

India–Africa Defence Diplomacy Amid COVID-19

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The abrupt and upsetting change caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weakness of the international system and put India's defence diplomacy with Africa to the test. The pandemic caused significant strain on Africa's frail and fledgling healthcare system and adversely affected many facets of its public life. Meanwhile, India's innovativeness and dynamism in dealing with the African continent during the pandemic opened the door to expand its contribution to the security of Africa. Rapid-action teams made up of medical specialists were sent by the Indian Navy as part of Mission Sagar to aid various countries in the Indian Ocean Littoral States. Later, India also reinforced its status as the 'Pharmacy of the World' by supplying India-made vaccines to several African countries. Additionally, Indian Navy performed several capacity-building exercises. Thus, while India's health diplomacy strengthened its soft-power projection in Africa, its uninterrupted defence diplomacy helped to project the country as a critical player in the continent.

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the first COVID-19 case came to light in Wuhan, China. As the number of cases outside China continued to increase, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed the situation a global pandemic.¹ Globally, this pandemic's effects have strongly influenced diplomatic operations. The handling of the COVID-19 situation diplomatically is now receiving more attention. The responsibility of providing consular aid to citizens stuck overseas falls under foreign ministries. An extraordinary rate of fundamental change is currently occurring in modern diplomacy. As a result of technological advancements, most notably digitisation, the public is today more conscious of foreign policy issues and actively seeking ways to influence diplomacy through social media and other channels.

Diplomats experimented new technologies during this time and beyond as tools of diplomacy, such as digitised approaches to regulatory systems, cutting-edge digital technology, and mobilising digital tools.² Governments' adoption of instruments like e-government portals and the creation of specialised websites as their nation's national COVID-19 platform to disseminate information on the crisis' evolution has been hastened by the pandemic. This led to a renewed emphasis on the digitalisation of diplomacy, first by adapting diplomacy capable of functioning effectively through digital means, and second by adopting new digital tools to the unique demands of diplomats.³

Moreover, as the outbreak of coronavirus expanded, and the number of cases rose, nations started closing their borders, leaving thousands of citizens stranded and, in some cases, negatively impacting bilateral relations.⁴ As a matter of fact, border restrictions give many political leaders across the world a chance to display resolute action in the face of a global health emergency, shift responsibility to other countries, and boost nationalism. The COVID-19 pandemic has produced new diplomatic prospects as well as medical and economic difficulties. One such example is bilateral humanitarian diplomacy, which India used to accomplish its foreign policy goals with various African nations during the COVID-19 emergency duration.

Over the last decade, the India–Africa relationship has witnessed an unprecedented growth, particularly in enhanced trade, investment and development assistance. In parallel, India also deepened its ties with Africa *vis-à-vis* defence cooperation. India has, in fact, been actively assisting Africa in recent years with cybersecurity, peacekeeping and anti-terrorism

operations.⁵ However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown have adversely affected people's lives, with loss of livelihoods, food shortages and disruptions in access to health services and education in both Africa and India. The pandemic caused significant strain on Africa's frail and fledgling healthcare system and adversely affected many facets of its public life. Additionally, this abrupt and upsetting change due to COVID-19 has exposed the weakness of the international system and put India's defence diplomacy with Africa to the test.

Ever since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a plethora of research work has been conducted on various aspects of the problem. Numerous economists have analysed the adverse impact on business and financial sectors. However, there is hardly any work on the effects of the pandemic in India's defence diplomacy with Africa. This article thus attempts to highlight the disruptions in India's defence diplomacy with Africa caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and elaborates on how the two sides dealt with the pandemic to maintain essential continuity *vis-à-vis* their defence diplomacy.

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN AFRICA

The African continent currently faces defence and security challenges, such as terrorism and violence, transnational organised crime syndicates, maritime security, and piracy, which are primarily brought on by maritime border disputes. Most recently, jihadist activity has increased in several regions of Africa. Although jihadist or Islamist terrorism has spread around the globe, some parts of Africa are particularly vulnerable to terrorism led by radical Islamist organisations. Presently, the Sahel region of West Africa is particularly susceptible to the threat of radical Islamism. In Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and other countries, jihadist terrorists often attack law enforcement officers and civilians. The region has significant oil deposits, especially in the Gulf of Guinea, and because of its strategic geographic location, the region has tremendous value for India.⁶

In the Horn of Africa, Somalia has been subject to the tyranny of the Islamist group Al-Shabaab, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Somalia. Al-Shabaab frequently conducts deadly assaults against both civilians and security personnel in various regions of Somalia as well as in its other neighbouring countries.⁷ In southern Africa, Islamist extremists have been terrorising Cabo Delgado in Mozambique since 2017.⁸

Moving towards central Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo is infested by an Islamic State affiliate (ISIS-DRC), making the country increasingly unstable due to continuous violent actions by ISIS-DRC. And to make matters worse, Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a well-known rebel group in Congo, is now collaborating with ISIS.⁹

DEFENCE DIPLOMACY

The definition of defence diplomacy is still not very clear. The genesis of the term is closely linked to the British Labour Party's Strategic Defence Review of 1998.¹⁰ This was during the post-Cold War change in understanding international security and related national security policies, when the traditional Military Diplomacy activities undertaken by an accredited Military Attaché were no longer needed to contain the threat of the spread of communism. Still, their critical impact on foreign relations remained. The Defence Review defines defence diplomacy as the "employment of peaceful measures to obtain favourable outcomes in the advancement of positive bilateral and multinational ties".¹¹ Defence diplomacy doesn't include military operations. Instead, it focuses on cooperation, including personnel exchanges, ships and aircraft, high-level visits, training, exercises, regional defence forums, military assistance, confidence-building measures, preventing proliferation, etc.¹² Its fundamental goals are to establish and uphold confidence and support the creation of armed forces towards maintaining a democratic regime.¹³

Several researchers have gone further with their interpretations of what entails defence diplomacy. Tan See Seng and Bjubhinder Singh from Singapore defined defence diplomacy as 'building confidence, preventing crises, and resolving conflict through the joint and coordinated use of peaceful collaboration initiatives between the defence and armed forces leadership'.¹⁴

As military diplomacy alone was deemed insufficient to deal with the rapid and unforeseen collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, scholars formulated a new spectrum of power politics that looked beyond the simple military might paradigm that had dominated the Cold War. Professor Joseph S. Nye raised the notion of hard power, which is coercive, and soft power, which is cooperative. He stated, 'The types of resources associated with soft power include intangibles like institutions, ideas, values, culture, and perceived legitimacy of policies, whereas those associated with hard power include tangibles like force and money.'¹⁵

In 2003, Nye updated his theory to include the term 'smart power', which he defined as strategies that combine hard and soft power resources

in differing contexts.¹⁶ According to Nye, the critical component of smart power is power conversion—from resources to behavioural outcomes. He cites the example of China’s deliberate investment in soft power resources, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to obscure its hard power threat.

In 2008, Ernest Wilson expanded the concept of smart power as ‘an actor’s ability to combine hard and soft power mutually reinforcing them, making the actor’s purpose more effective and efficient’.¹⁷ Linking soft power directly to defence diplomacy, Gregory Winger defined defence diplomacy as ‘... an exercise of soft power practised by the defence establishment of one country upon the government of another...’. He concluded by suggesting that it is not cooperation for its own sake, but actually the method of bringing the strategic thinking of one country (the recipient) into harmony with another (the practitioner).¹⁸

INDIA’S DEFENCE DIPLOMACY WITH AFRICA AMID COVID-19

The abrupt and upsetting change due to COVID-19 has exposed the weakness of the international system and put India’s security cooperation with Africa to the test. The pandemic caused significant strain on Africa’s frail and fledgling healthcare system and adversely affected many facets of its public life. However, despite the setbacks, India continued its defence cooperation with Africa, thanks to its innovativeness and dynamism. India’s rapid-action teams of medical specialists sent as part of Mission Sagar helped several African coastal countries, including Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles. Later, India also reinforced its status as the ‘Pharmacy of the World’ by supplying India-made vaccines to several African countries. The contours of India’s defence diplomacy with Africa during COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 days are as follows:

CAPACITY-BUILDING EXERCISES

For naval forces, the Indian Navy holds the biannual Milan Exercise. After the pandemic was partially over, Milan 2022 was held in March 2022 in Visakhapatnam under the theme ‘Camaraderie–Cohesion–Collaboration’.¹⁹ The event helped India to project itself as a responsible global maritime power. Milan 2022 was held over nine days in two phases: the harbour phase and the sea phase. However, as an aftereffect of the widespread pandemic, many African countries withdrew, and only three African countries—Kenya, Mauritius and Seychelle—participated in it.

In 2022, India also held its first-ever trilateral navy exercise with Africa as part of initiatives to expand its defence partnership with the continent. The first version of the IMT TRILAT (India–Mozambique–Tanzania Trilateral Exercise) took place in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, from 27 October 2022 to 29 October 2022.²⁰ This was a joint maritime exercise among the Indian, Mozambique and Tanzanian navies. During the exercise, Indian Navy showcased its guided missile frigate, INS Tarkash, a Chetak helicopter and MARCOS. The maritime exercise included both harbour and sea phases. The three key objectives of the exercise were:

To address the common security challenges through joint training and sharing of best practices;

- (i) Enhance the interoperability; and
- (ii) Strengthen maritime cooperation.

Followed by the IMT-TRILAT, India and France jointly conducted a maritime surveillance mission in the Mozambique Channel on 9–10 November 2022, where India used its P-8I Poseidon and Falcon 50 aircraft.²¹ Indian Navy's P-8I Poseidon arrived in Reunion on 8 November 2022 as part of coordinated operations with the French Navy to provide surveillance in the Reunion Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Boeing P-8 Poseidon is a United States maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft. This has been developed specifically for the United States Navy (USN). In addition to joint surveillance and ocean bed mapping, France and India joined hands to combat piracy, drug trafficking, arms smuggling and the presence of 'extraneous powers' on the eastern seaboard of Africa. Similar joint surveillance missions were held in March and May 2022. During the earlier versions, Indian Navy's P-8I was complemented by French frigates Floreal and Nivose.²²

Marking a new level of strategic convergence, during 24–27 September 2022, INS Sunayna participated in the capacity-building exercise at Seychelles, dubbed as Operation Southern Readiness of Combined Maritime Forces.²³ This was the first time an Indian Navy ship participated in a CMF exercise. Representative delegations from several advanced nations such as Australia, Italy, Canada, New Zealand and America, participated in the event. The joint training exercise also got ship participation from the UK and Spain.

Parallely, *INS Tarkash* visited Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, followed by Maritime Partnership Exercises with the Sudanese Navy and the Royal

Moroccan naval ships off Casablanca port. It participated in Maritime Partnership Exercise in the Atlantic with Royal Morocco Navy Ship Hassan 2, a Floreal Class Corvette, on 26 July 2022.²⁴ Exercises included MoB drills, VBSS, RAS, tactical manoeuvres and helicopter cross-deck landings. The exercise, apart from strengthening maritime ties between the two countries, provided an opportunity for both ships to better understand each other's operating procedures, thereby enhancing interoperability between the two navies.

Indian Navy also held its 9th edition of India–Seychelles Joint Training Exercise 'LAMITIYE-2022' on 22–23 March 2022 at Seychelles Defence Academy.²⁵ This was followed by a three-week Sail Training capsule for the officer trainees of the Republic of South Africa Navy (RSAN). The training was held at Ocean Sailing Node (OSN) at INS Mandovi, Goa.²⁶ *INS Kochi*, the largest destroyer ship in the Indian Navy, visited Safaga Egypt from 28 June to 30 June 2022, signalling expansion in the defence partnership.²⁷

These training exercises demonstrate India's and the Indian Navy's dedication to promote SAGAR (Safety and Growth for All in the Region), as well as maritime security and collaboration with maritime neighbours in the Indian Ocean Region. The exercises not only strengthened bilateral naval ties, but also advanced the Indian Navy's operational philosophy of Mission Based Deployments under which ships are regularly deployed in maritime areas of interest to India to ensure that national interests are protected.

India will hold the G-20 presidency from 1 December 2022 to 30 November 2023,²⁸ during which, India is slated to host over 200 meetings in over 50 cities, spanning 32 work streams.²⁹ The final summit in New Delhi will take place in September 2023, and the meeting will feature 43 Heads of Delegation, the highest number so far to attend a G-20 summit. From the beginning, India aimed the summit to promote the voice of global south. To understand the needs and aspirations of global south, India hosted 'The Voice of Global South Summit' in January 2023. The summit was attended by 125 countries, including 18 Heads of State/Government level dignitaries and others at ministerial level. Furthermore, during India's ongoing presidency, participation from Africa is the highest ever, which includes South Africa (G20 Member), Mauritius, Egypt, Nigeria, AU Chair—Comoros, and AUDA-NEPAD.³⁰ During the January 2023 summit, India made it clear that building strong people-to-people ties with the African nations will be its top goal and that it will continue to be an all-weather friend of Africa.

INDIAN NAVAL DEPLOYMENT IN AFRICAN COAST

As part of India's naval deployment programmes, *INS Kolkata* visited Djibouti from 4 May to 7 May 2022.³¹ Indian Navy conducts such anti-piracy patrols in order to ensure that the merchant vessels are transited safely from the Gulf of Aden.

Parallely, *INS Gharial* was deployed in the South West Indian Ocean as part of Mission SAGAR IX. From 11 May to 14 May 2022, the ship made a port call in Port Victoria, Seychelles. Additionally, Seychelles purchased a 15-meter Wave Rider Patrol Boat from Colombo and delivered it to the Seychelles Defence Forces (SDF) via the *INS Gharial*. The Indian Navy assisted SDF members in receiving training in specialised maritime disciplines while the ship was stationed in Seychelles. The operations during *INS Gharial*'s port visit show the Indian Navy's commitment to positively contribute to the Seychelles Defence Forces' efforts to strengthen capacity and boost capability.

The Indian Naval Ship *Tarkash* has been building new partnerships and strengthening old ones on its long-range overseas deployment. The Russian-origin *INS Tarkash* is one of the Indian Navy's most potent frontline frigates. It is outfitted with a broad selection of weapons and sensors. In 2022, *INS Tarkash* completed her 41-day long anti-piracy deployment, covering 4,315 nautical miles in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG), marking the first-ever deployment in the West African region by an Indian Navy warship. *INA Tarkash*'s most recent deployment included port visits at Dakar, Senegal; Lome, Togo; Lagos, Nigeria; and Port Gentil, Gabon. The deployment was used for capacity-building activities such as training in damage management, firefighting, diving, medical aspects and casualty evacuation, as well as anti-piracy patrol and joint patrols with the regional navies.

INS Tarkash visited Port Dakar, Senegal, from 31 July to 1 August 2022, and was received at Dakar by officials of the Embassy of India, Senegal and Senegal Navy. The ship was kept open for visitors on 31 July 2022, where members of the Indian diaspora were given an exclusive tour of the vessel. The medical team of *INS Tarkash* interacted with the crew of Africa Mercy, the most significant sponsored afloat hospital involved in providing medical facilities to rural regions in the African continent. Before the pandemic, on 27 August 2019, *INS Tarkash* made a three-day port call to Dakar, Senegal. On the last visit, it conducted a passage exercise at sea with Senegalese Navy ships to improve interoperability between the two navies.

The trip to Senegal was followed by a trip to South America to visit Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to hoist the national flag on 15 August 2022, as part of ‘Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav’. On its return, *INS Tarkash* made a port call at Lome, Togo, on 1 September 2022. In Togo, it became the first Indian Navy Ship to make a port call. The ship’s Commanding Officer called on the host nation’s senior military and civilian hierarchy. The ship later hosted senior dignitaries of the Togo Armed Forces and other government agencies onboard. She also remained open to visitors during her stay. The ship’s crew conducted professional exchanges in disciplines such as VBSS and diving operations. A medical camp was also conducted in collaboration with the Togo Armed Forces and the Indian pharma company, Strides Pharma Ltd, to provide basic treatment and free medicines to locals.

From Togo, *INS Tarkash* reached Lagos port in Nigeria on 8 September 2022. Officials of the Nigerian Navy, the High Commission of India and children of the Indian Language School welcomed the ship. During the port call, professional interactions between the Indian and Nigerian Navy took place. The ship also participated in a Joint Maritime Exercise with Nigerian Navy Patrol Ships to enhance interoperability and share best practices for many marine operation aspects such as anti-piracy tactics, help for ships in distress, SAR training, and anti-air and anti-surface operations. The ship was open to visitors, allowing the Indian diaspora and locals to interact with the crew.

INS Tarkash visited Port Gentil, Gabon, from 24 September to 27 September 2022, as part of her ongoing anti-piracy patrol assignment in the Gulf of Guinea. The port calls included professional interactions and courtesy calls by the ship’s crew to Gabon’s senior government and military officials. Professionals held interactions/discussions and exercises on diving operations, medical and casualty evacuation concerns, fire-fighting and damage management. Additionally, familiarisation trips were made. Visitors were welcomed on board.

INS Tarkash visited Port Walvis Bay in Namibia from 3 October to 6 October 2022. Earlier, *INS Tarkash* made a port call at Walvis Bay, Namibia, on 15 September 2019, for a three-day visit. For the 7th edition of IBSAMAR, *INS Tarkash* travelled from Namibia to Port Grequhrea, commonly known as Port Elizabeth in South Africa. Between 10 October and 12 October 2022, the Indian, Brazilian and South African navies participated in a joint multinational maritime exercise. IBSAMAR VI, the previous iteration, was held on 1–13 October 2018, in Simons Town, South Africa. In addition to *INS Tarkash*, the Indian Navy was represented by the guided missile frigate, a Chetak helicopter and MARCOS Special Forces. Professional exchanges

such as disaster management and firefighting exercises, VBSS/cross-boarding lectures, and interactions amongst Special Forces were all part of the IBSAMAR VII harbour phase.

Another Indian Navy Ship, Tarangini, visited the Port of Djibouti from 23 October to 25 October 2022, as part of Lokayan 2022, a seven-month long voyage with the theme 'Sailing through Different Oceans and Uniting Nations'. High-level interactions were undertaken with Djibouti Coast Guard during the stay. The ship was also open to visitors, and a guided tour of the ship was organised to help visitors understand the nuances of life onboard a 'Tall Ship'. As part of harbour activities, a cross visit of personnel was undertaken with JMSDF Ship Izakuchi. Basic sail training, mast drills and procedures for harbour and sea stowage of sails were undertaken for Sea Trainees of 94 IOTC, who joined the ship at Djibouti.

DEFEXPO 2022 AND INDIA–AFRICA DEFENCE MINISTERS' CONFERENCE

India's aspiration of deeper defence cooperation with African countries in the form of training and sale of equipment like attack choppers, drones, missiles, patrol vessels and small arms, among others, took shape during the DefExpo 2022, held from 18 October to 22 October 2022, in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. During the meeting, the magnitude of India's flagship Land, Naval, and Homeland Security Systems exhibition ensured that DefExpo 2022 became Asia's most extensive defence exhibition. The event united the nation's all high-end weapons and defence platforms under one roof. As a matter of fact, this was the first event solely dedicated to showcasing Made-in-India marquee products. There were over 1,000 exhibitors registered. Furthermore, as another highlight of the mega-event, the local IIT Delhi start-up Botlabs (an iDEX winner) displayed the largest drone show ever.

On the sidelines of DefExpo 2022, the second edition of the India–Africa Defence Dialogue (IADD) was held. In February 2020, parallel to the 11th DefExpo, the first India–Africa Defence Ministers' Conference (IADMC) was held in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. The creation of the IADMC led to the successful institutionalisation of defence cooperation between the two sides. The government of India resolved to formalise the India–Africa Defence Dialogue as a separate event from the DefExpo during the summit.

The fact that 50 African nations, including 20 defence ministers, seven CDS/service chiefs, and eight permanent secretaries attended the second IADD demonstrated the importance placed on India–Africa cooperation in defence and

security. The discussion successfully emphasised a number of aspects of the event's theme, "India–Africa: Adopting Strategy for Synergizing and Strengthening Defence and Security Cooperation", which was chosen by the IADD.

In his keynote address, Defence Minister of India Rajnath Singh described the IADD's central theme as the shared determination of African nations and India to investigate new frontiers in defence cooperation, such as capacity-building, training, cybersecurity, maritime security, and counter-terrorism. He duly emphasised the strong relationship between India and Africa, which is founded on the regional framework of cooperation known as 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and inspired by the traditional spirit of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (The World is One family). Additionally, he engaged in bilateral discussions with several of his counterparts from African countries, such as the Gambia, Central African Republic (CAR) and Mauritania.

As an IADD 2022 result document, 'Gandhinagar Declaration' calling for enhancing collaboration in training in all areas of shared interest, was also endorsed. Defence Minister Singh made the event's most significant announcement when he launched the 'India–Africa Security Fellowship Programme'. The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) will host the fellowship. The fellows would receive some stipend while working in MP-IDSA for a period of 1–3 months.

In addition to the DefExpo and IADD, the fourth edition of the Goa Maritime Symposium (GMS) was conducted by the Naval War College (NWC) at Goa from 31 October to 1 November 2022. This was attended by captains, commanders and equivalent-rank officers from four African island nations' navies—Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. Conceptualised and instituted by the Indian Navy in 2016, the GMS is a forum for fostering collaborative thinking, cooperation and mutual understanding between India and key maritime nations of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The NWC, Goa conducts the symposium biennially, and three editions of the event have been organised thus far.

The theme of GMS-2022 was 'Maritime Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region: Converting Common Maritime Priorities into Collaborative Mitigation Frameworks'. The theme is underpinned by the idea of SAGAR and five principles of Maritime Security enunciated by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, which imply that the prosperity of our region is interlinked with the maritime fate of all IOR littorals. The participants availed the opportunity to visit Goa Shipyard Limited (GSL) on 1 November 2022, and to witness, first hand, the indigenous ship-

building capabilities of Indian shipyards. The delegates visited INS Pralay, a Guided Missile Vessel, constructed by the GSL in 2002 and were also shown the construction and repair areas, including the Ship Lift facility. India has consistently advocated the concept of 'Collective Responsibility' for maritime security in the IOR. The Goa Maritime Symposium and the Goa Maritime Conclave, conducted by the Indian Navy in alternate years, is a manifestation of such efforts.

PEACEKEEPING MISSIONS

The Department of Peace Operations currently oversees 12 peacekeeping operations. Among these, seven are in Africa.

- a. UNMISS in South Sudan.
- b. MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
- c. MINURSO in Western Sahara.
- d. UNSOM in Somalia is in transition and will soon be taken over by AMISOM. As a matter of fact, India donated US\$ 2 million in 2011 to UNSOM.
- e. UNISFA in Sudan and South Sudan.
- f. MINUSCA in Central African Republic.
- g. MINUSMA in Mali. India donated US\$ 1 million to MINUSMA in 2013.

India remains one of the top three leading UN Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) in Africa. A total of 143 Indian troops died on duty in Africa under UN peacekeeping missions since the United Nations' inception. Currently, 4,483 Indian soldiers serve in UNPKFs in five African nations—Congo, Morocco, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia. India's contribution to UN peacekeeping in Africa is exemplary for providing humanitarian support, promoting gender equality, reflecting solidarity with African countries and enhancing bilateral cooperation with the region.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Since May 2020, INS Kesari has undertaken Mission Sagar, under which India has been providing humanitarian and medical assistance to 15 friendly countries. In Africa, the ship covered Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros. The service included food aid, oxygen concentrators and ISO containers. Indian Navy also deployed its Medical Assistance Teams in multiple locations.

Late in 2021, on 25 December, INS Kesari entered the Port of Maputo, Mozambique, to deliver 500 tonnes of food aid under Mission Sagar. This deployment, the ninth of its kind under Mission Sagar, is being carried out in close cooperation with the Ministry of External Affairs and other central governmental organisations. The Indian Navy also handed over two Solas Marine fast interceptor craft to Mozambique and provided military training. Earlier in July 2019, India handed over two Larsen & Toubro interceptors to the Mozambican Navy as part of an agreement to strengthen defence cooperation between the two countries.

Following the journey to Mozambique, the Comorian Coast Guard received technical support at the port of Moroni. The Comorian Coast Guard (CCG) asked the Indian Navy to provide technical support for repairing a grounded patrol vessel of the CCG: P002-M' kombozi during the Goa Maritime Conclave that was held on 7–9 November 2021. The visit, which took place on 7 January 2022, was in response to that request. To recall, India has always been a reliable partner to such requests made by Comoros. On 25 April 2020, India deployed a 14-member Indian Medical Assistant Team to Comoros to fight against COVID-19 and dengue fever. Once again, INS Kesari shipped necessary Indian medications for COVID-19 in June 2020.

PROJECTING AHEAD

African priorities drive India's diplomacy with regard to defence. In an effort to create a conflict-free Africa, the AU has unveiled its flagship project, 'Silence the Guns by 2030', which is also a part of 'Africa's Vision 2063'. SAGAR, which Prime Minister Modi unveiled in 2015 in Mauritius, is the cornerstone of India's defence diplomacy with nations along the coast of eastern Africa. PM Modi highlighted the need for security for long-term progress at the opening of SAGAR, which is Hindi for 'sea'.

African nations may benefit most from indigenous Indian products as they work to reduce their dependency on traditional Western allies for security. India may impart this knowledge to Africa as well. In particular, for air defence, air-to-air missile systems and strategic weapon systems, the Indian industry can meet Africa's needs far more affordably. India also financially supports the goal of an Africa free from violence. India supported AMISOM in Somalia in 2011 to the tune of US\$ 2 million. A similar US\$ 1 million in support was given to the UN mission in Mali in the previous year.

Although a few ASEAN countries use Indian ships for their police services, the Indian ship-building industry has remained primarily a missed

opportunity. Sagarmala Project, India's premier undertaking, has continued to prioritise ports. PM Modi's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' ambitions will be accomplished with the aid of a robust ship-building sector, which will also benefit Africa. One such instance is the unmanned undersea vehicle.

Similarly, the Indian Air Force has developed a number of helicopters that meet international standards and are suitable for deployment in African war and rescue operations. The Dornier aeroplane, produced by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, is particularly beneficial in many African nations. India is the fourth nation to launch 1,000 drones simultaneously, following the UK, Russia and China. India, especially North-Eastern states of India, deployed domestically built drones to distribute the COVID-19 vaccination in several rural locations with weak connectivity.

As India believes in 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' and SAGAR, it will be keen to share its military power and technological knowhow with its African counterparts. The Indian defence sector is also receptive to defence-related cooperative partnerships in African nations. Earlier in November 2018, the DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organisation) India, and DRDB (Defence Research and Development Bureau), Nigeria, signed an MoU for collaboration in R&D.³² It is anticipated that more African countries would join DRDO soon.

Another area of cooperation between India and Africa is exporting military vehicles. Manufacturers of Indian military vehicles, like Tata Motors and Ashok Leyland, are already a part of the network. Ashok Leyland provided 1,200 automobiles to six African nations between February and July 2015—Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Kenya, Djibouti, Seychelles and Botswana.³³ For US\$ 50 million, Ashok Leyland provided the Zimbabwe Defence Forces with 633 of 670 troop carriers, buses, transport trucks, water tankers, gasoline tankers, fire-tenders, ambulances and light commercial vehicles in July 2015.³⁴ As part of a US\$ 36.5 million loan agreement with India, Ashok Leyland also provided 679 vehicles to the Tanzanian and Zimbabwean defence forces.³⁵ Tata Motors, on the other hand, has delivered 520 military vehicles, including ambulances, jeeps, water and fuel tankers, recovery and refrigeration trucks and buses, that were ordered for at least four African militaries participating in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).³⁶

The economies of Africa and India have had some of the fastest economic growth worldwide. As of 2023, the GDP of the continent is estimated at roughly US\$ 3.1 trillion,³⁷ and several of the fastest-growing economies in the world are found in Africa. Africa will house a quarter of the global labour and consumers by 2030. Africa has a chance to realign its strategic relationships

in light of the shifting global order and the Ukraine crisis. Whether or not the coming decade will be Africa's will depend mainly on how the region's leaders handle their policies. Whatever the case, the role of India will be crucial to the development of Africa.

Finally, the IADD did an excellent job presenting India's vision for 2047. This was entirely in line with PM Narendra Modi's objective of making India a strong and independent nation by promoting, displaying and forging partnerships with both domestic and foreign consumers for the nation's aerospace and defence manufacturing industries. The progress of India's defence manufacturing industry, successfully displayed at DefExpo 2022, has fuelled the government's and the nation's larger 'Make in India, Make for the World' initiative. Obviously, India's defence diplomacy with Africa is not proceeding in a geopolitical or economic vacuum. Many countries, including the US, Russia and China are vying for the top spot. India has the second-largest army in the world and must work taking into account its competitive advantages (including price).

CONCLUSION

Modern diplomacy is currently undergoing a profound shift. The pandemic has significantly changed how diplomatic operations are carried out around the world, particularly with an increased focus on the digitalisation of diplomacy. This was done by simultaneously adapting a new form of diplomacy that can function effectively through digital means and by adopting new digital tools to the unique demands of diplomats.

The relationship between India and Africa has improved significantly over the past decade, especially in increased commerce, investment and development assistance. Parallel to this, India strengthened its defence cooperation with Africa. India has actively supported Africa in recent years with its cybersecurity, peacekeeping and anti-terrorism efforts. The COVID-19 outbreak and the ensuing lockdown have, regrettably, negatively impacted people's lives in India and Africa. Nevertheless, despite interruptions, the two sides could keep crucial continuity, particularly in their defence diplomacy.

India's defence diplomacy with Africa during the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 periods can be roughly divided into five segments—capacity-building exercises, India's naval deployment in African coastlines, DefExpo and the India–Africa Defence Ministers' Conclave, India's participation in peacekeeping missions, and finally its humanitarian aid. AU's flagship

project, ‘Silence the Guns by 2030’, which is also a part of ‘Africa’s Vision 2063’, calls for the creation of a conflict-free Africa. Throughout the whole time, this has been the driving force behind India’s defence diplomacy with Africa. Going forward, India’s defence diplomacy is anticipated to become more deep-rooted, driven by demand and mutual recognition.

NOTES

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