

Realpolitik takes over

India-Israel ties are no longer hostage to idealistic concerns

Relations with Israel always pit a government's interests against its instincts. There is a strong, instinctive sympathy among the public and among many leaders for the cause of Palestinian statehood. But there is an equally strong acceptance that Israel is a country that has become indispensable to India's security and technological interests.

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to break both the taboo against State visits to Israel and end the hyphenation of Israel and Palestine makes it official that India's realpolitik interests outweigh its idealistic concerns. The trajectory of New Delhi-Tel Aviv ties was such that the prime minister's decision seemed quite natural to most Indians.

Mr Modi's State visit to Israel has only underlined what has already been evident how important this small country is for India's future. Israel already is crucial in providing the security edge that India needs to face off its multiple enemies. Russia may provide the same fighters to India and China, but the electronic extras that Israel puts into the Indian aircraft contribute to India's aerial superiority against its northern neighbour. Israel is probably the closest external ally India has in the area of cybersecurity. And, as the predominance of space in the agreements that Mr Modi signed indicates, space is the next hardware frontier in bilateral relations. Yet, as Mr Modi indicated a number of times, Israel's greatest contribution to India's future may be in the most mundane of areas: Water. Israel is a superpower when it comes to water recycling, conservation and desalination. How exactly India will be able to harness Israel's knowhow in this field is still unclear.

Among the religious Right, whether Hindu or Muslim, there is a tendency to see the India-Israel relationship through the prism of domestic sectarian politics. Israel is not a model for anyone when it comes to communal relations. But given what Israel can and does contribute in the way of solutions to India's many problems, New Delhi is right to no longer hold the bilateral relationship hostage to idealistic concerns.