

A critical evaluation of evolution of Indo-Israel relations

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ABSTRACT

India's foreign policy since independence has been guided by diverse approaches in different periods. Soon after independence, India decided to follow an independent course of political interaction between and among nation as the Cold War had set in and the power rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was gaining momentum. In such a backdrop, India's intention to join either bloc could have jeopardized her politico-economic growth and constitutional aspirations. The interim government led by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru made it clear that India would embark on an independent path of foreign policy making. Among diverse approaches to a nation's foreign policy, Nehru chose Idealism as a guiding principle of India's foreign policy. Nehru prioritized internationalism over nationalism and this is why he maintained a distance from both power bloc, the USA and the USSR: he chose non-alignment, For Nehru, however, non-alignment did not mean, as he declared many a time, avoiding closer relation with some countries than with other. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of newly-carved out country was hesitant in recognising the State of Israel when it sought international recognition. As India's foreign policy was influenced by the Cold War alignment, India at the same time did not intend to join either bloc as the same could hamper India's independent course of action. As regards Israel, India led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, remained hesitant to recognise Israel owing to domestic as well as geostrategic concerns. Further, India's anti-Israel stance was also part of the larger Indian diplomatic strategy of trying to counter Pakistan's influence in the Arab world and of safeguarding its oil supplies from Arab countries. It also ensured jobs for thousands of Indians in the Gulf, helping India to keep its foreign exchange reserves afloat. India and Israel also ended up on the opposite sides during the cold war, with the United States strongly supporting Israel, while India's sympathies were toward the Soviet Union despite its non-aligned posture.

1. Nehruvian Era: An Age of Pragmatic Approach

For a newly independent nation like India, it was difficult task to embark on the path of an independent foreign policy against the backdrop of Cold War and in the wake of the devastating Second World War. Nonetheless India chose to distance herself from the power rivalry between the two blocs: The USSR and the USA. Under the stewardship of Nehru, the first prime minister of India, India decided to follow the path of non-alignment. Nehru's preference for non-alignment was neither arbitrary nor inconsistent with the India's strategic goal.

Nehru too believed in realism, but to undertake a realist politics was almost a case of impossibility for a newly independent nation like India as the country was weak on almost every front, be it economy, technology, education and the sense of pan-Indian character.¹ Unification of India was a major challenge for India as the princely states were in no mood to join the union. Another challenge was millions of illiterate population incapable of making the country economically and technologically stronger. Against this backdrop it was not possible, or say it was out of question, to directly partake in power politics. This is why Indian leadership chose another way to practice *realpolitik*, and non alignment was that way.

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other dimensions of power; however it is no denying that India was militarily weak at the outset.

With weak military setup, it would have been foolhardy on the part of India to jump into world politics against militarily far superior countries like the USSR, the USA, the UK, and France. So India opting other option to exert power was not only demand of hour, but it was also consistent with international political environment.

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Nehru's stance towards Israel is further shaped by his personality which entails his foreign visit even before independence and the western ideology he was much influenced by. "Few men," Edward Shils writes of Nehru, "so intellectual by disposition, occupy comparable positions in any countries."⁵ To a considerable extent, Nehru personality and legacy he received did profoundly matter in the making of Indian foreign policy. Nehru having been educated at Harrow and Cambridge, his deep study of history and his numerous foreign visits, his keen interest in international relations were instrumental in shaping India's foreign policy. At Harrow and Cambridge he came under the influence of Western liberalism and Fabian socialism which however does not seem to have led to any deep commitments.⁶ After returning to India, Nehru met with Gandhi in 1916 and he could not resist the spellbinding effect of Gandhi on his personality: He came under influence of Gandhi's preaching of nonviolence and peace as a means to achieve an end. Nehru adopted Gandhi's principles and applied them to international relations, according to Willard Range.⁷ Though Nehru differed from Gandhi on a range of issues like Gandhi's reliance on direct action, stress on cottage economics, objection to violence distrust of science and appeal to religious symbolism, Nehru highly appreciated Gandhi's activism, courage, political acumen and sense of timing, and his call for national respect and social reconstruction. Nehru stood by Gandhi's position on the State of Israel.⁸

Mahatma Gandhi's position on the issue was quite clear, *"My sympathies are with all the Jews....I came to learn much of their age long persecutions. But my sympathy does not blind me to the requirements of justice. The cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal for me. The sanction for it is sought in the Bible....Why should they not like other peoples of the earth make that country their home where they earn their livelihood? Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French."*⁹ This was further amplified by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first

Prime Minister. With his anti-imperialist and anti-colonial focus, he wrote the 'Zionist movement was the child of British imperialism' and in his famous Glimpses of World History, he observed 'the story of Palestine ever since has been one of conflict between Arabs and Jews, with the British Government siding with one or the other as occasion demanded, but generally supporting the Jews.'¹⁰ The establishment of the state of Israel was a political reality and Nehru was not unaware of it, but owing to large Muslim community with an umbilical connection to electoral matrix, he decided to tread cautiously.¹¹

2. Post-Nehruvian Era: An Age of Pragmatic-cum-Realist Approach

With the end of Nehruvian era following his death in 1964, came the second phase of India's foreign policy under the stewardship of Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi. Professor Sumit Ganguly refers to this period as a strategic dependence on the Soviet Union particularly after 1971. It was in this phase that India eventually realised the need to improve relation with the United States and much of the advanced industrial world. He further says, 1990s onwards there was a steady acceptance of the role of material power and India embraced the significance of the same.¹² The second phase of Indian foreign policy is characterised by intermittent realism. In August 1970, while paying tribute to her father's ideal of non-alignment Mrs. Gandhi asserted that the problems of developing countries needed to be faced 'not merely by idealism, not merely by sentimentalism, but by very clear thinking and hard-headed analysis of the situation'.¹³ On the international stage, the realist turn was evident as India veered away from non-alignment towards alignment with the Soviet Union, marked by Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship 1971.¹⁴ Emboldened by Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union, India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974 in response to nuclear test conducted by China at Lop Nor. Incorporation of Sikkim into Indian union in 1975 was yet another assertive tone in relation to bullying China. The shift of approach in India's foreign policy from idealism to realism became more apparent when India suppressed Khalistan movement which resulted in assassination of the then prime minister Indira Gandhi. In sum, this era dominated by Indira Gandhi was characterized by lip-service to anti-imperialism, Third world solidarity and non-alignment abroad, but was marked in practice by a drift towards power politics.¹⁵

The current phase a new phase in India's foreign policy is broadly characterized by pragmatism and increased assertiveness towards India's self-proclaimed enemy, China and Pakistan. Since a lot of change has occurred in the last ten years, India needs to redefine its foreign policy. The end of Cold War tremendously impacted India's foreign policy as the end of cold war ushered in an array of global prospects and challenges. On the one side the integration of global economy brought about economic opportunities, on the other it posed an immense threat to national security stemming from global terrorism.

To begin with, in the wake of cold war, Indian foreign policy shifted from non alignment to alignment and decade-long distrust towards the USA was abandoned for the sake of national interest, and the regional concerns were given priority

over global concerns. In continuation of this, Prime Ministers P.V. Narasimha Rao introduced a new course of foreign policy, "Look East Policy". India focused its attention toward Southeast Asia, which long neglected during the Cold war period. Look East policy was seen as an effort to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with the nations of Southeast Asia in order to bolster its standing as a regional power and a counterweight to the strategic influence of the China. Initiated in 1991, it marked a strategic shift in India's perspective of the world.¹⁶ While Narasimha Rao gave due importance to neighbours, he took taken the gigantic foreign policy leap of establishing full-fledged diplomatic ties with Israel on January 29, 1992 which resulted in opening up of embassies in New Delhi and Tel Aviv.

The tenure of Vajpayee was marked by a huge success as India for the first time showed to the world its assertive posture by conducting nuclear tests in 1998 in Pokhran. Despite the initial burst of hostility and a range of sanctions from the United States and the other great powers, the international community grudgingly accepted India as a de facto nuclear weapons State. Besides, Vajpayee furthered the legacy of Narsimha Rao by reinvigorating the relation with the State of Israel. During his tenure, in 2003, Ariel Sharon, Prime Minister of Israel, paid official three-day visit to India to strengthen Indo-Israel ties.

Relation between two nations touched a new height with Narendra Modi becoming Prime Minister of India in 2014. Political pundits are of the view that relations between India and Israel are now experiencing diplomatic renaissance. Cooperation with Israel — conducted secretly throughout most of the history — has now become public affair. In a stark departure from the past, Modi has openly and enthusiastically embraced the Jewish State.

Modi cherishes a personal connection with Israel. As a CM of Gujarat, he visited Tel Aviv in 2006 and spoke glowingly that India could learn from Israel. Notably, Israel welcomed Modi at a time when he was not welcomed in many countries for his purported role in failing to stem communal riots in 2002.

In September 2014, two premiers met on the sidelines of United Nations General Assembly where Netanyahu declared "sky is the limit" for India and Israel.¹⁷ What could be termed as a tectonic shift in India's foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel, Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a three-day visit to Israel. The tour was historic not only because Modi is the first sitting Indian Prime Minister to visit the Jewish state but also because significant agreements were signed between India and Israel that could be beneficial to both the countries in the long run.

Today, India boasts a vibrant Jewish community, which numbers close to 7,000, while Israel is home to 85,000 Jews of Indian origin. The warm ties between the Indian and Jewish people continue to enhance and influence the Indo-Israeli relationship today. As Israel and India celebrate 26 years of diplomatic relations, cooperation between the two countries has never been stronger. The following are just some of the many ways in which Israel and India are working together to promote a brighter and more prosperous future for all.¹⁸

Bilateral relations between India and Israel have touched a new height in recent years, with both nations experiencing a convergence of interests on a range of issues. At its heart, however, this relationship still remains driven by close defense ties and recognition of a common foe in Islamist terrorism. Apart from this, a host of defence agreements, which included purchase of sophisticated weaponry and transfer of defence technology in 2017, were also signed between Israel and India to strengthen innovation and technological ties between the two countries. Israel and India also established the "India-Israel Innovation Bridge" a platform dedicated to bringing together Israeli and Indian entrepreneurs and startups to collaborate on a series of innovative projects related to water, agriculture, and health.¹⁹

There has also been a substantial increase in commercial ties and business ventures between Indian and Israeli tech companies. Since 2015, a number of major Indian IT corporations such as Infosys, Wipro, and Tech Mahindra have demonstrated their increased interest in doing business with Israeli tech companies, and in continuation of this, these companies have made a notable investment. In 2017, OurCrowd, one of Israel's leading equity crowdfunding platforms established an innovation incubator in Jerusalem, in partnership with Reliance Industries, Motorola Solutions, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.²⁰

Israel and India are further strengthening cooperation in technology and innovation through a series of joint academic and educational partnerships, which aim to bridge between Israel and India's growing innovation and technology industries. In November of 2017, India's Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) opened an Israel Centre on its campus, which will serve as a hub for research, business strategy, technological innovation, and academic collaboration between Israel and India. Upon the inauguration of the new center, Israel's Ambassador to India Daniel Carmon noted, "Bengaluru is an ideal center for startups and this collaboration is an excellent idea. This center will bring together like-minded individuals in academic knowledge and research."²¹

3. Conclusion

Though attempts are being made by both sides to broaden the base of their relationship, significant constraints remain, preventing this relationship from achieving its full potential. Both sides will have to navigate their relationship carefully through these constraints. The current international environment, however, is particularly favorable to a deepening of Indo-Israeli ties. How far the two sides are willing to make use of this opportunity depends ultimately on the political will in the two states. The people of India and Israel have a long history of civilizational contact and it is only natural for the two states to cooperate more closely with each other on issues ranging from defense cooperation and counterterrorism to trade and cultural exchanges. There are significant mutual benefits that the two states can gain from a vibrant partnership with each other.

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