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India's military assistance in the Indian Ocean

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India's latest move to subsidise the sale of an offshore patrol vessel (OPV) to Mauritius is part of the tradition of occasionally helping the smaller states in the Indian Ocean boost their military capacities.

Sustaining this tradition on a modern and purposeful basis has become ever more important amidst the re-emergence of the Indian Ocean as the arena of great power competition at the turn of the 21st century.

During External Affairs Minister S M Krishna's just concluded visit to Mauritius, the two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the OPV transfer.

The total cost of the OPV manufactured by the Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers is about US \$60 million, and India has agreed to provide a grant of US \$10 million and the rest through a credit line from the Exim Bank of India.

In recent years, India has supplied naval craft to Mauritius, Seychelles and Maldives, virtually free of cost. The combination of grant and credit in the latest transfer to Mauritius underlines the evolution of India's policy on military aid and assistance to friendly countries.

On the demand side, many countries in the Indian Ocean and the Asia Pacific are looking towards India for assistance in improving their maritime capacities -- from radars and other monitoring

systems to increase the awareness of the situation in the waters off their coasts, to conducting hydrographic surveys, improving the seamanship of their coast guards, and expanding their fleets to mount an effective control of their exclusive economic zones.

India will be able to sustain its current naval assistance programme only if it significantly expands the indigenous capacities in shipbuilding and other maritime equipment and the ability to deploy its naval assets for a more expansive military diplomacy in the Indian Ocean.

The current capacities in the public sector like the GRSE are not adequate to meet the demands of India's own naval expansion, let alone helping others.

While large private shipyards have emerged on the Indian scene, the Government is yet to devise an effective policy for integrating them into a larger maritime strategy. Delhi also needs a sustainable framework for exporting arms either for sale or as part of a military aid programme to friends that is underwritten by finance from India.

China, which has steadily expanded the indigenous production of weapons systems and has developed a strong policy of promoting arms exports, is in a much stronger position than India to build special relationships through military assistance and arms transfers.

Many of India's immediate neighbours have already become major customers of Chinese arms. Delhi should also know that Chinese military aid programmes are likely to expand in sync with the growing Chinese strategic interests in the Indian Ocean.

It needs to go beyond the ad hoc arrangements under which it has often assisted Mauritius, Seychelles and Maldives. What Delhi needs is a comprehensive strategy for naval assistance, and emerge as a credible security provider in the Indian Ocean.

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