



INDO-ISRAEL HERON DRONE DEAL: COULD INDIA GET THE REGIONAL GAME IN THE BAG?

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In the next few months, India will receive the Heron drones from Israel on three years lease.¹ This Heron deal is one of many deals that India has concluded with Israel in the realm of military drones. Would this increasing Indo-Israel defence and security partnership for emerging technologies especially military drones enhance the offensive capabilities of India to decisively alter the course of the conflict in the region?

The recently acquired Heron drones are long-endurance drones with the capability of operating for 45 hours at a medium altitude of up to 35,000 feet. The total length of the drone is 8.5 meters with a wingspan of 16.6 meters and reportedly equipped with satellite communications (SATCOM), ultra-long-range surveillance cameras, automatic taxi-takeoff and landing (ATOL) system and “other state-of-the-art gadgets.”² The Indian Ministry of Defense is also planning for the up-gradation of 80-90 Heron drones, which are already operated by the Army, Navy and Air Force of India. This also includes the 50 drones that were previously acquired from the Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) in

¹ “India Set to Get four Heron Long-endurance Drones from Israel,” *The Economic Times*, May 27, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-shortly-deploy-new-israeli-heron-drones-in-ladakh-lac-sector/articleshow/82973127.cms>.

² Ibid.

2019 under a US\$500 million deal.³ This up-gradation consists of equipping Heron drones with anti-tank guided missiles, long-range air-to-ground missiles and laser-guided bombs.⁴

Israel's first drone project started in 1969 and mainly used for spying against Egypt. The less technically advanced drones were also used during its war with Lebanon in 1978. However, half a century down the line, Israel emerged as a major and powerful player in the global military drone industry. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Israel remained the world's largest exporter of military drones and accounted for 60.7 per cent of total drone exports globally from 1985 to 2014.⁵ During the same time period, India emerged as the world's largest importer of military drones and accounted for 22.5 per cent of global imports of military drones.⁶ The Indo-Israel cooperation for military drones dates back to the late 1990s when the Indian Armed Forces initially inducted a small number of Israeli drones. However, the mass scale induction and integration of Israeli drones into the Indian force posture accelerated during the Modi regime.⁷ The Indian Armed Forces interest in purchasing the Heron drones was high during 2012. According to various reports, the deal for Heron drones failed to see the day of light due to a lack of political support within India at that time. However, the BJP government revived this US\$400 deal for ten missile-armed Heron TP in 2015, which entered the service within a year.⁸ Currently, India is the second-largest importer of major arms globally while Israel is its third-largest supplier of major arms and top supplier of military drones.⁹

In addition to Heron, India is also set to acquire 30 MQ-9B Predator drones worth US\$3 billion from the US and indigenously manufacturing Rustom drones.¹⁰ This recent progress made by India for establishing its military drone fleet under the military modernisation plan of the Modi regime has received a great amount of national, regional and international attention and appreciation.

³ "Israel Sells India 50 Military Drones in 500-mln-USD deal," *Xinhuanet*, February 24, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/24/c_137847151.htm

⁴ Manjeet Negi, "Indian Defence Forces to Arm 100 Heron Drones with Missiles for Offensive Operations," *India Today*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/indian-defence-forces-to-arm-100-heron-drones-with-missiles-for-offensive-operations-1709409-2020-08-09>

⁵ "Israel's Drone Industry becomes Global Force," November 28, 2019, *Outlook India*, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/israels-drone-industry-becomes-global-force/1672672>

⁶ "India Tops List of Drone-importing Nations," *Business Standard*, May 4, 2015, https://www.business-standard.com/article/specials/india-tops-list-of-drone-importing-nations-115050400136_1.html

⁷ Kavita Nagpal, "Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) Market," Q-Tech Synergy, <https://www.defproac.com/?p=2041>

⁸ Franz-Stefan Gady, "India's Air Force to Get 10 Killer Drones from Israel," *The Diplomat*, September 15, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/indias-air-force-to-get-10-killer-drones-from-israel/>

⁹ "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020, SIPRI Fact Sheet," SIPRI, March 2021, https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs_2103_at_2020.pdf

¹⁰ Sudhi Ranjan Sen, "India to buy US Armed Drones to Counter China, Pakistan," *The Economic Times*, March 10, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-buy-us-armed-drones-to-counter-china-pakistan/articleshow/81415793.cms>

However, the less-discussed aspect is that to what extent this huge Indian investment in military drones will be effective keeping in view the existing and future military potential of China and Pakistan.

Earlier this year, the Indian Army Chief, General MM Naravane, in his statement indicated the potential use of drones to strike deep behind the opponent lines in a swift, offensive and non-escalatory military operation to achieve the desired outcome.¹¹ This statement indirectly points towards the future military operation through military drones against Pakistan similar to alleged Indian airstrikes in Balakot. There is a wider consensus among the national and international experts that the introduction of military drones would not make a great difference and India will get the same befitting response from Pakistan. These drones will only save India from international humiliation because of capturing or death of its fighter pilot. India is also acquiring military drones to enhance its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. However, there were many instances when the Pakistan Army destroyed Indian spy drones along the Line of Control (LOC). As far as China is concerned, India is far away from reaching par with China in the realm of emerging technologies especially military drones and swarming technology. Recently, China has not only introduced an advanced radar system capable of detecting multiple drones but also developed a new Anti-drone Laser System with the ability to target and destroy drones.¹² The acquisition of a large number of military drones and swarming technology has created a dangerous false sense of superiority and confidence in Indian political and military leadership that they can control conflict escalation vis-à-vis Pakistan and China. However, keeping in view the military readiness of China and Pakistan, Indian plans to achieve big with these military drones will never be more than a pipe dream.

¹¹ Abhishek Bhalla, "Drones Future of Warfare to take on Tanks and Artillery: Indian Army Chief," *India Today*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/drones-future-of-warfare-to-take-on-tanks-and-artillery-indian-army-chief-1768343-2021-02-11>

¹² "Terminator of Drones': China Unveils Stealth-detecting Radars," *Al Jazeera*, April 24, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/24/terminator-of-drones-china-unveils-stealth-detecting-radars>