Changes in Indian Foreign Policy: The Case of Israel and the Palestinians

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India and the Palestinians: A History of Empathy

For many years, elements such as religion, anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, the sanctity of the secular state, and a non-aligned policy shaped India's attitude toward the Palestinian issue. At first, the struggle between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League focused on gaining the support of the Muslim community in their struggle for national liberation. When the question of a Jewish state was brought before the UN, India became an important behind-the-scenes player. In the first session of the UN General Assembly in 1947, India foiled a boycott sponsored by the Arab Higher Committee and Arab countries. India also managed to be included among the members of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), and in this framework devised the "federal plan," an idea rejected by the UNSCOP majority. Once the State of Israel was founded and during all its wars, India expressed strong support for the Arabs.[1]

In contrast to the faltering support by the Arab countries during India's 1965 war with Pakistan and the 1971 war in Bangladesh, Israel provided India with full backing, including a supply of artillery equipment. Many Indian MPs perceived a constant imbalance in India's relations with Arab countries. For the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) party (Indian People's Association), a nationalistic party opposed to minorities and an earlier version of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Indian People's Party), the idea of an alliance with Israel was natural, and Israel's victory in the Six Day War was comparable to India's victory over Pakistan in 1965.[2] Nevertheless, India's foreign policy continued along the previous lines.

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India attempted to partake in various Muslim conferences, condemned Israel's actions, and sent medical equipment for those wounded in the fighting against Israel. In 1974 India supported the PLO's participation in various frameworks as an observer, and in November 1975 backed UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 defining Zionism as racism.

The Janata Party, a coalition of parties opposed to the state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi, among them the BJS, gained power in 1977. Many supporters of Israel were elected to Parliament, creating expectations in Jerusalem of an opportunity for change in the status quo. At the same time, the Janata Party owed its victory to support from Muslim voters. The Indian administration remained very cautious, and support for the Arabs continued.[3]

Several reasons lay behind the change in the Indian administration's policy toward Israel in the late 1980s. The role of internal politics was crucial to the matter, and the rise of a new party to power in 1989 reduced anti-Israel rhetoric and established a basis for a change. In the regional aspect, Islamic fundamentalist terrorism brought India closer to Israel. In addition, a drop in global oil prices diminished the leverage of the Arab countries. At the same time, India discovered the power of the United States, and aimed to establish relations in order to escape the crisis afflicting its economic plans. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 symbolized the end of the old order and the change in the international balance of power, and the emergence of a unipolar world led by the US. Hostility toward Israel constituted an obstacle to India's relations with the US; a public change in policy became easier when negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians began, following the Madrid Conference.[4] Yet along with the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in January 1992, India continued its traditional support for the Palestinians. These good relations were maintained through reciprocal visits, financial contributions, cooperation, and India's continued condemnation of Israel. The Palestinian issue remained popular in India, and has recently served as fertile ground for BDS activity in the Indian subcontinent.

Changes in Indian Foreign Policy on the Palestinian Question

The rise to power of Prime Minister Modi in 2014 signified both an historic change in India and changes in Indian-Palestinian relations. The right wing party in government announced significant reforms in India's foreign relations, and put three main issues on the agenda: a tough line in national

security, acceleration of the second phase in India's neo-liberal reforms, and promotion of cultural nationalism.[5] The changing attitude toward the Middle East is one of the developing dimensions in Indian foreign relations.

No assessment of the changes in Indian foreign policy concerning the Palestinian question can ignore the changes in relations between Israel and India. The closer ties are reflected in a number of aspects: security, diplomatic visits, the change in the public's perception, and the pattern of voting in the UN. In recent years, Israel has strengthened its security ties with India, and has made the Indian subcontinent one of its major export destinations, primarily in military procurement. Israel is the fourth largest weapons supplier to India. Diplomatic visits between the countries have gradually increased since relations were established. In September 2014, during the UN General Assembly, Modi and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discussed both the Iranian nuclear program and extending cooperation between their two countries. In addition, the President of India made an historic visit to Israel in October 2015. One example of the tightening political alliance occurred during Operation Protective Edge, when Modi's government exerted pressure in order prevent a condemnation of Israel by the Indian parliament, an act that most sources believe was highly gratifying to Jerusalem.[6]

The UN has become an extremely interesting arena for testing changes in India's foreign relations. India's voting pattern to date has shown steady support for the Palestinians and a strong anti-Israel policy. During Operation Protective Edge, India was the object of much criticism for failing to condemn Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip. Apparently in order to balance its support for Israel, India voted in favor of the establishment of a special investigative committee for the Gaza Strip under the auspices of the UN Human Rights Council. India eventually declared that it was "expressing concern" about escalating violence between Israel and the Palestinians. In July 2014, India, together with countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Paraguay, and Macedonia, abstained in the vote on the UN report condemning Israel for Operation Protective Edge. Indian sources reported that Netanyahu had made a personal appeal to Modi to abstain in the vote.[7] Palestinian Ambassador to India Adnan Abu Alhalija termed India's decision "shocking," and attributed it to the military relationship between Israel and India.[8] In August 2015, Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj, eager to win Arab and Muslim support, emphasized that there was no change in India's policy on the Palestinian issue, and that India's position remained steadfast in

support of the Palestinian struggle. She added that India was still guided by a special non-intervention, non-judgmental, and non-aligned policy. In other words, India was still willing to support the Arabs, but preferred that they take responsibility for their own fate.[9]

Some sources assert that the change in policy toward Israel began before the Modi government, in the Kargil crisis in May 1999, when the supply of arms from Israel enabled India's victory in its war with Pakistan. Starting in 2012, India "expressed concern," instead of condemning Israel for its alleged operations against Palestinian civilians. Although India continued to support a sovereign Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, its expressions of support for the Palestinian Authority have gradually changed.[10] When Modi became Prime Minister, Israel-India relations were rebalanced, with the Indian vote signaling the warming in relations between the two governments. India's abstention in the vote does not show neutrality; on the contrary. After years of active pro-Palestinian activity in the UN, this abstention constitutes a change in India's foreign policy.

The Reasons behind the Changed Foreign Policy

Foreign policy, rarely designed to serve a single purpose, is a tool to pursue security, aid, trade, status, or prestige. Most countries in the world tend to zealously preserve the fundamental principles guiding their foreign policy.[11] Indian foreign policy, which was shaped by its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, continued after his death. Over the years, as a country casting off the chains of colonialism, internal problems became the main focus of the Indian agenda, and prevented India from playing an active role in international relations.[12] At the same time, when economic reforms opened the Indian economy to the global market following the 1991 economic crisis, a substantial change in Indian foreign policy became evident. These reforms signaled the collapse of the old socialist-saturated politics and economy that had prevailed in India since its independence. A struggle is now taking place over the right way to conduct Indian foreign policy, in light of the new challenges facing the country. A number of factors dictating the current Indian policy are evident.[13]

India's Superpower Status

With the end of colonialism and independence, India's main task was strengthening and consolidating the new country. India as a country lacked a defined foreign policy other than what Prime Minister Nehru envisioned.

His diplomatic experience and power, and the lack of public attention paid to foreign affairs enabled him to play this role. With the rise to power of Lal Bahadur Shastri, India's second Prime Minister, the Indian bureaucracy became dominant, and India's global concerns were replaced by local and regional priorities. Overall, India's first years of independence focused on internal affairs helping to shape the nation, such as economic nationalism and anti-colonialism, with no major controversies regarding foreign policy. During these years, foreign relations were used to help deal with internal problems in the country.[14]

One key change in Indian foreign policy lies in the transition from a political-diplomatic discourse based on idealism to a discourse based on realpolitik. The realpolitik school holds that a country continually strives toward power, expressed mainly in terms of military capabilities.[15] India regarded itself as promoting values such as pacifism, non-alignment, cooperation, and democratic self-determination, which were instrumental, rather than utopian. This was India's way of attaining a special independent status among the nations of the world. The urge to adopt an attitude of realpolitik came gradually, as a result of tension with China and Pakistan. While those countries armed themselves and attained aid from major powers, India was preoccupied with its internal situation. Relations with Israel are consistent with these elements of a realpolitik outlook on the part of the Indian administration. It appears that the military aid between the two countries took place during wars, both the 1965 war with Pakistan and the 1971 war in Bangladesh.[16]

Before the foreign currency crisis of the early 1990s, Indian foreign policy sought external support, given its development needs.[17] Since its independence, India's economic development strategy emphasized the importance of government regulation, and its high customs duties and structural barriers were the most restrictive in Asia. During the 1980s, India began reforms in order to create a smoother import process, but its trade policy remained restrictive. India asked the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for assistance, which was made conditional in part on trade policy reform. India faced pressure to compete in the global market, and in the absence of patronage from the Soviet Union, Indian diplomacy entered unknown territory.[18]

> Determined to prove to the skeptics that it is a genuine candidate for superpower status, India has adopted a foreign policy combining nation branding with the use of soft power.

The market conditions dictated India's needs, which focused on a search for foreign investors and access to new markets. The economic reforms were slow moving but productive, and India succeeded in achieving rapid economic growth. This provided a basis for a change in India's relations with the major and regional powers, and with its enemies, China and Pakistan.[19] India's annual economic growth in the late 1980s was 13 percent, thanks to its free trade regime and foreign investments. India is likely to accelerate its economic growth and position itself as the world's third largest economy in terms of gross national product.[20] With the combination of economic growth and factors such as military and nuclear power, growing economic prosperity, a population projected to become the world's largest, and a substantial population of young people comes the responsibility of being a major power.[21]

India is seeking to leverage its status in the BRICS organization (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) in order to become more powerful in the global arena. Despite the desire of the ruling class for closer relations with the West, it was the BRICS group of countries that provided India with its entry to international organizations. The West, on the other hand, was not generous regarding a permanent seat for India on the UN Security Council and more power in the IMF. The BRICS group remained solid in its support for Palestinian rights and decolonization of Israel, and the BRICs position is likely complicating Indian policy regarding Israel. Other experts assert that in view of the respect India commands in these organizations, including from countries such as Iran and the Gulf states, India's closer relations with Israel and the US will require India to walk a tightrope.[22]

The National Image

In the digital world, the internet has completely revolutionized the way consumers buy and evaluate products. Today, relations between the manufacturer and the customer do not end when the product is purchased. Through various media tools, the customer becomes part of the branding industry.[23] A country's image has become an important part of its power in the global market. Scholar Simon Anholt coined the term "nation branding," which combines business administration theory with disciplines pertaining to the subject of national identity.[24] Determined to prove to the skeptics that it is a genuine candidate for superpower status, India has adopted a foreign policy combining nation branding with the use of soft power.

India believes that it is capable of playing a significant role in the global arena and regards itself as a major power, but that it has to gain the respect of countries around the world. The image it nurtured in the past served its former interests as a backward country in need of external aid. Despite the many years during which it supported Arab countries in general, especially on the Palestinian issue, India was not regarded by them as a source of power.[25] Once it became economically and militarily stronger, it was necessary for India to reconsider its national image. In the past decade, this dimension has undergone dramatic changes, with clear results. Once labeled as a Third World country, India has become synonymous with expertise in computers, media, and services. These aspects are consistent with its desire for closer relations with Israel, which has similar expertise.[26]

Changes in the Regional Balance of Power

Events such as the Arab Spring, the civil war in Syria, and Chinese militarization of the Indian Ocean have caused a reassessment of alliances. The current Indian government regards the Middle East as part of its extended neighborhood, and as critical to India's national interests.[27] India has observed the global acceptance of Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt and the growing power of the Islamic State. At the same time, India is increasingly concerned that the instability in the Middle East will lead to outbreaks of terrorism in India.[28] As a major energy consumer that imports 68 percent of its oil from the Persian Gulf,[29] any disruption of a regular supply of energy to the country is liable to have a negative impact on both India's economic development and the volume of remittances by the approximately seven million Indian workers in the Gulf. Anxiety about changes has culminated in increased military procurement by India. Military trade between Israel and India in 2015 totaled $695 million. Since Modi took office, trade between the two countries has exceeded the cumulative total during the three years preceding his term. These changes are consistent with India's perception of Israel as a military power and exporter of advanced technologies.[30]

In recent years, the United States, perceiving India to be rising power in the East, has gradually tightened the bilateral relations. Once both nations overcame the suspicion that formerly characterized their relations, the US and India have been successful in protecting their respective global and regional interests. New Delhi's attitude toward the Iranian nuclear program became Washington's criterion with respect to India, while the Indian nuclear strategy has been very cautious in a number of aspects:

energy-wise, strategically, and commercially. The tension between the two countries during the period of sanctions came to an end with the signing of the nuclear deal with the major powers in July 2015.

In turn, closer relations between India and the US are likely to confer a special significance on India's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Over the years, the US has been perceived by the Palestinians as an important, but not impartial, mediator. India's rising power, its profound commitment over the years to the Palestinian question, and its good relations with Israel can enable India to foster a broad agreement in which each side in the conflict feels supported by a power acceptable to both of them. The acceptance of India as an additional mediator in the prolonged conflict will enable it to induce the US to renew its involvement. This role is consistent with India's rebranding as a superpower seeking a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and will highlight its unique status as a bridge to tolerance.[31]

Prime Minister Modi's Policy

Since rising to power as the head of a nationalist party, Modi has been emerging as a representative of a new generation in Indian politics advocating a solid economic pragmatism. This view was expressed during his term as Chief Minister of the Indian state of Gujarat, when he visited Israel. Since his election as Prime Minister, he has made Indian foreign policy increasingly assertive. Realism has become the essential concept in achieving India's economic goals.[32] The Indian economy cannot survive without rapid industrialization, and the government is following a neo-liberal policy. For his election campaign, Modi received a great deal of money from the business community, which is anxious to expedite capitalistic processes. After his election, he created a supportive environment for business, shortened bureaucratic procedures, and improved infrastructure. Under the inspiration of the Chinese model, the government is seeking to turn India into a manufacturing center. One of the prominent examples of this government policy is the Made in India program, which is aimed at attracting foreign investments, while boosting domestic industry.[33]

Modi has shaped his relations with other countries in accordance with his policy of prioritizing economic growth. This coincided with the markets that Israel specializes in and has designated as export destinations, such as high tech, agriculture, communications, and defense. Until now, a major part of Indian foreign policy has been motivated by its rivalry with countries

such as Pakistan and China. Under Modi, however, India has striven to go beyond this by exploiting opportunities in order to redefine its role in the region. In this aspect, it is following in the footsteps of the Congress Party, which established diplomatic relations with Israel because it was the right and most useful time to do so. Modi is also continuing the tradition of his party, which regards relations with Israel as an alliance suited to both its internal and regional interests. Furthermore, Modi and Netanyahu, who share conservative, right wing, and capitalistic views, have developed warm interpersonal relations.[34]

Conclusion

Until the 1990s, Indian foreign policy was based on solidarity with southern countries under the flag of the non-aligned movement. At the same time, a non-aligned policy is not necessarily a foreign policy; it is a tactical response to a specific disturbance in the superpowers' power arrangements. The shaping of Indian foreign policy is a work in progress, and the new directions of Indian diplomacy are highly visible. Considerations of building economic power in international relations are again bringing about changes in India's relations with Israel. Relations with the Palestinians are also becoming an integral part of the considerations of the newly powerful India. India has demonstrated its abandonment of the voting pattern at the UN, which was considered a significant dimension of Palestinian support. At the same time, events such as Operation Protective Edge demonstrated the situational complexity in which India finds itself. This visible confusion is typical of a country freeing itself from post-colonialism and trying to design an independent foreign policy, while at the same time striving to be a major power. India is trying to strike a balance between the new alliances it has forged and its evolving motivations, and should therefore not necessarily be tagged as anti-Palestinian. It is reasonable to assume that India will not abandon its support for the Palestinians, which is consistent with many Indian values.

> Rising power, profound commitment over the years to the Palestinian question, and good relations with Israel can enable India to foster a broad agreement in which each side in the conflict feels supported by a power acceptable to both of them.

Indian foreign policy under Modi has complicated results. While many of his measures have won praise, his failure to develop a clear policy on the Middle East has drawn criticism.

Notes

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