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## **BUILDING STRATEGIC BRIDGES: INDIAN MILITARY'S ROLE IN SOUTH ASIA**

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South Asia is undergoing a geopolitical transformation, with shifting alliances, economic dependencies, and strategic recalibrations reshaping the regional balance of power. India, traditionally the dominant actor in the neighbourhood, faces increasing challenges in maintaining its influence as Beijing deepens its economic and security engagements with countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. While diplomatic outreach and economic partnerships remain vital, India possesses a critical but often underutilised asset—its military-to-military relationships.

This article delves into India's military history in South Asia, its role in shaping regional stability, and how leveraging its defence partnerships can serve as a strategic tool to reinforce diplomatic ties.

## THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Before independence, the Indian Army (comprising soldiers from now-independent India, Pakistan, Bangladesh as well as from Nepal) played a pivotal role in sustaining India's 200-year British colonial rule, functioning as a primary instrument of military, political, and administrative control. It not only protected British interests within India but also extended the former's power across Asia. As John Keay, the author of *India: A History*, notes, "The Indian sepoy was the hammer of the British Raj, deployed from the Hindu Kush to the South China Sea, quelling uprisings and expanding the empire's reach."

The Indian Army was central to Britain's imperial expansion. It was instrumental in securing the Northwest Frontier to curb Russian influence from spilling into the Indian subcontinent. It played a decisive role in the Anglo-Burmese Wars, extending British control into Southeast Asia. Indian soldiers participated in the Opium Wars and helped suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China.

However, the British reliance on the Indian Army had its downsides. The period after the First World War saw a gradual erosion of British control over the military, driven by rising Indian nationalism, exposure to global ideas of freedom, and the economic and political strain of

two world wars. By the mid-1940s, key events like the INA trials and the Royal Indian Navy mutiny convinced the British that their grip on the Indian armed forces was slipping, forcing them to accelerate the transfer of power to Indian leaders. This aspect is often not given due relevance in India's independence story.

## SECURING AN INDEPENDENT INDIA

After independence, there was some wariness among the political leadership about an institution seen as deeply tied to colonial rule. However, the Indian Army transitioned smoothly from being a tool of imperialism to emerging as a cornerstone of the nation's security and unity, shouldering immense responsibilities during a period of profound upheaval. Tasked with safeguarding a nascent sovereign state, the Army played a decisive role in consolidating India's territorial integrity. It responded to immediate challenges, such as the 1947 Indo-Pak war in Jammu and Kashmir, securing the state against external aggression, and integrating Hyderabad into the Indian Union. As a stabilising force during the volatile Partition, the Army managed mass migrations, escorted refugee convoys, and quelled communal violence.

In the first 25 years of India's independence, the military fought four major wars with Pakistan and China, created Bangladesh in 1971 and consolidated India's frontiers generally along the lines as they exist today. It also countered insurgencies in the Northeast, including operations in Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur, where separatist movements posed significant threats to national unity.

During this period, while the military was mainly focused on defending the nation's sovereignty and ensuring internal security, it also made a start in establishing a presence in friendly South Asian countries. The Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) was raised in Bhutan in 1962, and pension-paying offices were set up in Pokhara and Dharan in Nepal in the 1960s. Despite India's challenging security environment in the initial years of independence, the country was a significant contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations in Korea, Indo-China, the Middle East, and Congo, reflecting its broader international responsibilities.

## GROWING CAPABILITIES AND REGIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE

The 1980s marked a decade of significant operational challenges, strategic shifts, and enhanced capabilities for the Indian military. The defence budget saw a steady rise, reaching a high of 4.2% of GDP in 1987. The Army underwent large-scale mechanisation, the Navy inducted the aircraft carrier INS Viraat and leased a nuclear-powered attack submarine from the USSR, and the Air Force acquired modern aircraft like the Mirage 2000 and MIG-29.

This decade also saw the Indian Army launch a preemptive operation to secure key positions on the Siachen Glacier and engage in a prolonged faceoff with the Chinese Army in the Sumdorong Chu sector in Arunachal Pradesh. In 1986-87, India undertook Operation

Brasstacks, an exercise described by GlobalSecurity.org as “bigger than any NATO exercise—and the biggest since World War II.”

Even as Indian military capabilities grew, it expanded its role in the region. In November 1988, Indian Army paratroopers landed in the Maldives to thwart a coup attempt against President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom’s government. India received international praise for the operation. President Ronald Reagan expressed his appreciation for India’s action, calling it “a valuable contribution to regional stability.”

India’s largest overseas military deployment was Operation Pawan in Sri Lanka from 1987 to 1990. Initially inducted as a limited force not expected to be involved in any significant combat, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) subsequently grew to over 80,000 as it engaged in a brutal contest with the LTTE. While Operation Pawan has been criticised for its lack of clear political objectives and failure to achieve strategic goals, it highlighted India’s capability and willingness to act as a regional power to address conflicts in its immediate neighbourhood.

India’s intervention in Maldives and Sri Lanka led to some perceptions in the region that India was asserting itself as the dominant power. The Sri Lankan newspaper *Island* wrote, “It would be ostrich-like to ignore the fear of smaller nations in South Asia about current developments providing opportunities for what has been described as the spread of Indian hegemonism.” In contrast, India saw itself as a stabilising force in the region, acting only at the request of the host nations.

Operation Pawan underscored the complexities of intervening in a foreign civil war where local dynamics and interests clashed with strategic objectives. It also shaped India's future approach to those military interventions which did not directly impinge on the country's national security. Nevertheless, India did see its growing military power as contributing to its foreign policy of building closer ties with its neighbours.

**These engagements, built over decades through security partnerships, capacity-building, and humanitarian assistance, offer an avenue to enhance trust and cooperation with neighbouring nations.**

Although not directly involved in Sri Lanka's civil war after 1990, India supplied non-lethal surveillance and communication equipment to the Sri Lankan military. The Indian Navy provided crucial intelligence that helped neutralise LTTE's arms shipments by sea and gifted the Sri Lankan Navy a Sukanya-class offshore patrol vessel, which significantly bolstered their maritime surveillance and interdiction capabilities. In 2008, Sri Lanka's navy chief, Admiral Wasantha

Karannagoda, stated, “Cooperation with India has been extremely successful in countering the LTTE.”

During the Maoist insurgency, India provided the Nepal Army with four Advanced Light Helicopters and more than 26,000 weapons of various kinds, including 21,000 Indian-made INSAS rifles, 81mm and 51 mm mortars and other military hardware. Hundreds of Nepal Army personnel were trained in India in counter-insurgency operations.

## UTILISING SOFT POWER

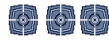
India's significant military capacity has made it the region's first responder to natural disasters. During the 2004 tsunami, the Indian Navy and Air Force provided support to Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Indonesia. Indian naval groups started the rescue operations within 12 hours of the tsunami's horrific arrival. Military relief teams from India were deployed within six hours of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal.

Today, India's military footprint is visible across South Asia. Military veterans of the 1971 war from India and Bangladesh meet annually in Dhaka and Kolkata to commemorate the liberation of Bangladesh. The IPKF memorial in Colombo has the names of 1200 fallen Indian soldiers inscribed in black marble. Another memorial exists at Palaly in Jaffna. The Defence Wing of the Indian Embassy in Nepal provides pensions, medical support and welfare assistance to approximately 1,22,000 Nepal domicile veterans of the Indian Army. IMTRAT provides training, advisory, and operational support to the Royal

Bhutan Army and the Royal Bodyguard and acts as a cornerstone of India-Bhutan defence cooperation.

Apart from joint military exercises, thousands of officers and soldiers from South Asia have passed through the portals of Indian military training establishments. The Indian Army alone offers more than 1500 courses annually to neighbouring countries. Under the Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation Framework, the Indian, Sri Lankan, and Maldives navies conduct operational coordination to address transnational threats in the Indian Ocean Region.

Even as China seeks to deepen its economic and strategic ties in South Asia, it still cannot match the strength of the military-to-military contacts India has developed in the region. Indian diplomacy can effectively leverage military relationships to reinforce regional stability and strengthen bilateral ties. These engagements, built over decades through security partnerships, capacity-building, and humanitarian assistance, offer an avenue to enhance trust and cooperation with neighbouring nations. By aligning military outreach with diplomatic efforts, India can present itself as a credible and reliable partner, reinforcing its image as a regional stabilising force.



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