

Roadmap for Enhanced India–Eastern Africa Defence Cooperation

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India's vast trade influence in countries around the Indian Ocean was at its peak in the 16th–17th centuries. Many researchers credit this to India's unmatched maritime capability during that time. The much-acclaimed 'spice trade' flourished particularly with countries in Eastern Africa, from Djibouti in the north to Mozambique in the south. The arrival of the East India Company in the 17th century diminished India's maritime strength and impacted trade adversely. British rule over India in the 19th century then led to a sizeable number of Indians moving to East Africa for trade and as labour. This long-time connection was cemented by India's support for East African countries in their freedom struggle. Sterling performances by Indian Armed Forces in UN Peacekeeping missions in Africa also helped burnish India's image. Capitalising on this centuries-old people-to-people connection, India also ventured into cooperation in the field of defence and security.

This article traces the origins of India–East Africa defence cooperation with the aim to understand the basis for its foundation, its effectiveness, the challenges (past and future) and suggest ways to leverage mutual benefits

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from it. Points of importance are an understanding of the reasons why the centuries-old India–East Africa connect has not been utilised well by India and why India is a reluctant participant in the field of defence cooperation. Analysing through the lens of ‘defence diplomacy’, the article will assess how this approach can effectively convert India’s soft power to the desired ‘smart power’. The article concludes with suggestions for India’s policymakers and executioners in this niche category of defence diplomacy.

Keywords: *India, Eastern Africa, Defence, Defence Cooperation, Defence Diplomacy*

INTRODUCTION

About 340 kms off the Horn of Africa, sitting on the mouth of the Gulf of Aden is the unique Yemeni island of Socotra—considered the ‘most alien-looking place on Earth’.¹ A UNESCO World Heritage Site, this island’s one-third of plant species are endemic (found nowhere else on Earth). The name of the island is supposed to be derived from the Sanskrit name for it: *Dveep Sukhadhara*, meaning ‘Island of Bliss’.² In December 2000, deep inside a cave on the island, Belgian speleologists discovered one of the earliest known and surviving evidence of any deciphered Indian writing. Written in Brahmi and Kharosti scripts are the names of sailors from India and these date between the 2nd and 4th centuries CE.³ This, and many other examples abound that show the capability of Indian sailors many centuries before Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route from Europe to India in 1498. Furthermore, it is an accepted fact that Vasco da Gama was guided from the Kenyan port of Malindi to Calicut (Kozhikode) in India by an Indian navigator called Kanji Malam.⁴

India’s maritime expertise was the widely accepted reason for a robust trade by Indians that flourished across the Indian Ocean from the times of the Romans in 30 BCE till the first decade of the 16th century when the Portuguese ships arrived on Indian shores.⁵ The ‘spice trade’ (as it was called) was the main reason why India was one of the world’s biggest economies for nearly 1,700 years.⁶ With such a stellar economic history and ancient tradition of trade across the Indian Ocean, it was unfortunate that India was reduced to a poor country in less than three centuries by the Europeans (mostly the British) arriving on the subcontinent and the surrounding oceans. Picking up the thread after her independence in 1947, India has made steady progress in its trade with the African continent, but it is still not what it was at its peak. Despite the old linkages and a deep people-to-people connection, why has India not been able to fully capitalise on these to the extent possible?

This article attempts to answer this vexed question and thereafter suggests a roadmap for better defence cooperation to enhance future interaction between India and Eastern Africa.

DEFINING EASTERN AFRICA

Eastern Africa can be defined as a group of countries along the east coast of Africa as well as those inland that depend on the ports along the Indian Ocean for trade and sustenance. These include (from north to south) Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (the DRC officially joined the East African Community in April 2022), Burundi, Tanzania, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Seychelles, Comoros and Mauritius. These countries are also part of the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA)—the largest regional economic organisation in Africa with a population of 583 million and a combined GDP of US\$ 805 billion.⁷ This gives a substantial heft to the region to resonate in Indian foreign policy planning.

THE INDIA–EASTERN AFRICA CONNECTION: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Indian Defence Minister Shri Rajnath Singh's opening paragraph at his address at the 1st India–Africa Defence Ministers' Conclave in 2020 mentions that India and Africa are 'connected by ancient maritime links'... and their ties 'go back in history'.⁸ India's famous diplomat and first ambassador to both the UN (1947) and China (1950), K.M. Panikkar has written in his book *India and the Indian Ocean* that archaeological evidence as well as Vedic and Sangam period texts provide some proof of people from the Indus Valley Civilisation using the monsoon winds and currents for maritime trade as far back as circa 2000 BCE.⁹ The *Barberu Jataka* mentions Indian merchants voyaging to Babylon as far back as the 4th century BCE.¹⁰ Even the *Rig Veda*, the oldest literary work in the Indian subcontinent clearly mentions monsoon winds as well as terms related to shipping.¹¹ The Indo-Kenyan researcher Blanche D'Souza goes on to even connect the Puranic name *Neel Sarovar* with Lake Victoria and the river Nile.¹² Not just Indian texts, but the Greco-Roman logbook *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* also makes mention of the India–Africa trade in 60 CE.

As per D'Souza, the dearth of written evidence (particularly by Indians) of all these trade activities across the Indian Ocean between India and

Africa in the early centuries of this millennium can probably be because of the illiteracy of the trading class, poor record-keeping (and whatever little existed was in all likelihood destroyed by the colonisers) and lastly, unlike the Europeans, a lack of a culture of maintaining journals by Indian pioneers. Panikkar's research clearly shows that Indian sailors and ships had complete control over the Indian Ocean till the Chola rule in the mid-13th century CE.¹³ The rulers of Gujarat and Calicut (Kozhikode) traded with East Africa and Indian merchants had established colonies from Abyssinia down the east coast of Africa to Mozambique in the 14th century CE. The Arabs and the Chinese appeared on the waters much later and were soon sidelined by the arrival of the Portuguese and later the British in the 16th-17th century CE.

In recent and more relevant history, India's connections with Eastern Africa were renewed when the British took indentured labour (predominantly from Punjab) for the construction of the Uganda Railway in 1895–96, a British effort to link Uganda to the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa in Kenya.¹⁴ This extremely difficult job found no takers except for the hardy Sikhs and the credit goes to their resilience (over a hundred of them were killed by the man-eating lions of Tsavo in Kenya¹⁵) that the railway line from Mombasa on the Indian Ocean to Kisumu on the shores of Lake Victoria (a distance of 1,056 km) was finally completed in 1901.¹⁶ Most of the Indian labourers returned home but some stayed back to eke out a living in the fertile Lake Victoria region. They were soon joined by small-time Indian traders from the east coast of Africa¹⁷ and this became the nucleus that has grown into a sizeable Indian diaspora in continental East Africa today. Indentured Indian labour was also taken for sugarcane plantations to other parts of East Africa. At its peak, Indians in some countries such as Mauritius constituted nearly 66 per cent of the total population in 1871.¹⁸ After India's independence in 1947, connections between India and Africa strengthened based on India's support for various African countries' independence and the fight against imperialism. Trade also got a fillip and has increased steadily albeit slowly in the last 75 years.

THE MILITARY CONNECTION

The first recorded instance of an Indian man in military uniform in Africa is probably the 9,000 or so Indian troops under the British Army who fought in the Second Boer War of South Africa from 1899 to 1901.¹⁹ Around the same time, the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps was formed in 1899 by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) to work as stretcher-bearers for

the British, with expenses met by the local Indian community. He was later awarded the Queen's South Africa Medal in 1900 in addition to 32 other Indian leaders (a medal that he later gave up in protest of the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre in 1919).²⁰ Again, fighting under the British flag, a sizeable contingent of two brigades of Indian soldiers fought against the Germans in German East Africa (now Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi) during World War I from 1914 to 1918.²¹ While wildlife attacks, malaria and other diseases caused more casualties than the enemy, the Indian troops acquitted themselves admirably in most battles. The second battalion of Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (2 JAK Rif) has the battle honour 'Kilimanjaro' for one such battle.²² It is estimated that nearly 50,000 Indian troops passed through East Africa as part of the Indian Expeditionary Forces B and C, numbering nearly 15,000 at its peak.²³ In an interesting turn of events, the 29 Punjab Battalion was tasked by the British to protect the Kenya–Uganda railway line, construction of which was made possible by the blood and toil of their brothers, the Punjabi labourers, 15 years ago.²⁴ Indian troops thus fought alongside the King's African Rifles (KAR), which had troops from Kenya and Uganda and is supposedly the nucleus of the modern-day East African Armed Forces. *The author has emphasised this connection (and the struggle against a common imperial power) to the local militaries during his recent tenure in the region and felt that it resonated deeply with the leadership as seen in their response.*

The Allied East African Campaign during World War II was short (1940–41) and again Indian soldiers fought under the British flag, but against the Italian East African army this time (occupying parts of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somaliland).²⁵ The 4th and 5th Indian Divisions were the main participants and the Indian troops again fought alongside the King's African Rifles. Many Indian battalions fought valiantly and were awarded battle honours/titles of 'Keren' and 'Ad Teclesan' in this campaign.²⁶ In a mirroring of this participation, troops from Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika (Tanzania), Belgian Congo (DRC), Nyasaland (Malawi) and Rhodesia (Zambia) formed a part of the 11th East Africa Division and fought alongside the Indian troops under the British flag in the Burma campaign from 1943 to 1945.²⁷

DEFENCE COOPERATION POST-INDEPENDENCE

In the years following India's independence in 1947, Indian troops made a mark for themselves while participating in one of the first United Nations missions in Africa, in the DRC from 1961 to 1964.²⁸ It was in this mission (ONUC) that Capt G.S. Salaria displayed the ultimate gallantry and laid

down his life, for which he was awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously. This valour of the Indian peacekeepers and their admirable neutrality was appreciated by the Africans. Since then, India has participated in nearly all UN missions in Africa, namely, Namibia (1989–90), Angola (1989–99), Mozambique (1992–94), Somalia (1993–94), Rwanda (1994–96), Sierra Leone (1999–2001), Eritrea–Ethiopia (2006–08), Ivory Coast (2004–17) and Liberia (2007–16).²⁹ Currently, India's troop deployments continue in the DRC (since 2005) and Sudan/South Sudan (since 2005), including the disputed region of Abyei (since 2011). Women officers and soldiers are also deployed in the DRC.³⁰ Besides troops and observers, India has provided 21 Force Commanders, Military Advisers and Division Commanders in various UN missions in Africa.³¹ It is a testament to the honour and commitment of the Indian soldier that a number of them have laid down their lives for the African continent (69 in DRC, 19 in Sudan/South Sudan, 16 in Somalia, 4 in Eritrea/Ethiopia and 2 in Mozambique).³²

The second half of the 20th century was characterised by much upheaval in Africa with the departure of the colonists. Left to pick up the thread, the newly independent countries struggled to defend imperialist-drawn borders and assimilate their people under a common identity. The Cold War dynamics forced many countries to pick sides either with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) or the United States of America (USA), often causing avoidable conflicts and coups. In these turbulent times, India led the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and many African countries chose the 'third pole' to avoid taking sides in the Cold War. Incidentally, 53 of the 54 African countries are members of the NAM even today.³³ While many in India feel that the NAM is a legacy grouping that may have become irrelevant, it may be prudent to continue with this forum for the precise reason that it has most of the African nations as members and is the perfect platform for India to showcase its leadership. India's defence cooperation with Eastern African countries was rather limited till the end of the Cold War and mostly revolved around military training activities. Assistance in setting up a military academy was provided to Ethiopia in 1958³⁴ and for setting up a Command and Staff College in Tanzania in 1988. Besides that, a training team headed by a Brigadier was also deployed in Tanzania from 1988 to 1991. Vacancies for courses in Indian military institutions (under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation or ITEC programme) commenced in 1964 and was another aspect of the defence cooperation where officers attended courses at many institutions, including the Indian Military Academy, the Defence Services Staff College and the National

Defence College.³⁵ Maritime cooperation during this period consisted of gifting two Seaward Defence Boats (SDB) and a Dornier maritime patrol aircraft to Mauritius in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁶ An Indian defence wing with a Defence Attache (DA) was set up in 1973 in Nairobi, Kenya, and remained the only one in Eastern Africa for a very long time till the second one was established in Sudan in 2016.

RECENT DEFENCE INITIATIVES IN EASTERN AFRICA

The post-Cold War period saw a rapid increase in India's defence cooperation activities with foreign militaries. After the economic liberalisation of 1991, Indian Armed Forces began a modernisation process, which included a review of their doctrine. The 21st century CE saw the commencement of the next chapter wherein Indian militaries began an engagement process with other big and modern militaries. Defence cooperation aspects were included as a part of India's foreign policy and the focus was initially on the neighbourhood as well as dependable partner countries such as the US, Russia, France, etc. The outreach to Africa started in earnest only at the beginning of this century. Interestingly, a comparison of India's and China's cumulative Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa at the end of 2004 reveals that India with US\$ 1.8 billion was ahead of China with US\$ 1.3 billion.³⁷ But this lead was lost soon after that and the initial investments have not translated into a similar increase in trade as China could achieve.

The last 10 years have seen substantial progress made by India, with a major emphasis on defence and security issues. As an example, the period from 2014 to 2022 saw 36 high-level visits from India to Africa and more than a hundred reciprocal visits.³⁸ India also opened 14 new diplomatic missions in Africa between 2018 and 2022, taking the total number of missions in Africa to 43 (out of a total of 54 countries in Africa).³⁹ Accordingly, defence cooperation activities also showed a considerable increase. Some salient aspects of the defence cooperation between India and East African countries in the recent past are covered below.

- *Maritime Defence Cooperation:* The Indian Navy (IN), by virtue of its area of operations, has always taken the lead in defence cooperation with foreign countries. The IN came for much appreciation from Eastern African nations during the very effective anti-piracy operations launched in October 2008 off the coast of Somalia and an IN ship is constantly deployed there since then.⁴⁰ India's Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS) chain, which is managed from the Navy's Information

Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) at the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurgaon, was extended to Mauritius in 2012 (five radars) and Seychelles in 2015 (eight radars).⁴¹ The launch of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008 by India has also been a game-changer—it now has Eritrea, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, France (Mayotte and Reunion islands) and Mauritius as members. This symposium takes the lead in coordinating the defence cooperation aspects of Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). The IN has also been proactive in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), the latest being assistance provided to Mozambique and Madagascar when these countries were hit by cyclones in 2019 and 2020.⁴²

- *India–Africa Defence Ministers Conclave/Dialogue and Joint Military Exercises*: The initiative of a conclave of African countries' defence ministers with India's defence minister was taken in February 2020 on the side-lines of the DefExpo in Lucknow and the second such meeting was held in October 2022 alongside the DefExpo in Gandhinagar.⁴³ The inaugural India–Africa Field Training Exercise (AFINDEX) was held at Pune in March 2019 wherein 17 countries from Africa (plus three as observers) participated. The second edition of AFINDEX was held in March 2023, also in Pune, and saw the participation of 24 African countries.⁴⁴
- *Training Teams and Defence Advisors*: In a significant step-up, India established a military training team comprising four officers (led by a Brigadier) in Uganda in 2010. Subsequently, another training team consisting of six Colonels/equivalent officers was set up in Tanzania in 2017. Both training teams are at the respective Command and Staff Colleges.⁴⁵ In addition, a new Defence Wing was opened in Khartoum, Sudan, with a Defence Advisor, who is also accredited to South Sudan.⁴⁶
- *Defence Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs)*: Before 2010, there was hardly any mention of African countries in the section on *Defence Cooperation with Foreign Countries* in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) annual reports. However, the last decade (2011–21) saw a deliberate focus on Africa. Beginning with enhanced maritime cooperation with the island countries of Seychelles, Mauritius and Comoros, this has further expanded into continental Eastern Africa with defence cooperation MoUs being signed with many countries such as Sudan (2015),

Mauritius (2015), Tanzania (2015), Kenya (2016), Madagascar (2018), Rwanda (2018), Uganda (2018), Comoros (2019) and Mozambique (2019).⁴⁷

- *Joint Defence Cooperation Committees (JDCC) and Working Groups (JWGs)*: India also took some existing defence cooperation agreements a step further to strengthen the bilateral defence relationship. Joint Defence Cooperation Committees and JWGs were established with Mozambique (2013), Kenya (2019) and Seychelles (2018).⁴⁸
- *New and Impactful Cooperation Agreements*: As a natural progression in the ongoing defence cooperation, India has very recently taken the next big step into new and long-term agreements. The first was an MoU signed in March 2022 between the Ugandan Air Force and India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) for the maintenance, repair and spares for their Sukhoi-30 fighter aircraft.⁴⁹ This is the first of its kind in Africa. The other significant agreement with Uganda is much more expansive than just defence cooperation. The first-ever foreign campus of any Indian national university was set up in Uganda; the Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar inaugurated the Uganda campus of the National Forensic Sciences University (NFSU) on 12 April 2023.⁵⁰ This means that India is stepping into a niche area, providing the Eastern African region with expertise in forensics as well as cybersecurity in the foreseeable future. India gains by taking the lead in this unique field and also showcases its strength in forensics/cybersecurity to the entire continent.

DEFENCE SALES POTENTIAL OF EASTERN AFRICA

While people-to-people connect and soft-power is an important aspect of bi/multi-lateral relations, economics is the major driver for any country to engage with another. In connection with that, it was announced by PM Modi on 16 February 2023 at the Aero India show in Bengaluru that India would aim to cross US\$ 5 billion in defence exports over the next two years.⁵¹ To achieve or surpass this target, it is important to analyse the emerging markets for defence-related equipment. As per the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 2022, sub-Saharan Africa has shown a marked increase in defence sales in 2021 at 4.2 per cent (second only to East Asia at 4.9 per cent) (see Figure 1).⁵² Within Eastern Africa, Kenya (US\$ 1.11 bn) and Uganda (US\$ 1.066 bn) are among Africa's top 10 military budgets.⁵³

WORLD MILITARY SPENDING, 2021			WORLD MILITARY SPENDING, 2021		
Region	Spending (US\$ b.)	Change (%)	Region	Spending (US\$ b.)	Change (%)
Africa	(39.7)	1.2	Europe	418	3.0
North Africa	(19.6)	-1.7	Central and Western Europe	342	3.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	20.1	4.1	Eastern Europe	76.3	2.3
Americas	883	-1.2	Middle East	(186)	-3.3
Central America and the Caribbean	11.0	-2.5	World total	2 113	0.7
North America	827	-1.2	() = uncertain estimate.		
South America	45.3	-0.6	Note: Spending figures are in US dollars, at current prices and exchange rates. Changes are in real terms, based on constant (2020) US dollars.		
Asia and Oceania	586	3.5			
Central Asia	1.8	-0.8			
East Asia	411	4.9			
Oceania	35.3	3.5			
South Asia	95.1	0.8			
South East Asia	43.1	-2.3			

Figure I World military spending 2021

Source: SIPRI Yearbook, 2022

The SIPRI 2022 report also highlights that active armed conflicts were reported in 46 states of which 18 are in sub-Saharan Africa—the probable reason why military spending in this region is showing a constant upward trend. These conflicts are within the borders of countries (no inter-state or trans-border conflicts) where their armed forces are fighting armed insurgent groups. With maximum countries in Eastern Africa witnessing persistent armed conflicts with rebel groups, this upward trend in defence spending is likely to continue.

ASSESSMENT OF INDIA'S DEFENCE COOPERATION WITH EASTERN AFRICA

Even though (a) India's linkages with Eastern Africa date back many centuries, (b) there is a big Indian diaspora in this part of the continent and (c) Indian military personnel have been seen to perform with great effect and complete neutrality in UN missions in Africa (besides some of them attaining martyrdom for another country), defence cooperation issues have been minimal and sporadic since India's independence. It is only in the last 10 years or so that engagement has picked up. Two assessments are necessary here: firstly, the reason why India did not capitalise on the old relations and soft-power build-up in the 19th/20th century CE and secondly, what has India achieved in the category of defence cooperation thus far.

A Slow Re-commencement of Ties: In the initial few decades of its independence, India was focused mostly inwards in trying to set up and run the world's biggest democracy, particularly in the aftermath of the Partition. The Cold War that followed soon after led India to showcase its neutrality/non-alignment and it concentrated on providing moral as well as ideological support on the world stage to counter imperialism/colonialism in Africa.⁵⁴ The legacy left behind by Mahatma Gandhi as an advocate against racism and slavery was the adopted theme in India's dealings with Africa. After the Cold War, India saw the commencement of an economic revival and its defence forces, which had fought three major wars by then, thought it prudent to concentrate inwards to upgrade and modernise. The 21st century gave economic wings to an emerging regional power and India decided rightly to engage with its immediate neighbours as the first step. The continuing modernisation of the Indian military also meant that worldwide defence engagements were focused on countries supplying defence-related equipment to India. However, it is to the credit of India's leadership that the country has recently expanded its role as the net security provider from the Indian subcontinent to the entire Indian Ocean Region in a short span of 10 years. This automatically meant that Eastern Africa, considered a near-neighbour, would get more focus from India.

Defence Cooperation Gets a Fillip: As part of India's foreign-policy objective to enhance trade, it was axiomatic that defence cooperation and defence sales would also get a fillip. This is more important in the context of Africa with its emerging economies and the many persistent conflicts that continue in the region. Could India have engaged more vigorously with Eastern Africa in 'defence cooperation' in the 20th century? Possibly not, with India's economy on the mend and a decidedly interior focus. Doing so could have imbalanced a precarious economy at that time. Did India squander its goodwill and soft power built up over the decades? It is always difficult to time the next step in this aspect, because an early attempt to convert soft power to more trade and economy could attract pushback and resentment as China is facing in Africa.⁵⁵ The goodwill and soft power of a country, as also the heft of the diaspora does not decline, they remain constant if not actually increasing. Therefore, attaining internal economical balance first and then planning the move towards Eastern Africa at the correct juncture was extremely important. And it is to India's credit that it has timed the next phase of cooperation well. What can it achieve and how can it achieve more, is discussed in the next section.

LEVERAGING INDIA–EASTERN AFRICA DEFENCE COOPERATION

As mentioned earlier, India has made a bold foray into the field of defence diplomacy with many countries in Eastern Africa, most of it in the last 10 years only. The foundation is strong, but will it support the rapid addition of newer levels? An analysis of these activities reveals many positives and a few areas for improvement.

- *The Positives:* India's recent actions have centred around PM Modi's visit to Uganda and Rwanda in July 2018, when he unveiled the 'Ten Guiding Principles for India–Africa Engagement' in Uganda's Parliament⁵⁶ (the seventh principle focuses on defence, security and cyber cooperation). Taking the 'Kampala Declaration' as a benchmark, an analysis of India's actions in not only following through, but also in keeping Africa in the 'top focus' and following an 'Africa First' agenda reveals these positives:
 - The many India–Africa forums, conclaves and summits held in India since the 1st India–Africa Forum Summit in 2008 are proof that India is listening to African leaders and giving priority to their needs.
 - The decision to open 18 new Indian missions in Africa (Rwanda was the first to be opened in this list)—this big initiative was taken in 2018.⁵⁷
 - The signing of defence MoUs with nine East African countries and the second edition of the joint Africa–India Field Exercise (AFINDEX) in March 2023 has built up a solid foundation that will lead to positive outcomes.
 - The establishment of CSRS, the HADR actions and the gifting of many ships/boats to Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar—all signal the significant success of maritime cooperation.
 - The most significant positive is the agreement for the maintenance of Sukhoi-30 fighter jets for Uganda and the setting up of the NFSU campus in Uganda.
 - All these point to an upward-rising graph and create the ideal situation for India to enter into defence contracts with these countries.
- *Areas for Improvement:* Although India's defence diplomacy activities with Eastern Africa have increased rapidly in the last decade, the economic benefits have not yet been commensurate. The following issues need to be addressed suitably:
 - The rapport and camaraderie that is built up between African Armed Forces officers and Indian military officers while attending courses in

a military institution in India (under the ITEC scheme) can be better leveraged. Proper follow-up action is required to be institutionalised wherein the ex-students can remain connected through specific appointments in that training institute.

- Procedures for analysis of the proposal and approval channels are lengthy for most defence-related proposals and invariably involve two or more ministries. Besides the MEA-MoD coordination aspects, which take time, the lack of a single-window system for defence-related deals within the MoD mean that proposals take a long time to fruition.⁵⁸
- Another issue until very recently was the capability and financial risk-taking ability of India's private defence industry to bid for contracts independently. This is now being overcome as it gains experience, but the next 5–10 years will need handholding by the government and the Indian Mission in that country.
- Last but not the least, is the financial aspect that restricts the potential of any defence deal with most African nations. India's offer of a Line of Credit (LoC), although lucrative in terms of the low rate of interest offered, is found too lengthy to suit most African governments. An alternate direct-credit facility from a private Indian vendor remains a viable and faster option, but the interest rates here are slightly more than the EXIM bank rate—again discouraging some countries on the lookout for a (near) zero-interest loan or credit.

THE WAY AHEAD

It is apparent that India has made efforts in recent years to solidify its defence cooperation with most East African countries. This foundation has been cemented by the soft power India has built over many centuries—with contributions from the age-old 'Spice Trade', the visible performance of the Indian military in UN missions, the presence of a vibrant Indian diaspora who have integrated well into the community and the non-exploitative nature of projects executed in Africa thus far. It is now time to build up the next level from this foundation—a level that promotes and executes defence deals as well as closer cooperation in long-term aspects such as counter-terrorism and cybersecurity. To do this, some changes need to be adopted. Taking the best practices from other success stories in Africa (particularly Turkiye, which has managed to leverage more than its economic potential in just the last three years)⁵⁹ as well as India's own experiences, the following are seven

important recommendations to enhance India's defence cooperation with Eastern Africa:

- Embassies/High Commissions of India must be quickly opened in each of the 19 countries of Eastern Africa. This will mean that more manpower will be required from the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) cadre to man/head these missions. To augment the IFS, it is recommended that military officers (retired or even serving) with previous experience in defence diplomacy in Africa be employed. This is particularly useful because most African countries have militaries as the backbone of governance and would be more comfortable dealing with (and having respect for) military personnel. Important missions should invariably have a Defence Wing.
- Hybrid projects (defence/civilian collaboration and joint use) should be prioritised. An example of this is the recently inaugurated NFSU campus in Uganda, which was steered through the 'defence cooperation' route, but also benefits the entire population of Eastern Africa. Similar areas can be cooperation in developing solar energy and building/training Ecological Units in the armed forces (armies are entrusted with nation-building in many African countries).
- A long-term perspective should be adopted in addition to one-time sales to ensure continued engagement. For example, assistance in developing a facility in one country for the maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) of common defence equipment of many militaries (like MI-17 helicopters) will be useful for the entire region. This will also get better traction and possibly shared expenditure by partner countries.
- ITEC alumni from Africa need to be nurtured well to maintain a connection. Country-wise chapters with a local coordinator could be funded for better engagement. Also, a select few alumni (whose potential has been identified) should be offered advanced courses in the same category in India to build on the relationship.
- The time has come to fully capitalise on India's UN mission participation in Africa. Each body of troops must be taken as an opportunity to showcase the armed forces' latest clothing, force-protection equipment, communication systems, weapons and vehicles. With increasing participation by African militaries in regional missions (under the UN or African Union [AU] umbrella or even independently), this display of the latest equipment and weapons will definitely attract enquiries leading to more sales.

- Bespoke solutions are necessary for each African country. A study needs to be done to assess specific needs and tailor-made solutions offered based on the results. Mobile/short-term training teams for a specific domain are one good solution. Another could be offering customised crypto-solutions where the algorithm/cipher code is owned by the country—a lot of whom no longer have faith in commercially available systems after the ‘Prism’ and ‘Pegasus’ revelations.⁶⁰
- Lastly, two new offices or agencies are recommended: the first within the Ministry of External Affairs can be called the ‘Office of Foreign-Defence Integration’ that will be responsible for defence-diplomacy fusion (akin to the USA’s Office for State-Defence Integration). Its mission should be the closer coordination and synchronisation between MEA and MoD for all defence diplomacy-related issues. The second office could be established within the MoD and could be called the ‘Defence Exports Agency’. It should be the single-point coordinator for all defence exports and defence deals for ease of negotiations and financing.

CONCLUSION

India’s connection with Eastern Africa goes back many centuries and it enjoys a very visible and perceptible soft power in the African region along the West Indian Ocean. The 20th century CE was a missed opportunity where India could not capitalise on these linkages due to the reasons enumerated in the article, but the 21st century CE has shown an increase in India’s multi-faceted interaction with Eastern African countries. ‘Defence cooperation’ in particular has seen a rapid increase both in frequency and spread in the last decade. Combined with India’s improved defence industrial base as part of the ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ agenda, it is time for India to fully capitalise on the multiple aspects of soft power it enjoys in Eastern Africa to enhance economic benefits for itself. India’s approach of keeping the other country’s interests in mind should be the guiding light as it gently but strongly rises on the crest of the wave travelling westwards across the Indian Ocean to make a meaningful impact on the shores of Eastern Africa. There is no doubt that India’s time has come, and it needs to make the best of this opportunity to ensure that the benefits are not shortlived.

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