



USE OF MILITARY AND STRATEGIC CAPABILITY IN EXPATRIATION OF INDIAN DIASPORA FROM CRISIS ZONES: A PARADIGM SHIFT

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Abstract

India has conducted over 30 rescue operations or expatriate evacuations across Asia and Africa, since 1947. However, our initial experience in evacuating Indian citizens from trans-border crisis situations were ad-hoc, sometimes with procedural & execution deficiencies. While considerable efforts have been made by successive governments in the past, this subject has largely remained understudied, with very limited studies & researches available in public domainⁱ. This paper intends to highlight the paradigm shift being witnessed in evacuation of Indian Diaspora from varied crisis situations since 2014, amidst rising geopolitical status of India as well as capabilities in a largely dynamic international order.

Introduction

Successful rescue of Indian expatriate nationals from crisis situations & natural calamities faced in varied global geographic zones and their relief, rehabilitation & reintegration with their parent roots back home post evacuation during last about one decade has vehemently cemented new India's emerging concept as a 'first responder'ⁱⁱ; its growing capability; rise in international profile and increasing willingness of the present Indian government to assume a developed country role amidst variety of transnational challenges being experienced in the international order, especially in context with unprecedented rise in levels of migration & mobility.

Indian Government's Proactive & Pragmatic Diplomatic Renaissance

Since the dawn of 21st Century, the world is witnessing perceptible growth & shifts in global power fulcrum from West to the East, particularly to Asiaⁱⁱⁱ. Resurgence of the new India under a stable, majority government during past decade (since 2014) has been characterised by proactive and path breaking efforts, bold initiatives, out of the box thinking, pragmatism & speedy implementation, leading to realisation of India's strengths and stature. The government's efforts towards energetic stimulation of ties with P5 powers (US, China, France, Great Britain & Russia); constructive engagements with some of the Worlds crucial regions to include East, West, Central & South-East Asia and Asia Pacific and strengthening of working relationships with multilateral groupings like ASEAN, BRICS, G-20, SCO, QUAD, etc have accorded fresh vitality towards reigniting the 'New India Story'. Additional engagements with BIMSTEC & initiatives like SAGAR etc have found new impetus since 2014.

Above notwithstanding, one more area, where dynamism, personal involvement and diplomatic outreach of Indian government in the last decade has really made a difference is successful expatriation of Indian Diaspora from varied war ravaged/ natural catastrophic/ pandemic affected zones, overcoming ad-hoc responses of the past triggered by each crisis. Under reported in the past, the present Central Government's comprehensive and institutionalised approach to the cause in addressing this vital national interest has ensured vastly improved capabilities & effectiveness.

Learning from the Past

Diaspora of any nation is a priced asset. However, dislocated from their homeland, this sizeable population living abroad continues to be a potential target of the risks emanating from various factors which include natural disasters, pandemics, violent conflicts & potential unrests or being a target of populist & extremist movements in their host regions/ countries or even under conditions of forced departure resulting from changes in immigration laws, thereby mandating their parent country to swiftly and decisively protect them and bring them back home safely, on humanitarian grounds. Towards this end, Indian foreign policy has always been accommodative and has accorded primacy to safety and welfare of its expatriate workers, students & professionals equitably.

Creditably, India may be counted as one of those few nations, who have been remarkably successful in executing evacuation operations of its people in the past. During the period between 1947 to 2014, Indian governments of the time successfully undertook more than 25 rescue operations, all varying in their complexity, frequency & size and evacuated approximately six lakh plus Indian nationals from crisis faced in the countries like Mozambique, Burma (now Myanmar), Kenya, Uganda, Iraq, Kuwait, UAE, Lebanon, Kyrgyzstan, Egypt, Libya, Yemen etc^{iv}. However, barring a couple of exceptions like evacuation from Gulf region (Iraq & Kuwait) in

1990 wherein more than 1,50,000 Indians were evacuated^v in approximately 490 special flights operated from Amman, Jordan and other neighbouring Gulf countries or 2011 evacuation from Libya in which more than 15,000 Indians were evacuated in chartered Air India/ Indian Airlines flights & IL -76 sorties by Indian Air Force operated from Egypt and through marine route by Indian Navy from Libya to Tripoli to Benghazi to Alexandria in INS Jalashwa, Mysore & Aditya, the overall conduct in most other missions, follow up actions, future strategic planning and institutionalisation of procedures & policies were somewhat ad-hoc with attempts to manage the crisis.

Although successive governments did accord primacy and urgency in conduct of these key rescue missions, they encountered many constraints such as resources, requisite command and control structures etc. Shortcomings in case specific policies were also limited by country's foreign policy alignments and reluctance in getting involved in far away conflict zones. During 1950's i.e early years following independence, the government mainly focussed on encouraging the Indian's staying abroad to integrate with their host countries and in 1952, a government report even indicated to all diplomatic missions abroad "*first objective in regard to Indian overseas communities should be to help them to assimilate themselves to local conditions and to identify themselves as closely as possible with the interests of indigenous population*"^{vi}". Resultantly when Indians were targeted with discriminatory policies in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) & Burma (now Myanmar)^{vii} and even in some East African countries, while Indian government did mediate to protect the concerns of Indian nationals, however, it rarely conducted any major evacuation operation. Things did change positively though in subsequent years with government undertaking large scale evacuations, especially from West Asia. Further, concern for the new generation expatriate population could also be seen in government's efforts in formulation of a separate Diaspora division in Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and creation of new Ministry of Overseas Affairs in 2004.

Strengthening India's Evacuation Response

As per MEA, India in 2016 had an estimated 11 million Indian citizens permanently residing abroad while almost 16 million people of Indian origin held other citizenships^{viii}. This combined figure as per Dec 2022 update increased to 32 million citizens^{ix} and annual migration count is touching nearly 2.5 million per year as against average increase of approximately 1.2 million per year during 2000 to 2015^x. These figures increasing, clearly indicate that Indian Diaspora today is getting larger, more diverse, geographically distributed and more influential than ever before. More importantly the numerical concentration of this Diaspora is greatly skewed towards West Asia with high risk impact probabilities which may arise from military conflicts/ strife, economic crisis and issues pertaining to religious identity^{xi} etc. Similar increasing trend is

prevalent in global migration pattern too, and while guided by the high economic remittances, security profile and political influence of this expatriate population, an increasing number of states are making safety and welfare of these nationals central to their foreign policies; India is no far behind.

Since 2014, aligned with present Indian government's larger vision of leveraging Indian Diaspora in facilitating promotion of India's economic & strategic interests abroad^{xii} and optimum use of Indian 'connect', dedicated & unprecedented attention and resources have been allotted by the government in conduct of evacuation operations and are being pursued by the Ministry of External Affairs including outreach through social media^{xiii}. With increase in frequency, size, complexity and spectrum of such operations in recent past, the broad canvas prepared by the present government has focussed on provision of special consular, financial and logistics support for repatriation efforts, flawless inter ministerial cooperation, creation of emergency coordination cells and enhanced integration of national military and civilian capabilities in preparation, coordination and execution of strategic evacuation efforts through effective employment of modernised military hardware which notably include C-17 Globemaster^{xiv}, IL - 76MD & C-130J Super Hercules military transport aircrafts, multirole specialist support vessels^{xv}, landing crafts & replenishment vessels and Air India & other chartered aircrafts for undertaking long distance operations^{xvi}. Creditably, it is due to investment of personal political capital by the present government and mobilisation of significant national resources in dire times, that India has been able to expand her horizon of evacuation operations from regional / tactical levels to extra regional levels thereby successfully demonstrating rise in India's strategic capabilities.

Unlike the past where the evacuation operations were mainly coordinated and conducted under a need based diplomatic umbrella created by MEA, the current evacuation operations are characterised by synergised application of diplomatic, military and civilian capabilities and well synchronised efforts towards assessment, planning, conduct and post evacuation rehabilitation process. There is greater sense of urgency visible in gathering inputs from diplomatic missions in the affected country or region; expert analyses of the degree of crisis/ emergency situation; opening of communication channels with the host governments, international community & different factions in case of civil wars; coordination between ministries, bureaucracy, civilian and military authorities at domestic level; intensity and need based employment of consular, diplomatic, military and intelligence resources under mission specific leadership; identification and ensuring accessibility to regional hubs/ air bases/ports for conduct of such operations; establishing contacts with expatriates and guiding them towards secure assembling points under constraints of permissiveness accorded by the situation and finally the security of air, naval and

other assets employed till the time they exit from the crisis zones and safely transport the evacuees back to the country. There also has been a perceptible change in focus towards addressing post evacuation integration & rehabilitation requirements which includes on ground coordination amongst local, regional and national agencies; relaxed immigration and custom regulations; extension of special medical, financial, food, shelter & psychological support and reintegration of evacuated people with the mainstream.

Evacuation Operations, 2014 Onwards: A Glance

Concomitant with India's ascending growth, capabilities, influence, relevance and diplomatic graph are expectations and sense of hope and aspirations in addressing global challenges with which the world looks at India today, whether these are climate challenges, global conflict zones, hot spots or humanitarian crisis - affected areas, etc. Backed by successful outreach and building up of India's relations with immediate & extended neighbourhood, especially West Asia as well as major global powers, whilst investments in revamped ties with emerging regions, the present government has clearly delivered on its steadfast commitment in rescue of distressed Indians stuck abroad, far and near, and has successfully undertaken several evacuation missions since 2014. The government has safely brought back Indian citizens stranded in various countries under conditions of crises manifested by conflicts, natural disasters or pandemics, while managing the political, diplomatic and varied pressures generated. Notably, during Covid 19 pandemic, India was amongst the first responders in swift and efficient rescue of its citizens.

Characterised by radical shift in foreign policy and changed diplomatic stance by effective use of comprehensive national power, using the '*whole of the government approach*' the government under carefully orchestrated plans, has undertaken courageous evacuations in recent past. Notable evacuations undertaken by the present Central Government are discussed in succeeding paragraphs.

Rescue of Indian Nurses from ISIS Captivity in Iraq

Barely few weeks into office in Jun 2014, the current government's first brush with changing reality came in the form of a pressing need of evacuation of 46 Indian nurses from ISIS captors in Iraq, who were known for meting out atrocities on their hostages. With escalation of civil war between ISIS and Iraqi army, the ISIS terrorists had managed to intrude into Tikrit, where a contingent of Indian nurses was stranded in a hospital. Unruffled, the government under External Affairs Minister and Indian Embassy in Bagdad were quick to respond, activating formal and informal communication channels and ensured safe passage of these nurses, unharmed. Notably, the nurses were ferried to the border by ISIS terrorists themselves and from their border office, another bus was arranged for transportation of the nurses till they reached Indian rescue

team. After 23 days of traumatic experience the nurses finally returned home in special flight from Erbil, Iraq to New Delhi.

Operation Raahat

‘Operation Raahat^{xvii}’ was undertaken in April 2015 for evacuation of thousands of Indians stranded in Yemen as aerial bombardments were launched by Royal Saudi Air force led coalition of Arab states and Yemen government for suppression of Shiite Houthi rebels. Under conditions of no fly zone announced by Saudi Arabian government, initial evacuation of Indian nationals was planned by sea route through Djibouti. Ports at Sana’a and Aden were also utilised for ferrying the Indians. INS Sumitra (P59), INS Mumbai and INS Tarkash were sent from Lakshadweep and Mumbai for providing protection and support to Indian ships and aircrafts operating in the conflict zone. The Indian government had also commissioned Indian Air Force for helping Indian Navy in the evacuation effort. Two C 17 Globemaster cargo aircrafts, two Air India Airbus A320 and two ferries MV Kavaratti and MV Corals were employed for evacuation efforts. While Globemasters operated from Djibouti, Air India flights were operated from Muscat in neighbouring Oman. Notably, Minister of State for Overseas Indian Affairs was sent by the Indian government for coordinating entire operation from nearest port of Djibouti city, while the Prime Minister himself spoke to King Salman of Saudi Arabia seeking assistance in evacuation effort and safe passage for Indian nationals. This operation also witnessed seamless integration and cooperation between PMO, Ministry of External Affairs, Home, Defence, Shipping & Railways, State Governments, Indian Armed Forces and Air India. Nearly 6700 individuals including Indians and foreign nationals from more than 20 countries were evacuated. Some of these countries whose nationals were evacuated by India lacked operational capability to undertake such complex evacuation and Indian government happily obliged in rescuing their beleaguered citizens.

Operation Maitri

‘Operation Maitri^{xviii}’ was a rescue and relief operation undertaken by Indian government and Indian Armed Forces in April 2015 for rendering assistance to earthquake hit Nepal. India was the first country to respond following this catastrophe and within 15 minutes of the earthquake, a fully fledged rescue and relief operation was launched by the Indian government. Nearly 200 tons of food packets and dry ration, 50 tons of water, 2 tons of medicine, 40 tents and 1400 blankets were dispatched as relief material. 18 Medical teams of 20 people each and 12 Engineer teams comprising of 60 persons were sent for providing Medical support, clearance of rubble and restoration of electricity in major areas. The Medical team also established a 45 bed hospital at Lagankhel, Nepal for treatment of injured. Indian teams were ably assisted by ex servicemen of Indian Gorkha Regiments and now settled in Nepal, who acted as an interface for guidance, relief and rescue. IL-76, C-130J Hercules, C-17 Globemaster & Air India aircrafts and

Mi-17 Helicopters were used during this operation. Kathmandu and Pokhara were used as airbases to fly to the affected areas. More than 5000 Indian Nationals and nearly 170 foreign nationals belonging to US, UK, Russia and Germany were evacuated in Indian Air force and civilian planes^{xix} and aptly signified accomplishments of the government in undertaking rescue and relief missions during its first year.

Operation Sankat Mochan

Government's commitment towards safe extrication of its nationals was again underlined during evacuation of Indians from South Sudan which was rocked by violence causing loss of hundreds of lives amidst heavy fighting between former rebels and South Sudan soldiers in July 2016. The Indian government specifically set up a task force for conduct of this operation as nearly 600 Indians were stranded amidst this civil war including 450 Indians stuck in violence rocked city of Juba. This evacuation mission named as 'Operation Sankat Mochan^{xx}' was led by Minister of State for External Affairs, who was assisted by a Secretary (Economic Relations), Jt Secretary and a Director in External Affairs Ministry. Two C-17 military transport aircrafts were sent to Juba, the capital city of war torn South Sudan and 156 persons including nine women, three children and two Nepali citizens, who were willing to be evacuated were brought to New Delhi. Efforts were also made by the government to persuade other Indians to move out with External Affairs Minister herself appealing to these persons through twitter, but they refused expatriation citing business concerns and other reasons. The Aircraft with evacuated persons was brought to India via Uganda. During conduct of operation, as part of diplomatic efforts, the Indian Minister had met Vice President of South Sudan to get the latest update on the situation and had also met Prime Minister of Uganda, who in turn assured all help to India for safe passage of its citizens.

Extraction of CRPF Personnel from Libya

Amidst deteriorating security situation in Libya in April 2019, the Indian government foresaw a possibility that the crisis may develop into a long drawn out conflict. Accordingly, through coordinated efforts under External Affairs Minister, the Indian government initiated a massive evacuation plan and the complete CRPF contingent of 15 personnel was evacuated through Tripoli duly supported by Indian Embassy in Tunisia.

The government's second term in office beginning May 2019 has been no different either, continuing with their efforts, the present government till date has already undertaken five major successful operations.

Operation Samudra Setu

Launched in May 2020, 'Operation Samudra Setu^{xxi}' was part of the national effort for repatriation of overseas Indian citizens during outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and culminated

with evacuation of 3,992 Indian citizens back to homeland. Indian Navy played a major role and Indian Naval Ships Jalashwa (Landing Platform Dock), and Airavat, Shardul & Magar (Landing Ship Tanks) participated in this operation which lasted over 55 days and involved traversing more than 23,000 kilometers by sea^{xxii}. Faced with serious challenge of avoiding any incident of outbreak of infection onboard the ships during the evacuation operation, rigorous measures were planned and medical/ safety protocols unique to the operating environment of ships were implemented by the Indian Navy, which eventually led to success of the operation. This operation was followed by Operation Samudra Setu –II under which seven Indian Naval ships namely Kolkata, Kochi, Talwar, Tabar, Trikand, Jalashwa and Airavat were deployed for shipment of liquid medical oxygen filled cryogenic containers and other associated medical equipment from various countries. Alongside Samudra Setu the Indian government had also carried out airlift of 76 Indians and 36 foreign nationals from China's corona virus hit city Wuhan in February 2020, which is also considered as one of the most difficult evacuation flight under conditions of global pandemic. The Indian Air Force transport aircraft which was employed for evacuation had also carried medical supplies as a symbol of goodwill to China.

Operation Devi Shakti

'Operation Devi Shakti' was launched by Indian Government in 2021 for evacuation of Indian citizens and foreign nationals from Afghanistan after Taliban took over the country in 2021. More than 654 people which included 448 Indians and 206 Afghans were evacuated in special chartered flights. 565 persons including 438 Indians were evacuated earlier from Afghanistan in August 2021. The evacuated Afghans included Afghan Hindu/ Sikh minority community persons who carried back with them two Swaroops of Guru Granth Sahib and some ancient Hindu manuscripts. Apart from evacuations, in view of challenging humanitarian situation faced in Afghanistan, the Indian government also adopted a benevolent approach and dispatched medical supplies in return flight to be handed over to World Health Organisation (WHO) in Kabul which could be administered at Indira Gandhi Children Hospital, Kabul^{xxiii}.

Operation Ganga

'Operation Ganga' was an evacuation mission launched for safe extrication of Indian nationals post commencement of Russia – Ukraine War on 24 February 2022. The stranded Indian citizens, mainly students, were transported from Romania, Hungary, Poland, Moldova & Slovakia under assistance extended by these countries to Indian government. India maintained a neutral stance during the invasion and did not side either with Russia or Ukraine. Notably barely 48 hours post initiation of the war, the Indian Prime Minister spoke to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on 26 February 2022 and brought up safe evacuation of Indian students among other pressing issues. Four Indian Ministers were sent as special envoys^{xxiv} to the neighbouring

countries for assisting evacuation plans and prioritizing coordination with local authorities^{xxv}. The Prime Minister also spoke to Russian President Vladimir Putin and leaders of other countries neighbouring Ukraine, highlighting concerns for safety of stranded Indian students. Between 24 February and 07 March 2022, the Indian Prime Minister had multiple talks with Russian and Ukrainian Presidents in which apart from discussion on other overarching issues, assistance for evacuation of Indian citizens was sought and was duly acknowledged both by Russia & Ukraine. At domestic level, the Ministry of External Affairs set up multiple information dissemination and communication channels which included round the clock helpline and assistance through email, fax, website and phone calls. The Indian Community Welfare Fund for helping Indian citizens in distress in other countries was activated. 90 evacuation flights which included 76 flights by commercial airlines and 14 flights by Indian Air Force were operated and 18,282 Indian nationals were evacuated under this operation^{xxvi}.

Operation Dost

‘Operation Dost’ was a humanitarian mission launched by Indian government for providing Search & Rescue (SAR) and medical assistance to the affected people, following massive earthquake which struck Türkiye and Syria on 06 February 2023. This operation called for close coordination by government with various other agencies and the swift response led to dispatch of first C-17 aircraft to Türkiye with specialised search and rescue team within few hours from receipt of request for assistance. Approximately 250 personnel including three self sustained teams of National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) of more than 150 specially trained personnel along with dog squads, specialised equipment, vehicles and nearly 135 tons of relief material were sent in five C-17 aircrafts of Indian Air Force. The specialised equipment carried by Indian teams was capable of detection, location, access and extrication of people who were trapped under collapsed structures/debris. Additionally, medical assistance for establishment of 35 bed self sustained field hospital by Indian Army was also sent. This hospital was equipped with fully functional Operation Theatre, X ray facilities, ventilators etc. The deployment of relief teams was coordinated with local authorities through Indian Embassy, who also assisted in ascertaining well being of Indian nationals in affected regions particularly Adana, Gaziantep, Malatya and Kahramanmaraş provinces of Türkiye. As regards Syria, more than 6 tons of emergency relief assistance which included medicines, fluids for hydration, protective gear and other medical equipment like ECG machines, patient monitor etc were delivered through a C130 IAF aircraft at Damascus^{xxvii}. Notably Operation Dost was India’s expression of being a first responder, a net security provider, and a country whose Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) response is quick and available to countries not only in the neighbouring region but globally, in keeping with Indian concept of ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’.

Operation Kaveri

Launched on 24 April 2023, 'Operation Kaveri'^{xxviii} was a coordinated effort by Indian government and its embassy for rescue and safe return of Indian citizens stranded in conflict-hit Sudan. The evacuation coordinated by Ministry of External Affairs, Indian Armed Forces and Indian Embassy in Sudan led to evacuation of 4097 persons including 3961 Indians and 136 foreign nationals^{xxix} in C -130 Air Crafts and Indian Naval Ship Sumedha. Notably, C -130 aircrafts of Indian Air Force had made a daring landing on a semi prepared, unlit airfield of Wadi Sayyidna in Sudan at night using night vision goggles. During the conduct of operations a transit facility was established by Indian government in Jeddah and Minister of State for External Affairs was appointed as in charge for smooth evacuation of Indian citizens, which included adherence to proper evacuation process and move of Indians to capital city of Khartoum for onward flight to New Delhi.

Conclusion

Execution of expatriate evacuation under fluid crisis situation manifests itself as a challenge for any country to draw a blueprint for safe rescue of its nationals, especially within the limited time available at the behest of governments. Security of Diaspora is now a subject of prime national interest for Indian government and development of such national capacities to assist 'Indians' abroad / globally, does much to establish confidence amongst them, as well as the world, of India's abilities, in such times of volatility.

Reinvigoration of India's diplomatic apparatus, infused by the pragmatism of current Central Government has brought to the fore a striking emergence of India's interest and capabilities in flawless conduct of these complex evacuation missions, which traditionally were an exclusive bastion of developed economies of North America & Western Europe, China being an exception. Perceptible changes are now visible in India's foreign policy synergised by engagements at political & diplomatic/bureaucratic levels, coupled with military level engagements through joint military exercises and increased visits to friendly countries, leading to greater confidence building. An example of this change was evident during the ongoing Russia - Ukraine conflict wherein both these rival nations and even their neighbouring countries extended overwhelming and unprecedented support in evacuation of Indian nationals from conflict zones.

As a prognosis, these ongoing measures and new institutionalised mechanisms will most certainly ensure that India is seen as a dependable & capable nation, one that its own people as well as other countries can count on in times of crisis – Jai Hind

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