

COMMENTARY

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Israel-South Korea Strategic Relations

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Alongside the recent deterioration of Israel's diplomatic relations with countries in the region, it has been making great efforts to upgrade relations in Asia. The recent burgeoning of its relations with the Republic of Korea, or South Korea, is a good example of the progress it is making in this regard.

Israel and South Korea first established diplomatic relations in 1962, but Israel closed its embassy in Seoul in 1978 following a policy shift by South Korea in the aftermath of the 1973 and later 1979 oil crises, although the official reason given for the closure was budgetary. The embassy was reopened in 1992.

Relations between the two countries were frosty for a prolonged period, but were never completely severed. Today, as the 50-year anniversary of the establishment of relations between Israel and South Korea approaches, South Korea has been expressing its keenness to strengthen the relationship in military-security, science and technology and renewable energy fields, alongside increased bilateral trade.

Between 1990 and 2000, trade relations between the two flourished, with Israel exporting materials required in chemical industries, precious stones and metals, electronic devices and optical devices to South Korea, while Seoul exported vehicles, textiles and other consumer goods. The decade since has seen a steady improvement in relations on most fronts, and looks to be on the way to becoming a true "strategic partnership."

Over the past few years, there have been frequent high-level official visits between the two countries. President Shimon Peres visited Seoul in June 2010 amid the Gaza-flotilla debacle,

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along with then Industry, Trade and Labour minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer and Communication Minister Moshe Kahlon. Discussions were focused on increasing economic and technological cooperation.

Shortly thereafter, in early 2011, an eleven-member South Korean delegation visited Jerusalem and met the Israeli president. Both countries pledged to intensify their relationship on all fronts. One of the most important discussions was on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which is likely to be signed sometime in April this year. If this happens trade, science and technological cooperation will greatly increase.

It was estimated that during the first nine months of 2011 Israel's exports to South Korea (excluding diamonds) stood at US\$ 500 million while that of the imports amounted to approx. US\$ 1.1 billion. This significant figure demonstrates the development of their economic relations.

The military-security dimension of Israel-South Korea relations has also gained significance over the past few years. Considering Israel's cutting-edge military industrial advancement, South Korea has expressed its desire to purchase military hardware including drones, missiles, radar and possibly missile defence systems.

Seoul is planning to make Israel one of its main arms suppliers alongside the United States. Its desire to procure advanced weapons systems and technology from Israel stems largely from its deteriorating relations with North Korea.

In 2009, South Korea's military decided to buy Israeli Green Pine Block-B, or Oren Yarak, radar systems, in a deal worth US\$ 215 million. In October 2010, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and South Korea signed two additional deals for radar systems (manufactured by Israel's Elta). Furthermore, in June 2011, the vice-commissioner of the South Korean Defence Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) Kwon Oh-bong visited Israel and toured the former's defence industry, and also met senior Defence Ministry officials.

Kwon, after his visit to the Rafael Advanced Defence Systems, expressed interest in the Iron Dome rocket interception system. Thereafter, South Korea struck a US\$ 43 million deal with Israel for the purchase of advanced Spike NLOS (no line of sight) anti-tank rockets. One crack in this otherwise promising relationship developed when South Korea learned Israel was leaning towards purchasing the Italian-made M-346 training aircraft to replace its aging A-4 Skyhawks.

According to the South Koreans, stated preference for the Italian plane put South Korea "in a disadvantageous position in negotiations for the sale of the training plane." However, the South Koreans are still hopeful that Israel will decide to purchase the Korean Aerospace Industries' T-50 Golden Eagle as its next advanced trainer aircraft. If the deal, which is for about 30 aircraft and is estimated to be worth over US\$ 1 billion, goes through, it would mark Israel's

first procurement of a jet from a country in the Far East, and would be a demonstration of the technological advancements South Korea has achieved.

Despite Seoul's threats to cancel defence deals with Israel over the issue, there has been no evidence of deterioration in bilateral ties and defence-related cooperation continues to grow.

The rapid growth of defence-related cooperation comes at a time when Israel is searching for new alliances in the face of growing diplomatic isolation in the region. For instance, Israel recently lost one of its most lucrative defence markets, namely Turkey, in the aftermath of the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident. Also, Egypt, its most important long-time peace ally seems likely to fall into the hands of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood.

With these regional developments, on top of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq, Israeli arms sales to South Korea will be beneficial for the defence industry. If not a stopgap measure for the above shortfalls, Israel's arms sales to South Korea will be an immense boost for its defence economy and R&D.

Keeping in mind the developments between the two countries on all the aforementioned fronts, their relationship can be termed a "strategic partnership." It has matured and is now expanding to other areas, though military-oriented cooperation is still dominant. Considering Israel and South Korea's problems with their respective immediate neighbours, their bilateral relationship will likely continue to be driven by these close defence ties and shared national security challenges. Finally, Israel and South Korea must enhance their political engagement to further the bilateral ties.

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