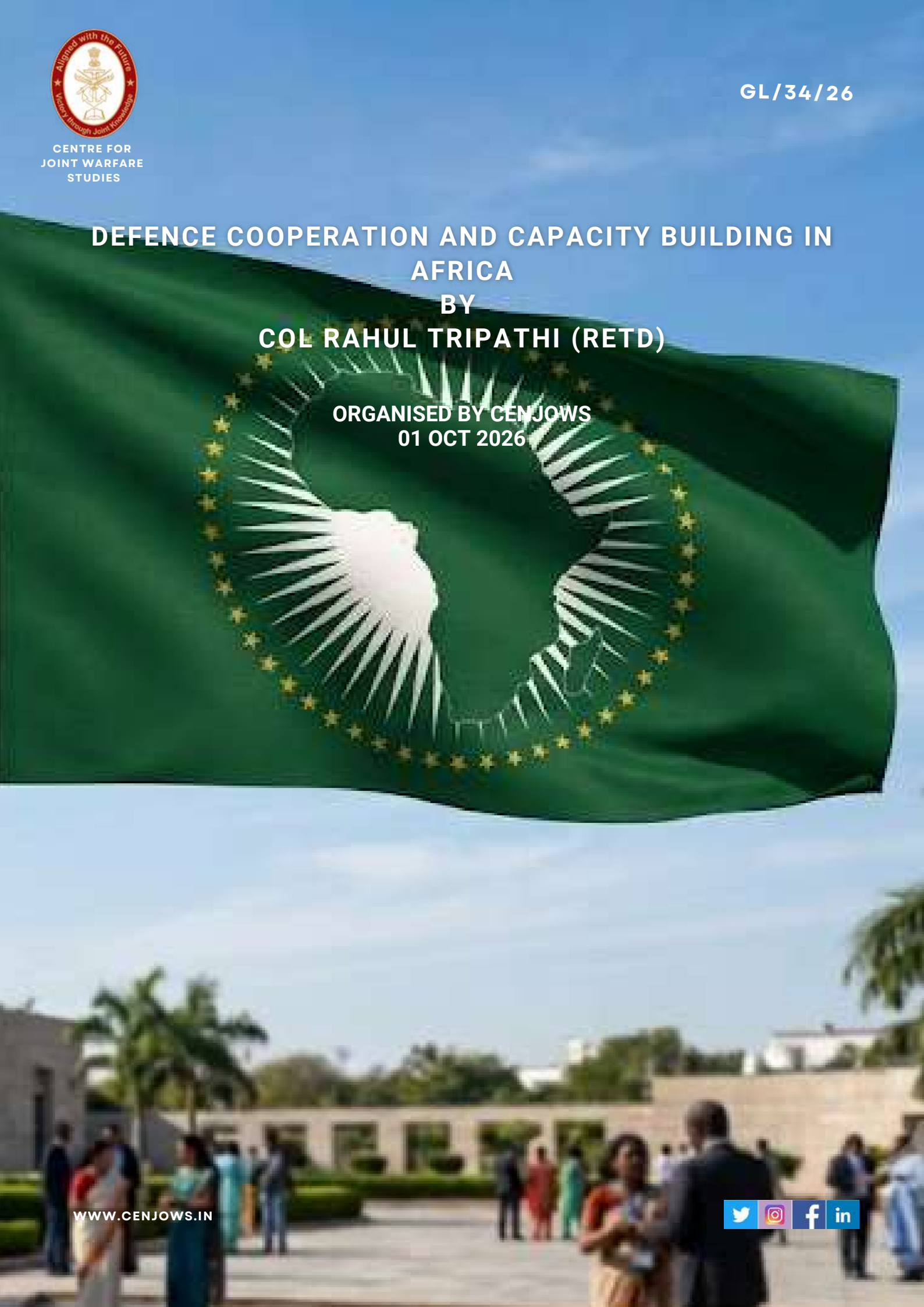
CENTRE FOR
JOINT WARFARE
STUDIES

GL/34/26

DEFENCE COOPERATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING IN AFRICA

BY
COL RAHUL TRIPATHI (RETD)

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
01 OCT 2026



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The guest lecture delivered by Col Rahul Tripathi (Retd), a veteran officer and doctoral researcher, provided a comprehensive analysis of India's evolving defence diplomacy, with particular emphasis on the growing strategic significance of Africa. The session examined how recent policy frameworks are reshaping India's external security engagement and assessed the opportunities and challenges that India faces in positioning itself as a preferred security partner and net security provider across the Indian Ocean and beyond. The lecture was attended by military professionals, researchers, industry representatives and an online audience, and concluded with an interactive question-and-answer session.

The lecture began with an overview of the defence diplomacy framework released in September 2026, which sets out a long-term strategic horizon for the period 2026-2036. Col Tripathi explained that the framework rests on four pillars: strategic partnerships, capacity building, indigenous defence exports, and maritime security. He emphasised that the document elevates defence diplomacy to a core element of Indian foreign policy and marks a decisive shift from a largely passive posture to proactive global engagement. By providing institutional direction for coordinated action among the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of External Affairs and the national security establishment, the framework enables India to pursue partnership and export goals in a more integrated manner.

Setting the strategic context, Col Tripathi walked the audience through a map of current and potential conflict zones extending from the South China Sea and Myanmar, through the India-Pakistan frontier, to Iran, Iraq, Syria, Gaza and Yemen. He drew particular attention to the hotspots in Africa, including Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and the Sahel. He stressed that many of these zones lie along or close to critical sea lanes of communication and that instability in these regions has a direct bearing on India's strategic and economic interests.

A major focus of the lecture was the evolution of India's maritime policy from SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), articulated in 2015, to MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions), announced in 2025. Col Tripathi explained that while SAGAR was centred on the immediate Indian Ocean neighbourhood, MAHASAGAR expands India's security and partnership footprint to the wider Indo-Pacific, East Africa and the Global South. This broader outlook, he argued, positions India as a preferred security partner and first responder and allows it to protect its maritime interests through sustained partnerships well beyond its near seas.

The lecture further traced the historical foundations of India-Africa relations, rooted in a shared colonial experience and India's consistent support for African decolonisation. Col Tripathi observed that this legacy has generated considerable goodwill that India can convert into deeper economic and security ties. He highlighted Africa's strategic weight: 54 votes in the United Nations, a population of about 1.7 billion, some of the world's fastest-growing economies, and around 30 per cent of the world's key mineral reserves. A secure and stable Africa, he argued, directly advances India's diplomatic and economic objectives, even though the depth of defence cooperation and trade has so far lagged behind this potential.

Col Tripathi then examined the intense, great power competition unfolding on the continent. He described China's approach of large-scale infrastructure investment and debt diplomacy to secure access to resources, the United States' reliance on aid, conditionality and sanctions, and Russia's use of security-for-resources arrangements, including private military companies, to gain mining access. Since India cannot match these powers in financial or military heft, he argued that it must adopt a 'smart strategy' that uses defence diplomacy to offer a credible alternative. He also outlined Africa's heterogeneous security landscape, marked by terrorism, piracy, internal and regional conflicts, governance fragility and resource constraints. Many African militaries operate a mix of Western, Russian and Chinese platforms, much of it ageing, which creates both a challenge and a significant opportunity for capacity building.

Reviewing the present state of engagement, Col Tripathi noted that India-Africa defence interactions have expanded steadily since around 2017. He cited the India-

Africa Defence Dialogue, which has remained largely dormant in recent years, a 2023 land exercise involving 23 African nations, and the Africa-India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) in 2025 with eleven participating countries. India has concluded more than 20 bilateral agreements with African states covering training, maritime security and intelligence sharing; extended lines of credit for defence procurement to five African countries and training a substantial number of African military personnel. In the maritime domain, he highlighted the Information Fusion Centre- Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established in 2018 and co-located with the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC), its linkages with regional centres, the provision of coastal radars and sensors to Seychelles, Mauritius and Madagascar, and the inauguration of the Agalega airstrip in 2024, which extends the surveillance reach of P-8I aircraft along the eastern African coast.

On defence exports, Col Tripathi noted that India's competitive pricing, willingness to customise and capacity for supply-chain support give it a distinct advantage. Indian equipment supplied to or under discussion with African partners includes armoured vehicles, BMP-2s, high-mobility vehicles, small arms, radars, maritime craft and unmanned aerial vehicles, with helicopters under evaluation, while private Indian firms are also providing cybersecurity solutions and non-lethal support directly to African governments. He cautioned, however, that overall export volumes remain modest relative to the potential.

Looking ahead, Col Tripathi identified several areas of opportunity for India. These include scaling up training and human capital development for African security forces, leveraging India's strengths in cyber, space, shipping infrastructure and information technology, and building secure, sustained supply chains for spares and maintenance. He singled out maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) and the upgrade of legacy systems as a particularly promising avenue, noting estimates that 50 to 60 per cent of some African equipment lies unused for want of repairs and spares, and that Indian public sector undertakings and private firms are well placed to service both Western and Russian-origin platforms cost-effectively, including through regional MRO hubs. He also pointed to the emerging Indian industrial footprint on the continent, most notably Tata's armoured vehicle facility in Morocco near Casablanca, India's first overseas defence manufacturing plant, which will progressively achieve 50 per cent local content, as well as discussions with Egypt's Ministry of Military Production on

local manufacturing and technology transfer. Such ventures, he observed, can generate local employment, nurture ancillary industries and open new export markets.

The lecture was followed by an engaging question-and-answer session. Responding to Cdr Uday Mathew, founder of a robotics and drone start-up, on how small Indian firms could enter African defence markets, Col Tripathi advised start-ups to work through India's defence attachés to identify specific African requirements, stressing that requirement matching and last-mile connectivity are critical. He cited the example of an Indian start-up that began exporting ground-penetrating radars to Africa after such a facilitated connection. Responding to Mr Rishi Athreya on whether shared Commonwealth and language ties were being leveraged and on the risk of resurgent piracy off Somalia and in the Red Sea corridor, Col Tripathi stated that language is not a barrier to engagement and that India will work with African partners irrespective of their English- or French-speaking heritage. He expressed confidence that the steady expansion of the Indian Navy's capabilities and recent ship commissioning strengthen India's ability to counter any resurgence of piracy.

In conclusion, the lecture underscored that proactive, capacity-building defence diplomacy in Africa offers India strategic, economic and diplomatic dividends: it secures India's maritime interests, opens export markets, provides an alternative to rival footprints and helps prevent conflicts from spilling over towards vital sea lanes. Col Tripathi urged that training, technology transfer, manufacturing and MRO be offered as an integrated package to reinforce India's role as a preferred security partner and warned that a failure to engage would leave the field open to other powers. The session offered valuable insights into India's evolving defence diplomacy and reinforced the importance of converting historical goodwill into durable strategic partnerships with Africa.