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India's Strategic Interests in the Mediterranean and beyond

Alexander Murinson

BESA, Bar Ilan University

According to an expert in geopolitics Praker Bandimutt, at the beginning of the 21st century, the old adage about the role of NATO in Europe should be rephrased as the following: "What is the purpose of international affairs?" and the answer: "To keep the Americans in, the Americans out, and the Americans down." The United States, as the world's only superpower, provides the only game in town. How a nation plays this new game depends on what it needs most and wants most.

The Mediterranean is the birthplace of the Judeo-Christian civilization. The Mediterranean Sea served for millennia as the main commercial and military thoroughfare and it continues to command the attention of military strategists. Almost 90 years before Samuel Huntington wrote his famous essay on the impending clash of civilizations and later developed it into a book with the same title, and decades before even the Hindu nationalism and organizations were formally organized in 1925 in India, Bipin Chandra Pal, a Hindu nationalist leader of India's freedom movement, had foreseen this clash among various civilizations and predicted that the Hindu civilization will side with the Judeo-Christian West in its war against Islamic and Chinese civilizations.[1]

The ascending economic giants, China and India, are likely to challenge the supremacy of the Western countries, especially of the United States, as economic and military powers in the second half of this century. India serves as a dynamo of global economy (especially in the high-tech, Internet help-desk outsourcing and computer technology, and space exploration) and a real challenger to the rising power of China. Indian strategists are acutely aware of the coming geopolitical competition with China. Since India has become a nuclear power in the late 1990s, its significance for the United States dramatically increased. The United States and its allies perceive India as a swing state in the global power game.

If India desires to become a major pillar in its own right in the international system as it develops in the 21st century, it has to evolve into a major sea power. In fact, Indian strategic thinkers envision just such a role for their country. Pakistan military's Patron Lt Gen (Retd.) Sardar F.S. Lodi argues that "[T]he great Oceans of the world have at least two or more littoral states with both maritime and economic strength to provide a power-balance. But in the Indian Ocean it is only India among its littoral states which alone has the economic potential, military strength and the political will to dominate this vast expanse of water to the detriment of her small neighbours." [2]

Lodi acknowledges that Indian navy might play much greater role in the global affairs in the close future: "The present Indian Naval strength, their development plans, composition of the various carrier groups and fleets and their basis is far beyond their legitimate defence needs particularly when there is no apparent maritime threat to India." This strategic choice necessitates projection of its power into the Mediterranean or establishing (or rather extending) of an important linkage with the existing transportation corridor Azerbaijan-Turkey-Israel, which allows the East-West rather than North-South option for Indian energy security policy. Historically, the eastern Mediterranean was geographically defined as the "near" East - the lands of the eastern Mediterranean sometimes also known as the Levant. This orientation provides an extra benefit to India as it coincides with the American Grand Strategy since the second Clinton administration (1994-1998.) The United States in its efforts to contain the expansionist Iran (aligned with Russia) sought to enhance its allies and formed close ties with Mediterranean regional powers, Israel and Turkey.

Defence Cooperation

Historically, Hindu-Brahminic tradition prohibited maritime trade that caused self-imposed isolation of ancient India. In fact, it were primarily the Jews and the Parsis from Persia who "brought the benefits of maritime trade along with the economic and social progress" to the Indian sub-continent. Given the Indian long-standing threat perception that its neighbours, especially Pakistan, can endanger its land mass and sea communication channels, it needs allies with anti-Islamic orientation in such important region as the Mediterranean. The increased capacity of Israeli navy to project its power in the Mediterranean and access to the Red Sea makes it an ideal partner for India, in the regional balance of power. Israel's acquisition of the Dolphin-class diesel submarines capable of delivering nuclear and conventional strikes in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf provided it with ability to respond to non-conventional threats from the Muslim world. A strategic understanding of Israel with India could allow Israeli submarines to find safe haven in the Indian ports on the Western Coast the Mediterranean. Another important factor in India's future naval projection is the Israeli access to the Red Sea through the Gulf of Aqaba. This asset allows an alternative direct route of communication for India with the Mediterranean region. The completion of transportation corridor from the Caspian brings multiple opportunities for the future cooperation in such fields as energy, satellite and Internet communications and other high-tech areas.

While the Teheran-Moscow-Beijing axis has taken more concrete shape after the meeting between former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the Russian ambassador, Aleksandr Maryasov, on 13 August 2001, it is prudent for India to firm up its strategic

relationship with Israel. The parties involved already took the initial steps in this direction. The United States approved a transfer of missile technology to India after a joint memorandum was signed concerning the Arrow theatre missile defence in January 2002. This memorandum allowed Israeli defence minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer to express publicly Israeli intention to export the missile defence technologies to India in February 2002. By 2004, India has already acquired the advanced "Green Pine" fire control radars from Israel. The "Green Pine" radar is an integral component of the Arrow anti-missile defence system. Negotiations on acquiring missile defence systems however did not make much headway after the coming of UPA government to power.

India spends an annual US\$2 billion on purchase of foreign weapons systems. A significant part of this expenditure goes to Israeli Defence Industry. Despite the long-standing military cooperation with Russia, Indian political elites recognize the growing significance of cooperation with Israel. But the domestic politics of India affects the relationship with Israel. This became especially apparent with the electoral victory of the left-leaning coalition led by the Congress Party. With the coming to power of the new government in India in 2004, several other projects with Israeli military industry were suspended.[3] India suspended the purchase of such systems as 16 Heron UAV's and advanced Israeli howitzers. At the same time, the Congress Party government authorized the purchase of three Israeli systems of Falcon early warning radars. [4]

Israel and India also cooperate in space. Israel launched its most sophisticated spy satellite to monitor nuclear and other military developments in Iran with the aid of India. On January 21, 2008, an Israeli Tescar satellite was propelled into space by the Indian-made rocket from the Sriharikota space station in India.

Counter-terrorism

Counter-terrorism is another area of growing cooperation between India, Israel and Turkey. This vector of the trilateral cooperation emerged because India and other pro-Western countries of the eastern Mediterranean are exposed to a growing threat of terrorism, potentially with the use of WMDs. Even the change from the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance to the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) has not affected the growing cooperation in training and technology transfer for anti-terrorist operations between India and Israel. The Indo-Israeli joint working group (JWG), established in 2000 to strengthen cooperation between the two states on counter-terrorism, has been meeting annually. Indian national security advisor, Brajesh Mishra, proposed that India, Israel, and the United States should unite to combat the common threat of Islamic fundamentalism in the speech to the American Jewish Committee in Washington in May 2003. He argued that democratic nations that face the menace of international terrorism should form a "viable alliance" and develop multilateral mechanisms to counter this menace.

Energy Security

Energy security, as a part of national security, has been the classical preoccupation of the political elite in the United States. But since globalization has become the dominant force animating the economic reality of the international community, energy security has reached the top of the international agenda. In the globalized world economy, competition for the control of primary resources increases. Energy security has become integrally interlinked with issues of global security.

India in order to boost its energy security in view of the chronic instability that affects the alternative route, i.e. the crescent of Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran, needs to implement a forward-thinking policy and link up with the East-West corridor that transports the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian region. This corridor, called the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), is supported by the United States and the European Union. The Mediterranean region is connected to the Caspian region by an increasing number of communication projects (including oil and natural gas pipelines, highways and the recently announced the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway that will extended to a trans-Central Asian railway link to China) that pass through the territory of Turkey.

Recent discoveries of gas in the Leviathan and Tamar fields in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have the potential to turn Israel into an important player in the natural gas industry. Estimates show that Leviathan has some 16 trillion cubic feet of gas, worth over US\$160 billion. Tamar has an estimated eight trillion cubic feet of gas, and production has already started this month. India will certainly benefit from Israel's government plans to sell a part of this windfall to the Asian market. [5]

The Suez Canal presents one of the passages avoiding two of the world's most strategic chokepoints linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, namely the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. The delivery of the Caspian and Central Asian oil via the Mediterranean to India can be stymied to shipping regulations and capacity limitations of the Suez Canal. Over 3,000 oil tankers pass through the Suez Canal annually, and represent around 25 percent of the Canal's total revenues. With only 1,000 feet at its narrowest point, the Canal is unable to handle large tankers. Other important passage is the Bab el-Mandab which connects the Arabian Sea with the Red Sea, to which Israel has access in the Gulf of Aqaba. The extension of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline through a submarine route in the Mediterranean from Turkey to Israel and beyond has a strategic significance for India and other Southeast Asian oil importers. Israel's location at the bridge between the Mediterranean, Asia and Africa and its small size can serve as more economical passage for the Caspian petrochemicals.

The next step is to connect via underwater pipeline the Turkish energy terminal in Ceyhan with Israel (Haifa or Ashdod). The bypass pipeline to the Red Sea port of Eilat provides an alternative and plausible cheaper way for transport of hydrocarbons to India and other nations in the Indian Ocean littoral, which is critically important for the energy-poor Western coast of India. The Israeli-Turkish project, which links up with the BTC, consists of exporting Caspian oil and gas using Israel as a transshipment route, through the Red Sea, to India and the Far East.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the Ceyhan-Ashkelon-Eilat corridor would be protected by the Israeli military. It would channel oil back to the Asian markets via the Red Sea. This dramatic rerouting of Central Asian oil and gas via the Eastern Mediterranean inevitably undermines the "direct corridor trading routes" between the producing countries in Central Asia and their South and East Asian trading partners, including India and China.

Constraints

The most significant of the constraints for a robust cooperation between India and Israel and the United States, perhaps, emerges from the Indian domestic political milieu. India cannot ignore the sentiments of its substantial Muslim populace of about 140 million that are overwhelmingly against Israel's policy regarding the Palestinians. Fear of alienating its Muslim population has been a major factor that prevented India from normalizing its relations with Israel for decades. India has also been a strong supporter of Palestinian self-determination.

Another constraint on India's enhanced engagement with Israel is India's flourishing relations with Iran. The relations between India and Iran have definitely been on an upswing in the last decade. In this respect, Israel is concerned about India's growing ties with Iran. Israeli worries over Iran figured prominently during the visit of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to India in September 2003. Israel has been raising its concern over Iran's nuclear weapons programme and its impact on the regional stability figured at the meeting of the Indo-Israeli JWG on counterterrorism held in November 2004.

Conclusion

India makes tentative steps to assert its global influence. The most populous democracy in the world endeavours to dominate the Indian Ocean. In order to achieve that goal India carries out a build-up of its naval strength. India desires to control communication channels in the Indian Ocean. If India will deem it necessary in the future to establish naval cooperation with Israel, it will gain valuable assets of the non-Muslim country in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Even the change from the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance to the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) has not significantly affected the growing cooperation in training and technology transfer for anti-terrorist operations between India and Israel. The military action against Taliban guerrillas in Afghanistan and the chronic instability in such neighbours of India as Pakistan and Iran make the Mediterranean route of delivery of hydrocarbons to the western coast of India a preferable alternative, at least in the mid-term.

Alexander Murinson is Researcher with BESA, Bar Ilan University, and Visiting Lecturer with the Ilan State University, Georgia. Email: murinson@hotmail.com

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Notes:

[1] Bipin Chandra Pal, "Nationality and Empire," as quoted in "India and Geopolitics," 30 January, 2008.

[2] Sardar Lodi, "Indian Ocean and our Security," *Defence Journal*, March 2000, Source: <http://www.defencejournal.com/2000/mar/indian-ocean.htm>

[3] Vivek Raguvanshi, *Defence News*, July 2004.

[4] "India Zamorozila voennye proekty s Izrailem," *Mignews.com*, July 26, 2004.

[5] "Steinitz met last week with Indian officials about gas deal, 'Economic Times' reports; India FM set to visit Israel", *The Jerusalem Post*, December 19, 2011.