

India and Israel: A partnership that beats asymmetry

• By RAN KOCHAV

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's next visit to Israel could do more than generate headlines. It could lower the friction that constrains the defense relationship and help India and Israel deepen cooperation at a moment when they are confronting the same strategic problem: how to defend societies and critical infrastructure against air and missile threats in an age of saturation.

This visit should not be read as a test of political warmth. It is a capability checkpoint: Can Israel and India translate diplomatic proximity into practical mechanisms that reduce the cost asymmetry of modern air defense?

For both countries, the past two years have underscored a hard truth: Air and missile defense is no longer a supporting function. It is a national strategic instrument that buys decision-makers time, maneuver space, and crisis stability while denying adversaries an outsized strategic payoff.

One of the lessons of recent conflicts, especially Operation Sindoor (May 2025), is that air defense determines the political room available to leaders during limited conflict.

But in the "Saturation Age," where low-cost drone swarms, loitering munitions, and missile salvos can overwhelm defenses, the core challenge is economic. No country can sustainably fire interceptors worth millions of dollars at targets that cost only a few thousand. If air defense becomes financially exhausting, it becomes strategically brittle.

Modern air defense cannot remain a collection of isolated missile batteries. It must transform from a static, linear shield into a dynamic kill web – an integrated network that combines early warning, command and control, kinetic interception, elec-

tronic warfare, cyber, and non-kinetic ("soft-kill") effects under a single operational logic.

The objective is to defeat saturation by distributing sensing, fusing data, prioritizing targets, and applying the cheapest effective effect rather than defaulting to expensive interceptors.

India is moving in that direction. During Operation Sindoor, it relied on a networked C4ISR architecture known as IACCS (Integrated Air Command & Control System), designed to generate a unified air picture by fusing inputs from ground radars, airborne platforms, and even civilian sensors.

The next turning point is the creation of a multi-service Joint Engagement Zone (JEZ), a seamless engagement environment where different services can share data and coordinate fires at speed.

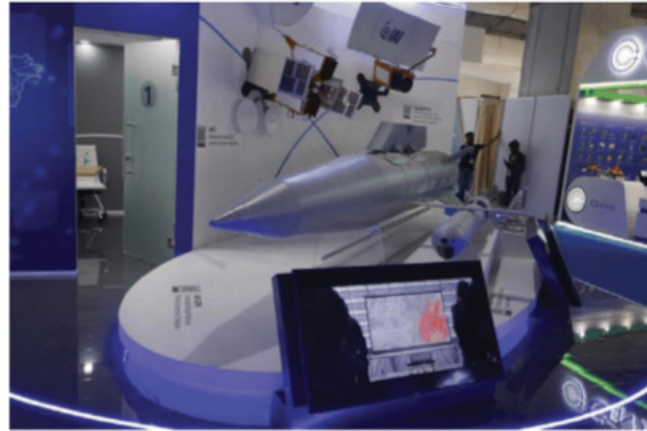
India is working to connect the air force's IACCS with the army's tactical air defense command system, Akashteer, and expand integration across additional regional nodes. Yet the remaining gaps, especially the challenge of real-time interoperability, still matter, because saturation attacks compress decision time. Any delay becomes a vulnerability.

Detection and interception: Where saturation bites hardest

The most difficult layer to build is the detection layer. The hardest targets to identify are low-flying threats with small radar cross-sections, such as small "kamikaze" drones. India operates airborne early warning platforms, including Netra and Israeli Phalcon aircraft, but availability constraints remain an issue.

The future requires large-scale deployment of distributed sensors, including compact radars and electro-optical systems, to feed the air picture and prevent swarms from exploiting gaps.

On interception, India is man-



MODELS of the Air Lora, an extended-range massive precise supersonic weapon, and Wind Demon, an affordable air-to-surface cruise missile on display at the Israel Aerospace Industries stall during the 'Aero India 2025' show last year. (Abinaya Kalyanasundaram/Reuters)

aging a layered approach. For long ranges, it employs the Russian S-400 system. For the mid-layer, systems based on Akash and jointly developed Barak-8 (MRSAM) play a central role.

For point defense and tactical ranges, India is shifting toward systems such as QRSAM and upgrading legacy anti-aircraft guns (including L-70 and Shilka variants) with proximity-fused smart ammunition to provide a cheaper, scalable response to drone swarms. This reflects the economic logic of saturation: Expensive interceptors cannot be the default answer for low-cost mass threats.

This is where Israel's value proposition becomes strategically relevant. The India-Israel technology interface is already a component of India's air defense posture, particularly through the jointly developed Barak-8 family and early warning platforms such as Phalcon.

But the deeper advantage lies in how Israel thinks about integrated air defense as a continuously evolving operational enterprise: architecture design, battle management, rapid iteration, and the translation of operational lessons into upgrades.

The global lesson from both Ukraine and Israel is that counter-saturation requires a system of systems supported by distributed, semi-autonomous decision networks.

Ukraine's experience with integrated EW-and-fire networks (such as Kvertus Atlas) and Israel's counter-drone systems (including Drone Dome) point to the same operational principle: The winning combination is detection, electronic disruption, and kinetic fires, orchestrated by a single "brain" that prioritizes targets and prevents national ammunition stockpiles from being exhausted.

The real ceiling is industrial, not diplomatic

If Modi's visit is to matter in defense terms, it must address the issue that now defines the ceiling of cooperation: industry.

India's push for indigenization is a strategic program to turn India into a global defense manufacturing hub and reducing dependence on single-source supply chains. In air defense, that means developing critical components domestically, including seekers and secure communications channels, rather than relying on external suppliers.

Israel understands this constraint. Remaining relevant in India's defense ecosystem requires alignment with India's domestic production goals – through models that privilege local manufacturing, long-term integration, maintenance and overhaul (MRO), and the transfer of tacit operational knowledge into Indian organizations.

If Israel frames the relationship as "more exports," it will hit a ceiling. If it frames it as capability acceleration inside India, it becomes harder to reverse politically and easier to scale.

India also has incentives to be flexible when it recognizes Israeli value that accelerates Indian self-reliance: architecture and integration expertise, an iterative upgrade culture, and proven experience in fielding capabilities under operational pressure.

In the Saturation Age, the advantage in air defense is determined less by the quality of any single interceptor and more by the depth of the industrial ecosystem behind it: production tempo, maintenance capacity, spare-part availability, software and sensor upgrade cycles, and supply-chain resilience.

Economic asymmetry is not solved by technology alone but by the ability to manufacture, sustain, replenish, and upgrade quickly and affordably.

Local production + MRO + rapid upgrade cycles reduce life-cycle costs, raise operational availability, and reduce vulnerability to wartime supply disruptions.

A strategic opportunity

Modi's visit should be evaluated by whether it delivers mechanisms. In air defense terms, three concrete directions stand out:

1. Integration as the "nervous system": accelerating interoperability between IACCS, Akashteer, and the JEZ concept to enable real-time joint engagement and kill-web logic.

2. Counter-saturation layers that are scalable and affordable: building stronger soft-kill layers (EW/cyber) alongside cheaper kinetic options, leveraging a division of labor between Israel's strengths in integration and protection and India's strengths in scale and deployment.

3. An industrial pathway that turns platforms into an ecosystem: moving from "systems" to industrial depth co-producing critical components, investing in secure communications, institutionalizing sustainment, and embedding upgrade capacity in India.

A deeper India-Israel defense relationship requires disciplined design: an alignment with India's production imperative, and an Israeli posture that prioritizes integration, sustainment, and ecosystem-building over one-off sales. If both sides pursue this, the partnership can turn a financially exhausting problem into a sustainable capability advantage.

In 2026, the question will be whether the relationship produces a defense partnership that is scalable, resilient, and economically survivable under saturation – a partnership that can beat the asymmetry.

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