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The Evolving India-Armenia Defense Partnership: Analyzing India's Strategic Shift As A Security Partner In The Caucasus

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India's defense exports have increased significantly as the country's military sales for FY 2023–24 totalled [₹21,083 crore](#) (about \$2.6 billion), a ten-fold increase from ₹1,941 crore in 2014-15. India now exports to over 100 nations. Armenia, the US, and France were the top three countries for these exports. Armenia is now India's biggest customer for finished weapon systems, such as 155mm artillery guns, Pinaka multi-launch rocket systems, and Akash air defence missile systems. (See Table 1). The total volume of weapons purchases by Armenia from India reached [\\$600 million](#) by the start of the current FY 2024-25.

Armenia has stepped up its [military spending](#) and currently ranks 7th among countries with the highest military expenditure as a share of their GDP, aka the military burden. Armenia's military burden is estimated to have risen by [\(+1.4 percentage points\) in 2023](#), a significant leap from the previous year.

Impetus Behind India-Armenia Defense Cooperation

A host of factors fuels the India-Armenia Defence relationship. Firstly, Turkey's growing presence in the South Caucasus, coupled with its support for Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, makes Armenia a strategic partner for India in counterbalancing Turkish ambitions in the region. Armenia, on the other hand, has publicly [endorsed India's position on Kashmir](#) and supports India's bid for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council. Engaging with Armenia will aid New Delhi to deter the growing [Ankara-Baku-Islamabad tripartite nexus](#) in the region, given that Pakistan is the only country that does not recognise Armenia as a sovereign state.

Secondly, the increase in the development of India's defense industry and the growing emphasis on arms exports provide a commercial rationale for cooperation. India has identified Armenia as a key market for its military hardware. This is in tandem with the Draft Defense Production & Export Promotion Policy- 2020 ([DPEPP](#))'s target of [\\$5 billion](#) in export income, a component of the country's broader objective to have a [\\$25 billion defense sector](#) turnover by 2025.

Tensions over Russia's role in Ukraine and allegedly delayed weaponry supply to Armenia also contributed to Armenia's decision to [turn towards India](#) and abandon its long-standing reliance on Russian military supplies. Nikol Pashinyan, the prime minister of Armenia, [openly voiced](#) his displeasure with Moscow, saying, "Our allies have failed to deliver weapons to Armenia despite contracts signed with them in the last two years."

Additionally, the [INSTC](#) (International North-South Transport Corridor) link project, of which Yerevan and Tehran are a crucial part, can help counter the BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) pipeline project, especially after the recent approval of Iran for Armenia to use its [Bandar-Abbas and Chabahar ports](#). This will provide India [strategic access](#) to overland routes to Europe and Central Asia, to better connect to European and Eurasian markets.

Recent Developments in India-Armenia Defense Ties

India and Armenia held their [first-ever defense meeting](#) on May 14 last year. The current level of defense sector cooperation between Armenia and India as well as potential future developments were covered during the consultations.

In 2023, Yerevan decided to bolster military relations with India by assigning a defence attaché to its embassy in New Delhi. The decision was made after Armenia [inked a series of defence agreements](#) with Indian arms producers in 2022. The Indian Air Force is now set to reciprocate this by [posting its officers](#) as Additional Defense Attachés in Armenia.

Considering all of this, the [October 2021 visit](#) to Yerevan by Indian External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar was noteworthy for the bilateral relationship between the two countries as it marked the first time an Indian foreign minister had visited Armenia since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992.

Equipment	Description	Developer / Manufacturer	Units Acquired	Deal Value	Year	Strategic Impact
Pinaka MBRL	Multi-barrel rocket launcher system with a range of up to 75 km, providing rapid area saturation capability	DRDO / Tata Advanced Systems & L&T	4 units	\$250 million	2022	Enhances Armenia's artillery capability for swift and high-impact area coverage, improving deterrence and defensive posture
ATAGS	155mm, 52-caliber towed artillery gun with a range of 48 km and fully automated gun-laying system	DRDO / Bharat Forge & Tata Power SED	90 units	\$155 million	2023	Provides Armenia with accurate, long-range artillery, critical in mountainous terrains for both offensive and defensive operations
Akash SAM	Medium-range surface-to-air missile system capable of engaging multiple aerial targets within a 25 km range	DRDO / Bharat Dynamics Limited	15 units	₹5,000-6,000 crore (\$600-720 million)	2023	Strengthens Armenia's air defense, securing its airspace from aerial threats in a volatile regional context
MAR-G 155	155mm wheeled self-propelled howitzer for rapid deployment and enhanced mobility	Bharat Forge (Kalyani Strategic Systems)	Undisclosed	Included in larger deals	2023	Offers Armenia agile artillery capabilities, allowing quick repositioning and reducing vulnerability to counter-artillery
Anti-Tank Guided Rockets	Portable and effective anti-tank weaponry suited to defensive operations	Indian private sector (Various suppliers)	Not specified	Included in larger deals	2022-2023	Augments Armenia's ground forces, crucial in defense against armored vehicles
Night Vision Devices	Tactical night-vision equipment to enhance visibility in low-light conditions	Indian private sector (Various suppliers)	Not specified	Included in larger deals	2022-2023	Improves Armenia's operational effectiveness in night-time and low-light conditions
Bulletproof Vests	Protective armor for enhanced soldier safety in combat scenarios	Indian private sector (Various suppliers)	Not specified	Included in larger deals	2022-2023	Provides additional protection for Armenian ground troops in active conflict zones
SWATHI Weapon Locating Radars	Advanced radar system designed to detect and track incoming artillery, mortars, and rockets, enabling counter-battery fire.	DRDO / Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL)	4 units	\$40 million	2020	Provides Armenia with advanced detection capabilities for enemy artillery, enhancing defensive measures and enabling precision counter-attacks.
ZADS (Zen Anti-Drone System)	Advanced anti-drone system capable of detecting, tracking, and neutralizing rogue drones, ensuring security against UAV threats.	Zen Technologies	Not specified	Included in larger deals	2023	Strengthens Armenia's defense against unmanned aerial threats, crucial for safeguarding critical infrastructure and enhancing battlefield situational awareness.

Table 1: List of Recent Indo-Armenian Defence Deals

Compiled by - Author

Chart Embed link -

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A closer look at the intricacies of the Defense Deals

Scrutinising the emerging defense ties between India and Armenia poses some vital questions. Firstly, Is Armenia looking at Joint Defense productions with India? If so, what type of defense equipment can be jointly produced? Speaking on the topic, Lt. Gen. Arun Sahni* reveals that although India is looking toward one of the larger companies in Yerevan to purchase and produce some of the defensive equipment, the idea hasn't moved forward as of yet. Armenia has, however, dabbled in some of the more recent, smaller technologies, such as [drones](#) like the [Krunk and X-55 light reconnaissance drones](#).

Second, are the defense acquisition deals linked to any Transfer of Technology (ToT)? If not, is there any possibility of it in the upcoming deals? According to Lt. Gen. Sahni, there are currently service centres available where SKD (semi-knockdown) and CKD (complete knockdown) kits are taken and put together. The infrastructure for repairs may become available for maintenance. The OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturers) will then review maintenance contracts and at that point, the search may begin for potential partners, though that phase hasn't arrived yet. Therefore, no ToT of production will occur for the foreseeable future. Instead, the focus could be primarily on maintenance and repair facilities.

Furthermore, conducting bilateral military exercises is another crucial area of defense cooperation between India and Armenia, which is likely to be the next natural step in this burgeoning relationship. Additionally, the potential for the Indian military to practice Mountain Warfare tactics alongside Armenian soldiers could be ideal for the hilly Nagorno-Karabakh region. However, as Lt. Gen. Sahni points out, the Armenian side has not yet requested a military exercise. Presently, Armenia is planning to reorganise their army over the next two years, from a Soviet to a more Westernised model.

Reactions from Yerevan's traditional Defense ally - Russia. Wary or Indifferent?

Understanding Moscow's stance on Armenia's recent proximity to New Delhi becomes imperative, particularly when contrasting this friendship with another emerging Armenian-French alliance. Having interacted with Ambassador Rtn. Anil Trigunayat (IFS Retd)*, on this, he shares that Russia sacrificed Armenia due to its close partnership with Turkey and by extension, Azerbaijan. Given the urgency of the Ukraine war and the need for reliable allies, this was purely a strategic action. However, Moscow will eventually make an effort to regain their support because Yerevan felt let down by Russia both during and [after the Nagorno-Karabakh](#)

[conflict](#). Lt. Gen. Sahni further adds that Moscow is fine with India-Armenia relations as long as it's not a Western power.

This renewed desire of Russia to win back Yerevan could be fuelled by Armenia's recent proximity to France, considering the [latest defence agreements](#) including the Bastion APCs, THALES radars, and Mistral Air Defence systems. Yerevan is looking to diversify towards the West while Moscow is looking for ways to keep Armenia away from the overwhelming Western influence while the Ukraine war is still raging because Russia still maintains a [military base in Armenia](#) which is [still a member of CSTO](#), albeit in a low-key capacity.

Prospects and Barriers to Indo-Armenian Defense Partnership

While the posting of Defense Attaches from India and Armenia to each other's countries is a step towards strengthening the defense relationship, future actions may include holding regular military dialogues and even conducting bilateral military exercises, particularly in the area of mountain warfare tactics.

Further, Azerbaijan's recent [induction of JF-17 fighter](#) jets co-developed by Pakistan and China, against the newly placed orders for India's Akash 1S air defense interceptor missile system by Armenia, makes an interesting case for testing Indian vs Sino-Pak weapons in the backdrop of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict.

The relationship between New Delhi and Yerevan is poised to grow further in the coming years. Recent indications show that the Armenians have reportedly contacted India to discuss [upgrading its fleet of Sukhoi 30](#) (Su-30) combat aircraft, incorporating the platform with Indian weapons. They are also investigating the possibility of [acquiring Indian missiles](#), including the country's indigenous beyond-visual-range (BVR) Astra air-to-air missile.

The Indo-Armenian defense relationship is not without its challenges as the two nations still diverge on important issues. While Israel and India have close ties, Armenia and Israel have a strained relationship because of Israel's military and intelligence assistance to Azeri forces during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. This puts New Delhi in a precarious situation, having to carefully navigate through Yerevan's desire of acquiring Indo-Israeli jointly developed weapons like the [Barak 8-SAMs](#). The other enduring problem is the entry hurdles into the Indian defense market, which is not just limited to Armenia. The issue is further exacerbated by persistent bureaucratic hurdles.

It will take subtle diplomacy and long-term vision to balance all India's ambitions in the South Caucasus region with escalating regional conflicts. Effective navigation of these challenges will enable India and Armenia to build a more promising partnership that is not only beneficial for bilateral ties but also for stability and balance in the South Caucasus region.

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