

COMMENTARY

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India's Promising Israel Defence Ties

Alvite N.

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

In what could be considered a major breakthrough for Indo-Israeli defence ties, under the newly installed Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India will finally get its much-needed Barak-1 missile, manufactured by the Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI). This is a significant step for the new government in New Delhi, particularly considering the depleted defensive capabilities of Indian warships. With delivery scheduled for December 2015, fourteen ships that presently lack missile systems will be outfitted with the Barak-1.

Going back a little more than a decade, Indo-Israeli cooperation were derailed by allegations of bribery and corruption allegations. The issues surfaced when India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) conducted a probe into IAI and Rafael regarding the supply of Barak-1 missiles, in a deal orchestrated by the then BJP-led NDA government in 2000. India's Defence Minister at the time, George Fernandes, retired Naval Chief Admiral Sushil Kumar, and a number of others were involved in the scandal. It was discovered that the deal had been signed by Fernandes over the objections of the government's scientific advisor and former Indian President A.P.J Abdul Kalam, and against the advice of the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO). Specifically, questions had been raised over the need to purchase Israeli missile systems when India's indigenously built Trishul was nearly functional.

In the wake of the kickback allegations, India's left-wing parties, particularly the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), demanded that India refuse all deals with Israel, and particularly with IAI. In the event, neither IAI nor Rafael was blacklisted, and indeed they became two of the most important Israeli defence firms operating in India. Still, the controversies gave the political

left, India's pro-Palestinian groups, and social activists ammunition to pressure the government to curb ties with Israel in general, and defence cooperation in particular.

However, the CBI investigation was closed in December 2013, with the admission that there was no evidence against the accused, including the former defence minister, former Samata Party president Jaya Jaitly, a former navy chief, and others. This outcome has breathed new life into India-Israel defence ties, which are now an important pillar of overall bilateral ties. Criticisms notwithstanding, the two countries are working to enhance their defence cooperation, much of which involves boosting the arms trade (worth an estimated US\$ 10 billion over the last decade) and moving ahead with joint projects. The framework for the Barak missile deal was laid down by the previous Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government, although it fell short of giving the final nod to the acquisition. Last year ended on a positive note as the then government approved the procurement of up to 15 Heron Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) from Israel, which will likely bolster the reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities of Indian armed forces along the borders with Pakistan and China.

The green light that has now been given by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), which Modi chairs, for the acquisition of 262 missiles has come much to the relief of the Indian Navy, given its rapidly dwindling stock of anti-ballistic missiles for its frontline battleships. The Indian Navy has been voicing concerns over its deficiencies, with ships operating without missile defence systems. New Delhi's announcement of the procurement at a whopping cost of US\$ 144 million is thus a welcome move. It is also the first major advance in Indo-Israel defence ties since Modi took power.

The BJP's big election win earlier this year was followed by a great deal of pontification on the likely foreign policy India would adopt in its immediate neighbourhood, with Western and Eastern powers, and with Middle Eastern countries. In the context of this discussion, Israel has received more than its share of attention. Apart from the economic and civilian ties India shares with Israel, many pundits believe military cooperation will also gather momentum. There are memories in New Delhi of Israel's rapid response to India's request for military assistance during a crisis (particularly, the 1999 Kargil War, when the BJP was in power), which increased Israel's credibility as a reliable arms supplier and helped bolster the bilateral relationship.

While the go-ahead for the Barak deal will not in itself necessarily spark a golden age of Indo-Israel defence cooperation, it is certainly an important step in that direction. Beyond arms trade, there are several factors that would encourage the countries to cooperate. For instance, India and Israel share threat perceptions when it comes to their immediate adversaries and rising terror activities targeting them, and this will remain a binding force in their bilateral relations. Their defence establishments will be committed to robust cooperation in intelligence sharing and counterterrorism. Signalling an appetite for further engagement in military-security affairs,

India's Defence Secretary R.K. Mathur paid a three-day visit to Israel in early July, during which he discussed arms deals, including a missile development program and the procurement of two Israeli-made Airborne Early Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) for the Indian Air Force. Israel has been pushing New Delhi – as yet, without success – to procure its Iron Dome air defence system for protection against incoming short- and long-range range missile threats.

New Delhi's clearance of the stalled Barak deal is a clear signal of India's continuing preference for Israeli-made missile defence systems. This is one area where Israel's presence in the Indian defence market is secure. That said, it remains as a space where competition from other foreign vendors always looms large.

The U.S. for one. America is keen to enter the Indian market. In fact, the U.S.-made Javelin missile was in a face-off with Israel's Spike anti-tank guide missiles in a contract meant for the Indian Army. Hoping to tap the lucrative Indian defence market, the Pentagon has already demonstrated its willingness to offer "groundbreaking" defence technologies to India, including helicopters and UAVs. The Obama administration is also hoping for joint development and production of items such as drones and missiles with India, as part of the much-hyped "Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI)" with New Delhi. In view of these initiatives, which are already in the discussion-stage, Modi's recent visit to the U.S. will have been watched closely, not only by Indian defence planners but by their Israeli counterparts as well. If the U.S. succeeds in entering the Indian defence market by supplying missiles, anti-missile systems and drones, then it could well provide Israel with some stiff competition. But for this to happen, both India and the U.S. will need to overcome some entrenched issues on military technology transfer mechanisms, the main roadblock for the further enhancement of their defence cooperation. This in itself will be an enormous hurdle to conquer.

In the meantime, with their longstanding ties, defence cooperation between India and Israel looks set to grow stronger. Certainly, in the presence of heightened criticism within India over the cordial ties, and particularly the debate on India's stance vis-à-vis the recent Gaza crisis, dealings on matters related to military affairs are likely to proceed very cautiously. But with this Barak deal, there is little chance they will be shelved.

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Alvite N. is a Doctoral candidate at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Email: alvite_n@yahoo.com

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