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Indian-Israeli Defence Cooperation: The Elusive Strategic Partnership

By Richard A. Bitzinger

Synopsis

Indian-Israeli defence cooperation is mainly based on Israeli arms sales to India, which are increasingly critical, in military and economic terms, to both countries. However much Israel might like to expand this cooperation into a larger strategic partnership, India appears content with keeping this relationship limited and tactical.

Commentary

DEFENCE COOPERATION has always been a low-key but essential element in relations between Israel and India. While most of this cooperation has taken place below the radar of international affairs, it has nonetheless been critical to the expansion of ties between these two countries since the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations in 1992.

At issue – particularly for Israel – is whether growing military ties can cement a broader “strategic partnership” between Tel Aviv and New Delhi.

A symbiotic relationship?

Most of this cooperation has taken the shape of Israeli arms sales to India. Israel has become India’s second largest arms supplier, after Russia, and in particular niches, it is perhaps the leading provider of advanced armaments and military technology to the Indian military. During the first decade of the 21st century, Israel has transferred an estimated US\$10 billion worth of military equipment to India. These deals include unmanned aerial vehicles and armed drones, missiles, and targeting pods. Of particular note, Israel has supplied India with radar systems for airborne early warning and missile defence.

In many ways, Israeli arms transfers to India have been a mutually beneficial, almost symbiotic relationship. Israeli technology fills critical gaps in India’s woefully deficient defence industrial base. After more than 50 years of effort, India’s defence industry has been unable to deliver the vast bulk of advanced military equipment its military demands, leaving it dependent on foreign suppliers.

Israel is often a ready, no-strings-attached arms supplier. Moreover, it has been willing to transfer technology and manufacturing know-how to help improve India’s defence industry.

At the same time, India is a critical market for an Israeli arms industry that desperately needs arms exports in

order to survive. Fully 75 percent of Israel's defence sales are to overseas buyers. Those revenues provide necessary income to underwrite military R&D programmes that in turn aid Israel's own defence, such as the Iron Dome short-range missile defence system.

Expanding cooperation beyond arms sales

While arms sales constitute the largest chunk of Indo-Israeli defence cooperation, other forms of collaboration have emerged. In particular, Tel Aviv and New Delhi recognise that terror is a threat common to both countries (particularly after the 2008 Mumbai attack), and Israel has offered to cooperate with India in fighting terrorism, including intelligence-sharing, counter-terrorist training, and joint exercises.

Both countries have also exchanged military visits in an effort to expand military-to-military ties. Finally, Israel and India have expanded their cooperation in outer space, with India launching two Israeli surveillance satellites. Co-development of earth-observation satellites – an area where Israel has considerable expertise – is also a possibility.

Indo-Israeli defence cooperation: tactical or strategic?

One can perceive the Indo-Israeli defence relationship in two ways. First, it is at present mainly a buyer-supplier relationship, that is, a simple case of a motivated customer (the Indian military) and an equally motivated seller (the Israeli defence industry) securing a mutually beneficial but limited relationship. In other words, Israel sells weapons to India, India buys them, and that's that.

On the other hand, there may be some – particularly in Israel – who like to build upon this basic supply-and-demand relationship and turn it into something bigger. A true “strategic partnership” between Tel Aviv and New Delhi would particularly bring benefits to Israel.

Such a strategic partnership would help Israel in a number of ways. It could, for example, induce New Delhi to use its position as a leading player within the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) to soften or mitigate the NAM's anti-Israeli policies. It could also provide Israel with an important partner in the struggle against Islamist terrorism, given their common challenges.

Above all, perhaps, Israel would probably like to see India also demarcate or lessen its relationship with Iran, which is seen by Tel Aviv to be a major threat to the Jewish state. In this regard, warming US-Indian ties (particularly in the nuclear area) could help Israel by creating another pressure point by which to entice New Delhi to reverse its often pro-Tehran stance. For example, India has several times voted to censure Iran in the IAEA over Iran's nuclear programme.

Limits and constraints

Nevertheless, beyond arms sales and a few other areas of defence cooperation, it is unlikely that Israel will soon, if ever, realise a strategic partnership with India. While India maybe be very important to Israel's foreign and security policy, New Delhi sees the relationship in a much more limited respect. India has too many internal constraints – a Muslim population of 160 million, an ardently anti-Israeli left – to ever get too cozy with Israel.

India can always find other arms suppliers to keep the Israelis continuing to offer weapons systems absent any broader political deals. Above all, New Delhi is unlikely to abandon its longstanding and multifaceted relationship with Iran, in exchange for closer ties with Israel, which may or may not pay larger dividends.

Israeli arms sales to India may be mutually beneficial, but they are largely confined to what they are: a limited economic, military-technical connection. So long as New Delhi sees Indo-Israel defence cooperation as a tactical relationship, then that is probably where it will remain.

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