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Exercise Bright Star-23: Global Military Diplomacy at its Best

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A contingent of the Indian Air Force (IAF) took part in Exercise BRIGHT STAR-23, a biennial multilateral tri-service exercise from August 27 to September 16, 2023, at Cairo (West) Air Base in Egypt.¹ The IAF took part in Ex BRIGHT STAR-23 for the first time along with contingents from the US, Saudi Arabia, Greece, and Qatar. Five MiG-29 (UPG) Upgraded Air defence fighters, two IL-78 Flight Refuelling Aircraft (FRA), two C-130 J Hercules strategic airlift aircraft, and two C-17 Globemaster heavy lift aircraft formed the formidable contingent of the IAF. Participants in the exercise also included members of the IAF's Garud Special Forces.² In a breakthrough of its kind, as a result of a joint effort of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Ministry of Defence (MoD), the three arms of Indian military were invited to take part in Exercise Bright Star 2023, which has been the biggest tri-service exercise ever. The exercise, steered by the United States Central Command (US CENTCOM) and hosted by the Egyptian Army, involved 34 nations from around the world, including the US, Saudi Arabia, Greece, and Qatar in addition to India and the host nation, Egypt. It was orchestrated in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region for the first time.

Building Stronger Diplomatic Ties

India and Egypt have a unique relationship and close collaboration in the defence sector. In the 1960s, the two countries had worked together to develop aero-engines and aircraft, and Indian pilots were engaged in training Egyptian pilots.³ The recent trips by the Air chiefs of both nations, Indian Defence Minister and Prime Minister, according to the Ministry of Defence, further cemented the two civilisations' bond. Additionally, the two nations have improved their cooperative training by holding regular military drills. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi visited India on a state visit in January this year and was the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations. Later in June, on a personal invitation of President Sisi, Prime Minister Modi visited Egypt for a number of bilateral meetings and certain significant engagements. Undoubtedly, defence cooperation was one of the key elements of the bilateral engagements. The consistent efforts and outreach towards Egypt paved the way for an invitation to the IAF, Indian Navy (IN) and the Indian Army (IA) for a Tri-service participation in this mega exercise. This year, the 37-nation joint tri-service exercise Bright Star-23 has emerged as a lighthouse in the field of international military cooperation, and the IAF has added another chapter to its ongoing efforts of augmenting international diplomacy.

The Participation and Gains for the IAF

A strong contingent of 550 personnel was mobilised by India, which clearly signalled the strategic importance that India accorded to the event. The 23 Jat Battalion of IA provided 137 soldiers, while IN sent its formidable INS Sumedh along with the requisite manpower. The IAF had the largest participation with 11 aircraft

(fighters and transport), pilots and requisite ground crew. The IAF contingent had the unique opportunity to be part of a large-scale multinational exercise involving the massive logistical movement of troops, equipment, maintenance, housing and other complicated aspects of planning and execution. In addition to drone displays, robotic explosive ordnance detonation, airborne operations, and combined armed live fire drills, the IAF crew also took part in air-to-air refuelling exercise of Egyptian Rafael aircraft by IAF FRA IL-78.⁴

The participating nations were divided into two categories: observers and participants, where the IAF was part of the ‘active’ participant nations. The cooperating nations engaged in live fire, vehicle manoeuvring, and even aircraft refuelling drills. These exercises transcended all linguistic, cultural, religious, and state boundaries, even though they occasionally required a linguist to translate. The application of medical procedures in a combat zone was one such instance. Large-scale medical evacuation under combat conditions was a very useful lesson that the IAF crew learnt during their participation. The IAF crew demonstrated their training capabilities in adeptly handling situational response under fire, tactical field care, and casualty evacuation.

Way Forward

The focus on international cooperation and interoperability acts as a model for participating nations with similar values. These kinds of cooperative projects can strengthen defence ties while also promoting understanding between various forces. This exercise was a powerful confirmation of the idea that strong international alliances are essential for preserving peace and prosperity in an uncertain world. In addition to strengthening defence cooperation, Bright Star 23 gave the Indian Armed Forces a rare chance to exchange best practices and learn strategic lessons with other armed forces. The IAF gained valuable professional experience from the Exercise. The IAF must take the lead and continue participating in such major exercises, enhancing not only its own training value but also serving as a leading force for military diplomacy.

NOTES:

¹ Ministry of Defence, “Participation of Indian Air Force in Exercise Bright Star-23 at Cairo Air Base, Egypt,” PIB, August 27, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=1952602>. Accessed on December 12, 2023.

² “Indian armed forces participating in multi-nation tri-service military Exercise Bright Star 2023”, *India News Network*, August 28, 2023 at <https://www.indianewsnetwork.com/en/20230828/indian-armed-forces-participating-in-multi-nation-tri-service-military-exercise-bright-star-2023>. Accessed on December 12, 2023.

³ *ibid*

⁴ “Exercise Bright Star-23: Indian Air Force refuels Egyptian Rafale fighter,” *Times of India*, September 13, 2023 at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/exercise-bright-star-23-indian-air-force-refuels-egyptian-rafale-fighters/articleshow/103603060.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on December 18, 2023.