reached out to African countries such as Mauritius, Seychelles, South Africa and Kenya in the past few years. Greater engagement with Egypt would build upon India’s outreach in the Indian Ocean Region.

In a further boost to India’s presence in the Indian Ocean Region, Egypt is considering allocating a special area of land for Indian industries in the Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCEZ). The Suez Canal is a strategically important choke point in the Indian Ocean Region since it connects the Asia–Europe trade flow; 12 per cent of the global trade and 30 per cent of the global

container traffic pass through the Suez Canal every year. As regards to India, around US\$ 200 billion of its trade passes through the Suez Canal.²⁵ A total of 4.8 million barrels of crude oil is shipped and transported through the Suez Canal per day. Of which, 5,00,000 barrels per day of crude oil is shipped to India.²⁶

As India's outreach to the Indian Ocean Region in general and the Western Indian Ocean region in particular has increased, it is defence diplomacy that has played an important role. While India and Egypt expand their defence cooperation in the form of military exercises and exploration of possibilities of joint defence production, India had made forays into the defence domain by interacting with other African countries as well. Some of these initiatives include exporting indigenous armoured vehicles to Uganda and holding a mini-defence expo in Tanzania in May 2022.²⁷ Deepening of India–Egypt defence cooperation further boosts India's defence diplomacy in Africa and among the Indian Ocean littoral states.

GAINS FOR EGYPT FROM THE RESETTING OF TIES WITH INDIA

Strengthening of ties with India offers Egypt an opportunity to diversify its engagements in at least three areas.

First, Egypt had long-standing defence cooperation with the United States. But under Sisi's presidency Egypt has sought to diversify its defence as well as trade ties. Apart from the United States, Egypt has developed close relations with Russia, China and European countries such as France, Italy and Germany. As a major military power in Africa and the Arab world, defence cooperation with India allows Egypt to further diversify its defence engagements to procure military equipment.

Second, China has already made deep inroads in the economic and strategic domains in Arab countries, including Egypt. Egypt's current economic crisis is expected to further increase China's role. To avoid China's overbearing presence, Egypt is reaching out to India for greater engagements in trade and economy.²⁸ Attracting investments from India and giving a boost to trade ties would diversify Egypt's economic relations.

Third, Egypt also looks at India for food security. The Russia–Ukraine war has caused disruptions in supply chains as well as food exports. Egypt used to procure 80% of its wheat from Ukraine and Russia. However, with the war disrupting the wheat supply, India has stepped in to export wheat to Egypt.²⁹ Food security is also a major reason for Egypt to deepen and diversify its engagements with India.

CONCLUSION

India and Egypt that enjoyed close ties in the 1960s and 1970s are once again working towards consolidating their ties. Defence cooperation, which was a cornerstone of India–Egypt relations, is a major factor that is leading the reset in the bilateral ties. The reset allows India to extend its defence diplomacy, complement deepening ties with the Arab world and boosts its presence in the Indian Ocean Region. For Egypt, this rekindling of ties allows diversification of engagements in the areas of defence procurement, trade and investments and food security. The reset in India–Egypt relations is promising for both the countries as it has initiated engagements in diverse areas. It is important for India and Egypt to build upon this momentum to realise the full potential of their bilateral relations.

NOTES

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