

**DEFENCE DIPLOMACY - ADDING VALUE  
TO INDIA–EAST AFRICA RELATIONS**

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**(Author's note).** For the purposes of this article, the term East Africa (EA) may often also refer to the adjoining Horn of Africa (HOA) and the West Indian Ocean Region (WIOR) islands such as Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius, Comoros, etc. This is not an arbitrary delineation. Several African security forums, for example, the East Africa Standby Force or counter piracy conferences, regard these contiguous land and maritime regions to be a single entity in terms of the strategic and security issues obtaining presently. Accordingly, while using East Africa as the common term in the text, this author seeks the indulgence of the reader to view it in the larger geographical context of the countries encompassing East Africa, HOA and WIOR.

**Preamble**

Indian foreign policy engagement, over the years, could be described as operating in a layer of several concentric circles. The innermost circle of India's concern is our immediate neighbourhood, which because of its volatility, poses considerable challenges. The next circle, arguably, is our extended neighbourhood of West Asia owing to the cocktail of factors spanning Diaspora and NRI issues including remittances, our energy dependence and the inherent instability that obtains in the region. After that, comes our engagement with the big powers, most notably the USA but also Russia, other P5 members and prominent EU nations. Our extended periphery on the East viz. South East Asia has also been getting a fair amount of attention in the recent past and it has now been extended to East Asian nations as a consequence of our 'Look East Policy'. The recent initiatives by our PM and EAM in Japan and Vietnam are pointers to the new frisson in this vector. Conspicuous by its absence in much of our foreign policy discourse is East Africa and the West Indian Ocean region despite their forming the western flank of the Indian Ocean and being linked to us in several

ways. It may well be possible that our foreign policy establishment may be willing to have a greater engagement with the region and lacks resources to do so or it may be a case of benign neglect by mandarins who are fighting several fires. Either way, this author believes that India's engagement with East Africa is a case of missed opportunities but surmises that defence diplomacy may perhaps fill the gap where traditional methods have not yielded dividends. A regional scan and an enquiry of this question are attempted in the succeeding paragraphs.

## **Introduction**

India and countries in East Africa have ancient historic links. Maritime trade between these regions flourished in medieval times and this led to further cultural and social contacts as seen in the architecture, cuisine and social mores of many places in East Africa. The monsoon winds linked the west coast of India, the coast of Oman and the East African coast in a triangular maritime highway facilitating not only trade and commerce but also exchange of ideas and osmosis of socio-cultural practices. Colonial conquest of all the hitherto mentioned regions introduced a new common narrative. In some cases, India was the headquarter of the colonial powers and the other colonies in the region were administered or loosely controlled from here; in other cases India served as the de facto largest colonial base providing troops, weapons, men and material for colonial administration in the 'nations on the rim' when such need arose. The use of Indian labour to construct the then Uganda railway is a case in instance. Meant for strategic British ends – to extend its reach up to the source of river Nile viz. Lake Victoria – it ended up giving birth to a country, Kenya, which today is the leading east African nation. Similar such Indian diaspora experiences and engagements, in different degrees, inform other nations of East Africa and those in close proximity in the West Indian Ocean such as Uganda, Tanzania, Mauritius, Seychelles, Reunion Islands (French Indian Ocean Territory), Madagascar, etc. In the post-colonial period, India provided support (and leadership) for developing and underdeveloped nations, such as those in East Africa, through such mechanisms as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and Afro-Asian friendship forums. Common shared experiences of colonialism and the leadership of towering personalities such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Jomo Kenyatta and Julius Nyerere were the binding factors in the close and fraternal relations. This was further underpinned by Indian technical, economic and industrial assistance despite its own challenges of development and constraints of finance. For

example, several students from East Africa have studied and continue to study in Indian educational institutions. Indian investment in East Africa and the surrounding regions has also steadily grown. Concurrently, the diaspora has continued to provide cultural continuity and context to the relationship.

### **Situation Obtaining**

Despite all this, relations between India and East Africa seem stuck in a groove and have, arguably, not paid the expected strategic dividends to both entities. In recent years India has emerged as a regional power to reckon with both, on account of its economic heft and its military might (including other related strategic aspects like the nuclear, space and guided missile programmes). However, India has achieved this without leapfrogging over developmental concerns or muzzling other discordant voices. It is viewed, despite its many shortcomings, as a sort of role model by many African nations for its ability to have taken the democratic route to development and for the way it has dealt with strategic and security challenges in its neighbourhood. Over the years, by its participation in peacekeeping missions (many of them in Africa) and other initiatives like the recent counter piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden and off Mauritius and Seychelles, India has come to be viewed as a net security provider in the region. Today, East Africa and the West Indian Ocean face several strategic and security-related challenges such as political instability, ethnic and tribal rivalries often manifesting in bloody and brutal violence, wars and conflicts over land, water and other mineral resources, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, piracy, gun running, drug and human trafficking, proliferation of arms and weapons, and so forth. Add to this concoction inadequate and inefficient governance often due to lack of knowledge or resources or both, and the stage is ripe for implosion with all its attendant consequences such as genocide in Rwanda or the failed state syndrome exhibited by Somalia.

For India, the Western Indian Ocean and East Africa form its western flank and instability or implosion here can have unwelcome results – for instance, export of terror or piracy. Given both our capabilities and interest, it would be in order for us to act proactively to assist in bringing stability to this volatile region. It would be natural that other big powers would, either to take advantage of the strategic vacuum, or to ‘protect their interests’, make their own moves. The USA, UK, France, EU and China have provided enough evidence of their interests in the region and signalled their desire to stay involved.

Meanwhile, Indian efforts while being ‘just about adequate’ have not been commensurate with either our capability or our interest. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, at the political and general awareness level, the East African region is a tiny radar blip in our national consciousness. Consider, for instance, the fact that until recently while a war was raging on the Kenyan and Somali border there was hardly any recognition or reportage of that subject in India. Secondly, our strategic concerns are more of the immediate neighbourhood borne out of our recent wars or conflicts. This sometimes undermines the long-term perspective. Thirdly, our engagement with East African region while spread across many arenas - be it economic and commercial exchanges, cultural interaction or educational assistance or the occasional defence-related foray - have lacked a coherent focus. However, very recent developments, in the region, such as piracy and related instability, the massive Chinese engagement and investment, the resurfacing of EU as a major player, the interest taken by other nations such as Turkey and UAE to name a few, and the abiding involvement of the USA act both as an opportunity and challenge for India.

### **Defence Diplomacy**

Defence diplomacy could provide one such avenue for not only addressing the strategic concerns but in enhancing the relationship itself. While the precise delineation of the term and what it implies in its broadest sense would be attempted later, suffice it to say that it should not be viewed in the narrow sense of cold war military blocks, creation of bases or gunboat diplomacy. Broadly speaking, defence diplomacy can be defined as the use of defence assets be it personnel or material to pursue diplomatic objectives in a largely peaceful manner. There are many reasons why the relatively nascent practice (at least in our country) of defence diplomacy can, possibly, create new opportunities for enhancing the overall relationship. First and foremost, countries in East Africa, West Indian Ocean Region (WIOR) and Horn of Africa (HOA) still face basic security-related challenges that threaten their existence and sovereignty – at the same time they do not always have adequate resources to counter these threats. Any assistance to them in this regard will be more than welcome. Secondly, defence services of the size and capability of India have the flexibility to be used in different scenarios, the reach to operate far from home and the sustenance or the staying power to be able to persist for long. Thirdly, defence forces contain within them a fair level of soft power that can be judiciously applied across a range of

situations. For all these reasons, it can be argued that defence can form the third side of the triangle comprising diplomacy and development (verily the 3Ds) with which to progress international and regional cooperation.

For this to happen, however, several things need to fall into place. First, there needs to be recognition of this proposition and possibility within the government and wider policy-making echelons including the foreign policy establishment. India has sought to conduct its foreign policy on very traditional lines with the political angle prevailing and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) as the principal interlocutor and interpreter. Given the constraints within the MEA of personnel and domain knowledge, this is a very limiting outlook. Only recently, there has been recognition of the fact that trade, commerce, environment, medicine and health and numerous other such disciplines are also contributory aspects to a country's relationship with the world and hence its foreign policy. While armed forces have been used in peace support missions abroad and to project power when required or on goodwill delegations, use of military power and assets to form a vital aspect of our foreign policy construct has been missing. Of particular interest would be the proposition that defence assets when judiciously applied can themselves act as an instrument of development, at least in limited ways.

Secondly, within the Defence Forces itself, there needs to be a greater recognition of this facet. While the assets in terms of hardware may already be in place, lack of understanding of an attribute by its practitioners can result in myopia and, over a period of time, induce inertia and rustiness. Therefore, adequate soft skill measures such as language skills or area specialisations need greater attention. Certain special capabilities may also need to be built.

Thirdly, this particular geographical area needs to have a greater profile and recognition in our national and strategic discourse. While defence diplomacy can be applied to all nations and regions, geography, common Indian ocean heritage, other historical commonalities, proximity and the politico-military challenges obtaining in East Africa render it uniquely capable of being a sort of 'perfect ground' for the conduct of defence diplomacy. If India were to integrate these seemingly diverse strands of thought, harmonise them into a central premise and engage in robust defence diplomacy, it could provide a new dimension to our relationship with countries in the East African region. It is instructive to note that

the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) has maximum civilian element with equal thrust on aid and development within the military structure.

### **The Contours**

Defence diplomacy is an instrument of policy for many nations particularly those of the West. The UK, for example, even has an articulated doctrine in this regard and the USA has several publications which allude to the same. India has no such doctrine or policy document. Indian armed forces have been practicing some forms of defence diplomacy with varying results. The Indian Navy, quite clearly ahead of the other two services owing to the essentially internationalist character of maritime forces, has, for long, publicly articulated that diplomacy is the one of the three important roles of the Navy, the other two being military and constabulary. The recently released (2009) Indian Navy's Maritime Doctrine emphasises this point. The Army and Air Force too have been recently bringing out the diplomatic aspect of their service and how they can be deployed to derive strategic advantages. Notwithstanding all this, the practice of defence diplomacy in and by our country is not only nascent but also random, isolated and uncoordinated without a larger national purpose. While we may, arguably, have adequate material resources, we have not developed the human resource, the intellectual elements and the software architecture to practice defence diplomacy in the manner it ought to be. But given only a slight tweaking of our infrastructure and backed by political conviction and support from other national agencies and ministries, this can become a potent weapon in our arsenal.

Defence diplomacy can be practiced across a range of situations below the threshold of war – from peace support operations to benign operations in times of peace. Particularly, in case of India, the ability and long experience of our Armed Forces to contain insurgency and to fight low intensity conflicts with a combination of minimum force and understanding of cultural sensitivities impart to us special abilities that can be put to use in similar situations occurring elsewhere such as in EA and HOA. While a detailed delineation of our capabilities would not be germane here, the very existence of a broad range of strengths that can be used in situations from Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) such as in Tsunami in 2004 or in forestalling a coup (such as in Male in 1988) makes it amply clear that India's defence assets and material can be put to use for several purposes. Given the recent discourse about the use of smart power,

which is essentially a combination of hard and soft power, this author believes that the defence forces of India are best suited to deliver and deploy smart power.

The recent years have witnessed several modifications and fresh interpretations of the theory and classical use or threat of use of military force. These revisions have been occasioned by change in the nature of war and conflict, technological advancements, explosion of media which makes it possible to not only carry news instantly but also brings huge amount of 'battle field transparency; and above all the increasing globalisation or 'flat world syndrome' wherein developments in one part of the world tend to affect the other parts in vastly telescoped time horizons. Thus, 'winning the peace' (or more correctly sustaining peace) has become as important as winning wars. 'After war' (and indeed before war) is just as important as war. These developments have led, among other things, to theories of soft power whose most passionate proponent has been the famous American academic Joseph Nye (*It is, of course, a matter of another paper whether soft power is really Nye's contribution or whether other proponents including, most notably, Mahatma Gandhi were better practitioners of this art long before Joseph Nye was a gleam in his mother's eye*).

In more recent times, the American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton coined the term 'smart power' to signify the combination of hard (classical military and state power) and soft power (culture, music, cuisine, language, arts, etc) as the new currency of international use. These theories were based on the premise that hard power application without soft power can cause animosities whereas soft power without hard power can be ineffective. Paradoxical as it may seem, defence forces contain elements and assets which can employ soft power. The attributes of reach, sustenance, flexibility, mobility and cosmopolitanism within them can be most useful in the exercise of soft power. Thus, defence diplomacy can be an instrument of policy in ways not foreseen.

## **Conclusion**

Defence diplomacy is most useful in the post-cold war era of multipolarity on one hand and sub-conventional threats on the other, which have come to define the new international security environment. While no definite definitions are available it is certainly not intimidation or military operations in the classical sense. The UK Ministry of Defence policy paper identifies defence

diplomacy as one of the military's eight defence missions and states that "defence diplomacy is often developed and implemented in close coordination with foreign and development ministries." East Africa is a region which faces enormous political, security and development challenges. It is the surmise of this paper that use of effective defence diplomacy by India can not only be beneficial to us but also be gainful to countries in the region, generating what can be described as a 'win-win' argument. In fact, India has the necessary ingredients and advantages to be a model practitioner of defence diplomacy in the East African region. If one were to analyse the strategic issues and problems inherent in East Africa on the one hand and the key aspects of India's politico-military strategy towards the region on the other, use of defence diplomacy as a concept of international activity can prove its efficacy in shaping India's policy towards East Africa.

What could be the precise ways and methods in which this could be practised? Once we accept the rationale for a more active and focused practice of defence diplomacy by India and its role in furthering our strategic objectives and in thwarting other inimical interests, the various precepts and practices of defence diplomacy and how they could be enmeshed into the overall canvas of the conduct of our 'external affairs' could be fleshed out. Constraints of space preclude further delineation here but that could be done in the second part of this article if, hopefully, the Editors of NWC journal give me the space next year.



### **About the Author**



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