

Sky is the Limit: Examining the Evolution of Indo-Israel Defence Relations

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Abstract

This research article focuses on the collaboration between India and Israel in defence matters since their full diplomatic ties were established in 1992 after more than four decades of estrangement since their independence declarations. It aims to examine in particular the evolution of counterterrorism relationships between the two countries. Their collaboration involves information sharing, counterterrorism, telecommunications, and the development of internet infrastructure. This article examines India's significant challenges in dealing with terrorist attacks on its land, as well as the worldwide background and internal political limits on the execution of the cooperation process with Israel. It also accounts for the influence of Narendra Modi's government in strengthening defence cooperation between the two countries.

Keywords: India, Israel, Diplomacy, Defence, Realism

Introduction

In international politics, shared interests, ideals, and issues are important for states to share a strong working relationship. India and Israel seem to possess several commonalities: a supposed belief in democratic principles and aversion to identical challenges of terrorism. India's simultaneous support for the Palestinian cause and recognition of Israel in the 1950s is evidence of both idealism and realism in India's diplomatic relations with Israel. India's decision-making after independence was influenced by internal factors in addition to international factors. The principle of nonalignment in India's foreign policy was prudent considering the potential consequences of a realist approach for India, a newly independent but underdeveloped nation, which would have posed obstacles to its socioeconomic advancement. This article locates the contemporary shift of India's foreign policy towards a greater recognition of Israel in the context of a realist understanding of the global international order.

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It surveys how ideals, interests and issues have formed the core of a strong relationship between the two countries especially in the domain of defence matters.

India's Israel Policy: A Historic Change

The presence of structural restrictions within the international system highlights another significant problem that is crucial to India's foreign policy. According to Kenneth Waltz (2008), nations are motivated to acquire power by minimising the power of their opponents. Great powers often engage in aggressive behaviour, prompting potential targets to counterbalance and fight in order to acquire power. China's strategy on border issues prompts India, which perceives itself as a possible target of this strategy, to adopt a balancing approach against China. This balancing behaviour, as argued by Waltz, serves as a means for combating aggressiveness. The decision to choose a nonalignment policy was driven by the desire to provide additional time for domestic growth. The primary objective was not to isolate India from global affairs. In order to establish a significant presence in international affairs, India required a substantial period to confront and overcome a range of obstacles, including but not limited to poverty, illiteracy, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, technical underdevelopment, and social fragmentation. Despite the significant problems faced domestically, India has occasionally exhibited its prowess.

The end of the Cold War, which brought new opportunities and challenges on a global scale, had a significant impact on Indian foreign policy. Globalisation gave economic opportunity but also presented a huge danger to national security from global terrorism. In this context, Indian foreign policy switched from nonalignment to alignment, abandoned decades-long scepticism of the US for national benefit, and prioritised regional issues over global ones. India's focus on Southeast Asia, which it had ignored during the Cold War, was the result of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao's Look East strategy. India used the Look East strategy to establish diplomatic influence against China in Southeast Asia, strengthening its regional clout. The 1991 initiative changed India's global strategy. Narasimha Rao valued neighbours, but on January 29, 1992, he opened embassies in New Delhi and Tel Aviv, establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel.

India-Israel ties had a significant upswing after the takeover of office by Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister of India in 2014. The current state of affairs between the two nations is now being characterised by experts as a period of diplomatic resurgence. India's historical secret

collaboration with Israel has recently evolved into a more overt and publicised sort of engagement. In a significant deviation from previous practices, Prime Minister Modi has publicly and wholeheartedly welcomed the nation of Israel. Prime Minister Modi enjoys a personal bond with the State of Israel. In his capacity as the chief minister of Gujarat, he embarked on a tour to Tel Aviv in 2006, whereupon he expressed admiration for the potential lessons that India may glean from Israel. Israel extended a warm reception to Prime Minister Modi during a period when he faced limited acceptance in some nations due to allegations of his involvement in inadequately addressing communal unrest in 2002. During the United Nations General Assembly in September 2014, the leaders of India and Israel convened, where Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his belief in the limitless potential of collaboration between the two nations. During a three-day visit, Prime Minister Modi's engagement with Israel may be seen as a significant transformation in India's foreign policy towards Israel. The tour has historical significance, as it was the first visit of an elected Indian prime minister to the Jewish state. Additionally, significant agreements were reached during the visit, which held the potential to provide long-term benefits for both nations.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which holds power in India, has consistently advocated for the enhancement of bilateral relations between India and Israel. The leaders, regardless of their stance in opposition or government, have continually demonstrated their support for Israel's skill in counterterrorism and its policies for national security. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) assumed power in 1996, first for 13 months, then subsequently, in 1998, for a whole term. Notable figures within the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), including Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the Deputy Prime Minister, as well as Home Minister L.K. Advani, have openly stated their respect for Israel's ability to endure in a challenging geopolitical environment. Additionally, their assessment of the worldwide threat posed by Islamist terrorism aligns with the perspective held by Israel. The significance of Israel in Indian strategic and security circles was underscored by the visits in 2000 of two prominent ministers from the BJP-led government, namely Home Minister Advani and Jaswant Singh, who became the first Indian foreign minister to visit Israel. The delegation that accompanied the visit of Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani included the leaders of India's intelligence agencies, including the Research Analysis Wing (RAW), the Intelligence Bureau (IB), and the Central Police organisation. During diplomatic engagements between Indian officials and their Israeli counterparts, discussions were held on potential collaboration in the areas of internal security

management, intelligence sharing, and cooperative efforts. Consequently, Israeli spy services reached an agreement to establish offices in New Delhi.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the spread of Islamist terrorism, and India and Israel's exclusion from the US-led War on Terror in Afghanistan, while Pakistan was made an ally in this effort, brought the issues of security, defence, intelligence, and counterterrorism to the forefront of the growing Indo-Israeli strategic partnership. It is thus not surprising that India, like Israel, concluded that it needed to develop its own instruments to safeguard its population and its borders from terrorist organisations, some of which get assistance from the neighbouring governments.

Defence: Bedrock of Cooperation

The strategic and defence cooperation between India and Israel has seen a positive trajectory since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two nations in 1992. In recent years, there has been an increased level of coordination between the two nations, resulting in a strengthened focus on enhancing their respective defence capacities through close cooperation. India is well recognised as a prominent importer of defence equipment on a global scale, whereas Israel has a prominent position as a leading supplier of defence technology worldwide. In the present setting, the defence partnership between India and Israel has considerable significance. The defence and security cooperation between both countries is of utmost importance. India's foremost objective is to prioritise collaboration with Israel, as it recognises that bolstering its military capabilities is essential for effectively managing the challenges posed by antagonistic neighbouring nations as well as combating domestic terrorism and extremism. Furthermore, India's pursuit of dominance can only be realised through the use of advanced Israeli defence apparatus and technology. Israel has consistently offered substantial assistance to India in times of crisis or when other resources were unavailable. Throughout several historical conflicts, such as the India-China War of 1962, the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, and the 1999 Kargil crisis, Israel has shown its support for India by providing military assistance and intelligence assistance. Israel's consistent and amicable alignment throughout times of turmoil establishes it as a dependable ally and defence collaborator over an extended period. The bilateral weapons trade between India and Israel has seen a substantial rise over the years since 1991. The dissolution of the Soviet Union spurred India to seek a strategic partnership that may address its need for military armaments. Furthermore, to address

the emerging issues, it became necessary to modernise the ageing Soviet armaments. In the given scenario, Israel proved to be a dependable partner in fulfilling India's requirements for weaponry, knowledge transfer, and collaborative manufacturing.

The two nations' arms production trade over the last decade was worth \$10 billion.³⁶ Israeli weapons exports to India increased when India received the Phalcon Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) installed on Russian-built Ilyushin II -76s in May 2009 and March 2010. Israel is India's third-largest weapons supplier (worth around \$1 billion).³⁷ After Modi became prime minister in 2014, Indo-Israeli collaboration skyrocketed. Israel shipped \$662 million in arms and defence goods to India from May to November after his win. This exceeded Israeli shipments to India during the preceding three years. Israel's defence establishment has developed many joint ventures with Indian partners for Make in India. Israel's Elbit firm has formed collaborative ventures with Indian enterprises, such as Adani-Elbit Advanced Systems India, to build UAVs. India's connections with Israel go beyond military collaboration, according to popular opinion. Besides billions in defence sales, India and Israel share a geopolitical ambition. The opening line of the India-Israel Joint Statement published during Netanyahu's January visit to India calls the relationship a "strategic partnership." Modi said that Israel and India have complicated geographies. Strategic risks to regional peace and stability are recognised. I and Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to do more to preserve our strategic interests." India and Israel must be able to handle varied issues in complicated geographies. Thus, the two countries' power struggles are not imperialistic. Like Israel, India needs power to survive, and interpreting its power aspirations as expansionism is misguided. Structures force India and Israel to increase their strength. Thus, India's power grab is compatible with democracy and world morality.

From 2015 to 2023, India and Israel participated in a number of key collaborative defence projects and signed several important defence agreements. 2015 saw the signing of an agreement with Israel for \$2 billion for the sale of surface-to-air missile systems to India. In 2017, the two nations formalised their commitment to working more closely together in the area of military hardware by signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU). In the same year, Israel Aerospace Industries became a supplier of missile defence systems to India after signing a deal for \$630 million with the country. In 2018, India and Israel participated in a combined naval exercise for the very first time. The purpose of the exercise was to strengthen

the two countries' existing cooperation in maritime security. In 2019, India and Israel staged their first joint military exercise in the Negev desert in Israel. This followed the signing of a second memorandum of understanding between the two countries to cooperate on cybersecurity. A contract for the purchase of anti-tank missiles produced in Israel for a total of \$777 million was also inked between the two nations. India and Israel reached an agreement in 2020 worth 200 million shekels to jointly develop a surface-to-air missile system with medium-range capability. In addition, the two nations collaborated on a naval exercise that took place in the Arabian Sea. It is anticipated that India and Israel will continue to work together in the field of defence over the next several years. It was claimed in the year 2021 that the two nations were working on a contract that would be worth \$3 billion and would include the sale of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) built in Israel to the Indian Navy. In addition, the first shipment of anti-tank Spike missiles manufactured in Israel is scheduled to be sent to India in the not-too-distant future.

Joint Military Training

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Israel in 1992, the defence cooperation between the two nations has been gradually strengthening. The collaboration between the two countries in joint military training has proven to be very productive, however, it has also been a source of significant disagreement. The Indian armed forces have participated in various collaborative military exercises with their Israeli counterparts in recent years. The exercises have concentrated on many aspects of conflict, including counter-terrorism operations, urban warfare, and air defence. Furthermore, throughout the exercises, participants exchanged their military concepts and strategies and used cutting-edge military hardware. The 'Blue Flag' exercise is one of the most notable instances of India and Israel cooperating on a military mission. Both countries' air forces take part in the exercise, which is held once every two years and alternates between the two countries. The exercise takes place in Israel to enhance the interoperability between the two air forces. The exercise encompasses realistic combat situations, including both aerial engagements and ground-based operations. The 'Hand-in-Hand' drill serves as an example of India and Israel collaborating on a combined exercise. The armed forces of both countries are engaging in the practice, to prevent terrorist strikes. The exercise is designed to enhance the capacity of both armies to collaborate effectively in addressing terrorist threats. Participants in the exercise will not only employ

modern facilities and military equipment but also exchange information and plans with one another.⁵¹ The ‘Shalom Shakti’ exercise is a collaborative military exercise conducted by India and Israel. Both countries’ naval forces are engaging in the exercise to enhance security in maritime settings. The training will simulate a range of maritime combat scenarios, with a specific emphasis on anti-piracy operations.

There have been several successes achieved as a direct consequence of India and Israel working together to advance their respective militaries’ training capabilities. Firstly, it enhances the coordination of the military forces of both countries. This factor must be considered in the context of a joint military operation. Another advantage is that it enhances the capability of the Indian armed forces. Israel’s reputation lies in its sophisticated military technology and equipment. The combined exercises provide India with a valuable chance to get insights from Israel’s expertise. Furthermore, the joint exercises enhance the reinforcement of the already defence ties between the two countries. This has great importance considering the current geopolitical climate, in which both India and Israel are dealing with several security challenges. In conclusion, the collaborative military training conducted between India and Israel has played a significant role in strengthening the defence ties between the two countries. The exercises have enhanced the interoperability of the Indian armed forces, as well as bolstering their overall capabilities. They have also tackled several aspects of the conflict. The defence ties between India and Israel have been bolstered via the combined military exercises, which is crucial considering the current geopolitical climate in both nations.

Intelligence Sharing

It is important to acknowledge that the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India’s external intelligence agency, has maintained a covert link with Mossad, the external intelligence agency of Israel, since its creation. The primary objective was to use Israel’s expertise in West Asia and North Africa, as well as to get insights from its counterterrorism methodologies. The Israeli embassy in Bombay facilitated the establishment of the ties. Over time, the agency relationships have become more robust because of the shared concern about Islamist terrorism and extremism.²¹ Following the brutal assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984, and the subsequent establishment of the Indian National Security Guard, there were claims suggesting the use of Israeli expertise. In the early 1980s, a few Indian military officers did get counterterrorism training in Israel.

Since the 1980s, India has been one of the most common places for Israelis to vacation. In June of 1991, a dozen armed Kashmiri Muslim terrorists assaulted a group of young Israeli tourists who were vacationing in the beautiful Kashmir Valley. Srinagar was the location of the incident. One of the Israelis who was guarding the prisoners decided to untie his wrists out of fear that the victims were going to be killed. He then assaulted one of the shooters, took his assault weapon, and began firing. The resulting gunfight resulted in the death of one Israeli, the wounding of three others, and the abduction of one more. An organisation based in Kashmir that operates under the name Defenders of the Islamic Revolution has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping. Pakistan had the suspicion that the Israelis were Israeli military personnel showing themselves off as tourists to instruct Indian security services in terrorist activities. The terrorist assaults carried out against Israelis were motivated by the propaganda spread by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Soon after that, in response to the mounting pressure, the terrorists let go of the Israeli tourists they had abducted. Officials from the Israeli government, including high-ranking intelligence agents, travelled to New Delhi to participate in the discussions for his release. Their interaction with Indian government representatives provided a boost to the overarching goals that were driving the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two governments.

Counterterrorism Strategies

Samuel Rajiv, a researcher at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), claims that India's engagements with Israel over its foreign policy are "marked by a political discreetness," which is in contrast to India's "prominent political engagement with the Palestinians and countries of the Arab world." Several ministers and representatives of the Indian government have acknowledged the significance of the "mutually beneficial cooperation" that "in no way dilutes India's principled support for the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people." The criticism that India directed at Israeli policy towards the Palestinians is illustrative of the "delicate balance" that the country maintains. Other experts have said that India's bilateral relationships with Israel have been raised to the status of "pivotal relationships" at the expense of India's relations with nations such as Iran. Israeli scholars have admitted that the bilateral relationship between their countries, India and Israel, is a "limited partnership" that "while mutually vital, is delicate."

India and Israel struggle to combat terrorism. The two nations formed a joint working group in 2001 for strategic dialogue. This Joint Working Group has shared practical experiences on border security, suicide terrorism, aviation security, terror funding, information security, and digital and cyber warfare. India and Israel have different counterterrorism approaches and threat assessments. India has traditionally prioritised dialogue, whereas Israel rejects terror as a political tool. Israel views Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas as dangers, whereas India sees Pakistan-sponsored radical Islamist organisations like the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Toiba, and Jaish-i-Mohammad. India wants Israeli help training four battalions of roughly 3,000 troops in desert, mountainous, jungle, counter-hijack, and hostage crisis operations. According to the Jerusalem Post of February 3, 2003, India sought Israeli security expertise due to its inability to control infiltration into Jammu and Kashmir and other stretches of the India-Pakistan border, which resulted in a high-profile Parliament attack on December 13, 2001.

Indian National Security Advisor Brijesh Mishra addressed the American Jewish Committee, outlining the convergence of Indo-Israeli interests and their strategic importance. In his argument, he posited that democratic nations, who are the primary targets of international terrorism, should establish a “viable alliance” and create multilateral structures to effectively address this threat. He selected India, the United States, and Israel as nations that align with the aforementioned criteria. During the Joint Working Group meeting held on June 22, 2003, Zvi Gabey, the Deputy Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressed the view that both parties are aligned in their efforts to combat terrorism and emphasised the need to foster their partnership based on this shared objective. According to sources from the Indian Foreign Ministry, it was expressed at the above discussion that India saw significant advantages in acquiring insights from Israel’s expertise in counterterrorism, given Israel’s enduring struggle with transnational terrorism.

Conclusion

In recent years, India-Israeli bilateral ties have increased dramatically, with the two countries’ interests converging on a variety of topics, which has contributed to this convergence. However, at its core, this partnership is still propelled by strong defence connections and the acknowledgement of a shared adversary in the form of Islamist terrorism. There are still considerable barriers in the way of the partnership attaining its full potential, even though both parties are making efforts to extend the foundation of the connection. Both parties will need to

steer the connection carefully within these limits to avoid damaging either of their positions. The present state of affairs on the world stage, on the other hand, lends itself especially well to the strengthening of connections between India and Israel. The level of political will present in both states will ultimately determine whether or not the parties involved will make the most of this chance. It is only natural for India and Israel to work together more closely on matters ranging from defence and counterterrorism to economic and cultural exchanges. The people of India and Israel have a long history of civilisational interaction; thus, it is only natural for the two governments to collaborate more closely on these subjects. There is the potential for significant reciprocal advantages to contribute to both India and Israel's efforts to maintain their existence and even prosper.

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