

# India–Africa Defence Cooperation

## A Strategic Perspective

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India and Africa are bonded by centuries old historic ties, which are deep-rooted, diverse and harmonious. As geographic neighbours, the two are linked by the Indian Ocean. Given the shared past, diaspora connection and future aspirations, India and Africa are natural partners. With the formation of India–Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) in 2008, bilateral cooperation gained huge traction and mechanism became more structured. India has accorded top priority to Africa in its foreign policy and strategic calculus. Consequently, 18 new embassies/ high commissions have been added over the last five years, taking the numbers to 47. Even bilateral trade has shown a sharp increase, of US\$ 98 billion in 2022–23. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India took a number of steps to help Africa by expediting the delivery of essential medicines and vaccines.

By presenting itself as the voice of the ‘Global South’, India has been advocating participative and less exploitive alternatives to ensure shared prosperity. One of the key highlights of the 18th G20 summit held in Delhi on 9–10 September 2023 was the induction of African Union (AU) as a

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permanent member of the global forum, primarily due to India's arduous efforts. In fact, Prime Minister Modi had recently said, 'No plan for the future of planet can be successful without the representation and recognition of all voices.' Even at the 15th BRICS summit held in Johannesburg in August 2023, India had called for Africa's sustainable and inclusive development, strongly supported the inclusion of Egypt and Ethiopia as new members of the group. Many African countries are looking to hedge against China in view of Beijing's economic partnership model which has pushed them into debt-trap.

Today, the ambit of security stands redefined, non-conventional threats overriding the traditional ones. With overlapping national interests, cooperation in the field of defence between India and Africa has become an indispensable imperative. India has developed a pragmatic framework for defence cooperation with Africa based on SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (world is one family) principles. Defence partnership between the two in mutually identified areas includes piracy, terrorism, cybersecurity and peacekeeping, to name a few.

India's increasing engagement with the African countries in the wake of the ongoing geo-political churning serves the interests of both sides. However, there are crucial challenges by way of reforms in global governance institutions, maritime and energy insecurity, besides rise of extremism/terrorism. Deepening defence cooperation between India and Africa is vital for the progress and prosperity of the region as a whole. While a number of initiatives have been taken towards enhancing the scope of Indo-African defence and security partnership, yet their full potential remains untapped.

This article aims to provide an insight into the defence cooperation between India and Africa, and its strategic ramification.

### SECURITY ENVIRONMENT SCAN

Security environment in the African continent remains rather complex, despite unprecedented economic growth in the recent times. The main elements leading to state of insecurity include ethnic conflicts, unemployment leading to poverty, dismal state of law and order coupled with gun culture, political instability and flawed governance marked by rampant corruption. These factors provide a fertile ground for the extremist and Islamic jihadi groups to thrive, posing threat to the global security. Terrorism in Africa has both political and religious dimensions.<sup>1</sup>

A number of African nations are engaged in combating extremist organisations that have links with Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Nigeria has been involved in a war against Boko Haram for over a decade. The Libyan crisis has strengthened existing armed groups and the emergence of new ones in West Africa. Al-Shabaab, known to be an affiliate of Al-Qaeda controls large swathes of Somalia. The rise of religious fundamentalism with trans-national outreach poses a serious challenge. According to the 'Global Terrorism Index 2022', the top ten most impacted nations by terrorism in descending order are Burkina Faso (2), Somalia (3), Mali (4), Nigeria (8) and Niger (10).<sup>2</sup>

Maritime violence along with internal instability in the Horn of Africa–Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a matter of genuine concern and focus of global attention. Of late, while piracy around Somalia has shown a decline, it has significantly increased in the Gulf of Guinea. India and Africa have a common interest in securing this strategic maritime space in the IOR.

## DEFENCE COOPERATION

In view of the growing strategic importance of Africa and critical security situation there, over dozen foreign countries have substantial military presence in the continent, US and France being the lead players. Even China has been active in conducting anti-piracy operations around the Gulf of Aden–Horn of Africa. India too has increased its naval presence in the IOR in pursuit of its national concerns, especially to counter Chinese military presence. Salient facets of Indo-African defence cooperation are enumerated in the succeeding paras.

### **India–Africa Defence Dialogue**

Safeguarding maritime security in the IOR is the combined responsibility of India and nine Indian Ocean Littoral Countries (IOLC) in Africa. These include Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa and Tanzania. The region needs to be future-ready to face security challenges, which entails collaboration in developing cutting-edge technologies in defence sector and a joint military training. To this end, India has initiated India–Africa Defence Dialogue (IADD) to be held biennially alongside DefExpos. During the first IADD held on 6 February 2020, scope for further investment in defence industry through strategic joint ventures in software, digital security, research and development and defence equipment was highlighted.

The second edition of IADD was held on 18 October 2022, alongside the 12th DefExpo, where 50 African countries participated. The focus was on identifying new areas of defence engagement such as capacity-building, cybersecurity, maritime security and counter-terrorism.<sup>3</sup> The potential for exchange of technical know-how and joint training included programmes like ‘Innovations for Defence Excellence’ (iDEX). In addition to addressing diverse defence requirements of African nations, it would also support the ‘Make in India’ initiative. The envisaged defence cooperation includes measures against piracy, illegal fishing, trafficking of drugs, arms and humans. It also entails capacity-building, surveillance and sharing of information.<sup>4</sup> The member-countries in IADD are exploring the adaption of new strategies for cyber, maritime and outer space, besides developing new-age weapons.<sup>5</sup>

### **Arms Supply**

Russia remained the largest arms supplier to Africa during the period 2017–21, accounting for 44 per cent of imports of major arms into the region. It was followed by the US at 17 per cent, China at 10 per cent and France at 6.1 per cent.<sup>6</sup> India has emerged as a new arms supplier in the African market; Mauritius accounted for 6.6 per cent, Mozambique 5 per cent and Seychelles 2.3 per cent of India’s arms exports during 2017–21.<sup>7</sup> In order to expand Pan-Africa E-Network, India had committed a grant of US\$ 600 million during the 3rd India–Africa Forum Summit in 2015. The fund is primarily allocated to expand the supply inventory, build installations, test and commission hardware-cum-software, end-to-end connectivity, satellite bandwidth, operations and maintenance (O&M) support along with provisioning of tele-education and tele-medicine services.<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has been strengthening cooperation within the framework of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to undertake specific projects and has formalised a framework of defence cooperation with South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar.

Prime Minister Modi announced a US\$ 100 million defence line of credit to Seychelles in addition to a US\$ 30 million gift of Dornier aircraft during President Danny Faure’s visit to India in June 2018. India has also renewed the agreement for cooperation in cybersecurity domain with Seychelles.<sup>9</sup> Cognizant of the mutual security concerns, India and Seychelles have agreed to collaborate to build a naval facility at Assumption Island.<sup>10</sup> India and Nigeria are set to ink an unprecedented US\$ 1 billion deal to boost the defence industry of the African nation, which could possibly include

new acquisitions like Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), Light Utility Helicopter (LUH), drones and Armed Personnel Carriers (APCs), besides refurbishing and local manufacture of a wide array of military equipment.

### **Maritime Security**

In the maritime domain, Indo-African cooperation has made significant progress. The Indian Navy has enhanced its role as a protector of international norms and as 'net security provider' in the IOR, in consonance with the concept of SAGAR. This is in sync with India's vision, which seeks to partner with IOR littorals to further mutual interests and work towards the resolution of maritime security issues through peaceful means.

Joint Operations and Counter-Terrorism are essential aspects of maritime security. On 24 March 2021, at Antsiranana Port, INS Shardul and Malagasy Navy Ship Trozona conducted a joint patrol of the Malagasy 'Exclusive Economic Zone' (EEZ) and joint exercise, PASSEX, for the first time. India continues to contribute to counter-terrorism and anti-piracy operations in various African countries. During the India–Africa Defence Ministers' Conclave held on 6 February 2020 in India, both sides expressed a desire to cooperate in counter-terrorism by strengthening the existing United Nations mechanisms. To combat the menace of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea, India has been periodically sending naval ships since November 2008.<sup>11</sup> Indian ships make regular port calls at Djibouti on transit and for joint exercise with US and French navies. INS Mysore during its anti-piracy patrol rescued an Ethiopian vessel, MV Gibe from Somali pirates.<sup>12</sup> Even India–Kenya cooperation in maritime security in the IOR has deepened. New avenues of collaborations were discussed during the recent visit of Kenya's Cabinet Secretary Aden Duale to India. An MOU has been signed between Goa Shipyard Limited and Kenya Shipyard Limited as a part of capacity-building and boosting defence industry cooperation.

Growing India–France cooperation in the African waters is an important development. Both the countries have identical geo-political and maritime interests. The two navies have conducted joint surveillance missions and mapping operations in the region in 2022. 'Indian Ocean Region-Information Fusion Centre' (IOR-IFC) based in Gurugram and 'Regional Coordination Operation Centre' (RCOC) based in Seychelles signed an MoU in February 2023 to enhance information sharing 'Maritime Domain Awareness' (MDA). Besides, India has access to eight 'Coastal Surveillance Radar' (CSR) in Mauritius and six CSR systems in Seychelles.

### **Training and Capacity-Building**

To provide specialised training for Malagasy commandos, a delegation from the Indian Navy visited the Marine Fusilier Training Centre at Diego Suarez, Antsiranana in December 2019. Fifty officers from the Malagasy Special Forces (SFs) received training for two weeks from the Indian Naval Mobile Training Team (INMTT) in March 2021. In October 2022, the second INMTT delegation travelled to Madagascar to conduct a similar programme for the Malagasy Special Forces.<sup>13</sup>

India played a pivotal role in the establishment of the ‘Harare Military Academy’ in Zimbabwe. In 2009, the Indian Army team helped improve the training standards at the ‘Major General Hailom Araya Military School’ in Holleta, Ethiopia.<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, the Sudan Block at India’s National Defence Academy (NDA) was partially funded by the Government of Sudan. It was in recognition of the sacrifices of the Indian troops for the liberation of Sudan during the North African Campaign in World War II.<sup>15</sup>

Over the past few years, two key initiatives have improved relations between India and Africa. The first was the Africa–India Field Training Exercise (AFINDEX), which was held in March 2019 in Pune, with participation from 17 African countries. The second was in February 2020, wherein India–Africa Defence Ministers’ Conference (IADMC) was held in Lucknow. In Tanzania and Ethiopia, India has helped in building military schools and institutions. India has also sent training teams to Botswana, Namibia, Uganda, Lesotho, Zambia, Mauritius, Seychelles and Tanzania, besides other African countries. Indian military personnel have been involved in sharing defence experiences and helping build African nations’ defence capabilities by building defence installations.

### **Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Aid**

India has been deeply involved in peacekeeping operations in Africa since 1960 in Congo—an important facet of the defence cooperation. It is amongst the top three contributing nations, having participated in peacekeeping missions in over 10 countries including Angola, Abeyi, Burundi, Congo, Ethiopia-Eritrea, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Somalia and Sierra Leone. The performance of Indian peacekeepers has been lauded by the UN officials and the local administration.

The role played by the Indian peacekeepers in providing humanitarian support has also been well recognised. The Indian armed forces have participated in various rescue missions over the years, mitigating catastrophic disasters like ‘Cyclone Idai’ in Mozambique in 2019. Similarly, Indian troops

worked day and night amidst adverse weather conditions during the 2020 floods in South Sudan. Even during COVID-19, Army Field Hospital in Goma, Congo treated not only UN officials but large number of civilians as well. India peacekeepers have made valuable contributions for the betterment of the locals, creating essential infrastructure wherever they were deployed.

### STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

India's increasing engagement with the African nations in the realm of defence cooperation has immense strategic significance. Strengthening defence ties with the African countries facilitates India in expanding its geo-political standing in the international forum as also counter the influence of other powers in the region. Defence cooperation also serves as a tool for enhancing defence diplomacy and building mutual trust. It opens avenues for deeper engagement in areas beyond defence, such as trade, education and culture.

In the era of geo-economics, defence cooperation involves technology transfer and joint ventures in the manufacture of military equipment. Hence, collaboration in defence provides economic benefit to both India and African countries, potentially leading to increased investments, building industrial ecosystem and infrastructure. It also enables human resource development, creating a pool of trained manpower and job creation.

Cooperation in maritime security, which entails piracy and illegal fishing off the African coast with a focus on securing sea lanes ensures, creates a conducive atmosphere for development. It also contributes to safeguarding the energy and trade routes. Besides, collaborative efforts to combat transnational terrorism threats ensures secure environment, making the world safer. To this end, India needs to partner with other like-minded nations to achieve synergy and better outcome.

There may be few concerns in view of varying strategic priorities and compatibility in terms of equipment, which ought to be addressed to foster meaningful cooperation. Besides, there are other global players like China who have increasing defence cooperation with AU nations. Hence, India's efforts must be well calibrated to compete effectively, while respecting the sensitivities and interests of the African states.

### GOING AHEAD

India–Africa defence cooperation has grown over the years in view of the converging political, economic and strategic interests. Given the complexities

of security challenges, the ambit of cooperation is rather broad, offering vast scope for expansion. India is engaged in enhancing the capacities of security services in Africa with its extensive experience in combating cross-border terrorism. Delhi must continue to visibly contribute to Africa's efforts by working jointly on intelligence, investigations and prosecution of terrorism-related incidents. Other areas that foster purposeful collaboration are cybersecurity, aerospace, maritime domain and armament technology.

Today, India is the 23rd largest arms supplier in the world. It can supply a large number of weapon systems including SAMS (Surface-to-Air Missile System), LCA Tejas, light weapons and ammunition. Africa can play an important role towards India's aspirations of becoming a leading defence exporter as also its emergence as a net security provider.

India has made a significant contribution in imparting training to the armed forces of African nations. It intends to scale up maritime cooperation evident from plans to set up a chain of coastal monitoring stations in Seychelles, Mauritius and Maldives. India must also enhance its engagement with the Djiboutian Navy, given its strategic significance as a number of nations have set up bases there, China being the recent entrant.

Africa is set to play a vital role in the process of rebalancing that is underway in the Indo-Pacific. Hence, it is in India's interests to engage with African nations purposefully with a well-defined roadmap. India's defence cooperation with African nations has strategic ramifications that go beyond the realm of security. Defence cooperation built on trust, aligning mutual interests in the long run will lead to regional equilibrium and economic growth, which will significantly serve the interests of both India and Africa.

## NOTES

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