

COMMENTARY

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Return of Israel's Arms Sales Diplomacy

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The recent news about Israel's alleged export of arms to Pakistan and four other Arab countries (Egypt, Algeria, United Arab Emirates and Morocco) made headlines all over the globe. According to a report by the British Government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) which oversees security exports, this activity has been going on for several years. The most interesting aspect of this story is that the alleged activity is being carried out in the absence of diplomatic relations between Israel and these countries.

This takes us back to the famous research conducted in the 1980s by now-retired professor Aharon Klieman of Tel Aviv University. Klieman examined Israel's "arms sales diplomacy," whereby it adopted "quiet diplomacy" or "back-channel diplomacy" methods. Israel's alleged supply of arms to Pakistan and others would seem to fit this sort of diplomatic approach.

Historically, Israel's establishment of closer ties with other countries has often been accompanied or facilitated by military relations. Arms sales and other forms of security relations occupied a prominent position in Israel's relations with Iran under the Shah, South Africa (during the apartheid regime), Taiwan, Latin America, Turkey and India (since normalization of relations in 1992).

Absence of formal diplomatic ties did not inhibit Israel from offering military aid to countries officially at war with the Jewish state. This is because its limited political, economic and diplomatic leverage has resulted in Israel using arms sales and other forms of military assistance such as training and military upgrading to further its foreign policy objectives.

For instance, the normalization of relations between Israel and the People's Republic of China in 1992 was mainly facilitated by arms sales, which had begun clandestinely in the 1970s.

In the current scenario, even though Israel and the other parties involved claim the allegations are "baseless," several connected issues could be triggered. One is the issue of re-transferral of arms

and military technologies to third countries, and the second is the resurgence of Israeli arms sales as a tool to promote diplomacy.

While it was the US Israel had major controversies within the 1990s and 2000s with regard to technology transfers, this time around the country in the dock is Britain. According to available reports, the military equipment exported to Pakistan by Israel is believed to have been originally purchased from Britain. Components (in 2011) included radar systems, electronic warfare systems, parts for fighter jets, etc.

It was reported that military components supplied by Israel to Pakistan were meant for JF-17 Thunder jets jointly developed by Pakistan and China. In some instances, BIS refused to give licenses to Israel for its intended exports of systems to India, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

Be it Britain or the US, the main concerns are that technologies will be transferred to a third country, and that these weapons systems might fall into the hands of non-state actors.

During the early 1990s and 2000s, relations between Israel and US were engulfed by Patriot anti-missile, Phalcon AWACS and Harpy-drone controversies. All these major controversies revolved around Israel's alleged re-transfers of American technology to China. Israel had to abruptly end its arms sales to China following intense US pressure.

This not only rocked Israel-US relations but also impacted on Israel-China military ties significantly. These incidents had given a veto power to the US over Israel's arms exports policies. A similar example was the Lavi fighter aircraft case with South Africa during the late 1980s. Alongside the perceptions of threat to American interests in the Asia-Pacific region, the Americans were worried about the reverse engineering skills possessed by countries such as China.

As a result, since mid-2000, the US has been closely monitoring Israel's arms sales and the recipient countries. Likewise, Britain might also begin to put certain restrictions on the Jewish state which could reduce its arms trade. This could be a costly development for Israel, whose economy and defence R&D largely depends upon its arms sales. Moreover, at this juncture, when Israel's isolation in the region and elsewhere is perceived to be growing, it should tread with caution.

Secondly, the question about Israel's age-old tactics of using arms sales to promote diplomacy (in absence of diplomatic relations) has returned. As mentioned above, Israel was very successful with this approach during the 1970s, '80s, and '90s.

Currently, its relations with countries such as South Korea and Vietnam have also been dominated by such diplomacy. Military relations have been the locomotive of their bilateral ties, though economic and civilian relations follow suit. And such resurgence cannot be ruled out completely.

However, while such activities could be lucrative for Israel, they could be extremely unpopular among the religious conservatives of the countries involved, particularly Pakistan.

So what does it mean for India? Today, Israel is the second largest arms supplier to India, after Russia. The approximate total value of the weapons trade over the past decade is estimated at around \$10 billion.

This is a significant amount for both countries, which only established diplomatic relations in 1992.

After Israel's establishment of diplomatic relations with India and China, the Jewish state began to monitor Muslim countries in Asia, Pakistan among them. It was also believed that Islamabad's attitude toward Israel was undergoing a change for the better.

However, no diplomatic breakthrough followed.

Despite failure to normalize relations, if this report of Israel's arms sales to Pakistan is proved to be true it could damage Indian- Israeli defence ties. Various Israeli-supplied weapon systems are being used for surveillance along the Indian frontiers and for maritime security as well.

Aerostat radars and UAVs from Israel could help India spot surreptitious guerrilla attacks and thwart events similar to the Mumbai carnage, where the intruders infiltrated the country using dinghy boats.

Even though present-day India is concentrating on grooming its indigenous arms production policy, the bulk of its military equipment is still imported. This is where Israel has carved its own niche. But if clandestine military sales to Pakistan exist and are to continue, then for obvious reasons, India will not approve.

This matter is going to be echoing for some time to come. It's not only the aforementioned countries that will be on constant watch, but also mega-players such as the US, UK, etc., which are likely to spring in with their concerns regarding American and the British interests in the Asian subcontinent.

In short, the story has the potential to develop into a really messy diplomatic quagmire.

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