

Modi's Israel visit: Pragmatic change in foreign policy

I was asked on a television talk show as to what was the most important takeaway from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Israel. One could cite the number of agreements signed during the visit, the warmth and palpable personal chemistry between Modi and his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, and bilateral ties galloping well beyond the routine commercial engagement, which led the two sides to describe their relationship as strategic. But in my view, the real salience of the visit lies in India demonstrating the requisite maturity and confidence in dealing with tricky foreign policy issues.

The BJP has traditionally favoured closer ties with Israel, and our relations with that country have been consistently growing ever since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. It is noteworthy that the decision to establish our Embassy in Israel was taken by the then Congress Government led by Narsimha Rao. It is, of course, a different matter that even though Rao was upbeat about India benefiting a great deal from Israeli experience in a number of areas, including agriculture, drip irrigation, water harvesting and solar energy, and had dispatched Prof MS Swaminathan to study the possible contours of cooperation almost immediately after opening of our Embassy in Tel Aviv, the Central Government continued to remain very coy and reticent about relations with Israel. Ironically, when I was asked to go to Israel to open our Embassy, the instructions given to me by the Foreign Ministry were to merely go through the technicality of setting up the Embassy in a discreet manner without creating much publicity. I realised soon after reaching Israel that our Foreign Ministry would continue to remain circumspect and not willing to take any political risks inherent in pushing the relations forward. It was clear that decades of prejudices built into our foreign policy would not be easy to get over with quickly.

In the initial period, the relations were driven by our State Governments which appeared more willing to engage Israeli companies in order to adopt technologies available there. They did not

seem to be constrained by political and diplomatic considerations. The first dignitary to visit Israel was then Gujarat Chief Minister Chiman Bhai Patel. He was followed by Sharad Pawar, the then Maharashtra CM and one of the most powerful Congress leaders at that time, who led a delegation of nearly 500 farmers and officials to an agriculture technology exhibition in Tel Aviv. Many more Chief Ministers and high-powered State Government delegations visited Israel to see for themselves Israeli accomplishments in areas which were critical for their development as well.

Despite a flurry of exchanges at the State Governments' level with Israel, growing bilateral trade and evolving linkages in Defence and security cooperation, the political relations at the Central Government-level remained lukewarm for quite some time. When then Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres visited India in 1993, he was not even received by then Prime Minister Narsimha Rao and had to be content with delegation-level talks with a junior Minister from our side.

Apparently, we continued to show a lot of concern for the perceived sensitivities of the Palestinians and the Arabs which was quite inexplicable since our decision to establish diplomatic relations with Israel was taken in consultation with then PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat as several Arab countries had themselves already normalised relations with Israel.

The balancing act of always looking at our relations with Israel from the prism of the Palestinian issue, which itself was quite misplaced as I have argued, began to be seen as a virtue in India — a moral guiding principle of our foreign policy. A very senior commentator, in fact, noted that Modi's Israel visit was ill-advised since it amounted to India having abandoned carefully crafted traditional balance on Arab-Israel issues. It was further argued that India needed to be fair to both the communities. The question is whether we were even-handed when we did not have diplomatic relations with Israel for 44 years after its creation. And how does careful and slow calibration of our relations with Israel ensure level-playing field when we have never



allowed any constraints to be imposed on our relations with the Palestinians. We have continued to provide them with all possible material support for capacity building and human resources development, which are our core strength areas, and have never wavered on principled support for their aspirations for an independent Palestinian state.

I feel that relations with a country should evolve entirely on our national interests and the needs of our people. In that sense, the foreign policy should evolve from within, based on what people want and not something that some so-called erudite "intellectuals" would seek to prescribe.

The Prime Minister's Israel visit is a courageous step to de-hyphenate our relations with Israel and Palestinians. Both need to proceed independently of each other. In fact, it is in

keeping with the current geopolitical dynamics that we should seek to optimise our relations with a host of entities and often competing power centres, benchmarking our policy and engagement only to our national interest both in economic and strategic terms.

Despite preponderance of desert and water stressed conditions, Israel meets most of its food requirements and is regarded as a world leader in agriculture technology. "Designing" of fruit varieties with longer shelf life, and other specifications such as skin colour and blush factor, size, firmness and reduced acidity level for the mango crop provided by overseas buyers have helped Israel secure significant export revenues. Israel now boasts of the highest mango yield per acre. Innovative techniques used for floriculture drew a lot of entrepreneurs

from India even in the early days. Admittedly, agricultural research is fairly well developed in India as well, but on-ground application remains pitifully marginal and that is an area we can learn a lot from the Israeli experience.

In the field of water management also, Israel has done wonders. Rainwater is used to recharge underground aquifers. Extensive use of drip irrigation has already caught the fancy of farmers in India. Most notably, Israel recycles nearly 90 per cent of the waste water using that to meet its agricultural needs. Spain is the distant second ranked country recycling just about 20 per cent of its waste water. India's record is, of course, abysmal. Modi has already identified this as a primary area of bilateral cooperation.

Israel has emerged as the third largest supplier of

Defence equipment and technologies to India and could move up in the ranking ladder in the coming years. Military trade is increasingly seen as a commercial transaction, and inclusion of Israel in the list of potential suppliers has helped us secure better terms overall. Addit-onally, Israel has proved to be a reliable supplier in time of our urgent need such as during the Kargil conflict. It has also shown willingness for technology transfer and joint production of Defence equipment in India contributing to Modi's "Make in India" pitch. The agreement on joint development of medium range surface-to-air missile system Barak-8 by Israeli aircraft industries and DRDO of India is a case in point.

Strong Israel-China cooperation is sometimes cited as a possible bottleneck in advancing our relations with Israel

further. We should regard that, at best, as an extraneous consideration and focus on accelerating our bilateral linkages in critical areas. India obviously stands to gain a lot and it would be logical to proceed with the task with full vigour and confidence.

In overall terms, our new approach signifies unprecedented confidence in creating our own narrative instead of having to forever react to developments and moods of other nations in a defensive manner. It has an unmistakable imprint of Modi. As an important emerging power on the world scene with rapidly growing economy, we deserve no less.

(The writer retired from the Indian Foreign Service recently and served as India's Ambassador in several countries. He opened the Indian Embassy in Israel in May 1992)



Virendra Gupta

The balancing act of always looking at our relations with Israel from the prism of the Palestinian issue, which itself was quite misplaced, began to be seen as a moral guiding principle of our foreign policy. However, foreign policy should evolve from within, based on what people want and not something that some so-called erudite "intellectuals" would seek to prescribe. PM Modi's Israel visit is a courageous step to de-hyphenate our relations with Israel and Palestinians