

Arrows for India?

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Brief Analysis

When Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon visits India on September 9-11, he is likely to explore the possible sale of Israeli Arrow antiballistic missiles to New Delhi. The United States, which has provided funds and technology for the Arrow since 1986, has a veto right over sales to third parties. U.S. approval of a sale to India would offer both advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

Geopolitics. After its August 6-7 meeting in Washington, the U.S.-India Defense Policy Group issued a joint statement describing "our new strategic partnership." India could be an important security partner for both the United States and Israel. Like them, India is threatened by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, missiles that deliver them, and radical Islamist terrorists. India has a large military establishment that could contribute to future coalitions and, as the world's largest democracy, it is a logical partner for other democracies. Moreover, a strong India could help to balance China's growing power. Being close to the Persian Gulf, India's naval facilities could also offer U.S. Central Command alternatives to risky Gulf ports. Similarly, as Israel develops its "blue water navy" to enhance deterrence against adversaries such as Iran, India's naval facilities could serve as refueling and support installations.

In recent years India has warmed to Iran, with vague discussions of high-level technology cooperation. Discouraging unwise Indian technology transfers is an additional reason to expand Israeli and U.S. influence.

Defensive orientation. The Arrow could help shift India's security orientation toward defenses. India and Pakistan currently deploy nuclear missile forces against each other. These forces are vulnerable to first strikes; that is, the side that strikes first would gain a substantial advantage. In a crisis, this incentive to launch a nuclear first strike could lead to disaster. Missile defenses are one way to create uncertainties about the effectiveness of such strikes. U.S. approval of Israel's recent sale of the Phalcon air defense system to India could be the first step toward shifting New Delhi's security orientation.

For its part, India endorsed the U.S. missile defense program -- to which Russia and other major nations had objected -- in May 2001, the day after President George W. Bush announced his vision of missile defense. The U.S. and Indian governments have agreed to hold a missile defense workshop in New Delhi by February 2004. Moreover, Arrow is not India's only missile defense option. Russia is discussing a sale of the comparable S300V system, and Washington could offer Patriot missiles.

Disadvantages

Geopolitics. Some analysts fear that, if India gains an asymmetrical advantage in defenses, it might behave more recklessly toward Pakistan. The South Asian nuclear arms race could in turn accelerate if Pakistan reacted by increasing its missile inventory or acquiring countermeasures against missile defenses. Moreover, if Pakistan reacted badly to U.S. approval of an Arrow sale, U.S.-Pakistani cooperation on Afghanistan and counterterrorism could suffer.

Proliferation. Arrow has been tested not only as an interceptor, but also as a target -- it can simulate an offensive missile with a range of several hundred kilometers. This is possible because the Arrow uses a large, sophisticated rocket motor. Indeed, the Arrow rocket exceeds the threshold for which the 33-nation, export-control Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) has prescribed a "strong presumption to deny" exports. (Some Russian interceptors, not yet exported, also exceed this threshold. The U.S. Patriot does not.)

Washington helped establish the MTCR in the 1980s, and Israel adheres to the regime's guidelines. The MTCR permits its members to make "rare" over-threshold exports, but India and Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs make them dubious candidates for such allowances. U.S. approval of Arrow sales could invite over-threshold exports by other MTCR members and jeopardize the regime's successes in retarding the proliferation of advanced missile technologies. U.S. willingness to cross the MTCR firebreak could also hurt its efforts to define illicit missile exports in its new Proliferation Security Initiative.

India has a record of diversions of sensitive technology. India diverted the engine of a Soviet air defense missile, the SA-2, to make the offensive Prithvi ballistic missile. It also diverted the design of a U.S. space-launch rocket, the Scout, to make the Agni medium-range ballistic missile. For years India dissembled about its rocket and nuclear programs, claiming "peaceful" purposes until the last minute. Arrow interceptors could be a source of more sophisticated missile technology not only for India but also for its customers. India seeks to export missiles; it has not agreed to abide by MTCR restrictions. Its export control record is spotty; although New Delhi has halted some dangerous shipments, the CIA has reported Indian assistance to Libya's missile program, and Washington recently imposed sanctions on Indian firms for missile and chemical weapon-related exports to Iraq and, possibly, Iran.

Countermeasures. India's missile relationship with Russia raises the additional possibility that Arrow technology could make its way to experts there who would examine it to find ways to develop countermeasures against it. Russia could then export those countermeasures to Israel's adversaries in the Middle East, such as Iran. The MTCR, to which Russia belongs, does not control the export of most countermeasures, so the regime would be no obstacle. Moreover, Arrow employs U.S. command guidance, seeker, and computer hardware and software technology to direct it to its target. Hence, lessons learned from examining the Arrow might lead to countermeasures that could stress U.S. missile defenses that employ similar technology.

Options

The U.S. decision regarding Arrow sales to India is a difficult one. Washington could approve a sale and use diplomacy and export conditions to try to limit adverse consequences such as Pakistani anger, Indian diversion of missile technology, development of countermeasures, and a weakening of the MTCR. Although approval would offer short-term diplomatic gains for the United States, Israel, and India, it would also leave a long follow-up agenda with an uncertain outcome.

Alternatively, Washington could deny approval for the sale, press Russia for similar restraint with respect to exports of systems exceeding the MTCR threshold, and pursue less sensitive U.S. and Israeli defense cooperation with India. In the short term, this option could cause bilateral difficulties with India, but it would offer long-term global security advantages.

As a third option, Israel could offer India "missile defense services" rather than Arrow interceptor hardware. That is, Israel could keep the interceptors under its control but deploy them to India and operate them in coordination with the Indian military. Such an approach would be similar to recent U.S. Patriot deployments to nations threatened by Iraqi missiles. There would be little or no technology transfer to India, thus reducing MTCR concerns and the potential for countermeasures development. Moreover, the presence of Israeli Arrow operators in India would symbolize -- and perhaps strengthen -- an active strategic partnership. Yet, this approach would not satisfy India's

desire to control its own defenses and gain access to technology. New Delhi would not consider this option at all unless there were no other alternative. Therefore, it would be critical to convince Russia to restrict any offer of its S300V system under a similar "services" approach.

U.S. and Israeli decisions on the Arrow issue will have widespread implications for missile nonproliferation and missile defense. Missile proliferation may be more of a danger to Israel than to any other nation. Israel should reconsider the Arrow sale and ensure that its actions reduce this danger.

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