

Cementing the India-Israel bond

Terming a relationship “special” and “unique” is a frequent cliché in foreign policy. But when Israel and India employ such language, it is justified.

By SREERAM CHAULIA Published: JANUARY 15, 2018 20:28



A municipal worker cleans the street in front of a billboard displaying Indian and Israeli flags for PM Netanyahu's visit, Ahmedabad, India, January 2018 (photo credit: REUTERS/AMIT DAVE)

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s high-profile visit to India this week, the first by an Israeli prime minister in 15 years, is an indicator of how close the two strategic partners have gotten in recent years. Accompanied throughout his India travels by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Netanyahu stepping on a welcome mat shaped by shared mutual interests and

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Terming a relationship “special” and “unique” is a frequent cliché in foreign policy. But when Israel and India employ such language on the occasion of the silver jubilee of their diplomatic ties, it is well justified, because burgeoning all-round cooperation has exceeded expectations and left behind the baggage of history.

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The natural bonhomie between Netanyahu and Modi, as well as the giant strides being made in bilateral defense and civilian trade and investment, have put to rest a bygone era when India had hesitated to touch Israel with a barge pole owing to domestic mental blocks.

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That we are in a new age is evident from the lack of any sizable constituency in India which vehemently opposes a deepening of ties with Israel or hyphenates them with India's outlook toward Palestine or Iran. This is a generational transformation wherein ideological and religious considerations which had colored and jaundiced India's approach to Israel have been replaced by hardheaded and nationalistic appreciation of the intrinsic value of Israel to India's security and economic development.

Israel and India have reached a mature stage of understanding that each will not prejudice or try to disrupt the strategic choices of the other vis-à-vis third parties. Geographically, since the two countries are located in different spheres and have different constructs of neighborhood and strategic space, they do differ on how to tackle their respective foes and secure themselves.

If India is courting Iran for geopolitical and economic reasons and if India continues to endorse the two-state solution for creation of a Palestinian state, Israel understands. It is not ideal from an Israeli point of view, but Tel Aviv is prepared to accept New Delhi's right to have its own views.

As Netanyahu put it after India recently voted in the United Nations . . . the United States' decision to unilaterally recognize Jerusalem as Israe capital, "I would have preferred another vote, to be frank, but I don't materially changes the tremendous flowering of relations." India is Is number one customer of advanced weapons systems and that mate

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overrides any Israeli disappointment over India's positions on Iran or Palestine.

Likewise, if Israel has a tacit alliance with Saudi Arabia to counter Iran, India understands the compulsion behind that maneuver and does not try to impose preconditions on Israel. In foreign relations, it is said that only bosom friends can agree to disagree.

The truest example of this empathy is being displayed by Israel and India.

When India announced cancellation of a \$500 million deal with Israel's Rafael for purchasing Spike anti-tank missiles due to technology transfer and indigenization priorities, concerns were expressed in business circles that such setbacks would dampen enthusiasm for the Indian market among Israel's corporations.

But Netanyahu had the bigger picture in mind when he remarked, "I think you're going to see an expansion of economic and other ties, regardless of this or that deal." In fact, the same Rafael has played a pivotal role in co-producing the state-of-the-art Barak 8 surface-to-air missile with Indian counterparts.

Netanyahu and Modi should prioritize launching more such successful joint ventures, which generate profits and also equip the militaries of both nations as well as those of customers from the rest of the world.

Modi realizes that without Israel, his "Make in India" manufacturing dream in the defense field will falter. Hence the effort at the highest political echelons in India to overcome occasional hurdles in dealing with Israel and explore "G to G" (government to government) solutions.

Netanyahu's delegation to India, with 130 Israeli businesspersons in tow, aims to broaden the civilian economic engagements which range from agriculture, diamonds and water treatment to encouraging entrepreneurship among India's youth by connecting with Israeli startups. A free trade agreement (FTA), which is being negotiated, could triple non-defense commerce, from less than \$5 billion today to \$15b.

The Israeli prime minister's outreach to Bollywood to incentivize filming in his country's scenic locations adds another layer to a developing relationship.

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For Israel, the Indian people and state's warmth toward it is critical to the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign to isolate it internationally. If China and India, the world's two most populous nations, treat Israel with dignity and respect, then its diplomatic footing is as

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India is an emerging global power which completes a supportive triad alongside China and the US, which are both already in Israel's corner.

Netanyahu is bringing along to India a 11-year-old Jewish boy whose parents were mercilessly killed by Pakistani terrorists in the 2008 Mumbai attacks. It is a poignant sight loaded with symbolism and a reminder to the world that Israel and India are coordinating at the level of intelligence agencies and military training to fight the jihadist scourge. In fields like counter-radicalism, border management and cyber security, Tel Aviv and New Delhi are bosom friends for life. The sentiment is emotional in these spheres since both countries are motivated by a feeling of common victimhood.

Had Israel and India limited their exchanges to a purely transactional level, they would not have attained the present heightened equilibrium. Theirs is a bond to cherish and nurture.

The author is dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs in Sonipat, India, and author of Modi Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of India's Prime Minister.

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