



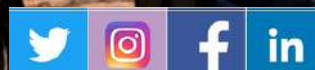
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JOINTNESS, INTEROPERABILITY, AND DEFENCE DIPLOMACY

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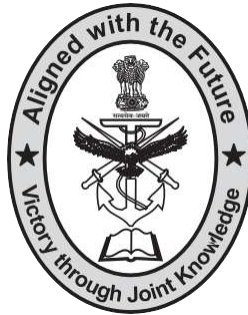
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**JOINTNESS, INTEROPERABILITY, AND DEFENCE
DIPLOMACY**

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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

**Jointness, Interoperability, and
Defence Diplomacy**



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Abstract

Between 14 and 26 March 2026, Indian warships met Indian-flagged energy carriers emerging from a contested Strait of Hormuz and shepherded them into the northern Arabian Sea. The operation was executed within a fortnight of the strait's effective closure, in a theatre some two thousand kilometres from Indian shores, alongside the largest voluntary repatriation India has managed in three decades. That such a response was possible at all is the subject of this paper. The prevailing account of India's West Asia policy treats joint exercises with Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia as ceremonial reassurance, the diplomatic furniture of a relationship whose substance lies in energy and remittances. This paper argues the opposite: that the exercise programme, the access arrangements and the multilateral command appointments accumulated over three decades constitute an operational architecture, and that the 2026 crisis was the first

occasion on which that architecture was drawn down rather than displayed. Reading the record through the literature on defence diplomacy and through the Indian military's own developing vocabulary of jointness, it reconstructs how bilateral exercises, port access at Duqm, command of a Combined Maritime Forces task force and a whole-of-government evacuation machinery are converted into deployable capability under fire. It then identifies three fragilities that condition the model's durability: an incomplete jointness reform at home, an asymmetry of reciprocity abroad, and a political ceiling on what defence diplomacy in a fragmented region can be asked to deliver. Six recommendations follow, directed at the tri-service and defence-policy community.

Keywords

Defence Diplomacy, Jointness, Interoperability, Operation Sankalp, Operation Urja Suraksha, Combined Task Force 154, Duqm, Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region, Theatreisation, Atmanirbhar Guardrail, West Asia.

The Question Exercises Are Meant to Answer

Joint military exercises occupy an odd place in Indian strategic writing. They are reported diligently and analysed rarely. A press release records that forty-five soldiers of a Mechanised Infantry battalion have arrived at Mahajan Field Firing Ranges to train with an Emirati brigade in fighting in built-up areas; the item is filed under bilateral relations and forgotten.¹ Cumulatively, these announcements form the densest single body of evidence about India's military relationships in West Asia, and almost none of it is read as evidence of anything in particular. The default interpretation treats the exercise as a gesture: a demonstration of goodwill, a photograph of two flags or a line in a joint statement.

This paper proceeds from a different premise. An exercise programme is a hypothesis about a future contingency, and its value is realised only when that contingency arrives. The question a decade of drills with Oman, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain was implicitly asking was this: if a regional war closed India's energy lifeline and stranded a million Indian citizens, could the Indian armed forces operate in Gulf waters and Gulf

airspace at short notice, with the access, the local familiarity and the political permission required to do so? Until February 2026, the question was hypothetical. It is no longer.

The claim advanced here is threefold. First, that India's capacity to respond to the 2026 crisis rested on an architecture of access, familiarity and institutional relationships built patiently over three decades, and that this architecture is the substance of what is loosely termed defence diplomacy. Second, that the response was joint in the operational sense the term properly bears, involving naval escort, maritime patrol aviation, strategic airlift and inter-ministerial coordination executed concurrently, and that this jointness was achieved through coordination rather than through unified command, which is a meaningful distinction and a live vulnerability. Third, that the architecture has three identifiable structural weaknesses which the crisis exposed and which are correctable.

Defence Diplomacy: The Conceptual Frame

The term defence diplomacy entered the strategic lexicon through a body of scholarship analysing the reorientation of Western military cooperation after the Cold War. Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster's foundational study defines it as the peacetime use of armed forces and defence establishments as instruments of foreign and security policy and catalogues its constituent activities: bilateral and multilateral contacts between senior defence officials, the appointment of defence attachés, bilateral defence cooperation agreements, training of foreign personnel, exchanges and ship visits, the placement of personnel within partner establishments, deployment of training teams, provision of equipment, and bilateral or multilateral exercises.² Their central insight is that these instruments, traditionally deployed to bind allies against a common enemy, were increasingly being used for a different purpose: engagement with states that are neither allies nor adversaries, in pursuit of influence rather than alignment.

That distinction is precisely the one India requires. New Delhi's West Asia posture is defined by its refusal to convert partnership into alliance, and defence diplomacy in the Cottey-Forster sense is the instrument built for exactly that ambiguity. It permits the accumulation of a military relationship without the acquisition of a military obligation.

Indian scholarship on the subject has been sparse and somewhat rueful. K. A. Muthanna's assessment in the *Journal of Defence Studies* argued that India's military diplomacy had failed to keep pace with its rising power status and that its neighbours were, as a result, more inclined to seek military relationships elsewhere.³ Arvind Dutta's earlier survey in the same journal traced the linkage between defence cooperation initiatives and foreign policy objectives, noting the breadth of activity but the absence of an articulated framework connecting activity to purpose.⁴ The Manohar Parrikar Institute's later handbook on the subject opens by observing that despite the discipline's growing utility to national security, very little ready-use academic literature exists.⁵ The gap is not merely bibliographic. Where defence diplomacy is under-theorised, it tends also to be under-directed: exercises are conducted because they were conducted last year, and their contribution to a specific strategic outcome is neither specified in advance nor assessed afterwards.

Three analytical propositions structure the argument that follows. The first is that defence diplomacy produces access, meaning the physical, legal and political ability to operate in a partner's geography, and that access is the scarcest commodity in expeditionary operations. The second is that it produces familiarity, meaning the tacit procedural knowledge, communication protocols and personal relationships that shorten the interval between decision and execution; this is what the exercise literature calls interoperability, and it is not reducible to equipment compatibility. The third is that it produces standing, meaning the reputational position from which a state may credibly offer itself as a security provider rather than a security consumer. Access, familiarity and standing are the three outputs. The Indian record in West Asia can be assessed against each.

The Architecture of Access

- **Oman: The Tri-Service Anchor**

The Indian defence relationship with Oman is the oldest and the deepest in the region, and it is the only one that has been developed across all three services. Its institutional roots run to a military protocol agreement of 1972 and the deputation of Indian Navy personnel to the Omani Navy the following year. An Indian Defence

Adviser's office began functioning in Muscat in 1989; Oman established its Defence Attaché's office in New Delhi in 2002; a Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation followed in 2005.⁶ The Joint Military Cooperation Committee, the apex bilateral defence forum, held its thirteenth meeting in New Delhi in November 2025, where both sides reviewed the defence partnership and discussed joint development, technology sharing and expanded production partnerships.⁷

The exercise programme layered onto this foundation is unusually complete. Naseem Al Bahr, the bilateral naval exercise, dates to 1993 and is hosted alternately by the two navies; its recent editions have progressed well beyond ceremonial passage exercises to encompass surface action, air defence, maritime surveillance and visit-board-search-and-seizure drills, with cross-deck helicopter landings and replenishment-at-sea approaches.⁸ The 2024 edition of Goa involved INS Trikand, a Dornier maritime patrol aircraft and the Royal Navy of Oman vessel Al Seeb, with the frigate's integral helicopter conducting cross-deck landings and vertical replenishment.⁹

Al Najah, the army exercise, has run biennially since 2015 and focuses on counter-terrorism and sub-conventional operations in desert terrain. Eastern Bridge, the air force exercise, began in 2009; in its seventh edition at Air Force Base Masirah in September 2024, the Indian Air Force deployed MiG-29s, Jaguars, and C-17 Globemaster III transports for joint training missions spanning complex aerial manoeuvring, air-to-air and air-to-ground operations, and logistical coordination.¹⁰

Two features of this record deserve emphasis. The first is the deployment of the C-17 to Masirah. Strategic airlift is the least glamorous and most consequential element of an exercise programme, because it rehearses precisely the capability an evacuation contingency demand. Air forces that have routinely landed heavy transports at a partner's airfield have solved, in advance, the diplomatic clearances, ground-handling arrangements and airfield familiarity that would otherwise consume the first seventy-two hours of a crisis.

The second is the conversion of exercise familiarity into standing access. India secured access to the port of Duqm for military use and logistical support during the Prime Minister's 2018 visit to Muscat, an arrangement that includes dry-dock availability for maintenance without returning vessels to Indian yards.¹¹ Duqm's geography is its argument: it sits on the Arabian Sea coast outside the Strait of Hormuz, beyond the chokepoint politics that constrain naval movement inside the Persian Gulf, and within reach of the western Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden and the East African littoral.¹² Complementing this, Indian P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft have operated anti-piracy sorties from Salalah.¹³ Access to a port outside the strait and a runway for maritime surveillance aircraft is not a symbolic asset. It is the difference between a navy that can sustain a distant station and one that cannot.

- **The United Arab Emirates: From Exercise to Framework**

The Emirati relationship has developed later but faster. It is managed through the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, which met for the thirteenth time in New Delhi in July 2025 and was elevated for the first time to the secretary level. That meeting agreed to enhance military training cooperation, with India offering customised training courses tailored to Emirati requirements; to cooperate on maritime security through information sharing; and to pursue joint manufacturing on the model of the existing collaboration between India's ICOMM and the UAE's CARACAL for small arms production, alongside discussions on shipbuilding, refits and the maintenance of common platforms.¹⁴

The exercise architecture spans the services. Desert Cyclone, the army exercise, held its first edition at Mahajan in January 2024, pairing an Indian Mechanised Infantry battalion with troops of the Zayed First Brigade in drills covering the establishment of a joint surveillance centre, cordon and search operations, domination of built-up areas and heliborne operations.¹⁵ A second edition followed in 2025, and a further iteration was conducted in Abu Dhabi in December 2025, focused on urban operations.¹⁶ Zayed Talwar serves as a bilateral naval exercise. In the air domain, the Indian Air Force is a regular participant in Desert Flag, the

multinational exercise hosted at Al Dhafra Air Base, which in its tenth edition brought together air forces from Australia, Bahrain, France, Germany, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.¹⁷

Desert Flag is analytically the most interesting of these, because it is not bilateral. Participation places Indian aircrew in a multinational air tasking environment alongside Gulf air forces and their Western partners, which is where procedural interoperability is actually built. It also, less comfortably, places India in the same exercise as air forces with which its regional partners are variously aligned and misaligned, which is a preview of the political ceiling examined in Section VI.

The cumulative trajectory was formalised on 19 January 2026, when the two governments signed a Letter of Intent towards concluding a framework agreement for a Strategic Defence Partnership. The joint statement records that the leaders acknowledged defence and security cooperation as a core pillar of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, welcomed the momentum generated by recent exchanges of visits by the service chiefs and commanders of both countries' armies, navies and air forces, and noted the successful conduct of bilateral military exercises.¹⁸ The Letter of Intent envisages expansion across defence industrial collaboration, defence innovation and advanced technology, training, education and doctrine, special operations and interoperability, cyberspace and counter-terrorism.¹⁹

The timing is the point. The document was signed forty days before the war began.

- **Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the Widening Arc**

The Saudi relationship is the newest and the thinnest, and its trajectory illustrates how quickly the architecture can be extended when political conditions permit. The bilateral naval exercise Al Mohed Al Hindi has run to two editions, the second conducted off Al Jubail in May 2023 with INS Tarkash, INS Subhadra and a Dornier maritime patrol aircraft operating alongside Royal Saudi Naval Force vessels, helicopters and unmanned systems.²⁰ The first-ever India-Saudi joint land forces exercise, Sada Tanseeq, was conducted at Mahajan between 29 January and 10

February 2024, pairing an Indian battalion of the Brigade of the Guards with the Royal Saudi Land Forces in a programme oriented to joint operations in semi-desert terrain, including the creation of a temporary operating base and the establishment of an intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance grid.²¹ The institutional scaffolding has kept pace: a Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation operates under the India-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council, and defence industrial ties have moved from discussion to contract, with Munitions India Limited signing an export agreement with Saudi Arabia valued at USD 225 million in early 2024.²²

Bahrain matters for a different reason. It is the headquarters of the Combined Maritime Forces, and India's engagement there is the point at which its bilateral architecture connects to a multilateral one. Egypt, meanwhile, has been drawn into the same widening arc: the eleventh India-Egypt Joint Defence Committee met in Cairo in April 2026, agreeing on a bilateral defence cooperation plan for 2026-27 covering structured military interactions, joint training, maritime security cooperation, expanded exercises and defence production cooperation.²³

What emerges from this survey is a pattern rather than a set of episodes. Over roughly a decade, India moved from having one substantial military relationship in West Asia to having five, from a single-service pattern of engagement to a tri-service one, and from exercises alone to exercises plus access plus industrial cooperation plus institutionalised dialogue. This is the architecture. The question is what it delivered.

The Multilateral Layer: CTF-154 and the Information Problem

On 11 February 2026, at Combined Maritime Forces headquarters in Manama, the Indian Navy assumed command of Combined Task Force 154, the first occasion on which India has commanded a CMF task force. Commodore Milind M. Mokashi took over from the outgoing commander of the Italian Navy at a ceremony presided over by the Commander of the Combined Maritime Forces and US Naval Forces Central Command, with the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff in attendance. CTF-154, established in May 2023, is

oriented to training and capacity building across the forty-seven-nation partnership, organised around five pillars: maritime domain awareness, law of the sea, maritime interdiction operations, maritime rescue and assistance, and leadership development. The Ministry of Defence framed the appointment as a reflection of the region's growing trust in India's professional expertise and its role as a preferred security partner.²⁴

The doctrinal significance is larger than the ceremonial one. Commanding a multinational task force is a different activity from participating in a bilateral exercise. It requires an Indian officer to direct the training programmes of navies that are not India's partners bilaterally, to work within a command structure India does not control, and to be answerable to a multinational constituency. It is, in Cottey and Forster's taxonomy, the placement of personnel within a partner structure rather than a contact between establishments, and it sits at the more demanding end of the defence diplomacy spectrum. It also situates an Indian commander inside the principal maritime security architecture of the Gulf seventeen days before that architecture was placed under the most severe stress it has faced.

Against this, a specific and instructive gap. The Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region, established at Gurugram in December 2018 and hosted by the Indian Navy, is India's own contribution to regional maritime domain awareness, aggregating white shipping data to build a common maritime picture and hosting International Liaison Officers from partner nations to compress information cycles.²⁵ The Centre reports seventy-six linkages across twenty-eight countries.²⁶ Yet the resident liaison officers have been drawn from Australia, France, Italy, Japan, the Maldives, Mauritius, Myanmar, the Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom and the United States.²⁷ Not one is from a West Asian state.

This is a structural asymmetry, and it matters operationally rather than merely diplomatically. India built the information architecture for the Indian Ocean and did not extend it to the sub-region where its energy imports, its expatriate population and its most acute maritime vulnerability are concentrated. When the Hormuz crisis broke, India possessed a mature information-sharing mechanism and no Gulf partner sitting inside it. The July 2025 Joint Defence Cooperation Committee with the UAE agreed to cooperate

on maritime security through information sharing; the natural institutional home for that commitment already exists and remains unoccupied.

The 2026 Test: What the Architecture Delivered

The war that began on 28 February 2026 tested the architecture across three simultaneous demands, and the record permits a reasonably precise assessment of each.

- **The Maritime Demand**

The naval response, examined in detail, is treated here only for what it reveals about the enabling architecture. Within a fortnight of the strait's effective closure, Indian warships were positioned in the Gulf of Oman to escort Indian-flagged energy carriers into the northern Arabian Sea, with over half a dozen vessels, including logistics-support ships, deployed under Operation Sankalp and subsequently under the purpose-built Operation Urja Suraksha.²⁸ On 14 March, Indian warships met the LPG carriers Shivalik and Nanda Devi after they had cleared the strait, with open-source tracking placing at least three Indian Navy vessels in the Gulf of Oman that day and imagery showing a Project 15-class destroyer and an MH-60R helicopter in company.²⁹

Three enabling conditions made this possible, and each trace to the defence diplomacy record. The first is sustainment: a distant-station escort operation of indefinite duration requires logistics support, and access at Duqm outside the strait is the arrangement that makes it feasible without indefinite reliance on Indian yards. The second is surveillance: escort without a maritime picture is escort into the unknown, and maritime patrol aviation operating from regional airfields is what supplies that picture. The third is de-confliction: Indian warships operated in waters simultaneously occupied by American, Iranian and Gulf naval forces, adopting a deliberately non-escalatory posture east of the strait, and were not involved in a single reported incident of miscalculation.³⁰ That absence is an achievement, and it is the direct product of accumulated navy-to-navy familiarity.

A comparative observation sharpens the point. India was not the only regional state escorting its own tankers; Pakistan mounted a parallel national escort operation in the same waters over the same period.³¹ Two navies conducted structurally identical missions in adjacent sea space with no combined framework between them. This is the defining characteristic of the Gulf's maritime security response in 2026: a proliferation of national escort operations rather than a coalition. It is precisely the condition in which pre-existing bilateral familiarity substitutes for absent multilateral architecture and precisely the argument for extending information-sharing arrangements into the sub-region.

- **The Human Demand**

The scale of the consular contingency is easily understated. India's expatriate population in the Gulf numbers roughly one crore. By 10 March, some sixty-seven thousand Indians had returned since the outbreak of hostilities, with the Ministry of Civil Aviation coordinating closely with Indian missions and the Ministry of External Affairs operating a Special Control Room working with state governments, Regional Passport Offices and ministry branch secretariats.³² By 21 April, more than 11.61 lakh passengers had travelled from the region to India since 28 February, in what the ministry characterised as one of the largest voluntary repatriation and travel management exercises in recent memory, sustained through round-the-clock helplines at missions across the region.³³

The routing of this movement is the analytically interesting part. With Iranian airspace closed and Gulf airspace intermittently restricted, evacuation ran through third-country land and air corridors: Indian nationals moved overland from Iran into Armenia and Azerbaijan for onward flights, while movement from Israel was facilitated through Georgia and Egypt. In a single instance in early April, 345 Indian fishermen stranded in Iran reached Chennai via Armenia, with the External Affairs Minister publicly thanking his Armenian counterpart for facilitating transit.³⁴

This is defence and diplomatic infrastructure functioning as a single system, and it carries an implication for how India's engagement with the South Caucasus should

be read. A relationship often dismissed as a peripheral adventure in arms exports supplied an evacuation corridor when the primary routes closed, which makes it a component of the same architecture of resilience rather than an unrelated venture. Access, again, is the commodity.

- **The Jointness Demand**

The third demand is the one this paper is obliged to assess most carefully, because it concerns the Indian military's own integration rather than its external relationships. The response required naval escort, shipborne and shore-based maritime surveillance, strategic airlift for repatriation, and coordination across the Ministries of Defence, External Affairs, Civil Aviation, Ports, Shipping and Waterways, and Petroleum and Natural Gas, together with the Directorate General of Shipping and Indian missions across the region. It was executed concurrently and, by the available record, competently.

It was not, however, executed under unified command. What the record shows is a whole-of-government coordination model: individual services contributing capabilities under their own command chains, harmonised through inter-ministerial mechanisms convened for the crisis, with the Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Chief of Defence Staff and Chief of the Naval Staff monitoring personally. This worked. Whether it would work under compression, against a shorter timeline or in a more contested environment is a different question, and it leads directly to the first of the three fragilities.

Critical Assessment: Three Fragilities

- **The Unfinished Reform at Home**

India's external interoperability has, for the moment, outrun its internal integration. The architecture of jointness reform is substantially built: the office of the Chief of Defence Staff and the Department of Military Affairs, the Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act of 2023, and the empowerment of the CDS to issue joint orders across the three services in June

2025. In April 2026, the armed forces finalised a broader leadership structure for the proposed Integrated Theatre Commands, with a Northern Command led by an Army officer, a Western Command by an Air Force officer and a Maritime Command by a Navy officer, and forwarded a formal proposal to the government. General N. S. Raja Subramani assumed office as the third CDS on 31 May 2026, with a presentation on theatreisation to the defence minister expected shortly thereafter.³⁵

The reform therefore remains, at the time of writing, a proposal. Commentary on its prospects has noted that securing approval may prove the least difficult part of the undertaking and that the harder work lies in building theatre structures that command the confidence of those expected to serve within them and that resolve lingering questions of authority and accountability.³⁶ The specific implication for West Asia contingencies is worth stating plainly. A Maritime Theatre Command, once constituted, would be the natural single point of command for precisely the operation India conducted in March 2026: an extended-duration, multi-domain, distant-station mission combining escort, surveillance, logistics and liaison. In its absence, that mission was assembled through coordination. Coordination is slower than command, and its speed depends on the personal attention of principals rather than on standing authority. The 2026 response succeeded on the strength of the individuals involved. Institutional design should not require this.

- **The Reciprocity Gap**

A second vulnerability stems from an imbalance that pervades the whole structure. Apart from Oman, which stands out as an exception, India's access arrangements across West Asia are weak, informal or non-existent. New Delhi has not concluded reciprocal logistics agreements with the UAE, Saudi Arabia or Bahrain on the lines of those it has signed with a number of partners beyond the region. As observed earlier, its information-sharing framework includes no liaison officer from any West Asian state. And although its exercise calendar is wide-ranging, it is for the most part sporadic and bilateral. Setting aside the important exceptions of Desert Flag and the CTF-154 appointment, India trains with Gulf countries individually, in

formats that foster familiarity between two navies or two armies at a time, but not across the multiple forces that would actually be operating side by side in a congested theatre during a crisis.

The effects became visible in March 2026. Indian warships stayed east of the strait and never entered it. That stance was rightly seen as non-escalatory, but it also showed how little the existing access arrangements allowed. India ran its escort missions on its own, operating next to the other navies in the area rather than together with them. The framework built so far lets India operate close to the Gulf; it does not yet let India operate within it alongside partners.

The case here is not for an alliance. It is for the specific, technical and deniable tools that make independent operations less risky: reciprocal logistics agreements, resident liaison officers, standing de-confliction arrangements, and communication procedures settled in peacetime. These quiet products of defence diplomacy are exactly the ones India has pursued least vigorously in the region where it most needs them.

- **The Political Ceiling**

The third fragility is not correctable by procurement or procedure, and it must be stated honestly because it bounds everything above. India's defence relationships in West Asia are with states that are, variously, at odds with one another. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have supported opposing parties in more than one regional conflict. India's partnership with Israel reached its formal apogee days before Israeli aircraft struck Iran, a state with which India maintains a working relationship on which its energy transit depended. The architecture this paper has described is an architecture of simultaneous engagement, and simultaneous engagement has a ceiling.

The Government of India has been unusually candid about where that ceiling lies. Asked whether the Strategic Defence Partnership Letter of Intent with the UAE implied Indian involvement in regional conflicts, the Foreign Secretary responded that India's engagement on the defence and security front with a country from the

region does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that India will become involved in particular ways in the conflicts of that region.³⁷ This is an accurate statement of policy and a precise description of the limit. India extends partnership without binding commitments, and its partners take it on those terms, since a partner free of commitments is also a partner free of rival obligations.

It follows that Indian defence diplomacy in West Asia has to be judged by the appropriate yardstick. It was never designed to generate alliance guarantees, basing rights or coalition command arrangements, and it has not done so. What it has generated is access, familiarity and standing, and under crisis conditions it turned all three into an effective national operation. That is the proper measure of its achievement, and equally the proper measure of its limits. When the framework is expected to provide anything beyond independent national capability, it will fall short.

Recommendations

The following are directed at the tri-service and defence-policy community, sequenced from highest leverage to most diffuse.

- **Establish a permanent West Asia contingency framework within the proposed Maritime Theatre Command.** The most impactful measure would be to make sure the theatre command structure currently under government consideration clearly allocates responsibility for sustained operations in the Gulf of Oman and the northern Arabian Sea. This should include earmarked force packages, sustainment and rotation standards, and clearly defined command relationships linking the Navy, Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, the Air Force's strategic airlift assets and the relevant ministries. The 2026 response showed that such an effort can be assembled on an ad hoc basis; it should not need to be.
- **Expand the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region to cover West Asia.** Hosting resident International Liaison Officers from Oman, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain would address the most visible and cheapest-to-fix shortfall in

the current architecture. The India-UAE Joint Defence Cooperation Committee has already committed to maritime information sharing; what remains is the institutional move of posting a Gulf officer at Gurugram and, in return, an Indian officer at a Gulf centre.

- **Pursue reciprocal logistics agreements with Gulf partners, starting with the UAE.** The Strategic Defence Partnership framework agreement currently being negotiated offers the obvious channel. Logistics access carries the least political sensitivity and the greatest operational payoff of any available form of cooperation, turning a partner's port into a sustainment hub without suggesting a formal alliance.
- **Shift from bilateral to plurilateral exercises across the region.** Rather than conducting separate exercises with each Gulf state, India should move toward formats that bring Indian, Omani, Emirati and Saudi units together under shared tasking, following the template Desert Flag has already set in the air domain. Convoy escort, mine countermeasures and non-combatant evacuation are the logical scenarios, since these are the missions, the region has actually demanded.
- **Formalise the evacuation-and-escort approach as a joint contingency plan.** The repatriation effort of March-April 2026 relied on arrangements put together during the crisis itself. Codifying the approach, covering trigger conditions, the lead ministry, airlift allocation, land-corridor partners and maritime extraction options, would transform a proven capability into a standing one and allow partners to understand India's crisis response in advance rather than after the fact.
- **Develop the analytical expertise and the institutional record.** India's exercises produce a large volume of after-action insight that remains mostly unpublished and largely unexamined. Dedicated research programmes on Gulf maritime security, consistent tri-service participation in regional strategic dialogues, and the posting of Indian officers to partner staff colleges would build a cadre equally versed in naval operations, Gulf politics and expeditionary logistics, which a lasting security-provider role requires.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that India's joint exercises, access arrangements and multilateral appointments in West Asia are not diplomatic ornaments but operational infrastructure, and that 2026 was the year the distinction became visible. Thirty years of the Naseem Al Bahre exercises, a C-17 touching down at Masirah, a logistics agreement at Duqm, a Letter of Intent signed in January, and command of a task force taken up in February together explain why Indian warships were able to remain on station east of the Strait of Hormuz in March and why Indian nationals could pass through Yerevan in April. Defence diplomacy moves slowly, attracts little attention and largely goes unseen, yet it is what capability looks like before the moment it is called upon.

This is also the practical expression of what might be termed the Atmanirbhar Guardrail. Self-reliance in industry and technology is what releases Indian diplomacy from dependence, but that independence is put to use through a particular framework of access and familiarity, one assembled with intent in peacetime and drawn upon under pressure. A home-built fleet is a prerequisite for independent action at sea, yet a fleet that lacks access, a clear maritime picture and arrangements for de-confliction remain bound to its own waters. Industrial strength and defence diplomacy therefore work in tandem: the former creates the instrument, and the latter secures it a place to operate.

The fragilities are real, and each is specific. The theatreisation reform remains a proposal rather than a structure, and the operation of March 2026 was assembled through coordination rather than commanded. The reciprocity gap leaves India with an information architecture that does not reach the sub-region it most needs to see and with access arrangements that permit operating near the Gulf rather than within it. The political ceiling ensures that partnership in a fragmented region will remain partnership without commitment, which is both the condition of India's success and the limit of it.

None of this diminishes what was demonstrated. In a theatre where India has no allies, no bases and no treaty obligations, it deployed, sustained and withdrew a naval task force, repatriated over a million citizens through third-country corridors, and commanded a multinational task force throughout, without becoming a party to the war. That is the

specific achievement of defence diplomacy, and it is the foundation on which any wider strategy of resilience and reassurance in the region must be built.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

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