

# Modi's hug-diplomacy

The serious business with Israel begins now

**T**HE optics of the six-day visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have been heady. If the two Prime Ministers walked barefoot in the Mediterranean Sea near Haifa during Modi's visit to Israel, there was the prolonged hug this time besides forced humour, a private dinner and the Taj visit. Even if Israel did not agree to mention Pakistan in the joint statement, the subtext of Netanyahu's Mumbai leg will be the 2008 attacks, much to South Block's pleasure. Once passed off as a Front Office for the US — Israel sold military hardware and surveillance equipment to India that the US could not because of export control laws or fear of upsetting Pakistan — the rather overdone bonhomie signals the desire of the two countries to strike out an independent path of their own.

By this time, the two PMs would have realised the honeymoon phase is over. The Indo-Israel relationship is beginning to encounter rough bumps and the complexities of geopolitics. India's cancellation of a large defence deal and its abrupt restoration a day before Netanyahu's arrival demands a few answers. India might not have the earlier latitude and comfort in conducting defence trade with Israel because of its expanding ties with China. Israel may have tried to offset that apprehension by offering a step-up in ties with India: initial approval for Indian energy companies to explore for oil and gas in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

The mutual glad-handing also obscures the political gulf between the two nations. The Indo-Israel joint statement did avoid a reference to the "two-state solution" which is anathema to the hardliner in Netanyahu. But the overhang of New Delhi's vote opposing the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital suggests that when it matters, India and Israel will find themselves on different sides of the fence. Notwithstanding the greater stress on older areas of collaborations, an overdose of bonhomie veils the fact that the two sides are still struggling to move away from a transactional arrangement to establishing the principles of a more durable relationship.