

With PM Narendra Modi's Israel visit, India crosses the rubicon

Synopsis

PM Narendra Modi's crossing of the ultimate frontier and going to Israel is a finishing touch to a saga of 25 years of progressively warming bilateral relations.



By **Sreeram Chaulia**

If diplomacy can generate national catharsis, then Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has achieved it with his epic visit to Israel. By trading with aplomb in a country where not one of his 13 predecessors dared set foot, he has simultaneously redefined India's external self, and vindicated Israel's identity.

Gone are the diffidence and the gingerliness that previously defined how [India](#) interacted with Israel. In its place, Modi has injected confidence and certitude about wearing India's choices and national interests on its sleeves.

Banished are the overcautious, hypocritical and domestically poisoned lenses for approaching Israel, and ushered in are bold, dispassionate and objective ways of handling this key West Asian power.

Driven by the motto of 'India First', Modi has overcome a huge psychological barrier, and slayed many a mental demon by finally making the journey to Israel. Modi's crossing of the ultimate frontier and going to Israel is a finishing touch to a saga of 25 years of progressively warming bilateral relations.

From the day when Prime Minister [PV Narasimha Rao](#) decided to end the Cold War-era estrangement and launch full diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992, the two countries have never looked back. Steadily over the years, Israel climbed up the ranks as India's most trusted national security partner and defence supplier.

So close was the friendship in the post-Cold War rediscovery period that Israel was once prevented by US objections from sharing cutting-edge military hardware with India.

Mutual trust between India and Israel accumulated in oodles and was unaffected by New Delhi's continued support for Palestinian statehood and its strategic equation with Israel's bête noire, Iran. Yet, in spite of being empathetic sojourners, something was amiss.

Israel noted with sadness that India was doing so much on the practical plane with it, but not acknowledging it at the apex political level. In international relations, two countries cannot enjoy a truly special relationship if one of them hides behind a thicket of ambiguities and self-doubts and denies proper political affirmation of the other. Israel is

especially touchy about recognition as a legitimate nation-state due to its controversial occupation of Palestinian territories and land of neighbouring nations.

Initially reliant on a handful of Western powers like France and the US to be counted as a respectable member of the international community, the Jewish State is seeking to widen the circle of global validators.

In this context, China and India have risen in estimation as Asian powerhouses whose closeness to Tel Aviv helps it counter the boycott, divestment, sanctions (BDS) movement for isolating and disenfranchising Israel as an apartheid state.

The protocol-shattering welcomes and wall-to-wall accompaniment Modi received from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his visit were expressions of gratitude not just for the symbolic lift the Indian PM provides but also for the rapid acceleration he has engineered in bilateral relations.

Modi has accomplished far more with Israel than merely showing daylight to a closeted affair. Under his leadership, India has signed Israel's largest ever [defence deal](#) for surface-to-air missiles and opened new vistas for cooperation such as innovative technology transfer. He has also twinned his 'Make in India' with Israel's 'Make with India', positing Israel as a core partner for India's economic modernisation.

Geopolitically, Modi has completed a full circle with his much-awaited Israel trip. His personal diplomacy with Gulf Arab nations, Turkey and Iran in the past three years have yielded material benefits for India. But there was one little chink in his 'Look West' policy armour — the most powerful West Asian state, Israel, was pining for his presence.

Now that Modi has crossed the Rubicon and ended the wait, the natural partnership has been freed from a sense of incompleteness and will gallop exponentially.

(The writer is Dean, Jindal School of International Affairs)

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