

A defining relationship

Netanyahu's visit must be viewed as a serenade to a rapidly expanding relationship between India and Israel which is bound to yield substantial results in the longer run

ISHAAN
SAXENA



The much-awaited visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has finally commenced. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his counterpart share tremendous camaraderie, which was on full display when Modi visited Israel to mark 25 years of formal diplomatic ties between the two countries. Despite the fact that India has voted against the 'Jerusalem Vote' in the United Nations, there is no doubt that this diplomatic visit is going to further cement Indo-Israeli bilateral ties. Areas of cooperation are vast and the results of a healthy interaction will be mutually beneficial for both countries.

The bilateral relationship between the two countries has witnessed a checkered history. Both countries faced similar circumstances post independence. Both India and Israel diverted their energies to the refugee crisis which emerged as the fledgling nations gained independence. The bloody scars of partition continue to have a lingering impact on the geopolitics of the region till date.

Israel continues to wage a war against Hezbollah and Hamas. India's Pakistan dilemma also seems to be a constant curse. Pakistan based terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba and Jaish e-Mohammed continue to be an alarming concern for Indian security agencies. Both India and Israel are beacons of democracy in an unstable and unpredictable geopolitical environment.

Concerns expressed by both nations are similar and these are going to underpin the foundations of a long lasting relationship. There is no doubt that anti-national elements in both countries are watching the emerging contours of these ties with a hawk's eye.

Coercive diplomacy and an aggressive military posture are tools both countries have utilised to meet security challenges in a dynamic and precarious environment. Israel, of course, can utilise this tool more frequently because of a very inferior opponent who virtually has no international recognition. India's troublemaker is internationally recognised and possesses a gradually expanding nuclear arsenal. Despite India's military superiority, its response to a terror attack in the past has been measured and calibrated.

Terrorism is certainly going to be an active part of the discourse both world leaders have behind closed doors. India's relationship with Israel was a little unsteady prior to 1992, even though both nations faced similar challenges. Negotiations and talks were usually being the veil; often very surreptitiously. Domestic imperative, such as a swelling Muslim



population at home and growing remittances from the Middle East meant that India's foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Israel was not always in consonance with the innate desire to engage more purposefully.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, domestic compulsion (a rapidly deteriorating balance of payment account, political instability following the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, a spike in oil prices following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait) compelled India to explore a more viable economic policy model. The New Economic Policy of 1991 enshrined the ideas of liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation. This also transformed the Indian economy from an inward looking state to one which began to make aggressive strides in the world economy.

Concurrent concerns in the security environment drove the two nations closer and engagement began to focus on wider issues. The violent secessionist struggle in Kashmir in 1989 also meant that security concerns were high on the table for the Indian state. The intifada against India was very similar to the one Israel experienced in the late 1980s.

There are innumerable areas where the two nations can seek to cooperate. Defence technology is one area. With production moving from sales, from to Israel to India, to a model which encourages coproduction. This could work against Israel's favour but there is ample room to cooperate nonetheless. They often say that 'Necessity is the mother of all inventions'. No other country exemplifies this better than the tiny Jewish nation.

BOTH PRIME MINISTER MODI AND HIS ISRAELI COUNTERPART ARE SEASONED WORLD LEADERS WHO WILL BALANCE THE VARIOUS STRATEGIC, DIPLOMATIC AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THIS DEFINING RELATIONSHIP WHICH WILL PROVE TO BE A HARBINGER OF A PROMISING FUTURE

With limited natural resources and an arid environment, it has successfully managed to surmount many challenges. The desalination and purification jeep which Modi's Israeli counterpart will present to him is a prime example of effective water utilisation in an arid environment. This will no doubt benefit a large percentage of India's population if the implementation is effective. India's conducive business environment is also a coveted space for Israeli startups that are likely to penetrate the country's large and lucrative market. Likewise, deepening ties in Research and Development will give both nations an impetus when it comes to innovation.

The bilateral ties between Israel and America have improved under President Donald Trump with his decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Relations between Israel and America will certainly improve under the current administration. The Obama Administration was not satisfied with Israel's expansion in the West Bank. This was very evident when the US decided to abstain from a vote which denounced the actions Israel was undertaking. Trump's wise decision to cut security aid to Pakistan due to its tacit support for the Afghanistan Taliban and the Haqqani network will give a momentum to the India-US-Israeli trilateral relationship.

But Israel on its part will have to balance its bilateral interests with India and China. Although there is hardly any defence related partnership between Israel and China, there is ample room for scientific and economic cooperation. How Israel carefully

strides the tenuous thin lines and crafts a durable relationship between the two growing Asian powers is going to be a pressing question for policy makers. Nonetheless, the visit must be viewed as a serenade to a rapidly expanding relationship which is bound to yield substantial results in the longer run.

It will be quite a sight to see Moshe Holtzberg, the toddler who survived the attack at Nariman House on 26/11. Horrific memories of helicopter circling the Chabad House, trying to ferret out Pakistan-based LeT terrorists are etched in public consciousness. Moshe, who is now 11, does wish to visit the place where his parents were mercilessly killed by gun brandishing terrorists. There is no doubt that one can expect a scathing statement on terrorism which is an issue both countries are grappling with and urgently trying to eradicate.

The congruence of broader interests and a convergence of national security imperatives will provide ballast for this relationship. Concerns regarding the Shia-Sunni divide in the Middle East may give rise to inchoate anxiety among the top leadership in both countries. Israel cannot afford a Middle East which plunges deeper into chaos and anarchy, and India cannot afford such a schism to have a spillover effect on its burgeoning Muslim population. Modi and Netanyahu are seasoned world leaders who will balance the various strategic, diplomatic and economic aspects of this defining relationship which will prove to be a harbinger of a promising future.

(The writer is a socio-economic commentator.)