

Understanding the Strategic and Military Rationale of Evolving India-Israel Relations

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Abstract

This paper attempts to understand the evolving defense ties between India and Israel and the key turning points in their bilateral relations. From having 'non-relations' for over four decades after the emergence of both states, India and Israel have developed strong diplomatic and military ties, encompassing cooperation in outer-space, missile technology, intelligence and communications. Each major trend in the India-Israel relations was an outcome of interplay of domestic, regional and international variables. The anti-colonial politics of the Congress party, its leadership considering Zionism as an imperial tool to perpetuate colonialism in the Middle East, the Nehruvian politics of socialism and non-alignment movement and the Muslim constituency of Congress party combined to dissuade India from establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. The subsequent regional and global political developments in 1980s and after the Cold War in the shape of peace negotiations between the Palestinian leadership and Israel and the disintegration of the Soviet Union paved the way for New Delhi and Tel Aviv to establish full diplomatic relations in 1992, which have, since then, translated into greater security cooperation, especially after the Kargil war.

Keywords

India, Israel, Foreign Policy, Defense Cooperation, Military Ties

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Introduction

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, India and Israel have entrenched their bilateral ties on a strong footing. Defense cooperation has increased manifold, expanding both in quantity and scope. India is Israel's biggest weapons' market, and it is the largest importer of modern Israeli military equipment¹. A perceptible shift in India's Palestinian policy has been visible over the years. India supported a move in the United Nations that called for rescinding the resolution that compared Zionism with racism. India voted with the majority in support of that resolution in the United Nations² in 1970s. India also abstained from voting a 2015 UNHRC report censuring Israeli actions in Operation Protective Edge in 2014³. In the last two decades, New Delhi has pursued a diplomatic course of de-coupling its bilateral relations with Israel from its strong economic ties with the Arab world, Gulf countries especially, and the moral and diplomatic support to the Palestinian cause. Narendra Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel. He has even developed a personal bonhomie with his Israeli counterpart. The significance of India-Israel relations increases considerably due to the fact that India was averse to the idea of establishing diplomatic ties with Israel for more than four decades because of domestic, regional and international factors.

India-Israel relations are an important foreign policy issue. It has even featured in recent military tensions between the two nuclear-armed South Asian states. India reportedly used Israeli Spice missiles to hit 'targets' in Pakistan after the post-Pulwama military crisis⁴. It is a topic that demands a thorough study. This paper attempts to understand this significant foreign policy issue in its historical context. The historical trajectory of India-Israel relations can be compartmentalized into three distinct phases. The first phase can be traced back to the pre-partition period, when Zionists were struggling to establish a Jewish state in historic Palestine, and the Congress leadership, led by Mohandas Gandhi, was vehemently opposed to it.

Even after the emergence of Israel as a state, India deferred the establishment of full diplomatic ties with Israel till early 1990s. The second phase started when the Congress government under the Prime Minister Narasima Rao extended full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992. However, full diplomatic relations did not initially translate into substantive military cooperation until after the Indian nuclear tests and the Kargil war. A visible uptick in defense ties between the two states was witnessed in the post-Kargil period, which have only become stronger over the years.

Foreign policy as a pursuit of national interest is informed by domestic, regional and international factors that both create opportunities for states to secure and further their core interests and constrain their policy choices⁵. Understanding the shifts in India's policy vis-à-vis Israel demands a consideration of aforementioned three factors that have shaped New Delhi's foreign policy courses towards Tel Aviv over different periods of its history.

The key questions that will guide this research article are: 1) how have evolving domestic, regional and international factors shaped India's policies towards Israel over the last seven decades? 2) What political and economic variables explain the increasing defense ties between India and Israel? What is India's policy of decoupling?

A Period of Non-Relations

Despite opposing the persecution of Jews in Germany, the Indian National Congress did not endorse the Zionist movement of establishing a Jewish state in historic Palestine. Taking a moral position and recognizing the inalienable right of indigenous Palestinian Arab people over their lands, Mohandas Gandhi said, "Palestine belongs to Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to English and France to French"⁶. Opposing the Balfour Declaration that promised a Jewish homeland in Arab world, Jawaharlal Nehru observed, "Palestine was not a wilderness. It was already somebody else's home. So that this generous gesture of the British government

was really at the expense of the people who already lived in Palestine⁷.”

The Congress leadership considered Zionism as an imperial tool to engender religious division in the Middle East and perpetuate colonialism in the region. Moreover, the Arabs were waging their own movements against the French and British rule in the Middle East. Thus, there was this element of fraternity and moral solidarity with people whose battle was not different from Congress’ in the Indian Sub-continent. The Indian National Congress had opposed the Muslim League’s Two-Nation Theory and had claimed to speak for all people of the Sub-continent, irrespective of religion. It might be added in parenthesis that the Muslim League leadership considered the British policy of Middle East, especially its support towards Zionism, as a ‘betrayal of Arabs⁸.’ Supporting Zionism, which would have necessitated a bifurcation of Palestinian land between Arabs and Jews on the basis of religion (a ‘solution’ that the newly-formed United Nations endorsed), would have undermined its own position in the Indian Sub-continent. Consistent with this policy, the independent India opposed the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. India was one of the eleven members of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) and it along with Yugoslavia and Iran opposed the recommendation of other eight members of dividing Palestine between Jews and the Arabs⁹.

Reconciling to the reality of a Jewish state, India officially recognized Israel in 1950. However, this did not translate into full diplomatic relations or economic and military cooperation. This phase from 1950 to 1992 has aptly been called as ‘a period of non-relations’¹⁰.

This ‘period of non-relations’ between India and Israel is attributed to Nehruvian politics of non-alignment during the Cold War, the strong Muslim constituency of the Congress party and India’s increasing economic and political relations with the Arab world, especially with the so-called socialist republics. India, under the leadership of

Jawaharlal Nehru, opted not to become part of any bloc, either the Soviet bloc or the United States. Jawaharlal Nehru, Jamal Abdul Naseer of Egypt, Sukarno along with other leftist and socialists leaders formed the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as an alternative to capitalist and communist blocs. Despite its avowed commitment to a politics of non-alignment, India sought political and military help from the two superpowers when its core national interests demanded. By signing the 'Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation' in 1971, India became part of the Cold War blocs all but in name¹¹.

The Congress leadership attributed the emergence of Israel to the colonial power of Great Britain and Israel's close ties with the United States dissuaded the Indian leadership to extend full diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv and develop economic and political cooperation with it. The economic and political significance of the Arab world, especially of Gulf countries, for India and the popularity that the Palestinian cause enjoyed in those states played an important role in shaping India's policy of non-relations with Israel. Moreover, there was this fear among the Indian leadership that lack of support for Palestinian cause would make the Arab countries to push their weight in a more significant manner behind Pakistan on the Kashmir issue¹².

The Palestinian cause resonated with the Indian Muslims. The Congress party had a considerable constituency among Indian Muslims and the apprehension of undermining its vote bank among one of its key support bases disinclined India to extend diplomatic and political overtures to Israel¹³. Thus, the triumvirate of domestic, regional and international factors combined to make New Delhi to pursue a policy of non-relations with Tel Aviv from 1950 to 1992.

Establishing Diplomatic Ties with Israel

India under the Congress government of Narasimha Rao accorded full diplomatic recognition to Israel in 1992¹⁴, which would be a prelude to increasing defense and economic cooperation in coming years. A

consideration of multiple variables explains this significant policy shift of India. Rajiv Gandhi, who had replaced his mother as the Prime Minister of India after her assassination in 1984, had already introduced liberal economic policies, opening up Indian markets for investment and trade and in the process signaling a shunning of ideological baggage of socialism which his predecessors had championed. To promote its core interests, India understood the incumbency of engaging in more substantive manner with economically and technologically advanced states. Rajiv Gandhi had also been engaging with different Israeli officials at international fora. This had set the ground for Narashimha Rao to depart from New Delhi's traditional policy vis-à-vis Israel.

The regional and international factors played an equally important role in shaping India's policy. Egypt had signed the Camp David Accords in 1978, lending Israel political and diplomatic recognition in lieu of getting Sinai Peninsula back. Iraq had become militarily emasculated due to its nearly decade-long war with Iran and the military battering it received from American forces when it invaded Kuwait in 1991, to be followed by stringent sanctions. In short, the Arab states had their own wars and urgent security concerns to deal with, putting the Palestine question on the backburner. Moreover, by late 1980s the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) had reconciled to the reality of a Jewish state and endorsed the two-state solution, recognizing the state of Israel. The Palestinian leadership had been engaging with Israel in peace negotiation in early 1990s¹⁵. This important policy departure towards Israel from the Palestinian leadership and a significant part of the Arab world made it easier for India to establish full diplomatic ties with Israel. If the main parties to the conflict were engaged in talks to politically resolve the Palestine-Israel conflict, there was no reason for India not to establish diplomatic ties with Israel. Since the Palestinian leadership had come to terms with a reality of living side by side a Jewish state, the

potential blowback that an Indian policy shift towards Israel would evoke among Indian Muslims would have considerably reduced.

The disintegration of Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War was a geopolitical development of great importance. It transformed the Bi-polar world into a unipolar world with America emerging as the sole superpower. It also had implications for states that responded to this significant development by recalibrating their political alignments and foreign policy to secure their core national security interests in an altered geo-political environment.

Since 1970s, India had been predominantly dependent on Soviet Union for military equipment and for diplomatic and political support¹⁶. The disintegration of the Soviet Union created new security challenges for states that had close military and diplomatic ties with it. To navigate the emergent security dilemma and political vacuum engendered by the end of the Cold War, India looked for fresh military and political partnerships that would secure its core national interests and compensate for its deficient indigenous military hardware. Establishing diplomatic ties with Israel would pave the way for greater military ties, considering Israel's strong technological base in modern arms and surveillance systems.

Thus, a combination of various domestic and geopolitical developments induced a departure from India's traditional policy vis-à-vis Israel. This shift in policy has paid great dividends for both states, especially in the area of defense cooperation. Israel has found in India its largest market for military sales. For India, Israel not only compensates for its lack of indigenized modern arms, but also helps India to fulfill its vision of 'Make in India' that envisages an increasing level of self-sufficiency in whole spectrum of fields, including modern military hardware.

Defense Cooperation between India and Israel

Since the establishment of full diplomatic ties between India and Israel in 1992, both states have cooperated in different areas to

entrench their bilateral ties. Bilateral trade has risen from \$ 200 million in 1992 to more than \$ 5 billion now¹⁷. One of the key areas that features in increasing cooperation between New Delhi and Tel Aviv is the defense sector, especially of military sales. Over the years, India has emerged as the largest market for Israeli arms with an average sales of over \$1 billion¹⁸. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from 2014-18, Indian arms imports accounted for 46% of Israel's arms sales¹⁹. But this upswing in military ties did not kick-start immediately after the establishment of full diplomatic ties. The Kargil war in 1999 heralded a new phase of defense cooperation between India and Israel. There are reports that claim Tel Aviv extended military support in small arms to New Delhi during the war²⁰. Moreover, the Kargil Committee Report, which was commissioned by the then Indian government, highlighted the key defense insufficiencies that Indian security forces faced and gave a set of recommendations. Its major findings included great inadequacies in India's surveillance and communications systems. The report observes, "Helicopters employed for air-surveillance patrolling do not have sophisticated monitoring and sensing devices. The Kargil battle was fought with less than optimum communications capability²¹." The report also emphasized the need of exports to fill the gap in indigenous defense sector in those areas. The report recommended, "While self-reliance and indigenization are sound principles, the availability of critical equipment in time of combat is the supreme consideration that must govern acquisition policy²²." Israel had not only developed a technological niche in fields of surveillance and communications, but was also a willing partner that did not attach political conditions on its weapons sales. Over the years, this defense cooperation between India and Israel has expanded in both scope and quantity.

India-Israel military ties encompasses fields like missiles, air defense, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), surveillance systems, sensors and outer-space cooperation. Defense companies of both states have

signed defense contracts and entered into joint ventures, increasing military cooperation between India and Israel. In 2003, Israel sold India three Phalcon Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) at a cost of \$1billion²³. In 2005, Israel sold India 10 Heron drones to India, at an estimated cost of \$400 million²⁴. In 2007, India made a defense deal with Israel Aerospace Industry Limited to build missiles and anti-aircraft systems²⁵. In 2010, India and Israel signed a \$1.4 billion defense contract to develop Barak-8 medium-range surface-to-air missiles for the Indian Air Force (IAI). In 2017, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), one of Israel's largest defense firms, signed a \$ 2 billion contract to develop missile defense systems for Indian army and navy²⁶. It was IAI's largest defense deal ever struck. In the same year, Israel Aerospace Industries signed an MoU with Kalyani Strategic Systems to 'develop, build and market selected air defense systems and light-weight special purpose munitions²⁷.' And for the first time in history, Indian Air Force took part in an air combat multinational military exercise with Israel. The other six states involved in the military exercise were the United States, Greece, Poland, France, Germany and Italy²⁸. The following year, IAI secured a \$ 777 million defense contract with Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) to supply Barak-8 long range surface-to-air defense missile and missile defense systems for the Indian navy²⁹. Moreover, India's Adani Defense and Aerospace and Israel's Elbit have struck defense contracts to develop and build Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in India, including its Harmes 900 and Harmes 500³⁰. India and Israel have also cooperated in outer-space. India has launched two Israeli surveillance satellites³¹. Given below is the list of some weapons that India has purchased from Israel over the last one decade. The weapons include sensors, aircrafts, air-defense systems and missiles.

Table

	Weapon Designation	#	Description	Year of Order/Delivery	Valuation
Aircrafts	Heron	16	UAV	2009/2012-13	\$239 m
	Heron	2	UAV	2010/2011	
	Searcher	2	UAV	2010/2011	\$12 m (est.)
	Heron	10	UAV	2016/y.t.d.	\$400 m
	Heron	10	UAV	2018/y.t.d	\$200 m
Air Defence Systems	SPYDER	18	SAM system	2008/2015-17	\$395.4 m
	BARAK-LR	5	SAM system	2009/y.t.d.	\$2.5 b (inc. production in India)
Missiles	BARAK-8	800	SAM	2009/2016-18	
	Derby	750	BVRAAM	2008/2015-17	\$940 m (est.)
	Python-5	750	BVRAAM	2008/2015-17	
	SPICE-2000	100	Guided Bomb	2008/2009	\$5-6 m (est.)
	Griffin	250	Guided Bomb	2008/2012-13	\$8-9 m (est.)
	Harop	50	Loitering Ammunition	2009/2013-14	\$100 m
	Crystal Maze	30	ASM	2010/2013-14	\$60 m
	Barak-1	131	SAM	2017/y.t.d	\$72 m
Sensors	EL/M 2075 Phalcon	3	AWACS	2004/2009-11	

	EL/M 2032	9	Combat aircraft radar	2005/2008-11	\$110-137 m
	EL/M 2248 MF-STAR	3	Multi-function Radar	2006/2014-16	\$200 m
	EL/M 2032	20	Combat aircraft radar	2007/2016-18 (9 delivered)	
	EL/M 2221 STGR	6	Fire Control Radar	2007/2010-12	
	EL/M 2221 STGR	6	Fire Control Radar	2009/2014-16	
	EL/M 2221 STGR	4	Fire Control Radar	2010/2014-17 (3 delivered)	
	EL/M 2248 MF-STAR	4	Multi-function Radar	2013/y.t.d.	
	EL/M 2221 STGR	8	Fire Control Radar	2014/y.t.d.	
	EL/M 2248 MF-STAR	1	Multi-function Radar	2015/y.t.d.	
	EL/M 2075 Phalcon	2	AWACS	2018/y.t.d.	\$800 m

Source: Israel's Arms Sales to India: Bedrock of a Strategic Partnership. Harsh V. Pant and Abjuj, ORF Issue Brief No. 311, September 2019, Observer Research Foundation.

The increasing military ties between India and Israel are mutually beneficial and complementary. Both states have strategic rationales that underpin this bilateral relationship. To diversify its military imports and compensate for its deficient indigenous defense sector³²,

India has found in Israel a willing defense partner. Israel has not only exported military arms to India, but has also entered into joint ventures and cooperation in fields of missile technology and outer space. Israel was one of few states that did not oppose the Indian nuclear tests in 1998 and some reports claim Israel supported India in small arms during the Kargil war. Moreover, Israel has been relatively less stringent in sharing and transferring military technology to India, in the process helping latter to achieve its regional aspirations of developing a strong and largely self-sufficient military-industrial base and buttress its 'Make in India' vision³³. Given Israel's advanced R&D sector, it has also been helpful in upgrading India's Soviet-era weapons. By diversifying its arms imports, India seeks to preserve a greater level of strategic autonomy, and through technology transfers, it intends to develop sophisticated indigenous weapons systems which is a prerequisite for its aspiration of a great-power status.

Unlike other Middle Eastern states, Israel is not rich in fossil fuels. But its Research and Development (R&D) sector is very advanced. The technology advancements it has achieved, especially in fields of intelligence, missiles and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), are second to none. Israel's R&D is driven by its military exports. It exports more than nearly 70 percent of its arms and revenue generated from them finances the indigenous defense projects. For Israel, India provides a huge market for its military sales. For the last half a decade, India has accounted for nearly 50 percent of Israel's arms exports. The military sales between India and Israel have increased both in terms of quantity and scope, expanding their defense cooperation in different areas. And given the reliance of Tel Aviv's defense industry on defense exports, the Indian defense needs and markets provide Israel with an added incentive to develop a sustained and complementary military partnership with India.

Besides allowing Israel to diversify its arms importers, increasing bilateral economic and military ties between the two states lend Israel political legitimacy. Israel has come under great censure for its

policies of illegal occupation of Palestinian lands in West Bank and East Jerusalem, for human rights violations and for undermining the internationally recognized two-state solution. When movements like Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS)³⁴ that seek to end Israeli occupation by trying to convince universities, multi-national companies and states to put pressure on Israel through a variety of tactics involving boycott, divestment and sanctions are getting increasingly popular, Tel Aviv has tried to diversify and expand its foreign policy choices with states like India that besides being a huge economic and defense market, lend it political legitimacy.

Some analysts and scholars attribute the increasing bilateral ties between India and Israel, especially under the leaderships of Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu respectively, to ideological factors. Both Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Likud do majoritarian politics and their treatment in occupied territories of Kashmir and Palestine share some similarities³⁵. But it would be too simple an approach to reduce strong defense and political ties between the two states to an 'ideological affinity'. India's overall West Asia policy and its economic relations with the Arab world defy such a characterization. In 2016-2017, India's trade volume with the Arab world stood at \$121 billion, with imports accounting for more than \$ 70 billion dollar. The trade volume with the Arab world constitutes more than 18 percent of India's total trade. Nine million non-resident Indians work in the Gulf countries and send back annual remittances of \$38 billion³⁶. India's energy dependence on the Arab world and the latter being a source of Indian remittances make Gulf region a stupendous source of geo-economic and geo-political importance. Moreover, India's huge and lucrative market attracts investment in different sectors and areas from Gulf States. Realpolitik and core security and national interests drive India's West Asia policy, be it with Israel or Gulf States, not any ideological affinity.

A more nuanced approach might be to understand the simultaneous existence of different strands of Indian foreign policy. There is the

right-wing majoritarian politics of the incumbent government in India, that harps on perceived injustices of past against the Hindu majority by Muslim invaders and the British colonialism. Then, there are the neo-liberal economic policies that de-territorialize capital that India has pursued over the last few decades to invite global investment and increase trade. And most importantly India is expanding its political and military ties with western powers that not only help it to compensate for its deficient defense sector, but also achieve global power status that will increase its strategic autonomy and make it stand among the world's great powers. Rather than focusing on a single factor that shapes Indian policy, an approach that takes into consideration multiple factors that inflect policy will yield a greater insight into India's foreign policy trends. As mentioned before, geo-political developments, evolving regional interests and political alignments and domestic politics combine to influence policy directions.

One of India's great foreign policy successes in recent decades has been to walk a delicate balancing act between military and economic rivals. Baharati Janata Party (BJP) has emphasized and reiterated the policy significance of de-hypenation in its manifestoes. Its 1998 manifesto says, "Protecting India's National Interest...We will pursue our national goals...Briefly these are: ...To strengthen political and economic relations with the European Unions, ASEAN countries...Iran, the Arab nations, Israel..."³⁷ The policy of de-coupling was more clearly enunciated in its 2009 manifesto, "We will pursue friendly relations with the European Union, West Asian countries and South-East Asian nations. It will further strengthen relations with the Arab countries and pursue enhanced cooperation with Israel-the two are nor inter-linked and both are beneficial for India."³⁸ This is most visible in India's policy of decoupling its economic relations with the Arab world from its strong and increasing defense ties with Israel. Moreover, India has continued to extend diplomatic and moral support to Palestinian cause and sticks to the global consensus on a

two-state solution. This trend also features in India's relations with other states. To diversify its energy needs, secure greater diplomatic and strategic leverage in the region and further its economic interests through creating an alternative route to Central Asia via Iran and Afghanistan, New Delhi has developed close trade and economic ties with Tehran. Despite American sanctions, India exported Iranian oil; invested in Chahbahar port and built a road link connecting Iran with Afghanistan. At the same time, India has been a major defense partner of the US, often projected in American policy circles as a counter-weight to a rising China. Similarly, India's two biggest arms exporters are the US and Russia, which are at loggerheads over different regional and strategic issues. India has great trade relations with China and good defense ties with Japan, and both these states have dispute over South China Sea. In short, by placing core interests at the center of its policy and avoiding, if not always being neutral, political entanglements between regional and global rivals, India has had the best of both worlds, accruing for itself immense political and military dividends.

Conclusion

This paper has revolved around three themes: 1) Foreign policy is an interplay of multiple variables, involving local political situation and global milieu. 2) Realpolitik and complementary defense needs drive India-Israel evolving strategic cooperation. 3) By pursuing a policy of decoupling, India has secured its core national interests along with accruing military and economic dividends.

The historical trajectory of Indian policy vis-à-vis Israel has been shaped and influenced by a triumvirate of domestic, regional and international factors, driving India to craft its policies accordingly.

Both India and Israel see their relations, especially their defense ties, in complementary terms. India sees Israel as a reliable defense partner, helping it to diversify its arms imports and compensate for its deficient indigenous defense sector. Israel has developed a

technological niche in fields like missiles, surveillance and intelligence. Moreover, Israel is relatively less stringent in matters relating to technology transfer; thus indirectly helping India to realize its vision of 'Make in India', which, among other things, envisages a greater self-sufficiency in military matters. Israel's Research and Development (R&D) sector relies on arms exports and the revenue generated from them finances those projects. Israel exports more than 70 percent of its arms. India has been the biggest market for its arms sales for nearly half a decade. Israel exports nearly 50 percent of its arms to India.

This paper has also tried to understand the evolving bilateral relations of the two states through India's policy of decoupling. To protect its core interests, India has walked a delicate balancing act. It has simultaneously good economic and trade ties with Iran and growing defense cooperation with the United States. This characteristic of Indian policy features in its dealings with other states and regions. It is most visible in its West Asian policy. Without relinquishing its moral and political support to the Palestinian cause, India has increased its bilateral defense and diplomatic cooperation with Israel. Moreover, India's economic and trade ties with the Arab World, especially Gulf countries, seem to be reaching new levels. Such a policy of de-hyphenation has accrued economic and military dividends for India, and strengthened its diplomatic leverage.

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