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INDIAN MILITARY AIR BASE IN AFRICA: A FUTURISTIC VISION

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of multiple stakeholders in recent years has dynamically changed the security paradigm of the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, the Indian Ocean has always been a strategically important region in terms of global trade and commerce. Today, 95 per cent of trade by volume and 80 per cent of crude oil transit the Indian Ocean.¹ The countries involved try to increase their presence in the region where their economic interests and geopolitical status are at stake, leading to the emergence of power politics and security threats. Signifying the importance of the Indian Ocean, the prime minister of India, in a speech at Mauritius in 2015, stated, “India is at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean.”² India has been expanding its cooperation with Africa, South Asia, and West Asia through initiatives such

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1. Annual Report 2015-2016, Ministry of Shipping, Government of India, p. 4.
2. Dhurva Jaishankar, “Indian Ocean Region: A Pivot for India’s Growth”, Brookings, September 2016, at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/indian-ocean-region-a-pivot-for-indias-growth/>.

China's expansionist policy in the maritime domain creates a security concern, particularly for India, due to the existing adversarial relations. Therefore, India can increase its activities in exploring Africa, as African-India relations also share a long history of trade and security relations.

as Vision SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). The Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR) is a gateway to the Indian Ocean, home to some of the world's busiest International Shipping Lines (ISLs). The passage of 60 per cent of the world's trade through these ISLs has become vulnerable to numerous non-traditional security threats such as piracy, terrorism, trafficking, smuggling, etc. Therefore, countries are trying to secure the ISLs, and also prevent the

threat over the ocean through military establishments and deployment of forces in the WIOR, but the exhibition of China's expansionist policy in the maritime domain creates a security concern, particularly for India, due to the existing adversarial relations. Therefore, India can increase its activities in exploring Africa, as African-India relations also share a long history of trade and security relations.

In the past, India focussed more on the Eastern Indian Ocean Region (EIOR) as it comprised the booming 'tiger economies', while the WIOR remained relatively unexplored. This also heavily influenced the Government of India's (GoI) Look East and Act East policies to engage with the Southeast Asian nations. Furthermore, China's aggressive claims in and around the South China Sea further propelled the GoI to focus on initiatives centring on these nations to secure India's national and bilateral interests. While India continues to engage with these nations, it is imperative that it taps into the potential offered by the WIOR, as it is in a geostrategic location—in terms of both abundant maritime resources and critical trading routes for oil and gas supplies.

In the last few years, the GoI has actively undertaken diplomatic and military dialogues in the WIOR after assessing the need to develop more robust security cooperation with the concerned countries. In 2016, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi visited the Eastern African Countries (EACs),

where he initiated multiple joint dialogues, including defence cooperation deals with the EACs and cooperation initiatives with military bases established by foreign countries in the WIOR. However, there is a need for a more permanent presence to be established in the WIOR to secure India's national interests and contribute to the region's collective security. A military base in the WIOR would serve India as a platform in numerous ways: posture its military strengths, proactively establish military ties with the surrounding countries, boost the countries' capabilities, provide training programmes for their armed forces personnel, undertake joint

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military exercises and participate in anti-piracy operations. In case of any future attack directed towards India from our adversarial neighbours, the overseas military base will be well positioned to ensure that such attack can be effectively deterred. The base can also ensure that India can counter any attempts to disrupt its critical energy supply chains. The base will have to be equipped appropriately to support the Indian military operations targeted against the adversaries. The location of the base will have to be determined after an in-depth study and analysis of its proximity to the adversaries or the overseas military bases of our adversaries, as well as the relations with the home country of such a base.

THE RATIONALE FOR 'WHY AFRICA?'

A few fundamental questions arise as to why India should choose Africa for the establishment of an Indian overseas base when, time and again, it has emphasised that it does not have global aspirations. With India's rising global stature, this premise ought to fade away gradually. An immediate

answer is the Indian Air Force (IAF) tableau rolling out on Kartavya Path on January 26, 2023. It gave a futuristic vision of its intent by showcasing the theme of “IAF: Power Beyond Boundary”. This section attempts to provide a futuristic vision which, in all probability, may become a reality in the fast-changing geopolitical equations and world order by 2047.

PRESENCE IN NORTHERN IOR

The airfield in North Agalega Island in Mauritius caters to the southern part of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and Southern Africa.³ Establishing an air base in one of the four studied countries will cater to the northern IOR, the eastern and northern parts of the African continent and the Arabian Peninsula region. India cannot ignore the fact that China has established a permanent military base on the African continent. Given the China-Pakistan nexus across sectors, particularly in the military domain, it is not far-fetched to think that a joint military action can be planned in India’s western neighbourhood to create another front in the IOR for greater nuisance. Given the high likelihood of such a scenario and keeping the geographical proximity in mind, it is logical that India has an overseas presence in Africa rather than relying on deployments from mainland bases alone. It will enable India to assess the situation beforehand to negate such strikes before they reach India’s shores. It will also allow India to conduct first-hand assessments and help monitor the adversary’s capabilities.

EFFECTIVE CAPACITY BUILDING

An airfield is limited in capabilities and facilities as well as in its overall operation, unlike the case of an air base which requires an extensive inventory, logistical support, training, runways, taxiways, hangars, maintenance buildings, control towers, and various support structures, etc. An inventory will showcase India’s defence capabilities. In contrast, military personnel on the air base will enable both sides to exchange their

3. S. Bashfield, “Agalega: A Glimpse of India’s Remote Island Military Base”, Lowy Institute, March 2021, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/agalega-glimpse-india-s-remote-island-military-base>. Accessed on January 24, 2023.

best practices, such as counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency strategy, local officers training, etc. For example, France trained the local African armed forces and police personnel. As a result, the African counterpart could shoulder more obligations than earlier through such initiatives. It led to a reduction in France's involvement in the African conflict.⁴ This proposed air base will facilitate the development of the local supply chain, which will involve the host nation and its local population. It will, in turn, contribute to the improvement of the host country's capabilities. Once this mechanism is implemented with the subject nation, it can be extended further to neighbouring African nations with similar requirements. This approach will be helpful for India to extend its outreach into Africa as a whole.

By setting up its air base, India can also indicate its potential, spread its cultural values, safeguard its overseas interests and enhance its political influence with the respective nations.⁵ India's bilateral trade with Africa reached US\$ 89.5 billion in 2021-22 compared to US\$ 56 billion in the previous year.⁶ Africa remains an indisputable massive continent with its one billion population, foreseen to be a huge potential market, and there is significant and similar reciprocity of trade relations between the two sides.⁷ Foreign military bases are politically sensitive but economically rewarding for most poor African nations. Despite the sporadic politicisation of these military bases, foreign troops in Africa continue to bring handsome fiscal revenue for the host nations.⁸ The proposed base could also be used to extend support to other Friendly Foreign Countries (FFCs) in terms of logistical maintenance, refuelling, or similar operations.

4. Sun Degan and Yahia Zoubir, "Sentry Box in the Backyard: Analysis of French Military Bases in Africa", *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, 5:3, 82104.10.1080/19370679.2011.12023186. 2011.

5. Ibid.

6. S. Jaishankar, "India Among Africa's Top Investors, Bilateral Trade at \$89.5bn in FY22: EAMs", *Business Standard*, July 20, 2022, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-among-africa-s-top-investors-bilateral-trade-at-89-5bn-in-fy22-eam-122072000023_1.html Accessed on January 25, 2023.

7. R. Utley "Not to do Less But to do Better: French Military Policy in Africa", *International Affairs*, 78(1), 28. 2002.

8. Degan and Zoubir, n. 4.

LEVERAGING SOVEREIGN GUARANTEE OF THE HOST COUNTRY

Political instability in the host country has been one of the major challenges of the rationale. However, the assessment is done based on the current political ties of the respective government with the Government of India. It has been observed that the African nations have a very dynamic political set-up, which is highly fragile at times and is subjected to volatility. When such a project is carried out at the government-to-government level, it is executed based on the issuance of a 'sovereign guarantee', which is extended by the nation itself, not by the political party/military regime in power. It is to ensure that the project is executed irrespective of the political conditions prevailing in the country. There have been multiple foreign military bases that have sustained their presence despite political turmoil within the countries, such as in the past 30 years, Somalia has experienced political instability and frequent conflicts.⁹ Still, the US military base in Kismayo, Baledogle Airport continues to exist and operate in Somalia.

GLOBAL SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

India and Africa have a long-standing relationship built on historical, cultural, and economic ties. In recent years, India has been expanding its economic and strategic engagement with Africa, including establishing military bases in the region. This move is a part of the global South-South cooperation, which aims to promote the interests of the developing countries in the international arena. In this context, establishing Indian military bases in Africa can counter China's growing presence in the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR). These bases can help enhance India's strategic position in the region, strengthen its relations with the African countries, monitor the Chinese naval activities in the WIOR, promote regional security and stability, and help India to play a more active role in regional and global organisations and ensure a balance of power in the region.

9. Sarah Dalrymple. "Crisis Context, Longer-Term Development at Nexus: Somalia", Development Initiatives, February 2021, <https://devinit.org/resources/supporting-longer-term-development-crises-nexus-lessons-somalia/crisis-context/> Accessed on January 25, 2023.

INDIA'S MILITARY INVESTMENT IN AFRICA

India should invest militarily in Africa for several strategic, economic, and security reasons. First, it can help to secure India's access to natural resources, counter China's growing influence, promote stability and security in the region, and enhance India's global reputation. Africa is a strategically important region for India. It is a significant source of natural resources, including oil and minerals, which are crucial for India's economic growth. India can secure access to these resources and protect its regional economic interests. Second, India's military presence in Africa can also help to promote stability and security in the region. Conflicts and civil wars plague Africa, and India's military expertise and resources can help to address these issues and contribute to peace-keeping efforts. Third, India's military presence in Africa can also help promote India's global standing and reputation as a responsible global power. Lastly, India can use its military presence in Africa to demonstrate its commitment to international security and stability and to build stronger ties with the African countries.

INDIA'S RISING GLOBAL STATURE

India is shaping its global outlook as a rising economic and military power and a significant player in global politics and international organisations. India's active engagement in the global arena will continue to be an important driver of its foreign policy and shape its global role. India is home to one of the world's fastest-growing major economies, touching the three trillion mark and this has given it increased influence on the global stage. This economic growth has enabled India to invest in infrastructure and technology and to play a more active role in international trade and investment. Another critical element of India's global outlook is its status as a rising military power. India has a large and well-equipped military and is a nuclear-armed state. It is also one of the few countries with a credible blue water navy and a growing aerospace sector. This gives India significant military capabilities and it is seen as an essential security partner for many countries in the region and beyond. The country has a deep understanding

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of the challenges facing the developing countries, and it has prioritised promoting economic development and poverty reduction in the developing world. India has been actively engaged in assisting other developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, through various initiatives such as capacity building, technical assistance and partnerships. India also plays a significant role in various international organisations, such as the United Nations, World Trade Organisation, and World Health Organisation. India's active participation in these organisations enables it to shape international policy and promote its interests on the global stage.

SYMBIOTIC RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND EAST AFRICAN COUNTRIES

The African countries, especially in East Africa, have had long-standing relationships with India. The two regions have a rich history of trade, cultural exchange and political ties. The East African coast has historically been a significant trading hub for Indian merchants. In addition, the Indian Ocean has been a vital trade route for India and East Africa since ancient times. Indian traders brought textiles, spices, and precious stones, while East Africa exported gold, ivory, and other natural resources. The trade between the two regions has continued to this day, with India being one of the largest trading partners of East Africa.

Cultural exchange is another aspect of the relationship between East Africa and India. Many East Africans have an Indian heritage, as their ancestors were brought over as indentured labourers during the colonial era. Today, there is a significant Indian diaspora in East Africa, and their presence has profoundly impacted the region's culture. Indian cuisine, music, and dance are all popular in East Africa. India and East Africa also have strong political ties. India has been a vocal supporter of the East African

countries in the international arena. India has provided aid and assistance to many East African countries, particularly in education, health and infrastructure. India has also been a mediator in peace talks between the East African countries and participated in peace-keeping missions in the region.

Indian private companies have also invested in East Africa's fast-growing economies, creating jobs and boosting economic growth.

Economic ties between India and East Africa have grown stronger in recent years. India has been investing in various sectors in East Africa, including infrastructure, telecommunications, and energy. Indian private companies have also invested in East Africa's fast-growing economies, creating jobs and boosting economic growth. The relationship between East Africa and India is one of deep historical, cultural and economic ties. Both regions have much to gain from continued cooperation and collaboration. As East Africa continues to grow and develop, India can play a vital role in supporting its development and helping build a better future for the region's people.

INDIA-AFRICA DEFENCE MINISTERS' CONCLAVE

As part of defence cooperation, India's initiative of conducting the India-Africa Defence Ministers' Conclave on the sidelines of the Defexpo every two years is indeed a trust building event and a major booster for the cooperation militarily. The first India-Africa Defence Ministers' Conclave was held in Lucknow in 2020, and the second was conducted in Ahmedabad in October 2022. The conclave brought together defence ministers and senior military officials from the African countries to discuss issues of mutual concern and explore ways to enhance defence cooperation between India and Africa. The conclave was a significant event in the India-Africa partnership, marking the first-ever gathering of defence ministers from Africa in India. It was aimed at strengthening defence ties between India and Africa and exploring opportunities for cooperation in areas such as counter-terrorism, maritime security, and peace-keeping operations. The conclave

was attended by defence ministers and senior military officials from several African countries, including Algeria, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania.

During the conclave, the defence ministers discussed various issues of mutual concern, including regional and global security challenges, the threat of terrorism and extremism, and the importance of maritime security. They also discussed opportunities for cooperation in areas such as counter-terrorism, peace-keeping operations, and capacity building. The ministers also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defence cooperation between India and the African countries. The MoU aims to establish a framework for cooperation between India and Africa in the field of defence, including training, joint exercises, and the transfer of defence technology. It provides an opportunity for India and Africa to strengthen defence ties, explore opportunities for cooperation, and address common security challenges. The outcome of the conclave will benefit both India and Africa and pave the way for further cooperation in the future.

EXPLORING MILITARY AIR BASE IN AFRICA

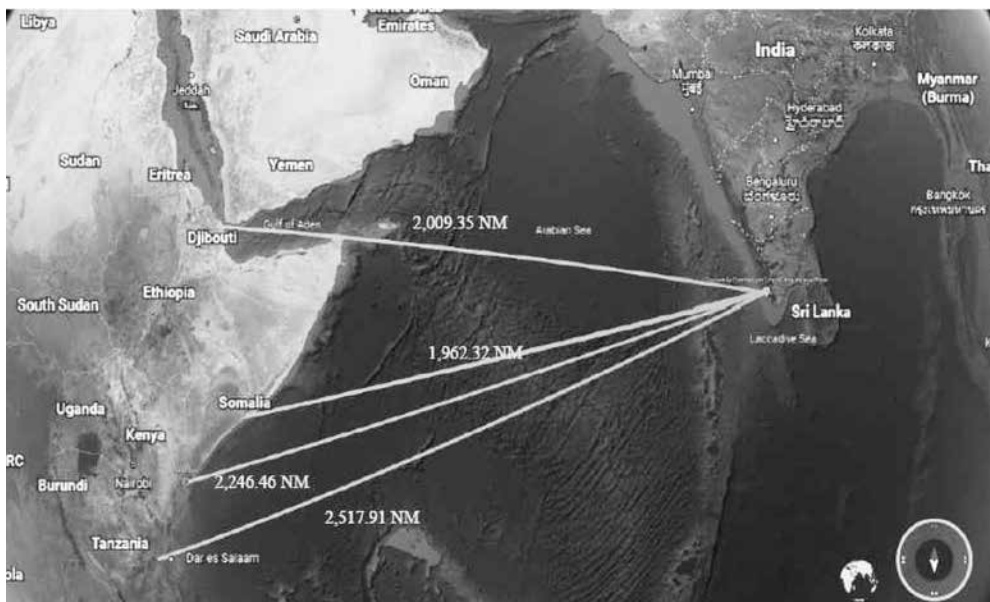
In comparing and analysing the countries of the WIOR—Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania—several factors can be studied to identify the potential country most suited for an Indian overseas air base. For example, political structures, the current state of internal affairs, the air power capability of those countries concerning their requirements, the military bases already established by foreign countries, and the geographical proximity to India, amongst others, are issues that can be considered.

SOMALIA

Somalia is located in the easternmost part of Africa, sharing its maritime boundary with the WIOR. Somalia's political structure follows a parliamentary democratic system, with the president as the nominal head and the prime minister as the executive head of government. However, in 2021, anti-government protests raised concerns about political instability

within the democratic set-up of Somalia. Somalia is also riddled with security concerns, particularly with the increase of Islamic armed group insurgents (such as Al-Shabaab) and issues about maritime security. The approximate geographical air travel distance between the two nations is 3,932 km (2,443 miles)¹⁰ as shown in Fig 1, with the passenger aircraft requiring only 4.5 hours from India's airport to the nearest air base in Somalia.

Fig 1: Distance from Southern Tip of India to the WIOR Nations



Source: By author's use of Google Earth image.

Geographical proximity cannot be the only parameter for India to establish its air base. Another basic requirement would be to ascertain the organisation with which India can establish and maintain its collaboration, such as the Somali Air Force (SAF). One of the core problems with the SAF is that it was completely destroyed in the civil war. The recent statement by General Mohamad Sheikh Ali, the SAF commander, is that *"he is going to*

10. Available at: <https://www.distancefromto.net/distance-from-india-to-somalia>.

*have to 'start from scratch' to introduce any new capabilities."*¹¹ The Global Fire Power (GFP) report on military capability indicates that Somalia ranks at 139 out of 142 countries and is indicated to have an air force capacity with zero strength.¹²

Given the disadvantages, as stated by the commander of the SAF, that they must 'start from scratch,' it provides the Indian Air Force with a broad platform to showcase its indigenous air capabilities. The current scenario provides India with a space to build its air base and train Somalia's pilots and ground staff. As indicated in the interview, Commander of the SAF, General Ali, stated, "The government is committed to building a small but efficient air force. We have a plan. First, we will train people—the pilots, engineers, technicians, and ground support staff."¹³

On the other hand, having 'zero strength' is largely a disadvantage for India because there is no existing infrastructure to rely on. Given the economic investment required to develop everything from scratch, the cost-benefit analysis might be a tricky proposition even for the Indian Air Force. The USA is the largest stakeholder in Somalia, with 500 plus operational personnel and considerable drone technology involvement, including providing military training to Somalia's Special Forces. The Europeans have started the "European Union Training Mission in Somalia" to train the Somali National Army. Despite such involvement, international players have expressed concern over the increasing power struggle between the president and the prime minister, especially following the 2021 political crisis. The crisis only showed that Somalia's political structure is still not mature enough to host the air bases of the developing countries. Though India has the experience of maintaining its first air base at Aini in Tajikistan and operate from there as well, it needs to avoid an unstable country

11. "Somalia Battles for an Air Force to Fight Against Terror", *Times Aerospace*, March 7, 2018, at <https://www.timesaerospace.aero/features/defence/somalia-battles-for-an-air-force-to-fight-against-terror>.

12. "Somalia Military Strength", Power Index, Global Fire Power (GFP), (04/26/2022), available at https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=somalia.

13. n. 11.

like Somalia for its overseas base in Africa. Rather, India must seize the opportunity to become a reliable 'aerospace product supplier' to Somalia, as the demand is entirely compatible with what India produces and what Somalia needs. The new indigenous products have the potential to tap into the defence requirements of Somalia.

DJIBOUTI

Djibouti is located at the Horn of Africa, the 'chokepoint' of the Indian Ocean. Due to the amount of trade navigating through that region, the nation is regarded as one of the most strategically crucial countries in the 21st century. The political set-up of Djibouti is that of a semi-presidential republic. The Djiboutian government has friendly relations with multiple foreign countries, which enhances the capabilities of the Djiboutian Air Force, also called Force Aérienne du Djibouti (FAD). However, the majority of air power contributed to Djibouti is by countries which have already set up their military bases: Mirage F-1C fighters backed by SA 330 Puma by France; recently, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) created its military base and offered Djibouti Xian aircraft (a single Modern Ark (MA) 60 (MA60) twin-turboprop transport aircraft).¹⁴ This signifies that establishing a military air base also encourages the foreign country to get involved in defence deals and enter into agreements to sell its home-grown defence products. Djibouti has good relations with India in the naval domain, as India participates in joint exercises with countries such as France and the USA at their respective naval bases. The Indian Navy has already been participating in anti-piracy patrol missions such as 'Operation Turn Around'. From the preliminary assessment, it is an indicator that India can focus on improving the Indian Navy's presence in the country, which would have a significant impact on the Indian Air Force starting from zero.

However, establishing an air base in Djibouti also has its challenges. Construction of the air force base from scratch is challenging when the Indian

14. "Xian MA-60 for Djibouti", *Times Aerospace*, December 12, 2014, at <https://www.timesaerospace.aero/news/defence/xian-ma-60-for-djibouti>.

As a part of the outreach of the Indian Navy, the GoI has announced plans to develop a network of 32 surveillance stations to provide maritime domain awareness, with dedicated sites in Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka.

Air Force does not have much leverage. India might not be able to leverage its position since there are established air bases of technologically advanced countries with more capabilities and services to provide to Djibouti than India. The air forces of France and the USA have already provided training facilities, and countries like China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Germany are selling their defence products to Djibouti.

A critical analysis reveals that having a military base in Djibouti will only further India's presence, given that China already has a military base there. However, it is also to be noted that the USA also has a military base in Djibouti. Moreover, there are many other friendly nations (Japan, France, and Saudi Arabia) with which India can cooperate in their respective military establishments in Djibouti. India can take measures against China by fostering stronger military relations with Djibouti and focussing on furthering cooperation in the naval sector.

On the contrary, the Indian Navy is better positioned to establish its base in Djibouti than the Indian Air Force. As a part of the outreach of the Indian Navy, the GoI has announced plans to develop a network of 32 surveillance stations to provide maritime domain awareness, with dedicated sites in Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka. As of 2015, India established its coastal radar surveillance system in Seychelles. Similar to this programme, if the Indian Navy can proactively participate with the Djiboutian armed forces and ensure the establishment of a coastal radar system, it can be used further to conduct surveillance in the region as well as track the movements of India's adversaries in the Indian Ocean.

KENYA

Kenya, which is situated in the Eastern African region, is a unitary state and a republic, and follows a parliamentary democratic system similar

to India's. The rule of law, the main component of Kenya's Constitution, acts as a common ground for India and Kenya. Following the successful elections in Kenya, India has nurtured a healthy air power relationship, which has the potential to be further strengthened not only at the military levels but also extend to Government to Government (G2G) cooperation. In 2021, the external affairs minister of India visited Kenya and participated in the 3rd India-Kenya joint commission meeting.¹⁵ This

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visit marked greater significance because the external affairs minister also interacted with the defence minister of Kenya. This visit indicated that there could be significant growth in the defence ties between India and Kenya. Before this visit, during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in July 2016, there was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Cooperation which was intended to strengthen the institutional cooperation between the defence establishments of both countries.¹⁶ This MoU indicated more significant staff exchanges; sharing of expertise and experience; training and institution building; cooperation in the hydrographic domain, and supply of defence equipment and systems. Despite having this MoU in place, the exact potential has not been thoroughly tapped by India. Regarding proximity between Kenya and India, the shortest flying distance is 5,016 km (3,117 miles), with a flight time of 5.6 hours for civil airlines.¹⁷ The coastal belt of Kenya consists of certain topographical features like the coastal plains and the foot plateau. The altitude of the coastal plains is

15. Anuradha Mishra, "India-Kenya to Consolidate Ties", *New On Air*, June 17, 2021, at <https://newsonair.com/2021/06/17/india-kenya-to-consolidate-ties/>.

16. "Press Statement by Prime Minister During his Visit to Kenya", High Commission of India at Kenya, July 11, 2016, at https://www.hcinairobi.gov.in/eoinrb_pages/MTIX.

17. Available at <https://www.distancefromto.net/distance-from-india-to-kenya>.

generally less than 45m above sea level.¹⁸ These conditions will provide a suitable advantage to the Indian Air Force towards establishing its air base in Kenya.

Concerning the geographical location, Kenya is of significant geopolitical importance in the WIOR, attracting the attention of major countries such as France, the USA and China. The USA has already established two bases in Kenya, one of which is at Manda Bay, an airfield with a high capacity to accommodate several aircraft and military personnel. The study of the US airfields could provide credible information about the capacity of this base and the vulnerabilities faced by it, considering that there was a recent attack over Manda Bay by Al-Shabaab, which destroyed six aircraft and also killed two personnel, indicating that there are significant security concerns even in Kenya.¹⁹ With respect to relations with foreign countries, India has currently established friendly ties with both France and the USA. A recent report from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reveals that “India had concluded its military logistic agreement with both foreign countries (France and the USA) for access to their military bases in the Indian Ocean.”²⁰ Hence, India, in all probability, will not face any hurdle in engaging with either of the foreign countries presently operating in Kenya. Kenya’s air power has been ranked 81 out of 142 in the Global Fire Power Index, with a total aircraft strength of 151,²¹ including fighter aircraft, transport aircraft, attack helicopters, and trainer aircraft.

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18. Pamela A. W. Abuodha, “Geomorphology of the Kenyan Coast: Not as a Result of Sea-Level Change Alone”, at <https://aquadocs.org/bitstream/handle/1834/407/1Abuodha.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#:~:text=The%20coastal%20belt%20of%20Kenya%20comprises%20of%20the%20following%20main,45%20m%20above%20sea%20level>.
 19. Chinedu Okafor, “5 African Countries with US Military Bases, Weapons Systems, and Troops”, *Business Insider Africa*, October 2022, at <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/leaders/5-african-countries-with-us-military-bases/1n7xsm2>.
 20. Neil Melvin, “The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region”, SIPRI Report, 2019, at <https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/sipribp1904.pdf>.
 21. “Kenya Military Strength”, Global Firepower, Power Index, January 14, 2022, at https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=kenya.

Fig 2: Satellite View of Manda Airport in Kenya, Africa



Source: Author's use of Google Earth image.

India has the potential to develop deep engagements with Kenya and go on to set up its military air base. India and Kenya have multiple common grounds, such as both countries following a democratic government set-up, the political institutions continuing to engage with each other, and the topographical advantage India can leverage. All these factors can contribute towards establishing the air base, which can be both sustainable and operational-able, as observed in the case of Kenya's airports (Fig 2). As mentioned earlier, India also enjoys favourable ties with active international players in Kenya. Hence, they will offer the least resistance to the establishment of India's air base, which will further enhance India's sustainability given the current conditions.

As we know, China is willing to expand its footprint in the Indian Ocean. This was also brought out in the recent annual Pentagon report to the US Congress titled "China's Military Power", wherein it was stated, "Beyond

its current base in Djibouti, the PRC is very likely already considering and planning for additional overseas military logistics facilities to support naval, air, and ground forces".²² Similar concerns are shared by India, which signify that the need of the hour is a shift in India's policy that can facilitate a dialogue culminating in the establishment of its military air base in Kenya, before the arrival of its adversaries. The above factors provide India with an enormous amount of substantial evidence that, at present, Kenya can be the most favoured nation among the other countries under study (Djibouti, Somalia and Tanzania) to establish India's air base in the WIOR.

TANZANIA

Tanzania is the second largest country in East Africa, which shares its coastline with the WIOR. Tanzania is a presidential republic with a multi-party system, but the selection of the president is not done by very free and fair elections.²³ The leadership of Tanzania has a less democratic set-up, with the judiciary system confined just to the interpretation of the law. India has continued friendly relations with Tanzania, and there have been developments after changes in their respective governments. The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2016 was a significant landmark in these relations. Concerning geographical proximity, the shortest aviation distance between Tanzania and India is 5,667 km (3,521 miles), with a flight time of 6.5 hours for civil aircraft.²⁴ The topography and climate of Tanzania present a significant challenge because of the high central plateau heights (altitude of 3,000-4,000 ft; rainfall of 2-30 inches) and a hot and dry climate,²⁵ which covers the majority of the country's landmass.

22. Cyrus Ombati, "China to Establish a Military Base in Kenya", *The Standard*, August 2020, at <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/entertainment/news/article/2001385627/china-to-establish-a-military-base-in-kenya>.

23. Freedom of the World 2022 (Report), Freedom House, at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tanzania/freedom-world/2022>.

24. Available at <https://www.distancefromto.net/distance-from-india-to-tanzania>.

25. Country Report, at <https://www.countryreports.org/country/Tanzania/geography.htm>.

The air bases are set up in particular locations, catering to many factors primarily because the workforce and machines involved depend on sustainable climate and topography. The air power capability of Tanzania is not very impressive, as statistics show that Tanzania has an inventory of only 37 aircraft.²⁶ This provides a sizeable opportunity for India to enhance its military investments. Although this is a preferable scenario, other foreign countries like China are unwilling to share their strategic presence in Tanzania. They want to maintain their monopoly over the procurement of defence products. The Indian air base will need an appropriate location with support from the local armed forces, which should be able to acquire skill sets from India.

Tanzania has recently been focussing on the defence acquisition process for its army, and in this process, it considers India as its defence cooperation partner. Recently, there was a bilateral meeting between Indian Defence Minister Mr Rajnath Singh and the Tanzanian Minister of Defence and National Service, Dr Stergomena Lawrence Tax. They released a joint statement stating, "A wide range of issues concerning bilateral, regional and defence industrial cooperation, military-to-military activities were discussed and ways to enhance cooperation in all domains with a focus on defence industry cooperation."²⁷

The main hurdle for India to increase its presence in Tanzania is the relationship between Tanzania and China. All spheres, right from the political to the military, are dominated by China in Tanzania; the military relations can be seen through the statement of Chinese State Councillor and Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe, who said, "China and Tanzania have an unbreakable traditional friendship and are good all-weather friends, Chinese PLA and Tanzania People's Defence Force have maintained a special friendly

26. Tanzania Military Strength (Report), Global Fire Power (GFP), January 2022, at https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=tanzania.

27. The Hindu Bureau, India, "Tanzania to Set up Task Force to Prepare Five-Year 'Future Road Map' on Defence Cooperation", *The Hindu*, August 27, 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-tanzania-to-set-up-task-force-to-prepare-five-year-future-road-map-on-defence-cooperation/article65815478.ece>.

relationship for a long time”.²⁸ These statements signify the relations between both countries. Further, the air power that Tanzania is currently equipped with traces its origin back to China.

To overcome the hurdle, India needed to start its approach in a step-wise manner. The process started with the ‘Future RoadMap’ initiative, wherein India has already outlined plans to develop good defence ties with Tanzania. Still, for the prospect of an Indian air base, the scenario is not so conducive, given the current state of affairs. The geographical conditions and the presence of China, all these combined present an obstacle in establishing an Indian air base in the current situation. However, the prospects are better since India has entered into agreements to enhance defence cooperation with Tanzania, which provides an opportunity for the Indian Air Force to further the defence ties through training programmes and joint exercises. As brought out earlier, the most significant and only hindrance for India in Tanzania is the extent of China’s presence and the military relations between the Tanzanian People’s Defence Force and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). However, if India can successfully create its niche space in the defence sector, it is highly likely to go on to establish its air base in Tanzania. Therefore, India must harness its diplomatic and political clout to make its way into Tanzania, which would mean considerable success for its future posturing.

FOREIGN BASES IN THE WIOR

The tabular listing of foreign bases in the WIOR provides insights about which country is placed in which strategic location, and signifies the importance of countries in the international world order. Table 1 provides a brief list of countries and the names of the places where the bases are located.

28. Li Jiayao, “China, Tanzania Pledge to Enhance Military Cooperation”, May 24, 2018, at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-05/24/content_8041205.htm.

Table 1: List of Already Established Bases in WIOR Countries

Countries	Foreign Countries	Name of Bases	Remarks
Somalia	UAE	Boosaaso Port	The state of India-Turkiye relations is still not favourable enough for Turkiye to support India's overseas air base.
	Turkiye	Mogadishu	
Djibouti	USA	Camp Lemonnier	The high traffic area of Djibouti has multiple foreign bases.
	France	Heron's Naval Base	
	Italy	Base Militare Nazionale di Supporto Station	
	Japan	Ambouli Airport Base	
	China	Port of Doraleh	
	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia's King Faisal Naval Base	
Kenya	USA	Manda Bay	There are minimal possibilities that India shall confront obstacles while developing an air base since these two countries have solid diplomatic and military relations. ^a
	France	Mayotte Bay	
Tanzania	None	None	Though Tanzania, for now has good ties with China ^b , India is continuously improving its relations with Tanzania to enhance its defence industry cooperation. ^c

Notes: ^a Statement sustained in footnote 10.

^b Refer to footnote 22.

^c Available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1854697>.

Kenya appears to have the highest probability wherein India can successfully build and operate a military base because Kenya's armed forces are capable of inducting the technology and training that India can impart.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The military air base in Eastern Africa can serve as an essential asset for India to secure its national interests and contribute to the region's collective security. However, to achieve this task, India must carefully examine the circumstances and factors that will be advantageous towards its interests, which can help identify the most suitable country in the WIOR for an overseas air base. Each country needs to be more robust in

one broadly identified category and provide India with different untapped potential that should be explored further, eventually enhancing India's relations with the WIOR countries.

Kenya: Kenya appears to have the highest probability wherein India can successfully build and operate a military base because Kenya's armed forces are capable of inducting the technology and training that India can impart. Kenya also consists of favourable topography with reasonable geographical proximity, making it an ideal country for establishing an air base. The foreign powers in Kenya are France, the USA and Russia, and these countries support India's military efforts towards collective security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Given the scenario that the USA also wants to curtail the expansionist growth of China in the region, it will look to partner with India in several initiatives and programmes to meet the end goals, and individual and collective objectives. France and Russia share extensive strategic and military cooperation with India, allowing them to cooperate with India individually and advance their interests in the WIOR.

Tanzania: This could be another country to house a military base. Political ties are strengthening, with new governments in both countries. The only cause of concern is the extent of China's presence in Tanzania. Nevertheless, the efforts made by India in the past eight years, which witnessed the visits of the vice president, prime minister, navy and army

chiefs, indicate the seriousness of India in maintaining bilateral relations with Tanzania. Also, various ministerial teams visiting the country have strengthened following the renewed association. Therefore, Tanzania could be the probable host country.

Somalia: India can look into the opportunity to be a dedicated aerospace products supplier. Somalia has already embarked on enhancing its air force's capabilities. Hence, India's supplies can boost its overall inventory and capabilities and lead to the development of strong relations between India and Somalia.

Djibouti: This country is already heavily engaged, hosting multiple foreign military bases. India has the opportunity to amplify its naval engagements in Djibouti. The Indian Navy already has excellent relations with foreign countries operating in Djibouti, and with Djibouti as a country. The presence of the Indian Navy can undoubtedly enable it to keep a check on the Chinese expansionist policy on the coasts of other Eastern African nations.

CONCLUSION

After conducting a detailed study and analysis of all four countries, it is clear that the Western Indian Ocean Region will be one of the most prominent and highly contested regions in the coming decade. The region will serve as a potential market, offering ample opportunities to supply India's indigenous defence products under different mechanisms. This, in a way, will also help India secure its national interests and deter China from the IOR. The air base in the WIOR will enhance and expand the functional and operational range of the Indian Air Force, and will also push the Indian defence industry to undertake more innovation to boost the overall air power of India.

Western Indian Ocean Region will be one of the most prominent and highly contested regions in the coming decade. The region will serve as a potential market, offering ample opportunities to supply India's indigenous defence products under different mechanisms.

The WIOR is a region where various forces maintain their presence to leverage strategic locations for their respective benefit. The African continent has great potential and resources that multiple countries such as China, want to exploit through diplomatic, economic and military power. China has been trying to increase its military influence over the African region by creating its first overseas base. Africa's Chinese economic and diplomatic expansion rings alarm bells for India. The emergence of China in the WIOR drew India's attention towards the African continent. Hence, creating an air base on African soil would benefit India in two ways: one, China's expansionist approach through its military power can be suppressed with the presence of Indian air power; two, the air base can become a new 'future roadmap' to increase and nurse the ground for India to regain its lost foothold in the African continent. Also, the growing China-Pakistan relationship makes the western coast of India vulnerable to a two-front war through the sea route. Therefore, the security of the east coast with an 'eagle eye view' is essential. The air base in the WIOR could provide that assurance and retaliation capacity for India.