

The launch of a Controversy

By G. Bharath and Harsh V. Pant

The Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) would never have anticipated that its launch of an Israeli satellite last month would provoke such an uproar. The comrades are demanding that a full report on the assistance given to Israel on the launch of its satellite be provided by the Indian government. Iran is lecturing India on the niceties of diplomacy and the nuances of good political relations that should be kept above economic considerations. Adding fuel to the fire, an Israeli diplomat has claimed that the launch last month was only the first of many such launches yet to come.

The commercial wing of Isro, Antrix, launched an Israeli spy satellite (TecSAR) using PSLV, its workhorse launcher, last month. The PSLV-C-10 was the 25th satellite launch mission from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC). The launch of TecSAR was implemented by a commercial contract between the Antrix Corporation and the Israeli Aerospace Industries (IAI). This is the second time that Isro has launched a full-fledged commercial mission, the first one being the Italian astronomical satellite, AGILE, which was put into orbit in April last year for a fee of US \$11 million. This commercial mission is of significant importance since it signifies India's assured entry into the commercial launch market, the US approval of launches from India with sensitive foreign technology and closer Israel-India strategic relationship.

India started its space programme in 1963 and carried out its first successful launch of a domestic satellite in 1980. India has also built its own launchers to reduce its reliability with overseas launchers. India currently has two launchers, the PSLV and the GSLV. The PSLV, after a first unsuccessful attempt in 1993 in its first flight, has experienced a significant amount of reliability and the launches of AGILE and TecSAR endorse it. It is estimated that India's launch service costs about 60 to 70 per cent of what is charged by other major space agencies, thus giving it a definite cost advantage. This also signals India's intentions in the global launch market that it would like to compete alongside the United States, Russia, China, and the European Space Agency in offering commercial launch services. Euroconsult, a Paris based market research firm, estimates that the global launch market would grow up to US \$145 billion over the next ten years, as more and more countries decide to launch satellites and space probes. Antrix has three more international customers in the forthcoming year availing its launch services — micro or nano satellites for an unnamed Dutch customer, the University of Toronto, Canada and the Cosmos International from Germany. India's ambitions to grab its share of the multi-billion dollar launch market are self-evident and should come as no surprise at this stage.

The TecSAR satellite was developed and manufactured by the IAI. It weighed just less than 300 kilograms and has the ability to operate under different weather conditions and during day and night. It is capable of creating high resolution images using advanced radar technology. The launch was initially scheduled for September 2007. Some have suggested that the launch was delayed because of American pressure, which was suspicious of India gaining access to powerful military platforms, while others claim that the delay was because of the resistance of the Left parties to this launch. However, Isro has maintained that the launch was delayed because of technical factors. By successfully launching TecSAR aboard PSLV, Isro has confirmed the US approval of launches from India with sensitive foreign technology, even as the Left has been forced to put on record its opposition to this collaboration.

Notwithstanding the resistance from the Indian Left, the strategic relationship between India and Israel is at an all-time high, with Israel on the verge of replacing Russia as India's largest defence partner. India and Israel established diplomatic relationship in 1992 and since then both of them have maintained a steady collaboration in defence. In sharp contrast to the back-channel security ties that existed even before the normalisation of bilateral relations, India now seems more willing to carve out a mutually beneficial bilateral relationship with Israel openly, including deepening defence ties.

In the past, both nations cooperated in a number of projects relating to small arms, weapons, avionics, ship-launched Barak missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles. However, India's decision to develop jointly a new generation of surface-to-air missile with Israel and launch a spy satellite is definitely a new phase in this relationship. According to a recently signed \$2.5-billion deal, the IAI would help India in developing an anti-aircraft system and missiles for the country. The IAI will develop the Barak-8 missile for the Indian Navy and the Air Force, which would help in protecting sea vessels and ground facilities from aircraft and cruise missiles. This missile is expected to replace the current obsolete Russian system used by India. The hypersonic missile interceptor test by India carried out late last year also employed the Long Range Tracking Radar (LRTR) which was developed by the Israeli assistance.

India-Israel partnership is proceeding with the tacit blessings of the US which itself is engaged in a high-profile defence relationship with India. Washington's endorsement of the burgeoning India-Israel ties is evident in its approval of the sale of the Phalcon early warning system to India, whereas it has vetoed a similar deal to China. And now the launch of TecSAR confirms the US approval of Israeli launches from India with sensitive foreign technology.

The declarations from certain sections of the Israeli security establishment, however, that the satellite will be used to spy on Iran, added to India's discomfiture that wants to keep its ties with Iran on an even keel in light of domestic political sensitivities. India has been walking a tightrope in balancing its relations between Israel and Iran for the last few years.

In a scenario where the Defence Research Development Organisation (DRDO) has announced the closure of its indigenous Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP) and has announced opportunities for interested foreign collaborators and private companies, the emerging defence partnerships are significant for India and its defence industry. Recent moves highlight a significant shift in Delhi's thinking and policy trajectory on defence related issues, with Delhi more willing to be assertive in matters of defence collaborations and in pursuing its commercial interests; thus, the decision by India to go ahead with the launch, much to the chagrin of Tehran and the Indian Left.

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