

Sharon is Coming to India

By Ninan Koshy | May 23, 2003

Close on the heels of Indian National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra's call for an India-U.S.-Israel strategic alliance, comes the confirmation that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will be visiting India in the next few weeks. Some observers in New Delhi consider Mishra's call, made at the annual dinner of the American Jewish Committee, as a curtain raiser for the Sharon visit. What they seem to ignore is that the India-U.S.-Israel strategic alliance has moved beyond last call to center stage and that the plan for Sharon's visit is some 15 months old.

It was an ironic coincidence that Brajesh Mishra was closeted in his office in New Delhi on Sept. 11, 2001 with his Israeli counterpart Maj. Gen. Uzi Dayan and engaged in what was dubbed a "joint security strategy dialogue" when the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon occurred. Their discussion had to be discontinued as they turned to the television news. Favored by the climate of the ensuing War on Terror, the security relationship between India and Israel developed into a strategic alliance in tandem with the India-U.S. strategic partnership.

The alliance between India and Israel—one an open member of the international nuclear club and the other a secret member—is based predominantly on military and intelligence cooperation. Israel has become the second-largest supplier of arms for India, next only to Russia. Israel has provided India with sea-to-sea missile radar and other similar systems, border monitoring equipment, and night vision devices. It also has upgraded India's Soviet-era aircraft.

Allies and Aircraft

The United States has given clearance to Israel's delivery of Phalcon reconnaissance aircraft to India, in marked contrast to Washington's vigorous opposition to supplying them to China in 1998. The United States forced Israel to cancel a deal to sell the Phalcons to China out of concern for altering the balance of power between China and Taiwan. Initially the U.S. administration also had worries

about how the Phalcons supplied to India could impact the delicate balance between India and Pakistan, but the concerns soon evaporated in the warmth of the India-U.S.-Israel strategic relationship.

In the third week of February 2003 an agreement was made to supply advanced Israeli avionics systems for the Indian Air Force's new MG-27 combat aircraft. There are reports of Indo-Israeli plans to collaborate on the development of a missile defense system based on the Israel Arrow technology. Indian defense officials acknowledged the acquisition of two Israeli Elta Green Pine long-range radar systems, a component of the Arrow Ballistic Missile Defense Systems, according to *International Herald Tribune* of Feb. 10. A 2001 Pentagon review said that the defensive nature of the Arrow system exempted it from sales restrictions imposed by the Missile Technology Control Regime, an international agreement designed to stop the spread of offensive military technology.

Israel and India established a joint commission at the ministerial level back in 1999. During that year's conflict with Pakistan, known as the Kargil War, Israel responded quickly to India's desperate requests for arms, despite pressures from various quarters not to supply ammunition to a party engaged in war. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles for high altitude surveillance, laser-guided systems, and many other items were provided within days of the request. *Jane's Defense Weekly*, which gave the details on the supplies, reported in March 2000 that Israeli security officers were regularly visiting the Kashmir border. *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor* reported on Aug. 14, 2001: "Israeli intelligence agencies have been



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intensifying their relations with India security apparatus and are now understood to be heavily involved in helping New Delhi combat Islamic militants in the disputed province of Kashmir.”

The *Jerusalem Post* reported on Feb. 3, 2003 that India was sending four battalions of nearly 3,000 Indian soldiers to Israel for specialized anti-insurgency training. Their special assignment on return would be to employ newly learned techniques to stop infiltration of India by Pakistani terrorists in the contested Kashmir region.

Professor Martin Sherman published an article in the *Jerusalem Post* on Feb. 28, 2003 entitled “From Conflict to Convergence: India and Israel Forge a Solid Strategic Alliance.” The alliance with India was important for Israel as it intended to develop sea-borne defense capability. In view of the miniscule territorial dimension of Israel, its defense planners are increasingly aware of the crucial significance of the marine and sub-marine theaters. The vulnerability of Israel’s land-based military installations grows with the acquisition of modern weaponry by other countries in the region. Strategic thinking in Israel tends to give prominence to the Indian Ocean as a location for logistical infrastructure. For the establishment and operation of such a maritime venture, cooperation with the Indian navy would be vital. The *Post* article said, “In this regard it is especially significant that in 2000, Israeli submarines reportedly conducted test launches capable of carrying nuclear warheads in the waters of the Indian Ocean off the Sri Lankan coast.”

Sherman added, “An alliance between India and Israel openly endorsed by the U.S. would create a potent stabilizing force in the region, which together with like-minded regimes such as Turkey, could contribute significantly toward facing down the force of radical extremism so hostile to American interests in Western and Central Asia.” The article argued that considerations beyond regional stability made a vibrant India-Israeli axis a clear interest. “For example in the growing balance of geostrategic power, the growing Chinese challenge to U.S. primacy will almost invariably dictate the need for a regional counterweight to Chinese domination.”

It was in the context of the War on Terror that the strategic relationship of India with Israel and the United States developed dramatically though defense and security cooperation. It was just natural that both Israel and the United States found a partner in the Indian government because of its ideological commitment to militaristic policy. Conveniently for them, at work in New Delhi was the calculated dismantling of the entire rationale of nonalignment and the edifice of an independent foreign policy.

New Axis in the War on Terror?

The visit of Shimon Peres to New Delhi in January 2002 became an occasion to cement the strategic ties between Israel and India. Both countries seemed to be convinced they were fighting a common enemy, terrorism. At that time Zvi Gabey, deputy director general for Asia in the Israeli government said, “We find ourselves in the same camp that fights terrorism and we have to develop our relationship according to that.” An Indian foreign ministry spokeswoman said during Peres’ visit: “India finds it increasingly beneficial to learn from Israel’s experience in dealing with terrorism since Israel, too, has long suffered from cross-border terrorism.” The spokeswoman slipped into the ministry’s grave and oft-repeated error of equating the Palestinian struggle with cross-border terrorism.

The visit was the most visible sign of the new phase of the Israel-India relationship. Peres was immensely pleased with it. The Israeli Cabinet communiqué of Jan. 13, 2002 on Peres’ briefing about his trip billed it as a major achievement “emphasizing the good relations and special ties between Israel and India.” Sharon was pleased too. He told the Cabinet he attributed special importance to the deepening of relations with India. That was when he noted that he intended to visit India, giving the first clear signal of the plan. Apparently an invitation to India had been extended to him through Peres.

Mishra drummed up U.S. support for the plan, finding a responsive audience for his skewed and cynical views on terrorism in the American Jewish Committee. Only a “core” consisting of democracies such as India, Israel, and the United States can deal

with terrorism, he maintained. The alliance of the three would have the political and moral authority to make bold decisions in extreme cases of terrorist provocation, he claimed, adding that they would not waste time in defining terrorism or arguing about its causes. “Distinctions sought to be made between freedom fighters and terrorists propagate a bizarre logic,” he spouted. “Another fallacy propagated is that terrorism can only be eradicated by addressing the root causes.” He repeated the pet themes of India, the United States, and Israel being “prime targets of terrorism,” having a “common enemy,” and requiring “joint action.”

His comments were underpinned by those of India’s Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishan Advani, who, in an interview given to Fox News on July 9, 2002, said: “Terrorism in so far we have seen it on Sept. 11 or Dec. 13 has a common source and that common source has described the U.S., Israel, and India as its three main enemies.” Dec. 13, 2001 was the date on which the Indian Parliament was attacked by terrorists. Advani implied that the three countries therefore have a common cause and could forge a common front against terrorism.

The India-Israeli alliance strengthens U.S. strategic designs for India and the region. India holds a very prominent place in the Sept. 20, 2002 *National Security Strategy of the USA*, “a policy document that bears the personal stamp of President Bush,” according to Robert D. Blackwill, U.S. Ambassador to India. The document states: “The United States has undertaken a transformation in its bilateral relationship with India. We are the two largest democracies. We share an interest in fighting terrorism and in creating a strategically stable Asia. We start with a view of India as a growing world power with which we have common strategic interests.”

In an article in the prestigious Indian daily *The Hindu*, Blackwill wrote: “Taken together our defense cooperation and military sales activities intensify the working relationships between the respective armed forces, build mutual military capacities for future joint operations and strengthen Indian military capability, **which is in America’s interest**” [emphasis added]. He concluded the article: “An Indian military that is capable of operating effectively alongside its

American counterparts remains an important goal of our bilateral defense relationship. What we have achieved since January 2001 builds a strong foundation on which to consummate this strategic objective, which will promote peace and freedom in Asia and beyond.”

Washington will ensure that the India-Israeli alliance will serve this strategic objective. As for the Indian government, it has already subjugated the country’s national interests to U.S. designs in return for its designation as a world power.

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