

Expanding Arc of India's Defence Diplomacy

From the Indian Ocean to the Gulf of Guinea

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The use of defence-related instruments and activities, in a cooperative and peaceful manner, to support foreign and strategic policy is defined as defence diplomacy. India has long been practising defence diplomacy to complement its foreign policy. The arc of India's defence diplomacy is expanding steadily in terms of the nature of activities as well as geographic coverage. Historically, the training of military personnel, capacity building and providing necessary security assistance, as was seen in the case of Seychelles and Mauritius, were key components of India's defence diplomacy. In the new millennium, maritime security emerged as one of the most significant aspects of India's defence diplomacy. Indian naval warships have been routinely deployed in the waters of the Indian Ocean to provide security, exercise with regional navies, tackle piracy, and provide humanitarian assistance as well as engage in disaster relief operations. India's defence diplomacy, through expanding naval footprint, is now engaging countries in the Mediterranean as well as in the Gulf of Guinea region. India seeks to expand influence and enhance its strategic footprint through the conduct of defence diplomacy.

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This article focuses on India's defence diplomacy in the geostrategic space from the Indian Ocean to the Gulf of Guinea. The article is divided into eight sections. It begins with a discussion on various dimensions of the concept of 'defence diplomacy'. The second and third sections discuss India's defence diplomacy and reshaping of India's foreign policy, respectively. In the following section, the article offers a broad overview of India's Africa policy. Having set the context, the article then examines four key dimensions of India's defence diplomacy, that is, military training and capacity-building; port visits, joint patrols, and maritime exercises; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations; and finally, defence exports and India–Africa defence dialogue. The conclusion ties the arguments presented in the article together.

DEFENCE DIPLOMACY: DEFINITIONS AND DIMENSIONS

In the last few decades, the concept of 'defence diplomacy' has gained increasing importance in the foreign and strategic policy toolkit of a state. The term is apparently first coined by the British Ministry of Defence in the 1990s.¹ However, the practice of defence diplomacy is not new. Major regional and global powers have been engaging in activities that could be classified as defence diplomacy. Defence diplomacy is generally defined as the use of defence-related engagements to promote foreign and strategic policy objectives of a state.

It is necessary to note that sometimes, defence diplomacy is used interchangeably with 'military diplomacy'. While 'defence' is a broader term and encompasses a range of instruments and activities including military forces, 'military' is a specific instrument designed for a specific purpose, usually, to counter threats posed by external aggression and internal subversion. In this article, the term 'defence diplomacy' has been used. Seen in the light of activities, initiatives and purposes, defence diplomacy complements the efforts of the regular diplomatic corps of a state, sometimes even ensuring that regular diplomatic activities intensify as a result of defence-related engagements. The concept of defence diplomacy is generally used as an umbrella concept and activities as diverse as capacity-building, port visits, delegation level visits, joint exercises, hydrographic surveys, etc., are considered part of defence diplomacy.²

Geogory Winger defines defence diplomacy as 'peaceful use of the defence institutions of one country to co-opt the government institutions of another country in order to achieve a preferred outcome.'³ He links defence

diplomacy with the concept of soft power and argues that defence-related engagement seeks 'to directly communicate the ideas, worldviews, and policy preferences of one country to another'.⁴ In a way, he positions defence diplomacy in the context of a broader practice of statecraft rather than just focusing on defence-related activities as they are undertaken.

Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster in their Adelphi Paper define defence diplomacy as 'the peacetime cooperative use of armed forces and related infrastructure (primarily defence ministries) as a tool of foreign and security policy'.⁵ This definition is more focused as compared to Winger's. Cottey and Forster argue that the role of defence diplomacy changed in the 1990s. It is now used not only for 'supporting the armed forces and security of allies', but also to pursue 'wider foreign and security policy goals'.⁶

In the context of analysing India's defence diplomacy, the definition given by Cottey and Forster is more appropriate. India uses defence diplomacy for supporting broader foreign and security policy objectives. In contrast to Winger's definition, India does not seek to communicate its own ideas, worldviews, and policy preferences (and in turn, shape others' ideas, worldviews, and preferences) through defence diplomacy (or for that matter any other means). Respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of a state are two core principles of India's foreign policy. Therefore, the general purpose of India's defence diplomacy is to generate influence, but India refrains from interfering with the domestic politics of the countries with which it pursues such efforts.

In the case of countries like India that face serious security problems, are located in a difficult neighbourhood and depend on weapons imports for strengthening military capabilities, the concept of defence diplomacy operates at two levels: one, to build up its own defence capabilities via diplomacy as an instrument. It includes activities such as striking favourable defence deals, ensuring access to advanced technologies, blunting efforts by adversaries or unfriendly powers to limit access to certain weapons or types of technologies, etc. Second and a more well-known dimension of defence diplomacy is to provide assistance for capacity-building, undertake military training and joint exercises, etc., with the relatively weaker countries of the Global South. While discussing India's defence diplomacy, both dimensions come into play.

Every major global power has adopted defence diplomacy as a key component of their defence strategy.⁷ They make efforts to systematically engage with military forces, foreign and defence policy bureaucracies, and the overall defence apparatus of a foreign country as part of their defence

diplomacy. The objectives of engaging in defence diplomacy range from strengthening defence ties, promoting democratic transitions to accessing foreign military markets, and increasing strategic influence.⁸

Based on the types of activities undertaken, defence diplomacy can be classified into two broad categories: coercive defence diplomacy and cooperative defence diplomacy.⁹ Coercive defence diplomacy includes coercive activities carried out by militaries without crossing the threshold of war to protect the national interests of a state. Cooperative defence diplomacy consists of all 'supportive/ coordinated activities' carried out by the defence apparatus of a country.¹⁰ The purpose of such activities is to 'shape a favourable foreign policy environment'.¹¹ Cooperative defence diplomacy is a 'comparatively gentler component' and consists of a 'relatively bigger basket' in terms of range of activities if we compare it with coercive defence diplomacy.¹² Cooperative defence diplomacy includes activities and engagements such as military training, bilateral and multilateral exercises, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, conducting hydrographic surveys, etc.

The nature of activities that are undertaken as part of cooperative defence diplomacy is such that there needs to be a minimum level of shared strategic interests, understanding or trust between states that will provide and receive defence-related assistance. Without any of these factors, it will be difficult to allow a foreign military-defence establishment access to the elite military units or even sensitive data such as the one generated by the hydrographic surveys.

The comparative power gap, or more specifically, asymmetry between the donor and recipient countries that engage in defence diplomacy is a factor that needs to be considered. Weaker states generally receive defence-related support from major global and/or regional powers in exchange for aligning their foreign and strategic policy positions. Such support helps in building capabilities to tackle the internal or external security threats. Defence diplomacy between major global and regional powers (for example, between the United States and India) usually takes the form of enhancing strategic communication, building confidence to avoid miscalculation, or to send a joint message to a common adversary. Therefore, the parity or disparity of power between the participating states in defence diplomacy is an important factor.

The regional and global strategic context in which defence diplomacy is being undertaken contributes in shaping the overall direction and scope of defence diplomacy. If both states share a similar worldview regarding global and regional security problems, the intensity, and scope of defence-

related exchange will naturally go up. Threat perception or foreign and strategic policy priorities will also drive the direction and degree of defence diplomacy. Other key factors like the domestic political priorities, willingness of the defence apparatus of participating states, and the nature of security challenges and threats also tend to influence decision-making regarding defence diplomacy.

INDIA'S DEFENCE DIPLOMACY

In the Indian context, defence diplomacy includes three major components: first is the import of defence equipment and technologies necessary for addressing the national security problems of the country, second is the defence-related assistance, mainly in the form of training, provided by India to friendly countries in the region and beyond and finally, the expansive range of activities that are now being undertaken by India's strategic establishment to not only protect its interests in the extended neighbourhood, but also to project its growing military power through activities that include not only capacity-building and training but also steadily growing export of weapons systems.

The relevance of defence diplomacy in the Indian context has existed since the earliest days of independence. In fact, as diplomatic practitioners have noted, 'the interplay between diplomacy and defence policy has been visible from the early days of our independence'.¹³ And that 'having served in many embassies where this was happening, I can personally testify to the difference that adept diplomacy can make to defence preparedness'.¹⁴ India's security problems, primarily along the northern and western frontiers, necessitated it to build strong defence capabilities. However, the country lacked a domestic defence technological as well as industrial base to develop and manufacture required weapons systems.

In the context of growing strategic challenges, there was no option but to import weapons platforms from abroad, primarily from countries like Britain, France and Soviet Russia. Despite intense Cold War rivalries and politico-ideological considerations, India's diplomacy played a role in acquiring necessary defence systems. Therefore, it was noted that 'much of our foreign policy energies were focused on developing this access [to weapons platforms and technologies] and our success in doing [so] should not actually diminish this achievement'.¹⁵ More importantly, Indian diplomacy played a role in 'overcoming the hurdles of technology denial that became increasingly problematic after 1974 [peaceful nuclear explosion]'.¹⁶

However, while India was building defence capabilities to handle threats posed by China and Pakistan, it was also engaged in defence diplomacy, especially in the Global South. In the 1950s and 1960s, India began to assist the newly-independent countries in Asia and Africa by providing training and capacity-building in the domain of defence. India helped set up military academies abroad, supplied military equipment, trained military officers, and even assisted in setting up intelligence agencies. For example, India supplied military assistance to Myanmar in its fight against rebels in the late 1940s and early 1950s and has been training Singaporean troops since 1965.¹⁷ In Africa, India set up the Nigerian Defence Academy in the 1960s and helped Ghana establish its intelligence agency. India's lack of a strong domestic defence industrial base and relatively weak military capabilities as compared with major global powers did not stop it from engaging in defence diplomacy with the countries of the Global South. India was still more capable and better-off compared with many countries in Asia and Africa and they looked to India for support.

Therefore, throughout the second half of the 20th century (and perhaps even now), one could observe India engaging in defence diplomacy at two levels: one, to build defence capabilities for itself via the instrument of diplomacy, and second, to provide assistance to other weaker countries through various initiatives including the training programmes.

At the turn of the new millennium, as India began to accumulate economic and military capabilities, the arc of its defence-related foreign engagements widened. As a result, India's defence diplomacy too began to expand. India now undertakes defence diplomacy related functions more frequently and is also in a position to engage many more countries for providing defence-related assistance. Over the years, India has expanded the scope of its defence diplomacy, as is seen in the diverse range of partners across the globe and complex missions that India's defence establishment has carried out. India is projecting itself as the 'net security provider', 'preferred security partner' and 'first responder' in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Various dimensions of defence diplomacy play a role in such a projection. India's defence diplomacy has played a major role in various crises in the immediate and extended neighbourhood. It includes providing relief supplies to Indonesia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka when the tsunami devastated Eastern Indian Ocean in 2004; rescuing civilians trapped in conflict zones like in Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015, providing necessary food and medical assistance at the height of COVID-19 pandemic, and assistance to the IOR countries like Madagascar, Mauritius, and Seychelles, etc.

However, India still lacks the sufficient institutionalised mechanisms (barring some initiatives like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and military exercises with friendly countries, especially in the IOR) to deploy defence diplomacy as a regular and effective tool for achieving its foreign and security policy goals. Echoing this sentiment, a former foreign secretary argued that 'our system has not yet evolved enough to capitalise in a coordinated manner on the country's military arm to further our external objectives'.¹⁸ Moreover, 'we continue to rely primarily on conventional approaches to diplomacy to deal with foreign powers'.¹⁹ However, it needs to be appreciated that 'the content of our military outreach abroad cannot be as wide-ranging as those of the principal big powers given our relatively limited military capacities and our general political outlook'.²⁰ Nevertheless, in the last few years, the role of defence-related engagements in India's diplomacy and the range of activities abroad, in support of broader foreign policy objectives, undertaken by India's defence apparatus have grown exponentially.

Participation in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) is also considered a part of a country's defence diplomacy-related effort. However, this article restricts itself to the initiatives and activities undertaken by India on its own and not in the multilateral setting as is the case with the UNPKO.

In the context of this article, we will focus on India's defence diplomacy in Africa.

RESHAPING OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

India's defence diplomacy operates as part of its broader foreign and strategic policy effort. Defence diplomacy in Africa is a subset of the broader India–Africa relationship. Therefore, before moving on to the activities and initiatives that make up India's defence diplomacy in Africa, the article offers a few broad observations about India's foreign policy and India's ties with Africa to locate India's defence diplomacy in the proper context.

India's foreign policy at the current juncture is being reshaped in response to India's growing strategic capabilities and the changing global geopolitical scenario. The changing orientation of India's foreign policy is most visible in its ties with three great powers—Russia, the United States (US) and China. India has long had a special relationship with Russia. The bulk of India's defence hardware is sourced from Russia. However, the dependence on Moscow for military supplies and technology has now put India in a

difficult spot as the relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated significantly in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine War.

Meanwhile, for India, China remained a strategic challenge as well as an important trade partner. Since April 2020, India and China are locked in a military standoff in the Eastern Ladakh and are yet to bring back the situation to normalcy. However, despite the standoff, India's trade with China has continued to grow. India's ties with Russia are complicated by the growing bonhomie between Moscow and Beijing. In the last few years, Russia and China are drawing closer together and both are challenging the western dominance of the international order. India joined them in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Russia–India–China (RIC) trilateral format as well as in the BRICS grouping that consists of RIC as well as Brazil and South Africa. With the deepening ties between Russia and China and the sharpening strategic rivalry between India and China, New Delhi is debating whether it can count on Russia or not in the event of India–China hostilities. Western pressure to downgrade ties with Russia is another factor in India's calculations.

In addition, India's strengthening ties with the US and its allies such as Japan and Australia expand as well as complicate New Delhi's strategic choices. The US is now emerging as one of the most important partnerships for India in the 21st century and the strategic ties have reached an unprecedented level with cooperation in areas like joint weapons production and new and emerging technologies. India–US relationship is one of the most important anchors of security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. China and Russia are anxious about the US' role in the Indo-Pacific region and oppose strategic initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). India is a member of the Quad and is attempting to balance its ties with Russia on the one hand and with the US and its allies on the other. As there is no end in sight to the Russia–Ukraine War, India's dilemmas will continue to persist. Moreover, China will also be a critical factor that will underscore the challenge for India's ties with Russia and the US and its allies.

Meanwhile, India's growing strategic capabilities are felt in its expanding engagement with the countries of the Global South. To that end, India sought to leverage its presidency of G-20 grouping by organising a summit for highlighting the most pressing issues faced by the Global South. India's Africa engagement fits well within this matrix. India's growing power and strategic reach finds a receptive arena in Africa. India has long sought to build ties with African countries and the changing global strategic context

is providing additional incentives for both India and Africa to deepen their already strong relationship.

INDIA–AFRICA RELATIONS

India–Africa relationship is built on the solid foundations of shared struggle against colonialism, imperialism and racism. India particularly shared a close relationship with the East and Southern African states. These states were a part of the British Empire and were linked to India due to the intra-imperial network of trade, commerce, migration and security. Owing to their geographic location along the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), littoral as well as island states in East and Southern Africa are maritime neighbours of India.²¹ As the IOR attains growing geopolitical importance, India's engagement with the region assumes greater strategic relevance. India is the resident naval power in this region and is directly affected by the expanding Chinese military presence in the WIO.²²

Post-independence, from the 1950s onwards till the dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1994, India actively campaigned and supported liberation struggles in Africa and provided whatever assistance it could to newly liberated countries. India's freedom struggle and the subsequent developmental trajectory were a source of inspiration for many African countries. Several African countries were a part of the groupings led by India like the Non-Aligned Movement and Group of 77 (G-77).²³ Many of these countries looked to India for technical, developmental as well as defence-related assistance in their hour of need. Even though the material base was weak, and the economy was shackled by state controls, India extended educational scholarships, military training and political support to Africa. In the new millennium, after the launching of economic reforms and liberalisation, economic dimensions were added to the Indo-African partnership.²⁴ Many Indian private and public sector companies are active in Africa. India is now the third largest trading partner of Africa. The imperatives of energy security and the quest for global influence is deepening India's interest in Africa.²⁵

Defence relationship is a key pillar of India–Africa strategic partnership. In fact, Africa has been a recipient and beneficiary of India's defence diplomacy initiatives. India has trained generations of military officers from African countries in its military training institutions. The best example of an African army officer receiving training in India is Nigeria's president Muhammadu Buhari. He was trained at the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) in India

in 1973. While recalling his days in India, Buhari has commented that, 'it was a very good experience. I think I was a Lt Colonel then, and I spent a year in India. We travelled and met international people from different countries. It became part of my success story in the military'.²⁶ Moreover, as noted above, India helped Nigeria set up the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA) in the 1960s at Kaduna. The first commandant of the NDA was an Indian, Brigadier M.R. Verma.²⁷

India also trained intelligence and police officers from Africa. The best example is the assistance India provided to the newly independent Ghana in beefing up its intelligence capabilities. Senior intelligence officials from India's Intelligence Bureau (IB) like R.N. Kao, who went on to set up India's external intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and Sankaran Nair, who headed RAW in the late 1970s, spent months in Ghana at the request of Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah in 1958–1961. For India, 'the Ghana assignment offered institution-building experience'.²⁸ It helped in 'expanding and strengthening IB's international partnerships' as well.²⁹ Moreover, 'operating in Ghana allowed IB to expand its outreach within Africa, but also outside the continent'.³⁰

These military, intelligence and police training programmes primarily benefitted Anglophone African countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, etc. It was also true generally of India's Africa policy in the Cold War wherein India had strong relationships with English-speaking countries and countries that housed Indian diaspora. However, in the last two decades, India's African outreach has also been widening and expanding and French-speaking countries of West and Central Africa are in the ambit of India's strategic outlook towards Africa. As a result, India's defence-related engagement too is now focused on the entire continent.

Of the two broad levels at which India's defence diplomacy operates, Africa features in the second category where the relationship is primarily structured as a donor–recipient relationship. Except for a brief attempt in the 1960s to manufacture joint fighter aircraft with Egypt and artillery purchases from South Africa during the Kargil conflict of 1999, African countries could never emerge as defence suppliers for India.³¹ It is on account of the simple fact that most African countries, barring few notable exceptions, lack any significant defence-industrial base and therefore, do not have major defence industries to speak of. Many of these countries depend on external players like France, the US, Russia and China for military training and weapons supplies.³² In the last few years, India too has been making concerted attempts to market and sell its weapons systems to African countries.

In the following sections, we will focus on India's engagement with Africa in four key domains: military training and capacity-building, naval visits and exercises, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations and finally, the growing role of Africa in India's defence exports.

MILITARY TRAINING AND CAPACITY-BUILDING

Capacity-building in the form of training African security forces has been a key component of India's defence diplomacy in Africa. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) is a premier forum through which civilian and military training programmes are conducted. ITEC has been in operation since 1964 and so far, has trained more than 2,00,000 officials from about 160 countries in both the civilian and defence sector.³³ As per the data provided by the Ministry of External Affairs, in 2022–2023, India offered 2,709 defence slots under the ITEC programme to 78 countries including those from Africa.³⁴ In fact, since 2014, India has offered nearly 18,500 defence training slots of which 10,871 have been availed by the recipient countries for training their military officers and personnel.³⁵ However, the problem is that India does not clearly list out which countries received how many defence slots in which year. Perhaps, it is the deliberate policy to not divulge too many details or perhaps it is just a case of not understanding the importance of sharing data for the purposes of national branding.

The courses that were offered under the ITEC defence slots were 'both of general and specialised nature' and covered diverse areas like 'security and strategic studies, defence management, electronics, mechanical engineering, marine hydrography, counterinsurgency and jungle warfare, Maritime Law and Ops course by Coast Guard Headquarters, and also foundation courses for young officers in three services'.³⁶ These courses were conducted at premier military institutions such as National Defence Academy (NDA), Pune, and Defence Services Staff College (DSSC), Wellington. Other notable institutions include Indian Coast Guard and the National Defence College, Delhi.

According to S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, 'India was associated with the establishment of defence institutions in Nigeria, Ethiopia and Tanzania. Our military training teams have worked with their counterparts in Botswana, Lesotho, Zambia, Uganda, Namibia, Tanzania, Mauritius and Seychelles'.³⁷ A close look at these countries reveals that except Nigeria and Namibia, most other countries are located in the East and Southern Africa. Therefore, apart from neighbouring countries like Bhutan,

Maldives and Sri Lanka, Indian Ocean African countries are probably among the largest beneficiaries of the defence training programmes and capacity-building initiatives offered by India.

Mauritius, which is India's close defence partner in the Indian Ocean, receives 360 slots as part of ITEC.³⁸ However, many times, the official data does not clearly differentiate between the civilian and defence slots. It is probably on account of the sensitivities associated with the news reports about India's growing security presence and the likely military base in some of these WIO states. In the case of Seychelles, nearly 1 per cent of the entire Seychellois population (almost 95,000) has been a beneficiary of the ITEC assistance.³⁹ In 2019–20, 42 civilian and 38 defence slots have been utilised by Seychelles.⁴⁰ Amongst the other states in the WIO, in 2019–20, Madagascar received 107 ITEC slots, which included slots for Army as well as the Navy. In 2021–22, India offered Madagascar 20 slots for Army training and two slots for naval training.⁴¹

India's capacity-building activities, apart from the training under the aegis of the ITEC, are most visible in the form of gifting military equipment, especially in the naval domain, to Indian Ocean maritime African states. It helps in expanding security links between these countries and India and, to an extent, prevents the entry of other players who may perhaps seek to expand their influence via the instruments of defence diplomacy such as the supply of military equipment. Within the Indian Ocean maritime Africa, Seychelles has been one of the largest recipients of Indian security assistance. For example, India has gifted two patrol boats, PS Topaz (in 2005) and PS Constant (in 2014) to Seychelles. India handed over the Fast Patrol Vessel SCG PS Zoroaster to Seychelles Coast Guard in April 2021.⁴² Moreover, to further augment the coastal security capabilities of Seychelles, India gifted and installed six coastal surveillance radar systems in 2015 and Indian Coast Guard's Fast Interceptor Boat C-405, renamed as 'PB Hermes', was gifted to Seychelles in 2016. Signalling the close strategic partnership, in 2013 and in 2018, India gifted two Dornier maritime surveillance aircraft as well.⁴³

In the case of West African states, in 2022, Cameroon was offered 47 defence slots whereas Senegal was offered 31 defence slots.⁴⁴ Interestingly, for both countries, India offered more slots for defence training than for civilian training. Perhaps, it was on account of the growing challenges to these countries in the form of terrorism and Islamic radicalism. For Cameroon, naval training is also a key component given that the country is located along the Gulf of Guinea. Reflecting the size and the requirements of the armed forces, and the magnitude of security challenges, Nigeria was offered

150 defence slots.⁴⁵ As mentioned earlier, India–Nigeria military training programmes go back to the 1960s and have been a key pillar of Indo-Nigerian military partnership.

As India expands its security presence across the world, including in the Indo-Pacific region and Africa, military training is likely to emerge as one of the key practices to enhance India's strategic influence. India has proven capabilities in this domain. Two factors are of relevance: one, India has been training African militaries for decades, which brings in invaluable knowledge, networks and experience. Second, India has a long experience of participating in Peacekeeping Missions in Africa under the banner of the United Nations. It helps in understanding local conditions and breeds familiarity. Both factors can be leveraged to structure training programmes. Moreover, counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency and counter-radicalisation are some of the other competencies of India that could be offered to African states dealing with these challenges.

NAVAL VISITS, JOINT PATROLS AND MARITIME EXERCISES

The Indian Navy has long been a regular player in the strategically important waters of the WIO off the coast of East and Southern Africa. The African coastline from the Suez Canal in the north to the Cape of Good Hope in the south is critical for India's strategic, economic and commercial interests. In fact, Indian policymakers believe that 'the primary area of Indian maritime interest ranges from the Persian Gulf in the north, to Antarctica in the South, and from the Cape of Good Hope and the East Coast of Africa in the west, to the Straits of Malacca and the archipelagos of Malaysia and Indonesia in the east'.⁴⁶ And that, as 'India's economy and her international role grows, the area of this benign but active engagement will also grow'.⁴⁷

The role of naval power projected through regular naval visits and exercises in the WIO region is critical for ensuring the security of vital Indian interests. The region is afflicted by interconnected threats, primarily in the non-traditional domain, such as maritime piracy, drugs and weapons smuggling, armed robbery at sea and illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing. These threats endanger maritime security in the region and affect global trade passing through the critical waterways like the Gulf of Aden. The threat of maritime piracy was particularly grave after 2007 and was contained by the concerted actions of the international naval forces. It also allowed the Chinese navy to regularise its presence in the Indian Ocean. Other major powers are also increasing their military presence in the region,

the most notable being the upcoming Russian naval base in Sudan and the launch of Combined Task Force (CTF)-153 by the US for the Red Sea. Therefore, the region is staring at the confluence of traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

In this context, the last few years have seen an increase in the number of Indian naval visits and exercises with African navies. It is on account of India's growing capabilities as well as in response to the deterioration of regional security and stability and the sharpening of great power politics. The Indian navy has been expanding strategic engagement with Africa and is widening the geographic arc of its security presence. The WIO countries have seen or in some cases even sought regular naval presence of, port visits from, and exercises with, the Indian navy. In this context, the role of Seychelles and Mauritius has been particularly important. They have traditionally been India's close partners in the Indian Ocean maritime Africa.

In fact, India's approach towards the Indian Ocean, known as Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), was launched in Mauritius in 2015.⁴⁸ The regular Indian military presence (and assistance) to Seychelles and Mauritius dates to the 1980s and has continued since then. Indian naval presence in support of the then regimes in Mauritius and Seychelles have helped thwart the destabilising activities of anti-government forces including externally sponsored mercenaries.⁴⁹ India's deep defence-related links with these two countries can be gauged from the fact that Mauritius has a practice of appointing Indian security officials as its National Security Advisor.⁵⁰

Madagascar and Comoros are also emerging as important countries for India's growing naval activities. For example, in 2022, India's *INS Kesari* visited Comoros to repair a coast guard patrol vessel whereas *INS Tarkash* made a port call at Port Mutsamudu in Anjouan.⁵¹ In the case of Madagascar, last year, *INS Suvarna* and *INS Tarkash* made port calls in Antsiranana.⁵² Moreover, the Indian naval mobile training team trained Malagasy special forces. India also handed over two fast interceptor boats to Madagascar.⁵³ The Indian navy, in October 2021, while delivering much-needed food assistance to Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan and South Sudan also made port calls at Djibouti, Massawa (Eritrea), Port Sudan (Sudan) and Mombasa (Kenya).⁵⁴ Taking Indian engagement with the wider WIO region a step further, in 2022, Indian navy ships conducted naval exercises with the Sudanese and Egyptian navies near the Suez Canal.⁵⁵

The last two years has seen Indian navy ships marking its presence in the North and West African waters too. In 2021, Indian navy conducted its first

joint exercises with the Algerian navy as a part of its deployments to Europe and Africa.⁵⁶ Next year, in September 2022, Indian naval ship *INS Tarkash* visited the Gulf of Guinea region. India's growing energy imports from the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) region is a primary motivation for the growing naval deployment to the region. The stated purpose of the deployment was to carry out anti-piracy operations. *INS Tarkash* undertook joint naval exercises with the Nigerian navy patrol ships. The naval drills provided an 'opportunity for reinforcing inter-operability between the Indian and Nigerian navies in various facets of maritime operations like anti-piracy operations, assistance to vessel in distress, SAR drills as also anti-air and anti-surface operations'.⁵⁷ It was the first joint operational deployment by India and Nigeria, in support of anti-piracy operations, in the Gulf of Guinea. Furthermore, the ship made 'port calls at Dakar in Senegal, Lome in Togo, Lagos in Nigeria and Port Gentil in Gabon'.⁵⁸ Apart from the anti-piracy patrol and joint patrols with the regional navies, the deployment was utilised for 'capacity-building activities like training in damage control, firefighting, diving, medical aspects, and casualty evacuation'.⁵⁹

The Indian naval deployment to the GoG is geopolitically significant for two reasons: first, the growing strategic importance of the GoG and second, in the context of China's attempts to establish a naval base in the region. The GoG connects resource-rich Central and West Africa to the world. The Gulf is important for global energy security as well. Oil-rich countries like Nigeria, Angola and Gabon are located in the GoG region and the African energy exports to the markets in Europe, Asia and the US pass through the GoG. In terms of economic growth, countries along the GoG like Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire are growing at a rapid pace. In this context, criminal activities such as oil theft, bunkering and maritime piracy in the GoG are a matter of concern for regional states and other major players engaged with West Africa.

There were reports that China was in talks with Equatorial Guinea and was interested in establishing a military base in the West African country.⁶⁰ The reports spooked the US and apparently, under American pressure, Equatorial Guinea seemed to have backed down. However, it indicates the intent as well as the ability of the Chinese navy to extend its strategic reach and presence. In this context of increasing great power interest in West Africa, India's gradual moves to expand its naval presence in the West African waters are taking shape.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Africa now finds itself at the receiving end of geopolitical competition between competing powers. Russia and China are expanding their security presence in Africa including through

the military bases and are challenging the Western powers, primarily the US and France. Many African countries are refusing to choose between Russia and the West over the issue of Russia–Ukraine war. South Africa is the best example of such a non-aligned foreign policy. It has abstained in the UN and has even conducted naval exercises with Russia and China despite the Western protests.⁶¹ The evolving strategic scenario presents challenges as well as opportunities for India and defence diplomacy will have a critical role to play.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF (HADR) OPERATIONS

India likes to project itself as the ‘preferred security partner’ and the ‘first responder’ in the IOR. The role of a ‘first responder’ is particularly relevant for the purpose of defence diplomacy as it enables India to project power in a benign manner. It also helps in building goodwill and trust with the affected countries. India is known as the pharmaceutical factory of the world and has emerged as a net exporter of food. Therefore, providing necessary food and medical supplies to the countries in the Global South, especially in the immediate and extended neighbourhood, ravaged by the natural disasters should not be too difficult and will perhaps be among the most effective components of defence diplomacy.

Besides, India has the experience and capabilities to undertake necessary HADR and rescue missions. Over the years, the Indian navy and air force have built capabilities for long-range missions. India’s acquisition of long-range, military transport aircraft like the C-17 Globemaster and C-130 J Hercules has helped it in these HADR as well as rescue missions. The navy’s regular and growing forays in the Indo-Pacific and African waters have positioned it well when it was called upon to deliver HADR assistance. India rescued thousands of its own citizens from conflict-ridden Libya in 2011. In April 2015, Indian air force was deployed to evacuate citizens of 41 countries from Yemen via Djibouti. For that rescue mission, ‘a combined MEA, IAF, Indian Navy and Air India evacuation plan was put into place’.⁶² While the ‘Indian Naval ships evacuated nationals from Yemen port cities to Djibouti and Air India ferried back nationals from Sanaa to Djibouti, IAF deployed three C-17 aircraft to ferry back Indian nationals from Djibouti to Kochi and Mumbai’.⁶³

In the last few years, the Indian navy has been taking a lead in providing the necessary assistance to IOR countries during their times of need. The

best example has been India's assistance to Southwest Indian Ocean countries since 2019 when a series of disasters like cyclones, COVID-19 pandemic and drought ravaged the region. In 2019, when Cyclone Idai devastated Mozambique, the Indian navy responded quickly. Cyclone Idai made landfall on 15 March 2019, and by 19 March, Indian naval vessels were in Mozambique. As a press release from the Indian Navy noted, '*INS Sujata* along with *ICGS Sarathi* arrived at Port Beira morning of 18 March 2019 whilst *INS Shardul* arrived on 19 March 2019 and are providing necessary support to the local administration' and that, 'the disembarkation of HADR stores including food, medicines and clothing to the Mozambique Defence authorities has been completed. Arrangements are in progress to disembark potable water.'⁶⁴

Next year, when Cyclone Diane struck Madagascar and 92,000 people were affected, India launched 'Operation Vanilla' to provide relief supplies to Madagascar. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian naval ships were busy providing food and medical assistance to the countries in the IOR. The Indian Navy sent aid to 15 countries in the IOR. India 'delivered a cumulative assistance of more than 3,000 MT of food aid, over 300 MT Liquid Medical Oxygen, 900 Oxygen Concentrators and 20 ISO containers'.⁶⁵ The lion's share of assistance was obviously provided to countries located in the Indian Ocean maritime Africa. In the process, India not only underscored its role as the 'first responder' in the crises but also bolstered India's ties with the countries in the strategic region.

HADR operations are likely to remain a key component of India's defence diplomacy in the foreseeable future. It serves the interests of Indian Ocean countries as they could bank on India during the crises whereas for India, it fits in with the narrative of 'preferred security partner' and that of being the 'first responder'. It is also a useful tool for highlighting India's benign role in the geopolitics of Indo-Pacific and Africa as opposed to the role of other players like China and Russia who seem to have engaged in military power projection and are challenging the security and stability of the region. For India, HADR and rescue missions are also valuable instruments from the point of view of public diplomacy as well.

INDIA–AFRICA DEFENCE DIALOGUE AND DEFENCE EXPORTS

Since the launch of the India–Africa Forum Summit in 2008, India has been systematically engaging African countries to bolster political, economic and defence relationships. In 2020, India launched the India–Africa Defence

Dialogue (IADD) to engage African countries specifically in the domain of defence. So far, two dialogues have taken place—the first in 2020 at Lucknow and the second in 2022 at Gandhinagar. IADD will build on the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which already engages Indian Ocean maritime Africa for maritime security.

The 'Lucknow Declaration' adopted after the first dialogue observed that, 'terrorism and extremism, piracy, organised crime including human trafficking, drug trafficking, weapon smuggling and others' as 'common security challenges' for India and Africa.⁶⁶ Underlining the important role of defence cooperation, the Lucknow Declaration called for the 'deeper cooperation in the domain of defence industry including through investment, joint ventures in defence equipment software, digital defence, research & development, provisioning of defence equipment, spares and their maintenance on sustainable and mutually beneficial terms'.⁶⁷ It is in line with India's efforts to emerge as a defence exporter and is eyeing Africa as a potential market. In 2022, the second IADD at Gandhinagar was attended by 50 countries including the defence ministers from 20 countries. India also instituted a fellowship at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. It was also decided that the IADD will be held biennially.⁶⁸

Both dialogues have been geared to further enhance India's defence ties with Africa, especially to boost weapons exports. Africa faces a multitude of security challenges and therefore, will benefit by the security cooperation with India. From India's point of view, Africa will be a theatre of opportunity to emerge as a global security player. Mauritius, Seychelles, Mozambique, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa are some of the important customers for India's defence exports in Africa.⁶⁹ There were reports about Egypt's interest in acquiring India's indigenously produced light combat aircraft, Tejas.

It remains to be seen whether India succeeds in its stated ambition to emerge as a major defence exporter to Africa. Forums like IADD will be useful for this purpose. Perhaps, military exercises will also prove beneficial in marketing and showcasing India's defence products in action to the likely customers. India's diplomacy, especially the defence attachés posted abroad, will have an important role in marketing India's defence products and in convincing the prospective consumers in Africa. Historically, India's defence diplomacy played a role in the defence imports. Now, it will be called upon to develop skills to promote India's defence exports.

CONCLUSION

Defence diplomacy is an important instrument in the foreign and strategic policy toolkit of a state. Every major global power engages in the practice of defence diplomacy. Wide range of activities such as military training, capacity-building, port visits, defence policy level dialogues, etc., are undertaken as part of defence diplomacy. Usually, the relatively weaker states of the Global South are at the receiving end of defence diplomacy, whereas major powers tend to provide various forms of assistance. It results in tying the weaker state closer to the major power whereas for major powers, the expansion of influence is a key goal behind defence diplomacy. Defence diplomacy between major global powers and regional/ relatively more capable states is aimed at enhancing strategic trust and communication, sending a message to a common adversary, etc. In the context of global uncertainty and strategic flux, the significance of defence diplomacy is steadily going up.

In the context of India, defence diplomacy operates at two levels—first, diplomacy is an important means for India's military preparedness. Indian diplomacy has been playing a major role in ensuring access to weapons and technologies, in striking favourable deals and blunting efforts of technology denial. The second level is visible in India's provision of assistance to the Global South countries, mostly in Asia and Africa. For many states in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa, India has been a long-standing partner in defence-related matters.

The arc of India's defence diplomacy is expanding from the immediate neighbourhood to the wider Indian Ocean and even further to the Gulf of Guinea and the Mediterranean Sea. India has provided various forms of assistance, the most notable being the military training, capacity building, port visits, joint exercises, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief operations, etc. Countries in the Indian Ocean maritime Africa like Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar and Mozambique have been major recipients of India's defence diplomacy. India is also now making concerted efforts to enhance its defence exports to Africa and seeks to further engage African states in the domain of security. To that end, it organises the India–Africa Defence Dialogue. The strategic objectives of expanding influence and growing India's geopolitical footprint will be served well through the conduct of defence diplomacy.

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