



INDIA'S PURCHASING OF IAI ELTA DRONE GUARD AND ITS REGIONAL (IN)SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

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Israel's major aerospace and aviation manufacturer, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), has announced selling in dozens of their counter-UAV Drone Guard systems, the IAI Elta Drone Guard, to an unspecified South Asian country. Israel usually keeps their customers anonymous leaving observers to speculate whom it might be. From the South Asian countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives, Israel has no diplomatic relationships with Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.¹The remaining have no major military ambitions other than India. The argument could be further justified with the signing of accords between IAI and Indian firms to share drone technology and produce UAVs for India.² Furthermore, Eli Alfassi, EVP, Marketing of IAI in an interview to *Geopolitics* Magazine stated, "Indian authorities have shown significant interest in this system which is already in service with several

¹ Seth Frantzman, "Who is Buying Israeli Counter-drone Systems in South Asia?," *C4ISRNet*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/unmanned/2021/07/13/who-is-buying-israeli-counter-drone-systems-in-south-asia/>

² Shoshanna Solomon, "IAI Signs Accord to Share Drone Tech and Produce UAVs with Indian Firms," *The Times of Israel*, February 5, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iai-signs-accord-to-share-drone-tech-and-produce-uavs-with-indian-firms/>

customers.”³ All of this indicates the speculation of India being the obvious buyer of these drone guards.

What makes Elta Drone Guard so special? The drone guard is built on adapted radar and electro-optical technology, which has the capability of detecting low-signature and low-speed targets. It also has a communications intelligence system for being more precise at detecting the frequencies of drones and has an upgraded Drone Guard's 3D radar as well as its electro-optical and jamming systems.⁴The system consists of three pieces of hardware on tripods: the rotating radar, a small electro-optical turret and the jammer being lightweight enough to be carried around by a pickup truck. It has both, hard-kill solutions and means to taking over drones. Its radar can be programmed for 360-degree range and its jammer function can jam GPS. The radar can detect up to 200 targets, whereas, its communication intelligence system and jammer can detect in dozens. Its 3D radars including “the ELM-2026D, ELM-2026B and ELM-2026BF for short (10km), medium (15km) and long (20 km) ranges, respectively are used for detecting low-signature targets.”⁵

India is already on its way towards an aggressive military modernisation. Earlier this year, the Indian government has approved a 19 percent increase in their budget for its armed forces.⁶ They plan to buy more fighter jets, increase their naval fleet and modernise their army as well as their conventional weapons. Furthermore, India has purchased Heron long-endurance drones from Israel⁷ and 30 MQ-9 Reaper drones from the US.⁸Furthermore, India already enjoys the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) agreement with the US, which in its essence gives India strategic advantage over their rivals including an advanced network of geospatial information of the US, which includes the enhancement of the accuracy of automated systems and weapons, navigation and high-quality GPS to navigate missiles with real-time

³ Nitin J. Ticku, “Has India Acquired Israeli ELI-4030 Drone Guard System After Air Force Station Attack in Jammu & Kashmir?,” *EurAsian Times*, July 3, 2021, <https://eurasianimes.com/has-india-acquired-israeli-eli-4030-drone-guard-system-after-air-force-station-attack-in-jammu-kashmir/>

⁴ Seth Frantzman, “Countering UAVs: An Inside Look at IAI Elta's Drone Guard,” *Defense News*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2019/01/28/countering-uavs-an-inside-look-at-iai-eltas-drone-guard/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Elizabeth Roche, “Govt Hikes Defence Capital Budget by 19% for Military Modernisation,” *Mint*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/budget/news/govt-hikes-defence-capital-budget-by-19-for-military-modernization-11612203908115.html>

⁷ “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-quickly-deploy-new-israeli-heron-drones-in-ladakh-lac-sector/articleshow/82973127.cms?from=mdr>

⁸ “India Plans to Buy 30 MQ-9 Reaper Drones for \$3 Billion from US Company General Atomics,” *Business Insider*, last modified March 10, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.in/defense/news/india-plans-to-buy-30-mq-9-reaper-drones-for-3-billion-from-us-company-general-atomics/articleshow/81430469.cms>

intelligence. India can use and refuel from the American bases and vice versa. Lastly, India can enjoy the equipment and systems of encrypted communications of the US for their military means.

All of these combined with the IAI Elta Drone would elevate India's ability to further enhance its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Keeping in view the irresponsible behaviour and hegemonic agenda of the Indian military and political leadership, the possibility of its misuse by disrupting and jamming even peaceful and civilian applications such as weather reconnaissance, air traffic control and navigation systems and coastal surveillance for commercial ships cannot be undermined. In addition, due to its capability of jamming, it could cause communication problems for the Pakistani troops stationed at border areas close to the drone guard especially the monitoring of border movements. It might also put Pakistan in a difficult position during any crisis in future. Meanwhile, India maybe enjoying encrypted communication and access to a high-quality GPS to navigate the borders with real-time intelligence as agreed in the COMCASA agreement.⁹ Pakistan has always aimed for peace in the region, however, the aggressive military stance of India, forces Pakistan to take their defensive measures. This drone technology build-up would push Pakistan towards an unintended arms race.

Equally, does this provoke China, as India often disguises their aggressive military developments on their alleged vulnerability towards China? Some experts claim that China does not see India as a threat and are confident they can outperform India in the military domain of "at least ten years ahead for the foreseeable future."¹⁰ However, they do believe India is a regional rival of China.¹¹ The US earlier this year declassified their strategy to use India against China,¹² as according to their intelligence report, the US believes China is the biggest threat to them.¹³ As a result, with India coming closer to the US, China worries it may cause further instability in the region. With the benefits India has received from the US as discussed above, India with the support of exogenous factors have already been emboldened for pursuing risky policies towards Pakistan and a more assertive negotiating posture towards China.

⁹ Rajat Pandit, "COMCASA Agreement: COMCASA Will Pave Way for Armed Drones, Sharing of Op Intel," *The Times of India*, last modified September 7, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/comcasa-will-pave-way-for-armed-drones-real-time-sharing-of-operational-intelligence/articleshow/65710226.cms>

¹⁰ Toby Dalton and Tong Zhao, "At a Crossroads? China-India Nuclear Relations after the Border Clash," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 19, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/19/at-crossroads-china-india-nuclear-relations-after-border-clash-pub-82489>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "US Declassifies its Strategy to use India against China," *TRT World*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/us-declassifies-its-strategy-to-use-india-against-china-43296>

¹³ Julian E. Barnes, "China Poses Biggest Threat to US, Intelligence Report says," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/us/politics/china-national-security-intelligence-report.html>

Additionally, China also unveiled their stealth-detecting radar, YLC-48, dubbed as the 'terminator of drones.' It is a multipurpose radar that can be carried by a single soldier and is capable of detecting small and low flying targets.¹⁴ Developed by the China Electronics Technology Group Corporation No.14th Research Institute, it has a detection range of 15km to 6 km and point of origin accuracy being "60m at 7km" vs "75m at 5km" of the AN/TPQ-49. The stealth-detecting radar utilises L-Band operation frequency for countering fire directing. With the capability of scanning 360°, it can detect drones and helicopters within a 25 km radius.¹⁵ In addition, as per reports, these radars would be able to detect stealth fighter jets such as US F-35 and low-flying cruise missiles.¹⁶ Since it can detect slow, small and low-altitude targets and is light, small and mobile, it is suitable for all-weather operations and all kinds of light-weighted weaponry platforms with a swift deployment and withdrawal procedure.¹⁷

To conclude, India already enjoys the BECA, LEMOA and COMCASA agreements with the US and has recently bought their IAI Elta Drone Guard from Israel, which could impact countries like Pakistan, especially in terms of ISR, due to owning no drone guard system of their own. India often times disguises its aggressive military developments on its alleged vulnerability towards China. Though China does not feel any threat from India, however, they have felt uneasy with India coming closer to the US, worrying about further regional instability in which India with benefits enjoyed by the US will pursue more risky policies towards Pakistan and a more assertive negotiating posture with China. With the recent unveiling of stealth-detecting radar YLC-48 and geo-economic relations already underway, can the YLC-48 be a counter for Indian advances and the IAI Elta Drone Guard?

¹⁴ "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>

¹⁵ "YLC-48 'Spider Web' Portable Multi-function Reconnaissance Radar," China Military Drone Alliance, July 30, 2021, <https://www.militarydrones.org.cn/ylc-48-spider-web-portable-multi-function-reconnaissance-radar-p00200p1.html>

¹⁶ "China's New Radars to Make US's Stealth F35 Aircrafts useless," *Global Village Space*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/chinas-new-radars-to-make-uss-stealth-f35-aircrafts-useless/>

¹⁷ Cao Siqi and Liu Xuanzun, "Chinese Developed Anti-stealth Radar is Superior to its Foreign Counterparts: Top Radar Scientist," *Global Times*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1221942.shtml>