

India–Africa Military-cum-Defence Diplomacy

A Viable Option

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The relationship between India and Africa is based on historical ties forged during colonialism and apartheid. However, due to a wave of liberalisation and privatisation in the 1990s, India's involvement in Africa shifted significantly. Despite active engagement for more than 70 years, India's long-term strategy for expanding its relations with Africa lacked clarity and wherewithal. As a result, India has also been unable to capitalise on its enormous historical goodwill in the region. However, it may change as ideological and political issues are taking a backseat. Also, rising economic and security ties have recently given the partnership a fresh start. However, given the unprecedented opportunity to engage with African countries to address their security concerns and thus strengthen relations, it is observed that initiatives to this end are insufficient. What else can be done to make the engagements more meaningful and worthwhile? Can the defence diplomacy factor be one of the strategies for strengthening bilateral security cooperation? Can the bilateral engagement move to other military arenas beyond UN Peacekeeping Operations? Can the Indian military contribute more to the African countries' capacity-building? Can India think of establishing a military base beyond the maritime domain? Can India capitalise on Africa in its effort of 'Atmanirbharta' to 'Bharatnirbharta'?

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This article attempts to answer these questions by focusing on the need for India and Africa to strengthen their relationships at all levels, particularly in defence and military diplomacy.

Keywords: *India–Africa Relations, Defence Diplomacy, Military Training, UNPKF, Continent of Hope, East Africa, Capacity Building*

INTRODUCTION

India and Africa have a long history of political cooperation, and India's diaspora is strongly rooted throughout the continent. Under the non-aligned movement, India's founding fathers fostered and supported Africa's independence from colonialism and apartheid throughout the Cold War and stood with the continent against colonial nations.¹ India and Africa have maintained a multifaceted relationship since antiquity. Geographical proximity and the navigable Indian Ocean drew the inhabitants of the two places closer together. India enjoys tremendous goodwill in the continent due to the old connection and strong multidimensional historical ties.²

There is a long history of trade, cultural exchange and political relations between India and Africa. Throughout history, the East African coast has served as an important trading centre for Indian merchants. Since ancient times, India and East Africa have relied on the Indian Ocean as a major trade and commerce route. East Africa exported gold, ivory and other natural resources, while Indian merchants brought textiles, spices and valuable stones. Trade between the two regions has persisted to the present day, with India being one of Africa's leading commercial partners. The existence of a sizable Indian diaspora in Africa has had a tremendous effect on the culture of the region. Africa is fond of Indian cuisine, music and dancing, and the two regions share a passion for Bollywood films. Several African nations have received support and aid from India, particularly in education, health and infrastructure. In addition, India has contributed significantly to peacekeeping efforts in the region. In recent years, India and Africa have strengthened their commercial connections. In addition to infrastructure, telecommunications, military cooperation, and energy, India has been investing in various other industries. Indian corporations have also invested in Africa's economies, creating jobs and fostering economic progress. Both regions stand to gain substantially from continuing cooperation and collaboration. As Africa continues to grow and develop, India can play a crucial role in supporting its growth and helping to construct a better future for the region's inhabitants. The

increasing frequency of high-level visits from both sides and the introduction of new areas of cooperation regularly illustrate Africa's importance in India's foreign policy.

Africa is a continent that India cannot afford to ignore from an economic and commercial standpoint. India's contribution to UN peacekeeping has been recognised throughout Africa, and it needs to be further expanded with greater participation in consultation with the African allies. India needs to engage with Africa far more firmly on all of these challenges. While the revival of India–Africa cooperation and engagement has to be all-inclusive, the diplomatic, economic and military affairs can be clubbed together for a practical approach towards bilateral connection. The diplomatic and economic efforts have always been on the cards of comprehensive national power. Still, a very robust and effective mechanism of defence-cum-security cooperation is often missed out or given little weight. India needs to act firmly for greater defence collaboration in the present governance regime in the ever-changing geopolitical environment.

INDIA–AFRICA TIES IN RECENT TIMES

India's bilateral and regional economic connections with Africa have been strengthened in the last two decades, first with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Team-9, and then with the African Union (AU). With the 1st India–Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-I) held in New Delhi in April 2008, an organised engagement with Africa began. In May 2011, the IAFS-II was held in Addis Ababa. However, these meetings were confined to a few African leaders under the AU's Banjul structure.³ Finally, in October 2015, New Delhi hosted the 3rd India–Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-III), a historic event that brought together delegations from all 54 African countries. This summit proved to be the landmark for beginning of the new era of cooperation between the two regions and also signifies the importance of Africa in the foreign policy of India.

In recent years, Africa has become one of the most popular political destinations globally. The traditional and developing powers' sudden evident increase in interest in Africa is a testament to the need to tap on Africa's tremendous potential. The intense interest in global polity stems from the abundance of opportunities for hope, trade, economics and a foothold in the universal market. India has upped its speed in actively engaging with Africa since 2014 under the current leadership. It builds meaningful relationships with African countries in various areas, including infrastructure and soft

power and has stepped up its political, diplomatic and economic engagement with Africa. It is vividly reflected in the numerous visits undertaken by Indian Ministers, President, Vice President and Prime Minister since 2014. As part of military diplomacy, the armed forces' chiefs have also visited East African countries in these years to further strengthen the relations. There is an urgent requirement of reaping the dividends from visits undertaken by India's government to strengthen the foresightedness of looking towards the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR) through African countries. India needs to explore the tremendous opportunity existing in Africa as it is the continent of hope in this century.⁴

INDIA–AFRICA BILATERAL TRADE

Bilateral trade has expanded from US\$ 34 billion in 2009 to US\$ 69 billion in 2019, supporting the expansion of the India–Africa economic partnership.⁵ According to the IMC Chamber of Business and Industry, this sum is projected to exceed US\$ 100 billion in a few years.⁶ India is currently Africa's third largest trading partner, with bilateral trade of around US\$ 89.5 billion.⁷ With cumulative investments of US\$ 73.9 billion from 1996 to 2021, India is currently the fifth largest investor in Africa.⁸ The report titled 'Reinvigorating India's Economic Engagements with Southern Africa' was published by India Exim Bank during the opening of the CII-Exim Bank Regional Colloquium on India–Southern Africa Growth Partnership in Johannesburg in November 2022. The report recommended a 'shift from India's existing strategy to its defence and security cooperation with Africa and other developing nations, which remains need-based and focuses on empowering through training, capacity building, and humanitarian aid'.⁹ According to the report, increasing collaboration in aerospace, defence, maritime equipment and vessels may strengthen Africa's technological capability and safeguard its security while accelerating India's defence export goal of US\$ 5 billion by 2025. According to the SIPRI International Arms Transfer Database, India was the 23rd largest exporter of military equipment between 2017 and 2021.¹⁰ It further brings out that 'Mauritius accounted for 6.6% of India's arms exports between 2017 and 2021, followed by Mozambique (5 per cent) and Seychelles (2.3 per cent) in Africa'.¹¹

AFINDEX-19

The Africa–India Field Training Exercise-2019 (AFINDEX-19) was held in Pune in March 2019; it was the first time that India and African nations

had participated in a joint field exercise. In total, 17 African countries participated in the first exercise.¹² AFINDEX-19 was aimed at helping participating countries plan and execute humanitarian mining action (HMA) and peacekeeping operations (PKO).

FIRST INDIA–AFRICA DEFENCE MINISTERS’ CONCLAVE 2020

On the sidelines of DefExpo India, the Indian government’s Ministry of Defence conducted the first-ever India–Africa Defence Ministers’ Conclave (IADMC) in Lucknow, India, on 6 February 2020. The purpose was for India and Africa to strengthen their defence ties. This event marked a brave choice forward in the run of Pan-Africa ministerial activities leading up to the India–Africa Forum Summit IV. At the end of IADMC 2020, a Joint Declaration titled the ‘Lucknow Declaration’ was adopted, which became a Conclave document. The Defence Ministers’ Conclave, which was attended by over 154 delegates from Africa, including Defence Ministers from 14 African countries, Members of Parliament, 19 Defence and Service Chiefs, and 8 Permanent Secretaries from 38 African countries, can be considered a successful attempt by India to revive India–Africa relations. In the context of long-standing historical ties between India and Africa, this Conclave demonstrated the great significance of India–Africa interaction in defence and security. The contribution of Indian defence forces to the security and defence of African nations has long been recognised, primarily through UN Peacekeeping Forces, the establishment of military academies, the operation of training teams and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, including recent cases in Madagascar, Mozambique and Ethiopia.

The most important deliverable of the Lucknow Declaration was a commitment to deeper cooperation in the domain of the defence industry, including through investment, joint ventures in defence equipment software, digital defence, research and development, provisioning of defence equipment and spares, and their maintenance on sustainable and mutually beneficial terms. Another significant outcome was continuing ‘to collaborate in the fields of peace and security, including conflict prevention, resolution, management, and peacebuilding through the exchange of expertise and training, strengthening regional and continental early warning capacities and mechanisms, enhancing the role of women in peacekeeping, and propagating the culture of peace’.¹³

DefExpo 2022

In October 2022, the India–Africa Defence Dialogue (IADD) was conducted alongside DefExpo 2022 in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. Several facets of the IADD’s theme, ‘Adopting a Strategy for Synergizing and Enhancing Defence and Security Cooperation’,¹⁴ were successfully discussed during the dialogue. Furthermore, the forum emphasised India and African countries’ underlying commitment to pursuing new areas of convergence for defence engagements, such as training, capacity development, maritime security, cybersecurity and counter-terrorism. The two parties collaborate in numerous regional structures that enable inclusive and constructive engagement in addressing shared security concerns and mutual threats to peace and development. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reaffirmed India’s assistance to Africa in addressing the challenges of conflict, terrorism and violent extremism, highlighting the multifaceted nature of India and Africa’s defence and security partnership. The commitment of India to ‘stay united with African countries in their pursuit of peace, security, stability, growth, and prosperity’ is based on the 10 guiding principles outlined by Prime Minister Modi in his address to the Ugandan Parliament in 2018. India urged African nations to explore Indian defence equipment and technology, claiming it has been a prominent exporter of defence goods in recent years. The defence minister added, ‘Africa will remain at the top of our list of priorities. We will continue to strengthen and expand our ties with Africa. Peace, security, and development are intertwined; therefore, security is vital for growth in the region. In India, a governmental and private defence manufacturing ecosystem has been established, which provides a substantial number of technical personnel that can assist you in meeting your defence needs.’¹⁵

An outcome document, the ‘Gandhinagar Declaration’, was adopted at the culmination of the dialogue. It suggests various measures to strengthen training collaboration in all areas of mutual interest. Increasing training slots and the deployment of training teams, empowering and enhancing the capabilities of African defence forces, participating in exercises, and providing humanitarian aid during natural disasters are a few areas of collaboration. Fifty African nations, including 20 Defence Ministers, 7 CDS/Service Chiefs, and 8 Permanent Secretaries, participated in the dialogue, demonstrating the importance placed on India–Africa collaboration in the military and security fields. In addition, the IADD highlighted to African nations, as part of DefExpo 2022, the rising capabilities of the local defence sector, which is one of the critical drivers of the Prime Minister’s ‘Make in India, Make for the World’ initiative.¹⁶

PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION TO KENYA AND TANZANIA

In one of its kind, the Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, led the Indian parliamentary delegation to Kenya and Tanzania in January 2023. This parliamentary delegation from India was visiting Tanzania after a gap of 50 years. Such high-level visits strengthen political, defence and parliamentary relations between the countries. The Lok Sabha Speaker emphasised that the ‘defence ties between the two countries have augmented over a period of time’, and he expressed hope that this will be further strengthened.¹⁷ During the visit to Kenya, the Lok Sabha Speaker expressed hope that ‘India’s rapid economic growth and its emergence as the world’s fifth largest economy and is one of Kenya’s and Tanzania’s most important economic and trade partners.’¹⁸ The great desire for the advancement and prosperity of their people has characterised the relationship between the two nations, and India has always been a dependable partner in Tanzania’s development journey. The recent inauguration of the first Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) outside India, which is being established in Tanzania, is testimony to this.

AFINDEX-23

The Indian Army hosted the second iteration of the Africa–India field training exercise (AFINDEX-23) in Pune from 21 March to 30 March. Over 100 personnel from 23 African nations participated in the exercise. The exercise aimed to foster peace and security, facilitate sharing of ideas, and encourage a collaborative approach to enhancing the capabilities of African armies. The joint exercise focused primarily on tactical drills, procedures, and the capacity to operate jointly with seamless interoperability.¹⁹ Also, it provided an opportunity to learn from African experiences managing security crises and cooperative security. The significant highlight of the exercise was the Indian outreach to African nations through the conduct of the 1st India–Africa Chiefs’ Conclave at the culmination of the event.

MORE VIABLE OPTIONS

Till sometime back, ‘Defence Diplomacy’ was the least discussed or holistically thought-off subject with peripheral interest in international relations. Little knowing that the contribution of armed forces towards the modification and upliftment of defence forces of African countries can change the outlook of their troops and, in turn, the local populace. It is a stated fact that the Indian Diaspora and workforce approach is always empathetic and based on the

requirement and needs of local people. Hence, India's art of managing affairs is always in high demand and is long-lasting, whereas it has yet to be seen in dealing with other countries.

While India attempts to establish itself as an African net security provider in the face of shared threats from terrorism and piracy, the military-to-military connections must be re-established. Indian Armed Forces can prove vital in imparting academic and military training to African countries. Apart from UNPKF, the Indian Armed Forces can play a vital role in building up African Armies, Air Forces and Navies. Going by the principle of 'With Africa-For Africa', the Indian Armed Forces must be the best choice for the present government for revitalising India–Africa relations for decades to come in line with Agenda 2063. Since 2019, a few significant events have been exclusively for defence engagement between the two regions.

MILITARY ENGAGEMENT

With the second-largest Army and fourth-largest Air Force globally, India has presented itself as an accountable member of the global community. It has effectively deployed its military in global defence cooperation initiatives. As part of its defence cooperation, India has provided training to numerous African military officers at various military institutes over the years. India engages in military-to-military cooperation with over one-third of African states, particularly in the training fields. In addition, India has participated in all UN peacekeeping missions as one of Africa's largest peacekeeping donors. Active deployments include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Ethiopia. This engagement needs to be further widened in other areas, especially in central and eastern African countries.

MILITARY TRAINING

India has deployed military training teams in Botswana, Tanzania, Lesotho, Zambia, Nigeria, Uganda and Seychelles. Our Indian Defence Attachés are based in Egypt, Kenya and Nigeria. Also, several military-to-military cooperation activities are being planned with other countries. Many military officers from African nations have participated in various levels of training in India. India's well-equipped training and infrastructure facilities are essential contributors to this phenomenon. The availability of English-speaking officers in African armies significantly facilitates the training of officers. Due to linguistic issues, however, personnel's training below the

rank of officer is severely hampered. This is another segment of defence cooperation that can yield tremendous benefits.

INSPECTION SERVICES DEPARTMENTS

Internal governance supervision procedures have been established in many African countries. Most Francophone African countries, for example, have established inspection services sections in their defence ministries. This department is in charge of overseeing, advising and testing the military's operational capability and the implementation of government policies. The main tasks of the department are to:

- Control the application of laws, rules and ministerial decisions regarding administrative and financial aspects of the armed forces.
- Participate in the development and implementation of military doctrine.
- Submit periodic reports on the management of human resources, equipment, training and needs of the armed forces.

Col (Dr) Emile Ouédraogo,²⁰ a parliamentarian in the National Assembly of Burkina Faso states that 'Inspection services departments are a valuable institutional innovation, and they can be easily circumvented unless empowered. Such is the situation when inspection services are just dead-end appointments for former armed forces chiefs of staff or high-ranking military officers and exist only to finish out a defence ministry's organisational chart.'²¹ The Indian Air Force has a very robust mechanism of such inspecting agency. This facet of IAF can be easily be implemented for various militaries of the African countries.

REVIEW OF MANDATE

Col (Dr) Emile Ouédraogo states that 'militaries are expensive, and a professional army needs to be educated, trained, equipped and maintained'. He further analyses that 'Most African militaries are created and organised primarily to counter foreign aggression. However, they are ill-equipped to deal with non-traditional security challenges like domestic conflicts, terrorism, transnational crime, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and maritime piracy. This mismatch is a critical factor in African militaries' challenges. African governments must adjust their security perspectives to respond to actual challenges appropriately and improve the professionalism of their forces.'²² Indian Armed Forces have been approached by the African

defence forces to help them revisit their training curriculum, write their doctrines, etc. There is no comparison between the literary skills and vision of Indians. The Indian Armed Forces are best at drawing the conceptual framework and strategies. The African defence forces can efficiently utilise the same.

UNPKF

India has taken part in all United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa. As part of post-conflict peacebuilding, Indian army contingents have played a crucial role in training army soldiers in conflict-affected nations such as Congo, Sudan, Mozambique, Rwanda and Angola.²³ In terms of professionalism, humanitarian concern and gender equality, India's commitment to maintaining peace in Africa is unparalleled. Notwithstanding the perilous nature of missions in Africa, India has long been regarded as a dependable peacekeeper due to its willingness to accept risks and capacity for steadfast devotion. India did not remove its troops from Somalia, one of the most dangerous UN missions, until the end, despite suffering fatalities.²⁴

EXPORT OF DEFENCE EQUIPMENT

The first meeting of the India–Africa Defence Ministers' meeting on the sidelines of the 11th DefExpo in Lucknow sent a message that India would like to strengthen the India–Africa security partnership with African priorities. Defence cooperation includes enhancing cooperation and mutual capabilities in combating terrorism and extremism. As a result, India is preparing to supply African counterparts with Fast Interceptor Boats, body, OPVs, vehicle armour, Dornier aircraft, Night Vision Goggles (NVGs), Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), as well as weaponry and ammunition.²⁵ The supplies of military hardware to a few countries like Kenya and Seychelles have also been undertaken in the past.²⁶ Going strong with the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' concept, there is immense possibility for India to manufacture and export numerous military hardware. Moreover, a technological stalwart in the military sphere, such as Defence Research Development Organisation (DRDO), Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL), Electronics Corporation of India Limited (ECIL), Tata, etc., can export equipment ranging from communication, radars, missiles, artillery to IT software and hardware.

FOCUS ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Education and training are also crucial in bringing together belligerent forces in demobilisation, disarmament and re-integration. There cannot be a better proposition to have the Indian Armed Forces Training Teams (AFTT) undertaking this arduous task for most of the African countries and focus on education and training in the African defence forces.²⁷

MEDICAL CAPACITY BUILD UP

Medical diplomacy through an empathetical use of healthcare and medical assistance can prove to be an effective tool for diplomacy and international relations as a key constituent of the foreign policy. Towards this, harnessing the medical tourism capacity of India along with the set-up of Armed Forces medical paraphernalia can imprint an everlasting impact on the African society as Africa faces significant challenges in the healthcare sector, with poor healthcare infrastructure and a shortage of healthcare professionals. The Indian Armed Forces Medical Services (AFMS) can play a crucial role in promoting medical diplomacy and contributing to the global health agenda through organising joint medical camps and training programmes to promote collaboration and sharing of medical expertise for longer duration. The AFMS has been actively involved in providing medical assistance to foreign countries in times of crisis, such as natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies. For instance, during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the AFMS provided medical assistance to affected countries, including Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Similarly, during the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the AFMS deployed medical teams to provide emergency medical assistance to the affected population and the most recent being the Op Dost in the earthquake-stricken Türkiye. The medical help by the Indian armed forces in the far adverse and tragic conditions has won hearts of millions of affected people in Türkiye and has written a new and positive chapter in India–Türkiye relations.

Similarly, apart from providing medical assistance during emergencies, the AFMS can involve in capacity-building and training programmes for medical personnel of African countries. The AFMS can collaborate with various international organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), to provide training and support for medical professionals in areas such as disaster management, public health and medical education. As a long-lasting project, after having established the medical assistance and training, medical diplomacy can further get involved in medical research and

development culminating into the opening of Armed Forces Medical College (AFMC) on the lines of IIT in Tanzania.

SCHOLAR WARRIOR EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

Another unique opportunity for capacity-building in Africa could be utilising the Indian defence subject matter experts (SME) leveraging the Scholar Warrior Exchange Programme (SWEP). The concept of SWEP combines academic knowledge with military expertise to create a new paradigm for capacity-building in the military and defence sectors. Indian defence SMEs can engage with African countries to understand their specific defence requirements and identify areas where the SWEP can be applied effectively. As a result, it will provide targeted support to African countries and build their capacity meaningfully. The academic training for African defence personnel can be imparted in doctrine, strategy, logistics and leadership. It will enable African defence personnel to develop a deeper understanding of defence concepts and apply them in real-life situations. Military training can also be provided to African defence personnel to build their operational and tactical skills.

The SWEP would also emphasise mentoring African defence personnel to provide ongoing support and guidance. This will allow African defence personnel to continue developing their skills and knowledge over time, even after the initial training. One such example in the academic domain is the recently institutionalised 'India–Africa Security Fellowship Programme' at the defence think tank Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDS) in New Delhi. The fellowship is an opportunity to enhance joint research capacities on security challenges in Africa and other strategic issues. The SWEP could also build collaborative networks between academic institutions and military organisations. Indian defence small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) can build collaborative networks with African defence and academic institutions to exchange knowledge and expertise, keeping them updated with the latest defence concepts and best practices.

CONCLUSION

Africa is currently a major foreign policy priority for India. India's pledge to remain a trusted partner and work closely with Africa for its people's economic and social empowerment will go a long way towards altering the

international order's contours along more egalitarian lines as Africa advances on its road towards security, revitalisation and prosperity. Historically, India's security relations with Africa have been around training African armed forces and involvement in United Nations peacekeeping missions. But on the other hand, New Delhi has recently attempted to strengthen its engagement with countries in the Indian Ocean Region, particularly those on the east coast of Africa, to enhance its capacity to tackle piracy and poaching. Hence, India has also established itself as the area's first responder in the Indian Ocean Region.

The Indian Armed Forces can significantly address all the persisting issues prevalent in the African defence forces. The suggested measures of the establishment of airbases or airstrips, SWEP, AFTT, military engagements and training would prove to be progressive indicators for Africa in the future. The Indian Armed Forces' presence in Africa will enable garnering support from all African defence forces in the hour of need in the Western Indian Ocean Region. It will also allow India to showcase its strength in the geo-strategic environment in the IOR. Such presence in the African continent would prove to be a win-win factor leveraging defence-cum-military diplomacy as an effective tool of the country's soft power.

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