

# COMMENTARY

No.181

Monday, 3 February 2014

## India-Israel Defence Cooperation

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Defence relations between India and Israel have come a long way, against all odds. Israel has emerged as India's second-largest arms supplier, behind only Russia, with bilateral arms trade over the last decade estimated at US\$ 10 billion. 2013 witnessed major developments in India-Israel defence cooperation, most of which involved enhancing arms trade and furthering joint projects. There were certain constraints as well, none of which curbed ties.

### Security Developments in 2013

Israel has carved its niche in India by supplying some of the most sought-after weapons systems, with the exception of bigger platforms, such as aircraft. The January 2013 visit to Israel by India's former air force commander, Air Marshal N. A. K. Browne, further bolstered ties. Military officials from both countries discussed upgrading cooperation, specifically in the area of drones. Browne also expressed India's desire to acquire Israeli-made air-to-air missiles, along with other precision-guided munitions. India also pushed for additional joint missile projects, despite Israel's delay in the development of its own joint medium-range surface-to-air missile project.

In mid-2013, India considered buying Israel's Iron Dome and David's Sling missile defence systems. While at first Indian officials were hesitant to commit to Iron Dome, on the grounds that it would be ineffective for India's long borders and congested air space, it has since been believed that Israel's willingness to share the sophisticated technology behind the system may alter India's decision. If these deals go through, they will not only benefit Israel, whose military industries and defence R&D largely depend upon arms sales, but will also enhance India's air defence capabilities against her adversaries.

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## **Constraints on the Defence Relationship**

The US as a competitor in India-Israel arms trade surfaced in 2013. The US has long tried tapping into the Indian defence market, but its reservations over technology transfers remain a roadblock. However, efforts for such agreements are underway. The latest example is the US proposal to forge a joint venture partnership with India for the development of next-generation Javelin anti-tank missiles. This deal almost caused India to reverse its decision to purchase Israeli-made Spike anti-tank guided missiles. However, no major breakthrough has yet been reported, and the Spike was back on the Indian Army's acquisition agenda in November 2013.

Another concern was the November 2013 interim nuclear deal between the US and Iran. With the thawing of US-Iran ties, certain doubts were raised about the impact of the deal on India-Israel defence cooperation, specifically because of past defence cooperation between India and Iran. Israel watched these ties cautiously, concerned that India might transfer Israeli-based military technology or training to Iran. However, with an agreement for a nuclear deal between India and the US in 2005, Israel's worries over Indo-Iranian defence ties gradually dissipated. The initiative would see India place its nuclear facilities under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency. The US agreed, recognizing India's non-proliferation record despite its refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. With certain preconditions from the US, India scaled down its defence ties with Iran, which have since remained almost non-existent.

India's increasing focus on Iran has brought the possibility of a resumption of military ties. In July 2013, the Iranian Ambassador to India expressed interest in enhancing defence ties with India, a sentiment that was reciprocated by Indian Defence Minister A. K. Antony. Discussions were held to initiate more bilateral defence exchanges between the two countries. In December, two Iranian warships and a submarine paid a "goodwill" visit to Mumbai, and naval officials from both countries called for close naval cooperation. In addition, the need for a "framework for joint cooperation and security for vessels in India's western waters to the Persian Gulf" was suggested.

If New Delhi and Tehran succeed in furthering their now-dormant defence ties, the latter would lure Indian defence planners with its military equipment such as ground surveillance radar systems, personnel carriers, drones, destroyers, submarines, and missile-launching frigates. Only time will tell how the military-security relations between India and Iran unfold.

India and Israel have had a few hiccups in their defence cooperation. India expressed its displeasure over Israel's prolonged delay in delivering weapons systems, as well as a few unsettled cost issues. The disagreements were mainly over the joint venture between India's Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) and Israeli Aerospace Industry (IAI) for the development of long and medium-range surface-to-air missiles. In November 2013, DRDO officials blamed the lack of progress on an Israeli "lack of transparency and non-transfer

of technology.” However, the Israeli media reported that the long-range missiles project for the Indian Navy is slated for completion by December 2015, while the medium-range missiles will be ready for the Indian Air Force in August 2016.

### **A Positive End to the Year**

The November visit to India by Israeli Chief of the Ground Forces Command, Maj. Gen. Guy Zur, opened more prospects in defence cooperation. Discussions were held not only on joint military training and exchanges, R&D projects, and arms deals, but also on the security situation in South Asia and the Middle East. Combating terrorism, a common problem of both countries, was discussed intensively.

The visit coincided with India’s decision to reconsider buying Spike missiles and transfer technology. Furthermore, India and Israel reportedly agreed to collaborate in the production of high-tech systems for Indian troops at an estimated cost of US\$3 billion. For this venture, Israel would team up with DRDO to produce systems related to command and control, battlefield management, sensors, and weapons. There is also an additional joint development program for an advanced mobile observation system designed for infantry soldiers.

Two major events invigorated India-Israel defence ties. The first was the closure of the seven-year-old Barak missile kickback case. The original deal for Barak-1 missiles, at the high cost of nearly \$180 million, was inked during the BJP-led NDA government in 2000. Due to this controversy, leftist parties demanded that the government refuse all deals with IAI, which was under investigation for alleged corruption. However, neither IAI nor Rafael was blacklisted and have instead become two of the most important Israeli defence firms operating in India.

The Indian defence minister recently closed a deal for the procurement of 262 Barak-1 missiles, at an estimated cost of US\$143 million. This came as a great relief for the Indian Navy and its fast-depleting stock of anti-ballistic missiles for its frontline battleships. All that remains for the deal to go through is an approval from the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS).

The second major event that helped boost Indo-Israeli ties was the CCS approval of the procurement of nearly 15 Heron Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) from Israel, which will likely enhance reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities of Indian armed forces along the borders of Pakistan and China. Currently, the Indian Air Force uses both Israeli-made Searcher II and Heron UAVs, with about 100 deployed along the borders.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that defence ties between India and Israel are robust, and the countries would not like to be undermined by a third party. However, they should be cognizant of the changing

reality of the arms business, where other potential vendors are queuing up to sell their products. Israel's credibility as a reliable arms supplier with limited political implications should be preserved. The countries should seek utter transparency to allow the bilateral relationship to continue to flourish. India and Israel share national security challenges and are thus natural security partners. 2013 was an overall successful year in relations for the two nations, and the future holds many more potential positive developments.

**Note:** This article was originally published in **BESA Perspective Papers**, 27 January 2014 and has been reproduced here with the permission of the author's. Web link: <http://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/india-israel-defense-cooperation/>

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