

India, Japan, and Swords of Iron: Asia's Strategic Importance

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In the ongoing war against Hamas, Israel continues to invest much effort in public diplomacy in European and North American countries, and pays careful attention to the positions of the respective countries. However, it seems that a vast and important area, which includes India and Japan (also China, but its position toward Israel and the war against Hamas is known), remains marginal to Israel. India and Japan are leading countries in Asia known for their demographic dominance, and their global strategic importance is only increasing. The way they relate to the war merits examination, in part because it indicates a positive change of direction toward Israel. Israel must also take into account that in the long term, relations with these countries may well play an important role both in future frameworks vis-à-vis the Palestinians and in Israel's strengthened position in the Indo-Pacific region – and act accordingly.

For decades, relations between many important countries in Asia and the Arab and Muslim world have been positive and close. Many Asian countries saw and still see themselves as part of the "non-aligned countries" and often as part of "solidarity between Asia and Africa" frameworks, within which the Arab and Muslim world has a built-in dominance. Accordingly, in most of the cases when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict deteriorated into violence and significant bloodshed, such countries overall leaned toward the Palestinian side, and at the very least "balanced" their messages in order to be perceived as completely neutral. However, in the Swords of Iron war, it seems that some of the important countries in Asia actually support – directly or implicitly – the Israeli side.

India

Israel and India established diplomatic relations in 1992, immediately after the Madrid Conference, which was a watershed in Israel's relations with Asian countries, as well as with countries beyond Asia. For many years, India, which has a very significant Muslim minority of about 15 percent of the country's population (over 200 million people) and has excellent relations with Arab and Muslim countries (including Iran), would condemn Israel and support the Palestinians, certainly in extreme situations. However, since the rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power in 2014, a change in the Indian attitude has begun. Operation Protective Edge began shortly after Modi took office, and even then India's shift from harsh condemnation of Israel was evident. Already then, various commentators began to recognize that Modi's India was abandoning the policy of automatic support for the Palestinians and was siding increasingly with Israel.

Over the last few years Modi and his government, led by the BJP party, which has a nationalist and even religious (Hindu) agenda, have adopted a policy that has often been described as discriminatory against Muslims in India, and the connection between this policy and the State of Israel is seen as almost natural. The fact that India is approaching general elections in a few months even increases the nationalist rhetoric of the BJP representatives, and it sometimes seems that some of the statements of support for Israel heard in the last month are aimed at the Indian voters, no less than at Israel. The rhetoric of radical Islamic elements in India – as well as Khaled Mashal (in an online speech) – who in recent weeks compared Zionism to the leading concept of the BJP "Hindutva" ("the Hindu essence" of India) – aroused sharp criticism in India toward the Palestinians. India's Foreign Minister even claimed that like Israel, India also faces significant terrorist threats, and therefore must oppose terrorism in any form.

The strategic connection in the security dimension between India and Israel, especially in the last decade, is also related India's understandings regarding the importance of its relations with Israel. It is not just about fruitful cooperation between the defense industries of the two countries; it is also about a broader set of interests that includes, for example, the I2U2 partnership (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States), as well as the initiative, which at this stage is mainly still theoretical to connect India and Europe through the Middle East and Israel – an initiative that also corresponds with India's strengthening ties with the Gulf states.

On October 7, the first day of the war, Modi tweeted his condolences and shock at the terrorist attack, and ended with, "We stand in solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour." A few days later, on October 10, following a phone conversation with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Modi tweeted: "People of India stand firmly with Israel in this difficult hour." That said, India has not "abandoned" the Palestinians, India spoke out against the killing of civilians in general and reiterated its position supporting a two-state solution to the conflict. However, India's abstention from voting at the United Nations on October 27 on a call for an immediate ceasefire, which did not include condemnation of Hamas, can certainly be interpreted as a position in Israel's favor.

But beyond internal Indian interests, as well as those directly related to the Middle East, part of the change in the Indian position is related to an even more significant global issue, namely, the rise of the Indo-Pacific space as a global organizing concept regarding the linkage between different countries, certainly in Asia, but also in the Middle East.

Japan

Diplomatic relations between Israel and Japan have existed since 1952. In the first decades following the establishment of the state, relations were overshadowed by the close ties between Japan and Arab countries, Japan's dependence on energy imports, and various elements of the Arab boycott. The significant point of change, similar as with India, occurred around the Madrid Conference, when as part of the disintegration of the Arab boycott on the State of Israel, ties between Israel and Japan could also grow. And so, for example, many brand-name products (in the automotive field, for

instance) began to come to Israel, and various cooperation agreements between the countries were signed in the 90s.

However, Japan continued to adhere to neutrality regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in most cases when the conflict made headlines it seemed that this approach meant support for Palestinian rights and condemnation of Israel's use of force. However, throughout the last decade, Israel-Japan relations have gradually deepened, both economically and also security-wise, especially in the last two years. The deepening of ties, first under Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and then under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, were also related to the Abraham Accords. The trend of regional normalization enabled the Gulf states to accept in-depth cooperation between Israel and Japan and give increased legitimacy to such ties. In addition, it has also given increased legitimacy to a more active Japanese foreign policy, accompanied by a more aggressive security policy. From Japan's point of view, the importance of the Indo-Pacific in this context is very significant: Japan strongly promotes this concept, along with the idea of FOIP (Free and Open Indo-Pacific), and again, its western margins – our region – is of great importance.

On October 7, the Japanese Embassy in Israel published a statement condemning the attack on Israel, along with condolences to the families (the statement was issued at noon on Saturday, when the dimensions of the massacre were still unclear, without mentioning Hamas by name or using the word "slaughter"). The following day, Japan apparently returned to more "balanced" messages – those that condemn violence on both sides and call for an end to it. However, Japan soon began to show a greater inclination than before to the Israeli side. Condemnations of Hamas have become less laconic and more focused, and Japan has imposed sanctions on entities related to Hamas (which itself, at least its military arm, is defined as a terrorist organization in Japan). Like India, Japan abstained from the UN vote on October 27, and this too is a positive development for Israel.

The fact that Japan's Foreign Minister visited Israel immediately afterward and met with her Israeli counterpart as well as with her Palestinian counterpart indicates that Japan maintains its balanced line, but also that it attaches more importance to the situation than in the past. In this context, the Japanese humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip somewhat strengthens the way in which Japan is perceived in the region, and the Japanese emphasis on the Palestinian Authority while condemning Hamas is also in Israel's favor, recognizing the two-state solution as the only relevant option for the future.

Conclusion

The great importance that India and Japan attach to the Indo-Pacific region is directly related to their strengthened ties with Israel in recent years (and among themselves as well), beyond their respective specific interests with Israel. This importance is also related to what they see as the Chinese challenge, in this realm and beyond. Their strengthened ties with the United States is relevant in this context: massive US support for Israel has significant ripples in the Asian realm as well. The visit by Secretary of State Blinken to Tokyo, Seoul, and New Delhi these days, when the war in Gaza takes center stage, should also be interpreted in this light. Given the false charges against

Israel as "colonialist" or a "Western outpost" that is foreign to its environment, support from Asian countries carries particular significance. In this sense, the support of India, which competes mainly with China for the leadership of the Global South, undermines the apparent monolithic nature of the Global South and allows Israel effective public diplomacy leverage. This is also evident among the countries of Southeast Asia.

Therefore, Israel should expand its approach to advocacy and influence, including in the realm of public opinion, beyond the Western arena of Europe and North America, and strengthen Israel's place in the Indo-Pacific as well. While the governments in India and Japan understand the situation, public opinion there can easily drift (and it does) in the familiar directions of anti-Israelism. Admittedly, the Israeli embassies and consulates in Asia are doing significant work, and students, graduates, and faculty members from the East Asian Studies departments in Israel contribute to the effort, mainly on social media. But an overall public diplomacy effort is required from the state. Moreover, in the long term, improving relationships will encounter glass ceilings if a political horizon is not on the table, even if not immediately. India and Japan can certainly play an important role in creating such a horizon, not least because they are seen as significant actors in the region.

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