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Indian Air Power Diplomacy Overseas

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Introduction

While the world remained glued to the Russo-Ukraine War under the nuclear threat for the past four months, the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the air arm of the Indian Navy silently soared in the skies in and around the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This combined Indian air power not only demonstrated the professional outlook of the Indian armed forces but also highlighted the real and effective application of military diplomacy in general, and air power diplomacy in particular, in the country's overall comprehensive national power.

Eastern Bridge Air Combat Exercise

The five-day "Eastern Bridge" air combat exercise, which took place in Jodhpur in the last week of February 2022, was a sign of the expanding bilateral military collaboration between India and Oman. For the sixth iteration of the exercise, a fleet of Sukhoi-30MKI, Jaguar, and Mirage-2000 fighter jets of the IAF participated, along with the F-16 aircraft of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO). In order to improve the operational capabilities of both forces, it was intended to expose participants to operational situations and engage in a reciprocal exchange of best practices. Over the past few years, there has been an increase in defence cooperation between India and Oman.¹ Through a reciprocal exchange of experience and operational information, the exercise gave IAF and RAFO members a chance to cooperate productively. It also offered opportunities for cross-cultural interaction between the workforces of the two countries.²

P-8I Aircraft Marked Dominance

Rajnath Singh, the defence minister, flew a sortie in the P-8I (Poseidon Eight India) long-range maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare aircraft of the Indian Navy on May 18, 2022, to comprehend the operational intricacies of the most effective modern maritime surveillance and hunting aircraft. The long-range maritime patrol military aircraft P-8I of the Indian Navy is regarded as one of the best surveillance aircraft in the world and is capable of pinpointing and destroying enemy submarines. The P-8I aircraft, which were imported from the United States, is essential to the Indian Navy's ability to conduct vital maritime operations and serve as its eyes. The P-8I aircraft is hailed as a game-changer for the Indian armed forces because it allows the Indian Navy to keep an eye on the strategically significant Indian Ocean region. It has also been used to conduct operations in the high-altitude Ladakh region. A wide range of maritime and littoral operations can be supported by the P-8I aircraft's long-range anti-submarine, anti-surface, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities. The aircraft can launch a punishing response and

maintain a watch over India's near and extended areas of interest thanks to its rapid speed and long endurance of roughly 10 hours.³

P-8I Aircraft at La Réunion Island

A five-day deployment by an Indian Navy P-8I submarine-hunting aircraft to La Réunion Island in the southern Indian Ocean was to conduct coordinated surveillance with nearby French Navy warships. The Indian Navy's P-8I has been stationed on the French overseas territory of Réunion Island. The Indian Navy aircraft was patrolling in the southwest Indian Ocean while carrying French Navy personnel during the drill. Similar joint patrolling from the island was also carried out in 2020.⁴

According to a spokesperson for the Indian Navy, "The P-8I aircraft will engage with French warships and undertake coordinated surveillance missions in areas to enhance maritime safety and security in the Southern Indian Ocean, including the Mozambique Channel." One of India's main areas of interest is the east coast of Africa, where China has been making significant investments, as well as the southwest Indian Ocean, which includes the Mozambique Channel (used by ships passing through the Cape of Good Hope). On Mauritius' Agalega Island, which is situated in the same area, India is constructing dual-use infrastructure in addition to a 3,000-meter runway. The facilities at Agalega will support Indian maritime assets, including P-8Is, in the western Indian Ocean, notably in the waters near the east coast of Africa, a region that is becoming more and more significant but where the Indian Navy has only had a small number of engagements. In accordance with the logistical exchange agreements India has signed with these nations, India has access to the military facilities of Japan, France, and the United States, all of which have bases in the western Indian Ocean.⁵

Coordinated Patrols with a RAAF P-8A Poseidon Aircraft

The P-8I also took part in coordinated naval operations for anti-submarine warfare and surface surveillance at Darwin, Australia, alongside the P-8A of the Australian Air Force. The objective of the exercise was to improve maritime domain awareness. The 92 Wing of the Royal Australian Air Force and the Albatross (INAS 312) maritime patrol squadron of the Indian Navy engaged in combat.⁶ "Recently, greater cooperation between the two maritime nations, through bilateral and multilateral exercises at sea, has boosted interoperability and established bridges of friendship," a spokesperson for the Indian Navy said. The P-8I aircraft have previously operated together during the MALABAR and AUSINDEX series of exercises and have a shared understanding of operating procedures and information sharing. These aircraft have a demonstrated extended reach. The multi-

mission aircraft also participated in the Sea Dragon exercise, which was held in January 2022 at Guam Island, north of Australia in the western pacific.⁷

In light of China's aggressive actions in the region, New Delhi and Canberra have similar strategic goals in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific and a rules-based order. The Australian High Commissioner to India, Barry O' Farrell AO, tweeted in response to the Indian Navy's P-8I arriving at Darwin, "Defence cooperation between Australia and India in action! Australia welcomes the P8I of the Indian Navy to Darwin as we continue to develop intricate habits of collaboration in our bilateral defence relations." This is the bilateral defence component of the QUAD strategic cooperation, which typically stays away from military alliances. This deployment "reflects the continuing character of the India-Australia security alliance," according to the Australian Royal Air Force.⁸

RIMPAC Exercise at Hawaii

In preparation for the Rim of the Pacific exercise, which is regarded as the largest maritime drill in the world, the Indian Navy's frigate INS Satpura and P-8I aircraft have been deployed off to Hawaii. The US is hosting the exercise, which includes 28 different nations' navies. The exercise's maritime phase started on July 12 and concludes with a closing ceremony on August 4. According to the officials, the multi-dimensional exercise involves 38 warships, 31 unmanned systems, 170 aircraft, and more than 25,000 soldiers. The P-8I will take part in coordinated, multi-national, multi-platform operations for advanced anti-submarine warfare.⁹

IAF Tactical Leadership Programme in Egypt.

The Tactical Leadership Programme (TLP) for the IAF contingent is halfway through at the Egyptian Air Force (EAF) Weapon School in Egypt (Cairo West Airbase). The programme started on June 24 and will end on July 22. Three Su-30 MKI aircraft from the IAF are taking part. The contingent was inducted using two C-17 aircraft. An IAF Su-30 MKI aircraft flew a six-hour non-stop ferry over four nations, from Jamnagar Air Base in India to Cairo West Air Base in Egypt. The IAF is taking part in the Tactical Leadership Program as an unusual experiment, with its aircrew serving as instructors. This exercise offers a great chance to highlight the capabilities and reach of the IAF. Additionally, it will help to improve best-practice exchange and defence collaboration between the two nations. IAF aircraft took part in operations day and night during the first two weeks of the exercise, working alongside Egyptian F-16, Rafale, and Mig 29 aircraft in air-to-ground and air-to-air combat scenarios.¹⁰ According to the IAF, the project would also provide an opportunity to showcase the

Su-30 MKI built in India and the country's prowess in furthering the indigenization of spare parts and components.¹¹ It must also be noted that to boost the Indo-Egyptian air power relations, the IAF chief, Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari, travelled to Egypt earlier in November 2021 for a five-day tour to attend the Air Power Symposium and Defence Exposition (EDEX) in Cairo.¹²

Conclusion

It is evident that Indian air power is growing significantly in both the overall national development and in the outreach to the countries of mutual interests. The geopolitical equations keep changing as per the global strategic leanings. Apart from the conventional diplomatic measures undertaken by the government of the day, the armed forces have got the onerous task of maintaining the hard power firm and strong through the softer approach of defence and military diplomacy, and air power is proving to be the vital cog in the wheel.



NOTES:

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³ “P-8I aircraft: 'India's eye in the sky'! Nightmare for hostile submarines in Indian Ocean” *Times Now News*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/indian-navys-p-8i-multi-mission-aircraft-a-nightmare-for-indias-enemy-submarines-article-91654241>. Accessed on July 12, 2022.

⁴ “Indian Navy's Submarine Hunting P-8I Aircraft Participates In Drills With French Navy In Southwest Indian Ocean”, *Swarajya*, May 10, 2022, <https://swarajyamag.com/context/indian-navys-submarine-hunting-p-8i-aircraft-participates-in-drills-with-french-navy-in-southwest-indian-ocean>. Accessed on July 12, 2022.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “What is Indian Navy's P-8I aircraft doing Down Under?” *Aisa Net News*, April 13, 2022, <https://newsable.asianetnews.com/gallery/india-defence/what-is-indian-navy-s-p-8i-aircraft-doing-in-australia-raa8wm#image4>. Accessed on July 12, 2022.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Indian Navy Takes Part In Rim Of Pacific Exercise”, *Outlook India*, July 5, 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/indian-navy-takes-part-in-rim-of-pacific-exercise-news-207018>. Accessed on July 12, 2022.

¹⁰ “IAF Participation in Tactical Leadership Programme in Egypt”, MoD Press Release, July 08, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1840177#:~:text=IAF%20Su%2D30%20MKI%20aircraft,with%20its%20aircrew%20as%20instructors>. Accessed on July 12, 2022.

¹¹ Madhavi Gaur, “IAF to join Egyptian Air Force in Tactical Leadership Program”, *Adda 247*, June 27, 2022, <https://currentaffairs.adda247.com/iaf-to-join-egyptian-air-force-in-tactical-leadership-program/>. Accessed on July 12, 2022.

¹² “Indian Air Force team arrives in Egypt to participate in Tactical Leadership Programme” *ANI*, June 23, 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/indian-air-force-team-arrives-in-egypt-to-participate-in-tactical-leadership-programme/1008800/>. Accessed on July 12, 2022.