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The Friendship with Israel: India Squares the Circle

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The establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel in January 1992 marked a new beginning in India's Middle East policy. This was its most dramatic foreign policy move following the end of the Cold War. At the same time it completed a process that began in September 1950 when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru granted recognition to the Jewish State. The dramatic improvements in the political, economic, cultural and above all security relations between the two countries since 1992 have been in contrast to the past. For over four decades India oscillated from being cool, unfriendly to outright hostile and was at the forefront of anti-Israeli moves in various international forums. At the same time, normalization has enhanced India's overall interests in the Middle East and enabled it to explore avenues that were not available in the past. How did India square the past and pursue a more fruitful approach towards Israel? A modest attempt is made here to delineate some of the salient features of Indo-Israeli relations and the manner in which India handled its potential pitfalls.

Background

The roots of India's Israel policy can be traced to the early 1920s when the Indian nationalists made a common cause with the Arabs of Palestine. Their leaders, especially Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, understood, recognized and sympathized with

the historical sufferings of the Jewish people. This was in tune with the historic welcome and hospitality that India provided to the Jews since the first millennium and the absence of anti-Semitism towards the Jews. This sympathy however did not translate into their understanding of the Jewish longing for statehood. They never viewed Zionism as the manifestation of Jewish nationalist aspirations because they empathized with the native Arabs of Palestine. Viewing the problem through the Islamic prism, the Indian nationalists were unable and unwilling to endorse the idea of a Jewish national home in Palestine as propounded by the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Mahatma Gandhi's November 1939 statement stating that 'Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English and France to the French' underscored the Indian understanding of the Palestinian complexities.

This approach became the Indian position when it was elected to the 11-member United Nations Special Committee on Palestine in 1947. The majority of the UN committee advocated partition as the solution; whereas supported by Iran and the then Yugoslavia, Nehru's India proposed a federal solution to the Palestine problem. However, on 29 November 1949 the UN endorsed the partitioning of Palestine by a majority vote. In tune with its earlier position, India voted against the partition plan.

The formation of Israel and its eventual admission into the UN forced India to re-examine its Middle East policy. Pro-Pakistani positions adopted by some Arab countries and the need for a balanced policy towards the region gradually influenced New Delhi to modify its stand. After months of internal deliberations, in September 1950 India granted recognition to the Jewish State. Initially, the establishment of a resident mission in Israel was delayed due to financial constraints and lack of personnel. In March 1952 Prime Minister Nehru personally assured senior Israeli diplomat Walter Eytan that he was favourably disposed to normalization. This, however, did not happen. It is widely accepted, both within and outside the country, that Nehru's close confidant and senior Congress leader Maulana Abul Kalam Azad persuaded him from proceeding with full diplomatic relations with Israel. The Kashmir problem and the political competition with Pakistan were supposed to be the prime reasons for Azad's objection to normalization of relations with Israel.

The Suez crisis and Israeli aggression against Egypt, in blatant collaboration with the imperial powers, infuriated Nehru. In late 1956 he explicitly ruled out normalization. Since then, 'time is not ripe' became the standard Indian stand regarding normalization with Israel. It was left to Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao, another Congress leader, to complete the process. Thus, for over four decades, the hallmark of India's Israel policy was non-relations. Israel had to settle for a consulate that Nehru allowed to function in Mumbai since 1953.

Despite the absence of relations, there were friendly diplomatic contacts between the two countries during Nehru's tenure, which gradually became few and far between. Periodic Israeli overtures were ignored. Before long, the erstwhile Congress-Muslim League rivalry transformed

into Indo-Pakistani competition in the Middle East. India began emphasizing its historic support to the Palestinians vis-à-vis Israel to further its interests in the Arab countries. In April 1955 Nehru reluctantly endorsed Israel's exclusion from the Bandung Afro-Asian conference, thereby institutionalizing Israel's exclusion from the emerging bloc of Non-Aligned Movement. As time went by, India joined the rest of the Third World countries in adopting an anti-Israel policy that reached its crescendo in November 1975 when New Delhi voted in favour of the notorious UN General Assembly resolution that depicted Zionism as racism.

Such an attitude towards Israel, however, did not enjoy unanimous endorsement within the country. For some it smacked of Arab appeasement, while others perceived it to be a calculated move by the Congress party to placate domestic Muslim opinion. Far more importantly, through its excessive anti-Israeli posture, India had squandered its diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis the Middle East. It never demanded Arab reciprocity for its support over Israel. On all major conflicts that India had with its neighbour, most of the Arab countries supported Pakistan. Despite the much talked about Nehru-Nasser friendship, the Egyptian President settled for neutrality during India's conflict with China in 1962. Hence there were strong criticisms within India over the absence of relations with Israel. Reflecting these sentiments, in 1958 Prime Minister Nehru admitted that Israel was an issue where more than one opinion was possible.

Thus, for over four decades, this recognition-without-relations marked India's Israel policy. A major international transformation was essential for India to re-examine that policy. This happened in the 1990s.

Shifting Sands of Time

The end of the Cold War and disintegration of the Soviet Union radically altered the global order. Like many other Third World countries, India found itself on the 'losing side' of the bloc politics and was orphaned by the demise of the USSR. A zero-sum approach was not possible now. Like other countries, India was forced to readjust its policies towards what looked like a world order dominated by the United States of America. Having adopted an unfriendly posture towards the US, especially during the heights of the Cold War, it was a tall order for India to readjust. While the Cold War was not responsible for the Indian attitude towards Israel, its inherent ideological divide provided a platform and rationale for Indian opposition. Progressive states were expected to be anti-Israel.

There was another compulsion which forced New Delhi to re-evaluate its policy towards Washington. Domestic economic crisis had depleted its scarce foreign exchange reserves, thereby forcing the Indian government in mid-1991 to mortgage 200 tons of gold reserves in London. This was done to tide over exchange shortages to meet imports of essential commodities for two weeks. India was desperate for substantial aid from international financial institutions and was forced to embark upon economic liberalization and a market-friendly economic policy.

To meet both these objectives, namely, financial assistance and liberalization, India needed a friendly US. Narasimha Rao, who became Prime Minister in June 1991, had to convey a clear message that India was breaking with the past. This message came through Israel.

Israel, of course, would not have solved Rao's problems. But normalization of relations with Israel meant reversing a policy that India had doggedly pursued for over four decades. The symbolic importance of the act was that it indicated India's willingness to begin afresh. There was also an interesting twist in the timing of this move. The decision to normalize relations with Israel was announced hours before Rao was leaving for New York to attend the summit meeting of the UN Security Council where he would be meeting US President George Bush (Sr.). Since the late 1940s the US had been pressurizing India to normalize relations with Israel. Many countries and leaders believe that being friendly towards the Jewish State would accrue political benefits in the US. While the US angle could be a part of his calculations, there were other serious developments which forced Rao to re-examine the past.

The end of the Cold War also marked radical shifts in the Middle East. The Iraqi invasion, occupation and annexation of Kuwait was followed by the US-led international coalition that restored status quo ante in the Gulf. Demands upon President Saddam Hussein to accept the will of the international community were gradually shifted to the vexed Arab-Israeli Conflict. This eventually led to the Middle East peace conference that began in Madrid on 30 October 1992. This had some unique characters. First and foremost, it signalled the willingness of the Arab countries and the Palestinian leadership to formally abandon the military option and seek a political settlement to the problem. A negotiated settlement meant both sides would be giving up, sooner or later, their exclusive and extremist claims.

The Madrid conference also formalized a fundamental shift in the Palestinian thinking. Despite their prolonged criticism about the injustice meted out to them, mainstream Palestinians, as represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), accepted the UN partition resolution of 1947. There was a grudging desire on the part of its chairman Yasser Arafat to accept the division of historic Palestine and come to terms with the Jewish State. Though the formal recognition to this effect had to wait until the historic handshake at the White House Lawns on 13 September 1993, there were enough indications that by agreeing for a political settlement to the problem, the PLO had come around to accepting Israel. For its part, at Madrid Israel had to accept the Palestinians as a party to the dispute and a negotiating partner.

In other words, the Arab powers were seeking a political settlement with Israel and the Palestinian leadership was not averse to resolving their problem through negotiations. With Arab and Israeli leaders were sitting around the same table in Madrid, there were no compelling reasons for India to treat Israel as an enemy. When Palestinian leader Arafat was ready to negotiate with Israel, albeit indirectly under the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, at Madrid,

what was the need for India to be more Catholic than the Pope? More so when it had no bilateral dispute or any problem with Israel.

The Madrid conference also highlighted the weakening influence of the Palestinians. Their willingness to attend the conference with a host of conditions imposed by Israel signalled the weaknesses of the PLO. By endorsing President Saddam Hussein over Kuwait, Arafat and the PLO alienated a number of oil-rich Arab countries. That Arafat founded his al-Fatah movement, the backbone of the PLO, in Kuwait in the late-1950s made the situation worse. The Kuwait Emir and other Arab leaders felt let down by the Palestinian leadership. The collaboration of some Palestinians with the invading Iraqi forces did not improve the image of the Palestinians.

This adversely affected the Palestinians after Kuwait was liberated. At one level, the Palestinian issue became less important in the inter-Arab relations and its leadership was declared persona nongrata in the Gulf. While Saudi Arabia eventually relented its position, Kuwait refused to host Arafat until his death in November 2004. Soon after the Kuwait war, an estimated 400,000 Palestinians were expelled from the region, most of them to the impoverished Kingdom of Jordan. The PLO not only had to accept its formal exclusion from the Madrid conference, but it also had to settle for a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

These events clearly indicated that India could not further its interests in the Arab world by merely playing up the Palestinian card. Support for the political rights of the Palestinians was important but would have been insufficient to assure political benefits. There was a possibility that it could even alienate Arab countries, especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, if India were to harp on its consistent support to the Palestinians. In short, support for Palestinians became a less useful political currency to further India's interests in the Middle East.

Thus the *raison d'être* of India's Israel policy disappeared overnight. Historically, the Indian society has had no animosity towards the Jewish people. It provided refuge to them following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD and has closely interacted with them for centuries. Anti-Semitism has been alien to Indian society. Despite strong political differences over Zionism and the demand for a Jewish national home in Palestine, Congress leader Nehru personally intervened on behalf of many Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Germany. There were no bilateral problems or disputes between the two countries and there were considerable congruence of interests between Nehru and Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. Both adopted identical positions over a number of international issues of that time such as the recognition of People's Republic of China, non-aligned foreign policy and the Korean War. All these convergences were subsumed by the Palestinian factor and India's desire to view and accept the preponderance of the Arab rights in Palestine over the Jewish claims. Arafat's willingness to endorse the Madrid conference freed India from this historic bondage. For the first time in its history it began to view the Middle East through a non-ideological realist prism. Normalization of relations with Israel became the logical corollary of this paradigm shift.

Progress since Normalization

Since January 1992 the bilateral relations have been on an upward swing as both countries are keen to make up for the lost decades. Resident missions were soon opened in both countries to formalize ties. These have been followed by a number of high-level visits and establishment of political contacts. Beginning with the visit of Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in May 1993, many Israeli leaders have visited India. The highlights of political contacts were the visit of President Ezer Weizman in late 1995 and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September 2003. Leaders of the two countries have also been meeting in various other fora such as the UN, Davos Economic Forum and other multilateral gatherings. High-level political visits from India, however, have been few. Till date the visits of Home Minister L K Advani and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh in the summer of 2000 remain the most senior political contacts from India. Reciprocal visits by India at the levels of president and prime minister have not materialized primarily because of the sensitivity with which Indian political leaders handle the question of Israel.

This cautious approach by the national and union government leaders, however, has not prevented a number of state governments from dealing with Israel. Driven by strong economic agenda, various state governments ruled by the Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other parties have forged closer ties with Israel. Indeed, the Jewish State has been a prominent and favourite destination for many state chief ministers. These visits also signalled an emerging national consensus regarding normalization. In the summer of 2000, Chief Minister of the communist-ruled West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, visited Israel and concluded a number of economic agreements. In the past the communist parties were at the forefront of opposition to normalization. Basu's visit marked a dramatic shift. Interestingly, at the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000, India's communist parties reverted to the Cold War terminologies and demanded dilution of military co-operation with Israel. Yet this demand was accompanied by closer economic co-operation between Israel and West Bengal. As the years have passed, high-level exchanges between the two countries' diplomats, business community and the wider intelligentsia have increased. A significant number of Israeli tourists visit Indian destinations.

The bilateral trade between India and Israel has shown considerable improvements. In 1990, the bilateral trade stood at less than US\$100 million. It crossed the billion mark within a few years to stand at around US\$4 billion in 2009. If one excludes the energy component from India's foreign trade, Israel has emerged as its major trading partner in the entire Middle East. Such a growth has been unparalleled in India's bilateral relations. A major drawback of the bilateral trade is that nearly two-thirds of the total turnover is dominated by diamond trade. At the same time, there are growing numbers of joint ventures in such fields as agriculture, irrigation, horticulture, science and technology, and medicine. As part of its trade diversification plans, in recent years Israeli firms have shown greater interest and involvement in infrastructural projects in India.

A far more serious convergence of interests between the two could be noticed in the military-security arena. At the end of the Cold War, India was faced with a number of security related problems. The dissolution of the USSR completely dislodged its supply lines and India faced the problematic task of upgrading or replacing aging Soviet supplied weapons. Additionally, cross-border infiltration and terrorism along the Line of Control with Pakistan demanded new approach to counter-terrorism. Normalization proved extremely useful for India to meet some of these challenges. Both countries established institutional mechanisms such as joint working groups on terrorism and defence production. As a result, there are growing co-operation between the two countries in areas such as counter-terrorism, border fencing, upgrading of Soviet inventories, electronic surveillance and small arms and ammunition. The most prominent has been the US\$1.2 billion deal for the supply of three Phalcon advanced airborne early warning systems. The force multiplier also gained political importance as the US, which earlier vetoed a similar deal with China, allowed Israel to supply the spy planes to India.

While the actual size of the arms transactions is difficult to quantify, it is clear that India had overtaken Turkey as the principal destination of Israel's arms exports. Furthermore, in early 2009 Israel has emerged as the largest arms supplier to India. Two considerations underscore the importance of this accomplishment. Traditionally, the erstwhile USSR and later Russia has been India's principal arms supplier; and for a latecomer like Israel to surpass this giant is no mean achievement. Also, Israel has overtaken Moscow even though it does not export platforms such as aircrafts, tanks or ships.

The Indo-Israeli military ties are also maturing. Until recently their defence deals were in the realm of the cash-and-carry affair when India procured military equipments and technology from Israel. Gradually one could notice a qualitative shift as both are gearing military transactions to a higher level. In July 2007 the Indian cabinet endorsed a US\$2.5 billion joint missile defence research and development programme. This decision came even as the communist parties, then supporting the government headed by Prime Minister

Manmohan Singh, were being critical of India's Israel policy and were demanding the suspension of all defence-related co-operation with the Jewish State. Another sign in this direction came in February 2008 when India launched an Israeli spy satellite. This happened despite the satellite being seen as a possible component of an Israeli military strategy against the Islamic Republic of Iran. In sum, both India and Israel are gradually taking their military ties to a stage where they could pool their resources and expand areas of cooperation.

While pursuing closer ties with Israel, India has carefully avoided any role for itself in the Middle East peace process. If the US could not bridge the gap between the two warring sides, India could not even dream of playing an effective role. When invited, it took part in multilateral initiatives such as the Annapolis conference in November 2007. Otherwise India has confined itself to generalities, highlighting the need for negotiations and accommodation. This has been

reflected in a new moderation in its approach towards various developments concerning the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Terrorism against Israeli civilians, for example, figures more prominently in its discourse. Though nuanced, some might say bland, in its response it has been urging both the parties to maintain restraint and resolve the conflict through negotiations. Even violent upheavals such as the al-Aqsa intifada or Israel's killing of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin did not evoke strong reactions from New Delhi. Its reactions towards the Gaza war that saw the deaths of over 1,300 Palestinians were not pleasing to Israel but were not one-sided either.

These trends point to one interesting aspect in India's relations with Israel since 1992: its determination to de-link bilateral relations from the vagaries of the peace process. Until normalization, the absence of progress in the Arab-Israeli Conflict prevented it from dealing normally with Israel. Its leaders felt that support for the Palestinians meant opposition to Israel and non-relations were seen as the manifestation of India's support for the political rights of the Palestinians. In the post-Cold War world, such a zero-sum approach to global events became less relevant or useful. Normalization of relations was a conscious de-linking from the past whereby India was prepared to befriend both the parties to the conflict without sacrificing its basic principles as well as vital national interests.

India recognized the need and importance of maintaining normal contacts with all the parties to the conflict not only to safeguard its national interests but also to push the peace process further. Hence a decade later India gradually moved into a third phase whereby it de-linked bilateral ties with the peace process. While promoting strong political, economic and military ties with Israel, it was not prepared to endorse many of Israel's positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However the most fascinating aspect of the newly-found friendship with Israel is not the manner in which India squared its past but how it minimized frictions with other powers.

The Balancing Act

Without any declarations or doctrines, India gradually convinced the wider international community of its relations with Israel. Those who supported normalization and those who had misgivings recognized the merit in the Indian case and came around to endorsing it. Despite some fears, the Indo-Israeli relations have not undermined the traditional Indian support for the Palestinians. It is still committed to the full realization of the political rights of the Palestinians and endorses their demand for full statehood and sovereignty. It views the formation of two sovereign states in the erstwhile Mandate Palestine as the only just and viable solution to the problem. It disapproves of any unilateral moves or solution and urges both parties to seek a comprehensive peace through negotiation. On a number of key issues such as border, refugees, security fence, settlements, water or Jerusalem,

India's positions are at variance with Israel. It has publicly disapproved harsh Israeli measures such as targeted killings, civilian casualties, prolonged border closures, house demolitions and land confiscations directed against the Palestinians. Even while criticizing terror attacks against Israeli civilians, India was equally critical of Israeli actions against the Palestinians during the Gaza conflict (2008-09).

At the bilateral level, India continues to recognize the PLO and the Palestinian National Authority as the legitimate Palestinian representatives. Since the late 1980s it had accorded the honours of a head of state to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Following his death it bestowed similar treatment to his successor Mahmoud Abbas. It maintains a diplomatic mission in the Palestinian territories. Its limited political leverage does not prevent New Delhi from offering medical, material and education-related aid and assistance to the Palestinians. Thus, India wants to convey a message that its burgeoning ties with Israel would not come at the cost of its support for Palestinians.

Similar approach is apparent with regard to Pakistan, often seen in the past as a factor responsible for the prolonged absence of relations with Israel. By not harping on Pakistan, New Delhi has avoided creating an impression that the Indo-Israeli relations, especially the military co-operation, were aimed at Pakistan. Initial references to cross-border terrorism gradually disappeared and the Delhi Declaration issued during Prime Minister Sharon's visit was noted also for the absence of any references to Kashmir or other Pakistan-specific issues. This was in sync with India's new approach towards the Middle East, especially towards the Arab countries of the Gulf. Its bilateral interactions with these countries remained without the traditional obsession with Pakistan. While the western neighbour continues to be important, it occupies lesser space in India's dealings with the Middle East. By not making any demands over Pakistan, India was able to qualitatively improve its ties with countries such as Saudi Arabia and UAE who were often seen as Pakistan-friendly.

This Indian shift was also reflected in Pakistan's behaviour over normalization. Long before Rao established relations, Pakistan was obsessed with the idea of Indo-Israeli conspiracy against the wider Islamic world. Many Pakistani scholars warned their leaders of such a possibility. In the initial years, Pakistan sought to capitalize on Rao's decision by warning Arab countries of Indian 'duplicity.' When India conducted the nuclear tests in May 1998, some even argued that Israeli nuclear devices were tested at Pokhran. Pakistan even pleaded with the US to not approve the Phalcon deal on the grounds that the Israeli sale of the spy planes to India would destabilize South Asia and set off a new arms race.

Once this strategy proved ineffective, Pakistan began to re-examine its public hostility towards Israel. The highly publicized meeting between the Foreign Ministers of Pakistan and Israel in September 2005 has to be viewed in this context. The willingness of Pakistan to come out of the

closet and openly interact with Israel considerably reduced any misgivings over India's intentions.

The same degree of balance and moderation is also apparent in the manner in which India has handled another quandary: Iran. Since relations were established in 1992, the Islamic Republic has figured prominently in the Israeli discussions with India. Both privately and in public, Israeli officials have been highlighting the dangers posed by Tehran and the anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish rhetoric of its President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. During the visit of Prime Minister Sharon to India, some Israeli officials went to the extent of describing the Islamic Republic as the 'nerve centre of international terrorism.' Despite all these demands and pressures, India has carefully avoided being sucked into the ongoing tense and explosive situation between the Islamic Republic and the Jewish State. Much to the surprise of a number of western observers, New Delhi has maintained a studied silence over political pressures from Israel over Iran. Even the denial of the Holocaust and President Ahmadinejad's threats to destroy the Jewish State did not evoke any formal statements, let alone condemnations, from New Delhi.

India's choices are limited and its leaders are aware of their predicament. New Delhi needs the support and co-operation of both countries. It needs energy security from the hydrocarbon-rich Iran and it seeks military security from Israel. It is not prepared to side with or sacrifice one for the other. Such a non-parallel approach has been facilitated by the understanding attitude adopted by Iran. Except for some critical remarks in 1992, Tehran has consciously refrained from commenting on Indo-Israeli relations. Despite its obsession with the Jewish State and 'Zionist atrocities' against the Palestinians, Iran has not allowed the Israel factor to cloud or undermine its growing relations with New Delhi. It is interesting that far reaching improvements in the Indo-Iranian relations have happened after, and not before, Indo-Israeli normalization.

The manner in which the Hindu nationalist BJP handled the India-Israel-Iran triangular puzzle highlights the nuanced policy pursued by India. In September 2003 India rolled out a red carpet welcome to Prime Minister Sharon. At that time, not many western countries and pro-Israeli governments were prepared to host the controversial former general. Belgium was in fact planning to implicate Sharon for war crimes. When he landed in India there were widespread protests, especially from the leftist parties and some Muslim organizations. These however did not prevent the then Leader of Opposition and Congress President Sonia Gandhi from meeting Sharon and signalling a bi-partisan national consensus towards bilateral ties with Israel. In January that year, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee hosted another Middle East leader during the Republic Day celebrations, President Mohammed Khatami of Iran. During this visit both sides agreed to enhance co-operation in the hydrocarbon sector and paved the way for institutionalized energy cooperation.

Thus, by hosting Iranian and Israeli leaders within a span of few months, India indicated its willingness to befriend both of them and its desire not to be entangled in any conflict between

these two states. The subsequent Indian tension with Tehran was due to the American factor and was not related to Israel. By voting with the US over the nuclear row in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in September 2005, India earned the Iranian wrath. Its desire to de-link Iran from its Israel policy also enabled India to seek common foreign policy objectives with countries such as China and Russia. Closer energy ties with Iran also underscore its desire to maintain strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the US and thereby placate any Chinese concerns over emerging Indo-US bonhomie.

Normalization did not turn out to be an anti-Islamic measure as some had hoped or many had feared. Such a path would have been politically suicidal for India and would have made many enemies both within and outside the country. Some however were tempted to attribute the improvements in Indo-Israeli relations when the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was in power to a narrow convergence of interests based on anti-Islamic ideological worldview. Such a parochial approach to foreign policy would have unleashed far reaching problems for India; domestically it would have been unpopular, externally India would become an outcast. Fortunately for India, since 1992 all the governments have approached the issue in a balanced and nuanced manner. This was more visible when the BJP was in power from 1998 to 2004. There were more high-level political contacts between India and the Islamic countries of the Middle East when the BJP was in power than since 2004, when the Congress-led UPA was voted to office. Since 1992 all governments have carefully avoided casting themselves with an anti-Islamic paradigm. With the second largest Muslim community in the world after Indonesia, such a path would be suicidal for any Indian party or group. Therefore, even the BJP was careful not to present closer ties with Israel as part of any wider strategy against the Islamic world. Despite its anti-Muslim image within the country, or because of it, the BJP invested considerable political, diplomatic and economic capital in strengthening India's ties with prominent Islamic countries. High-level political contacts, visits and agreements with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria, for example, happened when the government was trying to forge closer ties with Jewish State. Therefore, greater Indo-Israeli security co-operation in counter-terrorism did not spill over into any common fight against Islamic extremism as many had feared.

Normalization played out well in the US which since the days of Nehru has been demanding a friendly Indian policy towards Israel. Interestingly, Rao's decision was also accompanied by a dramatic shift in India's US policy. Discarding the erstwhile misgivings, animosity and rhetoric, the Indian leadership began to view the US through a friendly prism. Both domestic economic liberalization and external post-Cold War reality forced India to abandon the past and the US became a critical component of economic as well as political aspirations beyond the immediate confines of South Asia. Orphaned by the demise of the USSR, Rao needed to evolve a political strategy in a US-dominated world order. The dramatic improvements in the Indo-US relations since 1991 have to be viewed in this context. As Prime Ministers, both Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh contributed to the process that culminated in the Indo-US nuclear co-operation agreement.

But the seeds of this shift were sown by the unassuming Narasimha Rao. While there are intense political debates, misgivings and concerns over the ultimate intentions and trustworthiness of the US, especially among the communist circles, a general consensus has evolved in favour of a friendlier attitude towards the US. This has worked tremendously in favour of improvements in the Indo-US relations.

Thus, far reaching improvements in India's relations with Israel and the US occurred around the same time, that is, following the end of the Cold War. This could prompt some to attribute a causal relationship between the two tracks, namely, normalization with Israel facilitated improvements in the Indo-US relations. Such a course favours the traditional approach towards Israeli influence in the US. Available indications, however, point to another possibility: the Indo-US ties strengthened the Indo-Israeli relations. The former improved because both countries were prepared to abandon their past blinkers and began to view the other in terms of friendship and partnership. Had New Delhi continued with pro-Soviet foreign policy and a closed economic model, the US would not have found business opportunities in India. Under such circumstances, normalization with Israel alone would be insufficient to swing American attitude towards India.

The remarks by India's National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra in May 2003 in New York have to be viewed in this wider context. Addressing a dinner hosted by the American Jewish Committee, he observed that these three countries "have some fundamental similarities. We are all democracies, sharing a common vision of pluralism, tolerance and equal opportunity. Stronger India-US relations and India-Israel relations have a natural logic." This observation was seen by some as an Indian aspiration for, or worse an endorsement of, an India-Israel-US triangular alliance. On the contrary, his remarks were merely recognition of the convergence of interests that exists among the three countries. India's differences with them over a number of issues pertaining to the Middle East should dispel any misgivings about an emerging alliance.

Another explanation is possible for Mishra's remarks. Since normalization, the military co-operation with Israel has been on the rise. India also recognizes that through its political support, economic largess and security assistance, the US exercises considerable influence over Israel. The last minute cancellation of the Phalcon sale to China in 2000 reiterated the influence of US veto over Israeli arms export. Ironically, Israel exported more arms to China before relations were established in 1992 than subsequently. Thus, the US has emerged as a big spoiler in the Sino-Israeli military sales. If India were to avoid facing similar US dictates over military ties with Israel, it became prudent on the part of New Delhi to keep Washington D.C. on board. The US understanding and approval are a pre-condition for India acquiring any sensitive military items or technology from Israel. Hence, Mishra's statement has to be seen not as an endorsement of an alliance among the three countries but as an insurance policy against a potential American veto. This approach paid dividends; the Phalcon spy planes which were denied to China, landed in India in May 2009.

Thus by carefully handling its foreign policies, India has avoided its newly-found friendship with Israel from transforming into an anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab or anti-Islamic move. Nor is it anti-Pakistani. It has been more a question of convergence of interests between two peoples who have had historic links and no political animosity or difference towards one another.

Conclusion

Israel has been a minefield for the foreign policies of many countries. Some get into trouble because of their close ties with it, others because of their pronounced animosity towards it. The Arab countries and the Palestinians are highly suspicious of the US because of its pro-Israeli Middle East policy. Likewise, some of the problems faced by Iran are directly linked to the anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish rhetoric of its leadership. In the past unfriendliness towards Israel got India into trouble with the US. Similarly there was a possibility that Rao's decision to normalize relations with Israel could have burnt India's bridges with the Arab and Islamic world. This did not happen primarily because India opted for a course correction and not a U-turn in its Middle East policy. Normalization rectified a major anomaly in its policy. Not dealing with Israel prevented it from being taken seriously in the Middle East. By precluding Israel from its dealings with the region, India excluded itself from the regional politics.

The Indo-Israeli relations are undergoing not a reversal but an adjustment; not an abandonment of the past but a recognition of the Middle Eastern complexities. For India, above all, it is not a negative alliance against any country, people or groups but a positive approach towards promoting and furthering its vital national interests. It is no more an ideological prisoner, and its friendship with Israel shows a more nuanced appreciation of reality.

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