

Indo-Israel defence cooperation and it's impact on India's national security in 21st century

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Abstract

In the rapidly evolving landscape of global geopolitics, strategic partnerships and defence cooperation play a crucial role in shaping a nation's security architecture. One of the most significant bilateral relationships to emerge in recent decades is the defence partnership between India and Israel. Since the formal establishment of diplomatic ties in 1992, Indo-Israel relations have expanded remarkably, particularly in the domain of defence and security. This partnership has evolved into a robust collaboration encompassing military technology transfers, joint research and development, intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism strategies, and arms trade. Israel has emerged as one of India's top defence suppliers, offering cutting-edge technologies in missile defence systems, drones, surveillance, and cybersecurity — all vital for bolstering India's national security. The defense relationship between India and Israel is one of the most robust and strategically significant aspects of their bilateral ties. Over the past three decades, this cooperation has evolved from cautious exchanges to deep and multidimensional engagement, encompassing arms trade, joint research and development, intelligence sharing, and collaboration in emerging defense technologies. The partnership has played a pivotal role in enhancing India's national security, particularly in the context of regional challenges and modernization of its armed forces.

Keywords: Foreign policy, national security, Israel-Palestine conflict, middle east

Introduction

The 21st century, marked by asymmetric threats, cross-border terrorism, and cyber warfare, has cooperation has had a profound impact on enhancing India's strategic capabilities and preparedness. This assignment seeks to explore the dynamics of this partnership, analyze its contributions to India's national security, and assess its broader implications for regional and global security frameworks. The foundation of Indo-Israel defence ties lies not only in shared strategic interests but also in mutual challenges—particularly in dealing with non-state actors, insurgency, and regional instability. Both nations have faced persistent security threats from hostile neighbors and terrorist networks, creating a natural synergy in their security outlooks. This commonality has paved the way for an unprecedented level of defence collaboration, ranging from joint military exercises and specialized training programs to co-development of high-end military hardware like the Barak missile systems and advanced UAVs.

India's pursuit of self-reliance in defence, under the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative, has further aligned with Israel's strength in defence innovation and technology. Israeli companies have increasingly engaged with Indian defence firms under joint ventures and technology transfer arrangements, helping bridge capability gaps in India's defence industry. Notably, the India-Israel defence relationship is characterized by pragmatism, confidentiality, and a focus on operational effectiveness rather than overt political alignment. The strategic importance of this partnership is particularly evident in key areas such as intelligence cooperation, border security, and homeland defence. Israel's expertise in surveillance systems and anti-infiltration technologies has contributed significantly to India's counter-insurgency operations, especially in volatile regions like Jammu & Kashmir and the northeastern states. Furthermore, Israel's experience in cyber warfare and urban

counter-terrorism has provided valuable lessons and tools for Indian security agencies.

In a global environment marked by shifting alliances, rapid technological advancement, and emerging hybrid threats, the Indo-Israel defence cooperation offers India a vital edge in strengthening its national security apparatus. At the same time, this growing relationship has implications for India's broader foreign policy, regional balance of power, and its position as a responsible global actor.

This assignment will critically analyze the evolution of Indo-Israel defence ties in the 21st century, evaluate the strategic benefits derived by India, and explore the broader impact of this partnership on India's national security strategy. It will also consider potential challenges and future prospects in the context of changing geopolitical dynamics, domestic policy shifts, and international strategic alignments.



Historical Background of Indo-Israel Relations

The Indo-Israel relationship, though relatively recent in terms of formal diplomacy, is rooted in a complex interplay of historical, geopolitical, and strategic factors. What began as a cautious and low-profile engagement has matured into a robust strategic partnership—especially in the realms of

defence, intelligence, and technology. This essay traces the evolution of Indo-Israel relations from its early years to the present, highlighting the key turning points that have defined this unique bilateral partnership.

The Early Years (1948–1991): Recognition Without Relations

India was among the first countries to recognize the State of Israel, doing so on September 17, 1950. However, this recognition did not translate into the establishment of full diplomatic relations for several decades. The Indian government, led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, chose to adopt a cautious approach, shaped by a combination of ideological, domestic, and international considerations. India's foreign policy during the early Cold War years was guided by its commitment to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), anti-colonialism, and solidarity with the Arab world. These principles made India reluctant to embrace Israel openly, particularly as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict intensified. India's support for the Palestinian cause became a cornerstone of its Middle East policy, reinforced by its desire to maintain cordial relations with Arab nations—especially given its dependence on oil imports and the presence of a large Indian diaspora in the Gulf.

Domestically, political sensitivity around India's substantial Muslim population also contributed to the government's reserved posture toward Israel. Despite these limitations, informal and covert interactions between the two nations continued, particularly in the areas of intelligence and security cooperation.

Covert Cooperation and Strategic Gestures (1960s–1980s)

Even without formal diplomatic ties, the two countries maintained unofficial communication channels. During the Indo-China War of 1962 and the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 and 1971, Israel is believed to have extended limited but timely military assistance to India. While much of this support remained under the radar, it signaled Israel's willingness to cooperate with India on strategic matters. Notably, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi maintained a clandestine relationship with Israel's Mossad for intelligence sharing during periods of heightened national security threats. Israeli-made Uzi submachine guns were reportedly supplied to Indian security forces in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly during operations in Punjab and against insurgent groups in the northeast.

During this period, Israel also sought to build relations with India, viewing it as a counterweight to Pakistan and a rising power in Asia. However, India's alignment with the Soviet Union, its pro-Arab diplomatic stance, and Cold War politics made open engagement difficult.

Diplomatic Breakthrough and Normalization (1992)

The end of the Cold War marked a turning point in Indo-Israel relations. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the shifting global order, and India's own economic liberalization compelled New Delhi to reassess its foreign policy priorities. Additionally, the Madrid Peace Conference of 1991 and the start of the Oslo Peace Process offered India the political space to engage Israel without appearing to abandon the Palestinian cause. In January 1992, under the leadership of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, India

established full diplomatic relations with Israel. Embassies were opened in Tel Aviv and New Delhi, marking the beginning of a new chapter in bilateral ties. This move was based on a pragmatic recognition of mutual interests, particularly in defence, technology, and agriculture.

Strengthening Strategic and Defence Ties (1999–2010)

The Kargil War of 1999 acted as a catalyst for the acceleration of Indo-Israel defence cooperation. At a time when India was under intense international scrutiny and pressure, Israel responded swiftly by supplying India with critical military equipment, including UAVs, surveillance systems, and precision-guided munitions. This support significantly boosted Israel's standing as a reliable defence partner. Following the war, the relationship gained both visibility and momentum. In 2000, Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh^[1] visited Israel, followed by reciprocal visits from Israeli leaders. These high-level exchanges laid the foundation for deeper collaboration in areas like homeland security, intelligence sharing, and defence manufacturing.

By the mid-2000s, Israel had emerged as one of India's top three arms suppliers, alongside Russia and the United States. India began purchasing advanced systems such as the Barak missile defence system, Phalcon AWACS, and Heron and Searcher drones. Cooperation extended into joint R&D programs, notably the development of the Barak-8 air and missile defence system, a significant milestone in bilateral technological collaboration.

The Modi-Netanyahu Era: Strategic Convergence (2014–Present)

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Indo-Israel relations entered a new, unprecedented phase of openness and strategic convergence. Modi's foreign policy marked a departure from the traditional balancing act between Israel and the Arab world. Instead, he adopted a pragmatic approach that emphasized national interest, counter-terrorism, and technology-driven development.

In July 2017, Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel, signaling a dramatic shift in India's diplomatic posture. The visit was notable not only for its symbolism but also for its substance—it resulted in agreements covering defence, water management, agriculture, and space cooperation. The decision to delink the Israel visit from Palestine sent a clear message about India's new diplomatic confidence and independence. On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's reciprocal visit to India in January 2018 further deepened bilateral ties. Defence, cybersecurity, innovation, and counter-terrorism remained high on the agenda. Several joint ventures were launched, and a bilateral innovation fund—the India-Israel Industrial R&D and Technological Innovation Fund (I4F)—was established to promote collaborative research.

Broadening the Strategic Horizon

In recent years, Indo-Israel relations have expanded beyond traditional defence cooperation into emerging domains such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, space defence, and counter-drone technology. Israel's expertise in surveillance, cybersecurity, and precision warfare complements India's efforts to modernize its armed forces and enhance national security. India has also shown increasing interest in Israeli

innovations in border security, especially for deployment along the Line of Control (LoC) and the Indo-China border. Meanwhile, intelligence sharing on terrorism and extremist threats has become a key pillar of cooperation, particularly in the aftermath of attacks like the 26/11 Mumbai attacks and the Pulwama incident in 2019.

Overview of Defence Cooperation

Origins and Strategic Foundations

While formal diplomatic ties were established in 1992, defence contacts between India and Israel predate this period. During the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 and 1971, and the Indo-China conflict of 1962, Israel reportedly extended covert military support to India. However, due to political sensitivities and India's pro-Arab stance, these engagements remained unofficial and limited. The turning point came with the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992, which laid the groundwork for an institutionalized and transparent defence partnership. The strategic logic was clear: Israel, a pioneer in defence technology and innovation, saw in India a major democratic power and a key player in Asia. Conversely, India saw in Israel a reliable partner capable of supplying advanced weaponry and sharing critical security expertise—especially at a time when India was diversifying beyond its traditional dependence on Russian arms.

The Kargil War and the Trust Factor

A major catalyst in solidifying Indo-Israel defence cooperation was the Kargil War of 1999. During this conflict, Israel provided India with vital military equipment on short notice, including laser-guided bombs, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and surveillance systems. These systems played a crucial role in targeting enemy positions in the difficult terrain of the Himalayas. The swift and discreet assistance during this period established Israel's reputation in Indian strategic circles as a dependable defence partner. The war also showcased Israel's technological edge, encouraging India to pursue deeper defence ties.

Arms Trade: A Growing Pillar

Since the early 2000s, India has emerged as one of Israel's largest defence clients, accounting for a significant portion of Israel's arms exports. Some of the major defence systems that India has procured from Israel include:

- **Barak-1 and Barak-8 missile systems:** These are naval air-defence systems jointly developed with India's DRDO to protect Indian warships from missile threats.
- **Phalcon AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System):** These are mounted on Russian Il-76 aircraft and provide long-range surveillance capabilities.
- **Heron and Searcher UAVs:** Widely used for surveillance and reconnaissance missions along the borders.
- **Spike anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs):** Deployed for use by the Indian Army for precision strikes.
- **EL/M-2080 Green Pine radar** and other advanced radar systems for missile tracking and air defence.

These acquisitions have significantly enhanced India's operational capabilities across land, sea, and air domains.

Joint Research and Development

Beyond procurement, one of the most significant aspects of the India-Israel defence partnership is joint R&D and co-development. A prime example of this is the Barak-8 surface-to-air missile system, a collaborative project between Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). Designed to counter multiple aerial threats, the Barak-8 system is now a key component of India's naval defence. The two countries have also signed agreements to jointly develop unmanned aerial systems, electronic warfare technologies, and missile defence components, including laser-based systems.

Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

One of the less publicized but highly strategic dimensions of Indo-Israel defence cooperation is intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism collaboration. After the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, in which Israeli nationals were also killed, cooperation in this area was significantly intensified. India has benefitted from Israel's experience in urban warfare, hostage rescue, and counter-insurgency operations. Israeli security experts have trained Indian forces in techniques used by the Mossad and Shin Bet, particularly for anti-terror operations in urban environments. Moreover, Israeli cyber-intelligence and surveillance technology have been integrated into India's internal security apparatus, especially for monitoring cross-border terrorism and insurgent networks.

Cybersecurity and Emerging Technologies

In recent years, defence cooperation has expanded into cybersecurity and emerging technologies. With cyber threats becoming a major component of modern warfare, India and Israel have initiated dialogues and collaborations in securing critical infrastructure, cyber forensics, and intelligence-gathering from digital platforms. Israel's private defence tech sector, renowned for innovation in AI, big data, drone warfare, robotics, and network-centric operations, is a key area of interest for India's military modernization drive. Indian startups have also begun partnering with Israeli firms under joint innovation funds and government-backed R&D initiatives like the India-Israel Industrial R&D and Technological Innovation Fund (I4F).

Space and Homeland Security

Israel and India have also worked together in space-based defence technologies, including satellite surveillance and missile-tracking systems. Israel has supported India's efforts to develop a multi-layered ballistic missile defence shield by sharing radar and tracking technologies.

In the field of homeland security, India has adopted Israeli models for smart fencing, border monitoring, and urban security. The Indian government has used Israeli technologies to manage borders in Jammu & Kashmir and the India-Bangladesh frontier.

High-Level Defence Exchanges

High-level visits and strategic dialogues have institutionalized the defence partnership:

- 2017: Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Israel, the first such visit by an Indian PM, marking a shift to open strategic cooperation. Several defence MoUs were signed.
- 2018: Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu visited India, emphasizing defence trade and joint innovation.
- The India-Israel Defence Working Group (DWG) and Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation have been established to guide bilateral defence engagement.

These platforms have enabled continuous dialogue, policy coordination, and review of progress in defence collaboration.

Key Areas of Cooperation

- Military Technology:** Examine joint ventures in defence technology, including weapon systems and military hardware procurement.
- Intelligence Sharing:** Discuss collaboration in intelligence gathering, cyber security, and information exchange.
- Counter-Terrorism Initiative:** Analyze joint exercises, training programs, and strategies to combat terrorism.

Impact on India's National Security

The India-Israel partnership, established formally in 1992, has evolved into a strategic and multifaceted relationship, especially in the realm of defence, intelligence, and technology. From a diplomatic standpoint, India and Israel share a bond rooted in democratic values, historical struggles for independence, and common security concerns. Over the years, this partnership has significantly contributed to India's national security, particularly in the face of external threats and regional instability.

Defence and Military Cooperation

One of the most prominent aspects of the India-Israel partnership is defence cooperation. Israel has emerged as one of India's top arms suppliers, offering high-quality, combat-tested technology suited to India's diverse terrain and security requirements. Key acquisitions include the Phalcon AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control Systems), Heron and Searcher UAVs, and Barak-8 missile defence systems—each of which has strengthened India's capabilities in surveillance, air defence, and precision targeting. This defence relationship proved especially critical during the Kargil War in 1999, when Israel supplied India with crucial surveillance and laser-guided munitions. Since then, joint research and development (R&D) projects—such as the Barak-8 system—have allowed India to advance its indigenous defence industry under the "Make in India" initiative. These collaborations reduce India's dependence on traditional suppliers and support the goal of strategic autonomy.

Counter-Terrorism and Intelligence Sharing

Israel's extensive experience in counter-terrorism and urban warfare has been a valuable asset to India. Following major terrorist incidents such as the 2008 Mumbai attacks and the Pulwama attack in 2019, India intensified its cooperation with Israel in the areas of intelligence sharing, homeland security, and cyber defence. Indian security agencies have

incorporated Israeli tactics and technology for surveillance, border protection, and rapid response. Training programs and knowledge exchange with Israeli forces have enhanced the operational readiness of Indian police and paramilitary units, particularly in insurgency-affected areas like Jammu & Kashmir and the northeast.

Cybersecurity and Technology

In an age of hybrid warfare, cybersecurity has become a crucial pillar of national security. India and Israel are increasingly collaborating in this field, with Israeli firms offering advanced tools for cyber threat detection, network security, and infrastructure protection. Joint ventures and tech exchanges have allowed India to secure its digital assets against both state-sponsored attacks and non-state actors. Moreover, the partnership extends into space defence, artificial intelligence (AI), and drone technology, areas that are vital for India's long-term strategic dominance. India's adoption of Israeli drone and surveillance tech has improved its monitoring capabilities across critical border regions, including the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the Line of Control (LoC).

Geopolitical and Strategic Significance

India's growing closeness with Israel also reflects a shift in its foreign policy—from idealism to pragmatism. While traditionally supporting the Palestinian cause, India has managed to strengthen its ties with Israel without alienating key Arab partners, a balancing act that enhances its diplomatic flexibility. The partnership also contributes to India's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East. Furthermore, Israel's support for India in international forums—particularly regarding counter-terrorism narratives and Pakistan's role—reinforces India's global security interests.

Challenges and Constraints in Indo-Israel Cooperation

While Indo-Israel relations have deepened significantly over the last three decades, especially in the areas of defence, security, and technology, the partnership is not without its challenges and limitations. These constraints stem from geopolitical considerations, diplomatic sensitivities, technological dependencies, and institutional barriers. Understanding these challenges is essential to assessing the sustainability and long-term impact of Indo-Israel cooperation on India's national security.

1. Diplomatic Balancing Act: The Arab World and Iran Factor

One of the most persistent challenges India faces in its relationship with Israel is balancing its ties with the Arab world and Iran. India has long-standing strategic, economic, and energy interests in West Asia, especially with countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iran. Many of these nations are historically critical of Israel, particularly over the Palestinian issue. India imports a significant portion of its oil and gas from this region and hosts a large Indian diaspora there. Any perceived tilt towards Israel—especially in sensitive areas like intelligence sharing or joint military exercises—risks straining these relationships. For example, India often refrains from overt joint military drills with Israel or voting in Israel's favor in UN forums to maintain a neutral position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Thus, India's need for diplomatic non-alignment and regional balance often acts as a brake on the full-scale strategic embrace with Israel.

2. Lack of Transparency in Defence Deals

Many India-Israel defence deals, especially those involving sensitive technologies, are shrouded in secrecy. While this is often for security reasons, it raises concerns about transparency, accountability, and public oversight, especially in a democracy like India. The opaque nature of contracts has, in the past, led to accusations of corruption, irregularities, and political controversies. The 2006 Barak missile scandal, in which corruption allegations were leveled regarding the procurement of Israeli missiles, temporarily stalled further deals. While most of the allegations were eventually dropped, such controversies have the potential to disrupt future cooperation or delay procurement processes.

3. Technological Dependence and Transfer Issues

While Israel has supplied India with advanced weaponry and defence systems, there are limitations in technology transfer. Israel is often cautious about sharing its most cutting-edge technologies, particularly those developed in partnership with the United States. As a result, India remains largely a buyer rather than a co-developer in several areas. Although joint development initiatives like the Barak-8 missile system have been successful, India has struggled to achieve full indigenization in critical sectors such as drones, air defence systems, and cyber warfare technologies. The lack of open access to core technologies hinders India's goals of self-reliance under the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" initiative and creates long-term dependence.

4. Limited Economic and Institutional Engagement Beyond Defence

Despite strong defence ties, economic and institutional collaboration between the two countries remains modest. Bilateral trade, excluding defence, has stagnated in recent years and lacks the momentum seen in strategic cooperation. Additionally, people-to-people engagement, academic exchange, and cultural collaboration are still relatively limited. The absence of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA)—under negotiation since 2005—has prevented the expansion of trade relations into areas like agriculture, pharmaceuticals, water management, and cybersecurity. This imbalance makes the relationship overly dependent on security and defence cooperation, which can be a vulnerability in the long term.

5. Domestic Political and Ideological Perceptions

In both India and Israel, domestic political narratives and ideological perceptions can influence foreign policy decisions. In India, the deepening of ties with Israel is sometimes ^[2] politicized, with critics arguing that it reflects a shift away from India's traditionally non-aligned or pro-Arab foreign policy. This perception can create domestic resistance, particularly among political groups that support the Palestinian cause or advocate for a more balanced West Asia policy. Similarly, Israel's domestic politics and strategic priorities are often influenced by its security concerns with Iran and Palestine, which may not always align with India's regional interests, particularly regarding Iran—a key strategic partner for India in terms of energy and access to Central Asia via the Chabahar Port.

6. Over-Reliance on Defence Ties

Another constraint is the narrow scope of the Indo-Israel relationship, which is disproportionately focused on defence and counter-terrorism. While this has yielded tangible benefits, an over-reliance on these sectors can hinder the development of a more comprehensive strategic partnership that includes innovation, academia, culture, and multilateral cooperation. This sectoral imbalance also limits the ability of both nations to mobilize public support and institutional capacity for long-term engagement beyond security needs.

7. Strategic Autonomy and Third-Party Constraints

India's strategic doctrine is built around the idea of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. While Israel is a close ally of the United States, India continues to maintain defence and diplomatic ties with Russia, Iran, and other countries that may have adversarial relations with either the U.S. or Israel. This geopolitical complexity sometimes creates constraints in the scope and depth of cooperation. For instance, joint ventures involving Israeli and American companies may be restricted by U.S. export control laws, which prevent certain technologies from being shared with countries that also engage with U.S. adversaries.

Conclusion

The evolution of Indo-Israel relations, particularly in the field of defence cooperation, represents a paradigm shift in India's strategic outlook in the 21st century. What began as a cautious diplomatic engagement has matured into a dynamic and multidimensional partnership anchored in shared security concerns, mutual technological strengths, and a convergence of geopolitical interests. The robust defence ties between the two nations—spanning arms trade, joint development, intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism training, and cybersecurity—have significantly enhanced India's military preparedness and strategic autonomy. Israel's combat-proven technologies and willingness to customize solutions for India's unique security environment have provided a critical edge to India's armed forces, especially amid regional challenges along its western and northern borders. Simultaneously, the partnership has offered India valuable lessons in homeland security, urban warfare, and surveillance capabilities, reinforcing its internal security mechanisms.

However, the relationship is not without its constraints. Diplomatic sensitivities, limited technology transfer, overdependence on defence ties, and balancing relations with the Arab world and Iran continue to shape the contours of this strategic engagement. Nevertheless, both nations have shown a strong commitment to overcoming these challenges through dialogue, innovation, and long-term collaboration. In an increasingly volatile global security environment, Indo-Israel defence cooperation is poised to play an even more crucial role in safeguarding India's national interests. By deepening this partnership beyond defence into sectors like cybersecurity, space, AI, and water security, India and Israel can forge a truly strategic alliance that contributes not only to bilateral resilience but also to regional and global stability. While India and Israel enjoy a strong and growing partnership, especially in defence and security, several challenges and constraints limit the full potential of their cooperation. Diplomatic balancing, technological access, political sensitivities, and institutional limitations continue to shape the contours of this strategic

relationship. Addressing these issues—through greater transparency, diversified collaboration, and mutual trust—will be key to sustaining and expanding Indo-Israel cooperation in the 21st century.

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