

## Cover Story

# FORGING STRATEGIC BONDS: INDIA'S EXPANDING DEFENCE FOOTPRINT IN NORTH AFRICA

India has increasingly become a key defence partner for North African nations like Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria, with significant potential for defence industry collaboration and arms exports. The North African region presents a strategic opportunity for India to expand its defence diplomacy and strengthen ties with the African continent. This article explores how India aligns with North African countries' defence modernisation goals and industrial cooperation efforts. Given North Africa's position as a gateway to Europe and Africa, fostering strong economic and defence ties could enhance India's regional influence through arms trade, industry partnerships, and capacity-building initiatives.

**Shayesta Nishat Ahmed\***

### Introduction

India's defence diplomacy has witnessed a notable expansion over the past few years, reflecting the country's ambition to be a key security and industrial partner in regions of strategic importance. Among these, **North Africa**—particularly Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria—has emerged as a focal point of India's defence outreach. India has endeavoured to leverage its historical ties, political goodwill, and complementary interests with Egypt,

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Morocco, and Algeria, who were all also part of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). India's engagement with these nations encompass high-level visits, military training, joint exercises, and defence industrial cooperation. North Africa's geostrategic location—connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa—makes it a vital partner in India's vision of extended neighbourhood diplomacy and South-South cooperation. As part of its "Atmanirbhar Bharat"

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\* Research Analyst, Defence Economics & Industry Centre, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi.

initiative, India is also promoting defence exports and co-production, offering cost-effective, high-quality systems to North African militaries seeking diversification and modernisation.<sup>1</sup>

This article examines India's evolving defence engagement with North Africa, focusing on three pillars: military diplomacy, industrial cooperation, and arms exports. It highlights India's efforts to position itself as a trusted defence partner through structured dialogue, joint training, and technology transfer, while enhancing its strategic presence across the region. These initiatives align with the vision outlined by Prime Minister Modi in his 2018 address to the Ugandan Parliament, where he underscored India's commitment to supporting employment generation, youth empowerment, agricultural innovation, climate resilience, and regional stability.<sup>2</sup> In line with this, India is steadily increasing its defence presence in Africa by engaging key partners like Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco, offering affordable and high-quality military solutions.

### Strategic Importance of North Africa

The North African region controls vital maritime routes through the Mediterranean Sea and the Suez Canal – an artery for global trade, including India's energy imports and outbound exports to Europe and North America. For India, North Africa's strategic significance lies not only in geography, but also in political alignment and shared developmental priorities. Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria are increasingly looking eastward to diversify their defence partnerships and reduce overdependence on traditional Western suppliers. These nations also seek partners that offer cost-effective, high-quality defence equipment and respect sovereignty in foreign policy – areas where India holds comparative advantage.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, North Africa plays a stabilising role in addressing transnational threats such as terrorism, maritime piracy, arms trafficking, and illegal migration. Enhanced defence cooperation in the region can directly support India's own maritime security interests in the Western Indian Ocean and broaden its role in Africa's peace and security architecture, including through United Nations Peacekeeping Operations.<sup>4</sup>

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The recently released SIPRI data on recent trends in international arms transfers in the Middle East and North Africa, highlighted that the region has witnessed increased arms imports, focusing mainly on combat aircraft, frigates, and anti-ballistic missiles. From 2020–24, aircraft made up the largest share (43 percent), followed by ships (20 percent) and missiles (16 percent).<sup>5</sup> The growing demand for long-range strike capabilities, naval security, and airspace defence – reflected in Egypt's focus on such arms imports over the past decade – is driven by regional tensions in the eastern Mediterranean, conflicts in Sudan and Libya, and strained relations with Israel.<sup>6</sup> Between 2020–24 Algeria and Morocco were North Africa's top arms importers, accounting for 53 percent and 34 percent of the region's imports, respectively – reflecting their ongoing tensions, particularly over Western Sahara. Algeria's arms imports dropped by 73 percent compared to 2015–19, mainly due to procurement cycles, with key deliveries including armoured vehicles, aircraft (notably Russian combat jets and Chinese

UAVs), and ships. Morocco's imports fell by 26 percent from 2015–19, though its peak was in 2010–14. Over half of its known missile imports were Israeli Surface-to-air missile (SAMs), and of 55 aircraft received, nearly half were UAVs, mainly from Türkiye.

Recognising Africa's increasing strategic importance, India has institutionalised its defence engagement with the continent through platforms like the India-Africa Defence Ministers' Conclave (IADMC), held alongside DefExpo since 2020. This reflects India's broader objective of enhancing security cooperation and deepening defence ties, especially as it

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pursues the ambitious goal of achieving <sup>1</sup> 50,000 crore in defence exports by 2029—a target closely linked to its growing outreach across Africa.<sup>7</sup> India's historical role in African security—including peacekeeping operations, maritime security, counterterrorism, and capacity-building, is now being reinforced through structured initiatives such as the Africa-India Field Training Exercise (AF-INDEX), which promotes interoperability and showcases Indian defence capabilities. The 2023 edition of AF-INDEX, themed *Africa-India Militaries for Regional Unity (AMRUT)*, was aligned with the

African Union's Agenda 2063.<sup>8</sup>

Maritime collaboration has also deepened under India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision, through training programmes, hydrographic surveys, and joint maritime exercises. A noteworthy example is among these are the first IMT TRILAT exercise with Mozambique and Tanzania and India's participation in Exercise Cutlass Express, which supports maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>9</sup> Tanzania stands out as a key example of this growing partnership, marked by a mini DefExpo in 2022 and the formation of a joint task force to define a five-year cooperation plan.<sup>10</sup> As SAGAR enters its second decade, Prime Minister Modi announced a new framework titled Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security across the Regions (MAHASAGAR) during his visit to Mauritius in March 2025. In alignment with this vision, the Indian Navy launched two key initiatives—IOS SAGAR and Africa India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME)—designed to reinforce its role as the 'Preferred Security Partner' and the 'First Responder' in the Indian Ocean Region.<sup>11</sup> To build on this momentum, India must institutionalise these defence engagements and move beyond ad-hoc approaches to ensure long-term impact.

### Overview of India's Defence Diplomacy with North Africa

Among North African countries, Egypt stands out as India's principal defence partner. The bilateral relationship between the two was revitalised following the landmark visit of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as Chief Guest for India's Republic Day in 2023.<sup>12</sup> This visit resulted in the elevation of ties to a 'Strategic Partnership,' with a particular emphasis on defence cooperation, counter-terrorism, cyber security, and military training.<sup>13</sup> Historical milestones include the joint development of a fighter aircraft in the 1960s and the

training of Egyptian pilots by the Indian Air Force (IAF) until 1984.<sup>14</sup> Institutional frameworks such as the Joint Defence Committee (JDC), National Security Advisor-level dialogues, and the Joint Working Group (JWG) on Counterterrorism—convened notably in January 2016 and most recently in April 2025—have cemented bilateral security cooperation.<sup>15</sup> This relationship was further reinforced by Egypt's participation in DefExpo 2016 and the signing of an MoU between the two National Security Councils.

In recent years, both countries have expanded collaboration to include co-production, maintenance of defence platforms, and enhanced joint training. Egyptian officers regularly attend professional military education courses in India (DSSC and NDC), while Indian officers receive training in Egypt. Operational synergy has grown through joint exercises such as the IAF-EAF 'Desert Warrior' (2021), Tactical Leadership Programme (2022, 2024), bilateral air drills (2023, 2024), and India's first participation in 'Bright Star-2023'. Naval and Special Forces cooperation has also deepened, with joint participation in MILAN-2024 and the third edition of Exercise Cyclone in February 2025. Egypt's presence at Aero India 2025 also signalled expanding interest in defence industrial cooperation.<sup>16</sup> High-level military dialogues and staff-level exchanges are supported by regular port calls, ship visits, and joint training programmes.

India and Morocco's defence relations have also steadily advanced, with naval diplomacy and joint defence manufacturing forming the cornerstone of bilateral engagement. The Indian Navy has conducted a series of port visits and maritime exercises with the Royal Moroccan Navy, including Passage Exercises (PASSEX) and Maritime Partnership Exercises (MPX), involving ships such as INS Tarkash, INS Tabar, INS Sumedha, and INS Tushil.<sup>17</sup> Notable examples include joint drills with Moroccan vessels Hassan-II and L C Arrahmani in 2022 and 2023, respectively.<sup>18</sup> These engagements have enhanced interoperability and tactical coordination, even in the absence of a formal defence agreement. Morocco's geostrategic position—linking Europe, Africa, and the Atlantic—complements India's SAGAR vision and broader foreign policy objectives. As a gateway to African markets and a strategic partner in the western Mediterranean, Morocco enables India to expand its regional footprint while promoting South-South cooperation and capacity-building in maritime security.

The shared global interests of Algeria and India were further solidified in 2016 when then-Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal expressed strong support for India's position on Jammu and Kashmir during a meeting with the Indian Vice President.<sup>19</sup> The two countries have been working closely in developing strategic relationship, among which, space cooperation

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in September 2018 which entail close cooperation between the two in areas of remote sensing, satellite communication technologies, including disaster management and crop forecasting.<sup>20</sup> Notably, India successfully launched four Algerian satellites in 2016 through its PSLV-C35 mission. The INS Tabar also conducted its first Maritime Partnership Exercise with Algerian Navy ship Ezzadjer in August 2021, to enhance interoperability and maritime security cooperation.<sup>21</sup> This was followed by high-ranking delegation visit of the Chief of the Defence Force (CDS) General Anil Chauhan, where both states signed a MoU on defence cooperation with Chief of Staff of the Algerian People's National Army General Saïd Chanegriha, from 31 October to 3 November 2024.<sup>22</sup> India also reaffirmed its commitment to peaceful conflict resolution and announced the re-establishment of its defence wing in Algeria, while supporting Algeria's plans for a similar office in India. Further solidifying ties, General Saïd Chanegriha, visited India from February 6–12, 2025, participated in Aero India 2025, and engaged in high-level talks with Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh, including the Defence Ministers' Conclave themed 'BRIDGE – Building Resilience through International Defence and Global Engagement'.<sup>23</sup>

Several joint exercises including MILAN, VARUNA, and IBSAMAR have been conducted especially as India is a resident power in the Indian Ocean and Africa is an integral part of India's Indo-Pacific vision. These engagements serve not only India's foreign policy goals but also contribute to regional peace and stability, aligning with African countries' aspirations for strategic autonomy and indigenous capacity.

### Scope for Defence Industrial Cooperation

These North African nations are actively pursuing defence modernisation, diversification of procurement sources, and the development of indigenous capabilities—objectives that align closely with India's strengths in cost-effective defence manufacturing, capacity-building, and training. As part of India's effort, defence attaches have been strategically appointed in African countries like Ethiopia, Djibouti, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Ivory Coast, in addition to existing advisors in Egypt, Algeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria, to promote exports.<sup>24</sup>

Recent high-level exchanges have seen Egypt express strong interest in Indian defence platforms such as the BrahMos, Akash missile systems, Smart Anti-Airfield Weapon (SAAW), and electronic warfare technologies.<sup>25</sup> Among Indian offerings, the Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL)'s air defence system - Akash system has drawn particular attention for its operational capabilities and export success.<sup>26</sup>

In the context of Morocco, in 2022, TATA Advanced Systems supplied tactical transport trucks, including LPTA-715 and 90 LPTA 2445 6x6 vehicles, to the Moroccan Army.<sup>27</sup> A major milestone is the Tata Advanced System Limited (TASL) contract to supply 150 WhAP (Wheeled Armoured Platform) vehicles to Morocco, a local manufacturing facility in Casablanca, Morocco, on 30 September 2024.<sup>28</sup> This marks India's largest global deal for armoured vehicles and highlights the country's Atmanirbhar (self-reliant) defence production capabilities. India's Kalashnikov AK-203 facility in Uttar Pradesh is also delivering weapons that have attracted interest from African nations.<sup>29</sup> As India seeks export markets for systems

like the WhAP – such strategic partnerships, particularly with Morocco, are vital for sustaining indigenous defence manufacturing. As a part of expanding its defence procurement portfolio, signed a Defence Cooperation MoU with India in 2018.<sup>30</sup> These developments reflect Morocco's strategic move to diversify its defence ties and deepen collaboration with India beyond its traditional partners.

Indian training institutions – such as the National Defence College and Defence Services Staff College – have been welcoming Moroccan officers, fostering long-term interoperability and goodwill. India has initiated several defence diplomacy outreach with an official National Defence College (NDC) delegation, such as the recently concluded visit to Morocco from 1 – 7 June 2025.<sup>31</sup> CDS Gen Anil Chauhan and Gen Said Chanegriha also signed a landmark agreement to enhance India-Algeria defence cooperation, paving the way for long-term collaboration across multiple sectors.<sup>32</sup> The latter also visited key defence and aerospace firms like BrahMos, GSL, BEL, L&T Defence, and Bharat Forge.<sup>33</sup> Though its defence acquisitions are largely of Russian origin, India can complement Algerian capacity-building through customised training programmes.<sup>34</sup> Algeria, has expressed interest in procuring key Indian defence platforms, including Arjun battle tanks, Pinaka rocket systems, BrahMos missiles, and Akash surface-to-air missile systems capable of intercepting aircraft, drones, helicopters, and subsonic cruise missiles.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

India's deepening defence engagement with North Africa reflects a strategic confluence of mutual interests, geopolitical shifts, and the expanding contours of New Delhi's "Act East through West" approach. These engagements are no longer limited to symbolic exchanges but are increasingly driven by operational training, joint exercises, platform co-development, and high-level strategic dialogue. North Africa's pursuit of diversified defence partnerships aligns seamlessly with India's strengths in cost-effective, adaptable military systems and capacity-building initiatives. As regional actors seek sovereignty and technological self-reliance in their defence sectors, India's model of South-South cooperation – anchored in affordability, availability, and adaptability (3A) – offers a compelling alternative to traditional suppliers.<sup>36</sup> Through institutional frameworks like the India-Africa Defence Ministers' Conclave and joint ventures such as the Tata-Morocco armoured vehicle deal, India is reinforcing its presence as a trusted partner and building long-term interoperability.

Looking ahead, sustained engagement, targeted export strategies, and joint industrial ventures will be crucial to maintaining momentum and translating goodwill into tangible strategic outcomes. As North Africa continues to recalibrate its defence priorities in an increasingly multipolar world, India's collaborative, capacity-building approach offers a pathway to shared resilience, regional stability, and mutual prosperity.

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