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Conjoined by Circumstances

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Over the years, Israel and the US have evolved an understanding that transcends the worldview of the occupants of the White House or Smolenskin Street. Leaders of the two countries have to do business with each other, come what may

Let there be no mistake. The Israel-US friendship is not the Indo-Bangladeshi relationship. The latter centres around individuals, and more particularly on who is at the helm of affairs in Dhaka. Ever since multi-party elections were introduced in Bangladesh in 1991, there is a set pattern. India's fortunes improve when Sheikh Hasina is in power and get cold when Khaleda Zia replaces her. Despite all tensions and disagreements, however, Israel's relations with the US are radically different from that model centred on individuals and their eccentricities. Neither Barack Obama's re-election nor his defeat in November will materially affect the Israeli-American relations.

Reasons are not difficult to fathom. Over the years, both countries have evolved an understanding that transcends the worldview of the occupants of the White House or Smolenskin Street in Jerusalem. Even if Mitt Romney were to capture the White House, which is increasingly becoming a difficult, things will not be radically different. The same holds true for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or his successor following the next Knesset election.

Ever since former US President Harry S Truman granted recognition literally within minutes after David Ben-Gurion and his colleagues declared the State of Israel on 14 May 1948, the US has remained the staunchest friend, partner and ally of that country. The bipartisan consensus within the US has been critical for its political bonding, economic assistance and military-technological commitments to Israel. Many Western and Third World countries envy the relationship and some of the criticisms against Israel come from their jealousies and failures.

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This historic relationship has not been tension free. There were problems, differences and even acrimonious debates. Most were behind closed doors and some in the open and brazen. That is natural and inevitable. Survival is an existential issue for Israel, and protected by ocean and distance from troubled main lands, the US can be more relaxed. Moreover, the US would have to square its commitments to Israel with its other oil and strategic interests in the Middle East. Hence, doomsayers have been predicting the American abandonment of Israel; there are some of these within India as well.

Very often, the US had to protect Israel but still worry about its other interests in the region. During the Kuwait crisis, for example, former President George Bush (Sr.) had one simple request to former Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Shamir: Stay silent and do nothing. The Israeli leader kept his word even when Iraqi Scuds were raining over his country.

This time around both countries, more especially their leaders, differ over the Iranian nuclear programme. Not that US President Barack Obama gives the benefit of doubt to Iranian ambitions or Tehran's claims of peaceful intent. Like Israel, the Obama Administration views Iranian nuclear programme as a threat to regional peace and stability. Since assuming office in 2009, Obama had taken a number of measures towards isolating Iran internationally and imposed a series of unilateral and multilateral sanctions. By curbing Iranian oil industry, its principal foreign exchange earner, the US seeks to bring about a change in Iran's nuclear policy. Till now, isolation, economic sanction and unanimous or near unanimous UN Security Council resolutions have not worked. This in turn has caused greater anxiety inside Israel and intensified speculations about an Israeli military strike against key Iranian nuclear installations.

There appears to be a difference of opinion between Israel and the US over the lead-time for a nuclear Iran. While the latter believes that Iran had not made the critical decision to go nuclear, Israel believes that, given Iran's technological progress in recent years, the international community should not wait longer or rely only on Iran's claim of peaceful intent. This posture is in sync with the general Israeli practice of pre-emption — to meet a danger head-on before a potential threat becomes a reality. Its limited territorial depth does not give Israel the luxury of waiting.

The US, on the contrary, views the situation rather differently. It has wider interests in the region and needs to seek a strategy that would maximize its interests. The unplanned Iraqi invasions proved to be a disaster; both strategic as well as financial and partly contributed to the dwindling American influence in the region. While Israel believes in here-and-now option vis-à-vis Iran, the US feels it is still time for a political solution to the nuclear crisis. But, for both the bottom remains the same: Non-nuclear Iran as the ultimate solution.

Why then the hullabaloo over Netanyahu's recent outburst about redlines. In a statement which is seen as a tacit support for the Republican challenger Romney, the Israeli Prime Minister

remarked: “Those in the international community who refuse to put red lines before Iran don’t have a moral right to place a red light before Israel”. For its part Obama coolly dismissed it saying ‘noises’ from the Middle East would not force him into doing things that go against vital American interests.

Obama’s posture could have been interpreted as unfriendly towards Israel if Netanyahu enjoyed widespread domestic support over Iran. His hard-line position is extremely unpopular within the country; political leaders, current and former members of the intelligence community and senior echelons of the Army have been openly questioning the wisdom of a military option vis-à-vis Iranian nuclear programme. Despite his ceremonial position, President Shimon Peres has been expressing his misgivings. Under these circumstances, Obama appears to be siding with the Israeli Opposition than with the Likud-led ruling coalition. Hence, the fight is more with Netanyahu and his approach to the Iranian crisis than with the wider Israel that feels threatened by a nuclear Iran. At best, Obama’s posture can be interpreted as a sign of no-confidence in Netanyahu not abandonment of Israel.

Indeed, this is the third time that the leaders of Israel and the US clashed since the end of the Cold War. Months before the 1992 US presidential election, Shamir-Bush publically differed over the settlements issue. During the late 1990s President Bill Clinton disagreed with Netanyahu over the peace process and once even refused to meet the Israeli leader when the latter was visiting the US. This time around Iran is the bone of contention.

As it happened on the previous two occasions, the inherent resilience of the relationship and vital national interest calculations will force both countries to overcome the current tensions over Iran. It is immaterial if Obama or Romney occupies the White House after November. Netanyahu will either find a way to co-habit with the American President or the Israelis will look for a new leader who can do business with Washington.

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