

COMMENTARY

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India Deflects Israel's Iran Warnings

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Soon after the news flashed over the globe about a thawing of relations between Iran and the United States after the Geneva nuclear accord, several reports surfaced analyzing how India is going to benefit from the breakthrough. For many, this interim nuclear deal has been considered as a landmark deal while Israel has watched it with jaundiced-eyes and denounced it as a "historic mistake".

In India, there is optimism and pessimism over the improved US-Iran ties. While some talks of an overall boost in India-Iran relations, particularly in trade and energy-related relations, others say the deal is only for six months.

One of the most important advantages for New Delhi, according to Indian experts, is that it will now be able to play an active role in Afghanistan as a check against the Taliban, which could be helpful in the former's endeavours to strengthen its foothold in Central Asia.

With the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, Indian policy makers are looking at Iran from a very different political and logistical point of view. As a result of this thaw, India could also streamline its trade and business with Tehran, which have remained constrained due to the US-led sanctions since many years.

An immediate impact could be felt on the shipping activities which have remained visibly hampered due to the sanctions imposed. Most importantly, India's import of Iranian crude oil is expected to witness some flow in the coming months. However, it also largely depends on how both the countries will find out a final solution to the oil payment imbroglio. So far, this has remained as a major challenge in India-Iran energy-related ties.

The India-Israel-Iran triangular relationship

Alongside the pros and cons of the nuclear deal, one issue that needs to be examined critically is the possible impact of such a breakthrough in India-Israel defence relations. Today, Israel is the second largest arms supplier to India, next to Russia. Military trade between the two over the last one decade is estimated at US\$10 billion (with an approximate US\$ 1 billion arms trade annually).

This is a significant figure considering the fact that both the countries established diplomatic relations only in early-1992. Defence cooperation is playing a very important role in India-Israel bilateral ties, though it is often kept under-wrapped mainly due to India's sensitive domestic political concerns.

From what began in the 1990s as purely a business relationship, defence cooperation between India and Israel, today has many facets, namely, arms purchases, technology-transfers and co-production, naval cooperation, counter-terrorism and military training exercise, space technology.

Several joint-venture programs have already been undertaken by defence firms from both the countries and a few are underway. Furthermore, ways to enhance cooperation in the area of cyber-security have also been discussed very recently.

This is beyond the traditional limits of Israel's supply of weapon systems to India, which ranges from arms and ammunitions to sophisticated missiles and missile defence systems such as PHALCON airborne and early warning systems (AWACS) and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) such as Heron and Searcher UAVs, etc.

Doubts have already been raised about certain impact of the mentioned nuclear deal on India-Israel defence cooperation. Going back little more than a decade, a considerable defence relationship was maintained between New Delhi and Tehran, and it was given heightened importance with the signing of a strategic partnership accord during the visit of then Iranian president Mohammad Khatami to New Delhi in January 2003.

This agreement promoted mutual defence ties, granting New Delhi access to Iranian bases in exchange for various Indian defence products, training and technologies. Subsequently, hundreds of Indian naval and logistics specialists visited Iran, offering assistance on submarine maintenance and overhaul and tanks upgrades, and proposing the sale of Indian air defence equipment and airborne platforms.

During the mid-2000s, Iran even sought India's help in refitting and maintaining its armoured tanks and other military vehicles. Unfortunately, no such activities were reported to have ever taken place, partly due to intense pressure from the US. Alongside this, Israel was also reported to have raised its concerns over a few military exercises jointly conducted by Indian and Iranian

navies during the mid-2000s. Another Israeli concern was that India might transfer Israeli-based military technology or training to Iran. This issue was flagged during the then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's visit to India in 2003.

It was reported that Israel even asked for "explicit guarantees" from India that it would refrain from transferring any Israeli-origin technology to a third country, especially Iran." However, with the signing of Indo-US nuclear deal in 2005, Israeli concerns over the relationship between India and Iran began to dissipate. This happened with the pressure of the US on India to scale down its defence ties with Tehran, which was considered to be a condition for the nuclear deal.

Since then, defence-related ties between India and Iran have remained all time nadir. It was so dormant that both India and Iran have not conducted any meeting of their joint working group that was established in 2003. Military ties were mainly restricted to low-level training and exchange programs.

Today, with the visible change in the geopolitical and geo-strategic relations, the Iranian factor is likely to emerge in India's defence ties with Israel. Owing to the Geneva nuclear deal, there is possibility of India and Iran resuming defence ties, though not soon.

This also opens up a new channel of communication with the US which has been trying unrelentingly to dominate the Indian defence market. But what remains to be a major hurdle are Washington's rigid preconditions for any military technology transfers to any country, including India. However, efforts are underway, and the latest example being the proposal by the US to forge a joint-venture (JV) with India for the development of next-generation Javelin anti-tank missiles, during the visit of former deputy defence secretary Ash Carter to India in September 2013.

India even thought of deferring its decision to purchase Israeli-made Spike anti-guided tank missile (ATGM). However, no major breakthrough has been reported till today on this JV. In fact, this Spike ATGM was back on Indian Army's acquisition agenda in November. If India and the US manage to create mutually acceptable military technology transfer mechanisms, then Israeli arms sales to the former might face stiff competition.

One should remember that, to dominate the Indian defence market, the US needs to provide state-of-the art weapons systems such as missiles, anti-missile systems, electronic warfare systems, etc., as Israel already carved its own niche in India by supplying these.

Simultaneously, as the US warms up to Tehran, the latter has also shown its desire to revive defence ties with India. This has been evidenced by the coincidental "goodwill" visit paid by the Iranian warships, Alborz, Bandar Abbas, and Russian-origin Kilo-class submarine Younes, to Mumbai, in early December 2013.

During a meeting between the navies, an Indian naval official called for close naval cooperation with Iran. In this regard, the need for an outline of a "framework for joint cooperation and provision of security for merchant vessels in India's western waters all the way to the Persian Gulf" has been suggested. This initiative has resurfaced after a long pause in bilateral military ties.

In July 2013, Iranian ambassador to India Ghulam Reza Ansari expressed his desire to enhance defence ties with India. As a mark of reciprocity, India's defence minister AK Antony welcomed this idea of more bilateral defence exchanges between India and Iran. Acknowledging the achievements made by defence industries of both the countries, the Iranian envoy emphasized on his country's readiness to exchange experience with India.

However, it is still too early to predict a resumption of a strong cooperation in this field. But if it happens, Iran would obviously like to lure the Indian defence planners with its military and defence equipment such as ground surveillance radar systems, personnel carriers, drones, destroyers, submarines, and missile-launching frigates. Tehran might use its military sales both as a means to gain political support as well as to revive its crumbled economy. Such diplomatic tools have already been used very successfully by Israel since the mid-1960s, and continue till today.

A major question is whether new defence ties between India and Iran will impact on the former's military relations with the Jewish state. It all remains to be seen if there is going to be any negative fallout on India-Israel defence ties. Though Israel and India do not see eye-to-eye with regard to Iran's controversial nuclear program, both of them conduct their bilateral ties very maturely, particularly India maintaining a very delicate balance with Iran as well.

However, in June 2013, Israeli President Shimon Peres voiced his concern over the Iranian nuclear program and even asked New Delhi not to remain "neutral" to the issue. Going by the record, in the past, India voted against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for its noncompliance to disclose intentions of its nuclear program.

This ignores that with the changing global politics, India is gradually steering an independent foreign policy approach in the Middle East, and it is going to do the same with Iran as well.

As it was with the Jewish state, Iran also had its own concerns over India-Israel defence ties. This became very prominent when India, in 2008, launched TechSAR, an Israeli surveillance satellite also known as Polaris, believed to be capable of providing information on strategic installations in Iran.

Not only the Iranians but sections of the Indian political class criticized such strategic cooperation, especially at a time when Indo-Iranian relations were deteriorating due to New Delhi's vote in the IAEA against the Islamic Republic and the resulting energy stalemate. Iran

was reported to have asked India to refrain from permitting any other countries to conduct such operations on "friendly countries like Iran." But, for India and Israel, this launch marked a new stage in their ties and showcased India's growing advancement in the field of space technology.

As India and Iran have just started to discuss means to revive their defence ties, it would be unfair to draw any conclusion whether these will impact on Indo-Israeli military relations. Only time can tell how things will unfold pertaining to these respective military-security relations.

Currently, India and Israel are exploring further means to escalate their defence cooperation. That said it is undeniable that India and Israel have had no hiccups in their defence cooperation. Along with allegations of bribery and corruption in certain arms deals in the past, and the consequent blacklisting of Israel Military Industries (IMI) in 2012, India expressed its displeasure over Israel's prolonged delay in delivering weapons systems, and a few unsettled cost issues.

In a move to streamline these glitches, Israel's chief of land forces Major General Guy Zur paid a four-day visit to India in November when he explored further possibilities of enhancing military ties. Discussions were held not only on joint military training and exchanges but also that of security situation in South Asia and Middle East regions. It was around this time when India reconsidered buying Rafael-made Spike ATGMs including "321 missile launchers, 8,356 missiles and 15 training simulators and associated accessories, along with transfer of technology".

India and Israel reportedly agreed to collaborate in the production of high-tech systems for the Indian troops at a whopping cost estimated at US\$3 billion. For this venture, Israel would team up with India's Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) to produce systems related to command and control, battlefield management, sensors and weapons. Along with this, there is another joint-development program for an advanced mobile observation system meant for infantry soldiers which will be operated using radio frequency sensor.

The above developments are all an indication of the robust defence ties between India and Israel. Considering these lucrative deals involving sophisticated defence items, both India and Israel would not like their ties to be undermined by any third party, and Iran at this juncture. For Israel, India is one of the big markets which are filling up the voids left by its once-major clients such as Turkey and People's Republic of China.

While signals have emerged on improvements of Israel's relations with Ankara, maturation of their defence ties will take some time. However, military ties between Israel and China which ended during mid-2000 are likely to be revived, sooner or later. With the visible declining role of the US in the Middle East, Israel is likely to use this opportunity to renew its arms sales to Beijing, and could be conducted with "greater secrecy than before."

Conclusion

It is indeed going to be very interesting to see the warming of relations between Israel and China on one hand, and the US and Iran on the other. India, which is sandwiched in between, will have to navigate its foreign relations very tactfully in order to preserve its wider national interests.

India had to really walk a tightrope last year as a result of the attack on an Israeli diplomat. Israel accused Iran for such attack wherein Delhi was used as their battleground. Many in India and elsewhere blamed these two Middle Eastern countries for bringing their conflicts into the Asia-Pacific region.

Keeping in mind the strategic importance of Israel and Iran ties, India is very uneasy about the tensions mounting up between the former two, especially in the recent days.

Despite India's act of delicate balance while maintaining its relations with Israel and Iran simultaneously, it is going to be increasingly difficult for New Delhi to continue with the same policy.

India must be cognizant of the changing reality of the Israeli-Iranian standoff. As a result, it must strive unrelentingly to convince both the Middle Eastern countries to solve their crisis through diplomatic measures. For this, New Delhi needs to juxtapose its national interests vis-à-vis Israel and Iran and should take up a very proactive role as a mediator. Finally, India should separate its Iranian policies from that of Israeli strategic policies and should not let one dictate the other.

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