

COMMENTARY

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Emerging Naval Cooperation with Israel

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India's announcement on 29 January 1992 to establish diplomatic ties with Israel gave a fresh start to the relations between the two countries that had been left unfinished after India recognized Israel in 1950. This decision was largely due to the changed international context than any fundamental change in the dynamics of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since then, both the countries realized each other's potential to become strategic military partners. Major arms deals were signed between them and by 2000, Israel emerged as India's second-largest arms supplier after Russia.

Security is one of the main areas of convergence between the two countries as they both face serious threats, internal as well external. Both the countries have neighbours with whom they have had clashes (in India's case, its neighbours are now armed with weapons of mass destruction). India's nemesis—Pakistan—poses a threat to Israel as it is likely to align itself with Israel's adversaries in some future conflict. This set the stage for India and Israel joining hands on joint military operations that not only combine their defence strengths, but also act as a confidence building mechanisms.

Israel's small territorial dimension compels it to turn towards marine and submarine defence tactics for its national security. Its lack of strategic depth in terms of geography and the increasing vulnerability of its military establishments to long range missile attacks have resulted in growing Israeli interest in deploying a sea-borne second strike capability. Since the Mediterranean Sea has a dominant Arab and European presence that is hostile to the Israeli Navy, it realizes the potential for establishing a logical infrastructure in the Indian Ocean with the co-operation of the Indian Navy.

The last decade has seen both the countries coming closer through various defence deals and other diplomatic means. In December 2009, the Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defence Force (IDF) Lt. General Gabi Ashkenazi visited India and met his counterpart General Deepak Kapoor and the Commanders of Indian Air Force and Indian Navy. This was the first official visit of an Israeli military chief to India, indicating the changing relations between the countries.

Interestingly, out of the three pieces of the defence pie, it has been the naval departments of the two countries that have not only met in each other's 'home terrain', but have also potential to pursue joint operations along with other countries. It is increasingly apparent that with the number of nuclear-capable countries on the rise, conventional warfare is slowly becoming outdated. Land-based armies, which were earlier considered the most important part of a country's defence, are slowly losing their importance. This is evident from various arm deals that have been signed between India and Israel where the bulk of the resources have been allotted to arsenals used by the naval or air defence systems like the Barak Naval Air Defence system.

In May 2000, it was reported that Israel had secretly carried out the first test launch of a cruise missile capable of carrying nuclear warheads from two German-built Dolphin-class submarines in the Indian Ocean. It was further claimed that the Indian Navy was present during the launching of the missile that is said to have hit a target at a range of about 1,500 kilometres. But the Israeli defence forces denied any such missile test. However, in June 2002, former State Department and Pentagon officials confirmed that the US Navy had observed the Israeli missile tests in the Indian Ocean in 2000.

The international media have often speculated the existence of three Israeli submarines in the Indian Ocean. It is reported that these submarines carry modified Harpoon missiles. However, as happens in such cases, there are no official confirmations these submarines.

In 2009, a contract worth US\$ 1.1 billion was signed between India and Israel for an upgraded air defence system for India. This system, developed by Israel, is designed for naval use and can shoot down incoming missiles, planes, drones, etc.

In a further example of growing relations between the two navies, *INS Brahmaputra* made a goodwill visit to Israel in 2009. The Indian ship was armed with the Israeli-made Barak Naval Air defence system that is designed to counter anti-ship air threats including supersonic sea-skimming missiles. During the visit Captain Philipose G. Pnyumootil, commander of the warship said, "The visit shows the importance India attaches to its relationship with Israel." The ship was greeted with a lot of enthusiasm by the locals and the Indian community living in Haifa. One of the stars of the occasion was Commander Jack Japheth who was earlier the captain of the same ship, but had subsequently taken up Israeli citizenship. India's ambassador to Israel, Navtej Sarna, also added that "the enthusiasm clearly shows that the Indian ship is in friendly waters."

This ship played an important role during the Lebanon crisis in July 2006 and Tsunami-relief Operations in 2004.

The year 2010 saw another chapter being added to the naval relations between the two countries. In January that year, the Commander in Chief of the Israeli Navy Vice Admiral Elizer Maroom came on a three-day visit to India. He met his Indian counterpart and had wide-ranging talks with the aim of expanding strategic-military ties between the two nations. The focus was on the Rs. 26.06 billion project between DRDO and Israeli Aerospace industries (IAI) to develop a supersonic 70 km range Barak-NG (next generation) missile defence system for the Indian Navy which is slated for completion by May 2011.

This gesture was reciprocated by Indian Navy chief Admiral Nirmal Verma when he visited Israel on a four-day trip in October 2010. Several deals were signed during this extended visit. He had talks with Israeli defence minister Ehud Barak, Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi and Israeli Navy chief Vice Admiral Maroom. The focus was on Barak-2 that had been successfully tested in May 2010. Israel agreed to hand over these missiles to the Indian Navy not later than 2013. Both countries also agreed to enhance cooperation in various fields ranging from UAV technology, submarine-launched cruise missiles and anti-ballistic missile systems to network centric operations, micro-satellite surveillance systems, advanced precision-guided munitions and third generation night vision devices. Overall, Admiral Verma promoted “service to service” cooperation.

The increasing naval accords between these two countries have been enthusiastically welcomed. With the 26/11 exposing the vulnerability of the Indian coastal line to foreign intrusion and terrorism, these goodwill gestures have not only strengthened the ties between the two countries, but have are evolving into a new understanding of naval diplomacy.

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