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## **India and Israel: A Strategic Alliance?**

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The second decade of the twenty-first century has brought tremendous shifts in Israel's map of international relations, amounting to a new set of formal and informal alliances. The visit to Israel by Indian Prime Minister the Honorable Narendra Modi (July 4-6, 2017) can be seen as one of the milestones in this process.

India, with its sizable Muslim community, as a founder of the non-aligned bloc trying to wean Arab states away from automatic support for its arch enemy, Pakistan, and with its dependence on Arab oil and remittances of Indian workers in the Gulf, always sided with the Arab bloc when the Israel-Arab conflict reached UN organs. The collapse of the Soviet bloc, the 1991 Madrid Conference, which later ushered in the beginning of direct talks and agreements with Israel, and the establishment in 1992 of a center-left government in Israel, brought India, as well as the other Asian giant, China, to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel. Over the years, the pattern of these two countries' votes has not changed, and Israel's major diplomatic and economic efforts were directed west – at the US and Europe. A major exception was Israeli weapons exports, which ended in 2000 in the case of China but have even increased in the case of India.

Modi's election as India's Prime Minister accelerated the process of improved relations between the two countries and their exposure to the public. When he came to power in 2014, the turmoil in the Arab world had already tarnished the perception of a cohesive bloc wielding political and economic power and influence; this helps explain the decoupling in India's attitude to Israel and the Palestinians. PM Modi visited Israel but did not feel the need to balance it with a visit to Ramallah, even though Abu Mazen was warmly received in Delhi. Thus developments in the Arab world indirectly facilitated the progress, which is based on three of India's growing imperatives: expanding the economic base and engines of growth; improving the quality of life of the Indian population; and combating terror.

The economy of India is based heavily on services and particularly IT, which accounts for almost 60 percent of GDP. Industry accounts for less than of 25 percent and agriculture even less, although this sector is the largest employer. If India aims at creating a more balanced economy, Israel could provide assistance, marginal but not insignificant, in water management and utilization and the development of certain crops. Production of potable water with Israel's advanced technology in desalination will improve the quality of life of a large part of India's population, especially in arid zones. In the Joint Statement summing up the visit, the two Prime Ministers referred to the "strategic partnership in water and agriculture." An increase in the industrial share of India's economy will require inter alia the development of industrial R&D and the ongoing ability to maintain the innovative edge. In both there is merit in the bilateral cooperation, and Modi and Netanyahu agreed on establishing the India-Israel R&D and Innovation Fund of \$40 million. The two countries also agreed on cooperation in atomic clocks, GEO-LEO optical links, and other scientific areas, including health. Seven agreements were signed during the visit, creating a new, higher level for the expanding relations.

The bilateral cooperation in the security field is moving from sales from Israel to India to co-production. There is of course the danger that eventually Israeli sales will decline dramatically. The two countries can jointly find solutions relying on Israel's innovations in weapons design and development or finding third party markets .A separate issue in the realm of security is the cooperation in combatting terror, which has targeted both countries. Notwithstanding the different circumstances in the two countries, methodology and equipment are areas for Israel-India cooperation.

When Netanyahu and Modi met, there were two other leaders not present but looming in the background: Presidents Trump and Xi Jinping. The Israeli and Indian leaders can find a common language with the new US President more easily than with his predecessor. In the quest to re-assert itself in key regions in the world, the US may find Israel and India willing to participate in an informal "coalition of the willing." This willingness could, for example, start with a strategic dialogue on the region stretching from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and other subjects of common interest. Indeed, the Joint Statement speaks of an overall "strategic partnership" in describing the bilateral relations.

The Chinese factor is complicated, particularly for Israel, as it tries to expand its economic and scientific relations with China. The broad military cooperation between India and Israel is in stark contrast to the total void in this sector of Israel-China relations imposed on Israel by the US. China has turned a blind eye to this comparison but it may not look kindly on even a tacit India-Israel dialogue related to its zone of immediate security interests, especially under the auspices of the US.

The relations Israel has forged with these two rising Asian powers represent a major shift in the foreign relations component of Israel's overall strategic balance. The two are very different from each other and pose different dilemmas for Israel. While it may seem that the common language, the greater resemblance of political system, and the existence of a Jewish and Indian diasporas in the US are assets in developing relations more easily and rapidly with India, China offers Israel larger and more attractive economic opportunities in the short and medium terms. Navigating between China and India, monitoring their different economic clocks, and juxtaposing these trends with global developments requires skilled and artful coordination on diplomatic, economic, security, public, and private sectors levels. All these sectors in Israel will be heavily engaged by the intricate relations with India and China.