

COMMENTARY

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Israel at the Indian Defexpo 2012

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Hermes 900 drone UAV Photo: Courtesy Elbit Systems New Delhi successfully conducted its seventh biennial land, naval and internal security systems exhibition, a.k.a Defexpo 2012, between 29 March and 1 April. This mega-event was organized by India's Defence Exhibition Organization (DEO), the Defence Research & Development Organization (DRDO) and the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB). Major weapons-producing countries took an active part in this exhibition, including US, Russia, France, Israel, the UK and Germany. This year, it was reported that there were about 232 foreign firms along with 60 official delegations from the above countries. The flocking of these giant weapons producers came in consonance with the recent announcement made by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) of India as the world's largest arms importer between 2007 and 2011.

The Indian Finance Minister recently announced a 17 percent hike in its defence budget, taking it to approximately \$41 billion. With these advancements in mind, many global armament giants view India as a lucrative market and were all busy showcasing their products, including aircraft, helicopters, drones, submarines, howitzers, infantry combat vehicles, missiles and assault rifles. For these international vendors, this exhibition is an important opportunity to enter the Indian defence market.

Among the primary weapons exporters, the diminutive state of Israel also gained significant recognition. It could also be recollected that the Israeli pavilion occupied the largest exhibit space during the 2010 Defexpo, an indication of the robustness of the existing defence cooperation between India and Israel. On a similar note, this year the Israeli pavilion maintained

its status by being reported as the “most visited” pavilion at the exhibition. What enticed the audience was the display of its very recently developed, state-of-the-art weapons systems, some which have not been shown elsewhere.

Israeli defence firms such as Elbit Systems, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), Israel Weapon Industries (IWI), etc., endorsed their finest products to the public. Interestingly, Israel Military Industries (IMI), one among the many defence companies blacklisted by India’s Defence Ministry on the charges of corruption, was believed to be present during the Defexpo 2012. Shortly after the announcement of IMI’s inclusion in the blacklist, an anonymous official from the firm said, “IMI is continuing, and will continue, to operate with Indian authorities towards settling the matter.” Similarly, there are Indian officials who are of the view that while these restrictions are laid in order to curb corruption, a long list of blacklisted firms will, in a way, hamper India’s military modernization drive.

Some of the weapons systems displayed by the aforementioned Israeli firms included IAI’s GTADS, which is a self-contained, tripod-mounted, gyro-stabilized observation and targeting system. This system enables auto-tracking and laser designation of moving targets, especially for day-and-night target acquisition. The same firm also showcased its Barak-8 missile defence systems which are designed to counter several threats and can be launched out of fighters, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), helicopters and missiles. EL/I-3360 Maritime Patrol Aircraft, a multi-role airborne system for providing situational and maritime domain supremacy, was another featured IAI product, as was the Indian Air Force’s recently-acquired Harop missile. Likewise, Elbit Systems also promoted its cutting-edge artillery and mortar arrays. During the expo, Hermes 900, a next-generation medium altitude long endurance (MALE) UAS was unveiled. This is an electrically propelled system and is capable of operating beneath cloud cover.

But one of the most fascinating displays at the Israeli pavilion was the IWI manufactured 9mm Uzi Pro submachine gun, which is designed for special Forces and paramilitary forces. This weapon has been considered one of the most popular of the Uzi family, with millions of it units sold around the world. Moreover, it is very suitable in the Indian context, because of its light weight, for VIP protection and other law enforcement activities. Alongside this, IWI also unveiled its new model in the Negev family of light machine guns (LMGs) – NEGEV NG7; Ace family of 5.56mm- and 7.62mm-caliber assault rifles; and Tavor family of 5.56mm-caliber assault rifles. These weapons are reported to have met the requirements of today’s fighting forces.

Furthermore, if one looks into this event carefully, it is not only about the promotion of defence equipment but also about tapping opportunities for furthering arms trade. As a matter of fact, one

of the most prominent features of Indo-Israeli relations is the defence cooperation. Today, this cooperation remains robust and arms trade has been soaring since the late 1990s. Moreover, the approximate volume of arms trade between India and Israel over the past decade is estimated to be about \$10b. This is a significant figure considering the fact diplomatic ties between the two countries were established only in 1992.

On the sidelines of this exhibition, India's privately-owned Mahindra and Mahindra Ltd. agreed to go into a joint venture (JV) of \$19.8 million with Israel's Rafael Advanced Defence Systems Ltd. This JV will enable both the partners to manufacture a wide range of defence equipment such as Torpedo Defence Systems, Electronic Warfare Systems, Advanced Armour Solutions and Remotely Operated Weapon Stations for Futuristic Infantry Combat Vehicles (FICV). Further, the JV has also agreed to the setting up of a facility in Pune (in India) where most of the naval equipment will be manufactured. Also, the JV is hinting at an enhanced sale of Rafael-made SPIKE missiles to India as well as SPYDER air defence systems. These developments have clearly signalled a transition from that of seller buyer cooperation toward a joint venture relationship, which is also a sign of matured ties between India and Israel in the defence arena.

As covered by Israeli media recently under the headline "India's defence market is becoming an important Israeli target," both countries are going ahead with their defence cooperation, notwithstanding criticisms. More agreements between the two countries are likely to be inked over the next few months, and they are likely to be in the field of artillery. Besides, Israel's upgrading skills still entice Indian defence planners as the latter intend to refurbish outdated and aged weapons in their stockpile.

The only real concern is history repeating. In 2009, a bribery allegation against India's UPA government and Israel's IAI rocked the defence cooperation. At present, the Indian defence establishment has been shaken by the debacle of an alleged bribery case over arms purchases involving the present Indian army chief. These factors carry the potential to undermine the defence-related cooperation between the two countries. There are also risks of being lambasted by those that are not very happy with Indo-Israeli relations, especially left-wing parties and the Muslim populace of India, who have demanding New Delhi to snap ties with the Jewish state.

Considering all these, it remains to be seen to what degree India can absorb the opportunities provided by the Israeli defence firms without any kickbacks. In order to solidify the current trend of military-security cooperation, not only India should adopt stringent measures to tackle this problem of bribery but Israel should also continue proving its credibility as a reliable arms exporter. Moreover, with India's growing defence budget, Israel must try to tap this opportunity to sell more weapons systems and strive unrelentingly to retain its position amongst the world's top 10 weapons exporters. Finally, if both fail to live up to certain expectations, then the global

arms buyers and suppliers will turn to other options, and that will come at the cost of India's choice of armed forces' cutting- edge equipment and Israel's reliance on defence R&D and economy to maintain its superiority.

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