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India's surprising change of course

While many countries of the Global South stand by the Palestinians, India is on Israel's side. Why?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement immediately after the Hamas attack left no room for ambiguity: We are 'deeply shocked by the news of the terrorist attack in Israel ... In solidarity, we stand by Israel in this difficult hour.' The newspaper *Indian Express* concluded on 8 October: This 'is an unmistakable shift away from the carefully choreographed balancing act that characterised New Delhi's earlier responses to clashes between Israel and Palestinian militants.'

But why then the restrained response after Russia's war began in February 2022? India has always seen itself as a non-aligned country. The Indian government enters into what it calls 'multiple alliances' and chooses partnerships that suit its own interests. Samir Saran, president of the major Indian think tank *Observer Research Foundation*, which also advises the government, argues that today's geopolitics is characterised by the perception of self-interest. He speaks of 'limited liability partnerships among nations'. India's differing behaviour towards Ukraine and Israel, both of which were attacked in violation of international law, can be explained by this balancing policy, which some observers also call a seesaw policy.

Unlikely unity

India has long maintained a friendly relationship with Russia, which was firmly established with a treaty of friendship between India and the Soviet Union in 1971. Thereafter, the Soviet Union, and later Russia, became India's main supplier of armaments. To this day, the Indian armed forces depend on Russia's cooperation for their arsenal of weapons. India also imports energy from Russia on favourable terms, despite having already reduced its dependence and actively seeking to diversify.

India also abstained from the crucial vote in the UN General Assembly that overwhelmingly disapproved of Russia's war of aggression. Thereafter, Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar made it clear

that India's economic interests are more important than isolating Russia. India's foreign and security policy remains oriented towards not being captured by any of the competing geopolitical camps and therefore rejected the West's calls to join in sanctions against Russia.

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India, unlike Ukraine, has very close political and economic relations with Israel. But they were not always so friendly. When India won its independence from the British colonial power in 1947, this was enthusiastically welcomed by the Israelis. Yet, Mahatma Gandhi had previously been extremely critical of Israel's founding of the state in 1948: 'Palestine belongs to the Arabs, in the same sense that England belongs to the English and France to the French. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs.'

This distanced attitude towards Israel remained unchanged for a long time and India agreed to all UN resolutions condemning Israel's Palestine policy up until 2015. India was the first non-Arab country to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the only legitimate representation of the Palestinians. It was only in 2015 that India abstained from voting for the first time in the UN Human Rights Committee when Israel was to stand trial for war crimes at the International Criminal Court.

Nevertheless, there were certainly points of connection between Israel and India. Zionism was not only popular among India's Hindu nationalists; India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, also had much appreciation for the Zionist state-building concept. However, Nehru refused to recognise Israel diplomatically because he feared for the acceptance of India's non-alignment with Arab governments.

A question of security

India rejected Israel's advances for more than four decades. It is only since 1992 that Israel and India have had diplomatic relations. The Indian government's long hesitation was also due to the fact that India was dependent on oil supplies from the Middle East. In the meantime, the two countries maintain intensive relations in trade, with high annual growth rates, in agriculture and in culture.

Israel has become an important, at times the second most important, arms supplier to India. Around 40 per cent of all of Israel's arms exports

go there. Israeli companies modernised the obsolete Soviet MiG-21 and other fighter aircraft of the Indian armed forces. For years, Israel has supplied electronics and missiles for the modernisation of almost all categories of weapons. An agreement provides for the joint production of anti-aircraft missiles. According to estimates by the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the volume of Israeli arms exports to India in the last five years amounted to $1.8 bn. To arm itself against the aggressive policies of China, India ordered more weapons from Israel. Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his Israeli counterpart Benny Gantz agreed to strengthen bilateral relations during a visit to India in June 2022, and they talked about the further engagement of Israeli companies in the Indian defence industry.

The Israeli concept of homeland defence found great favour in India.

The 'war on terror' after 11 September 2001, led to an intensification of India-Israel relations. Both countries had bitter experiences with terrorist attacks: Israel because of the unresolved Palestine issue, India earlier through the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and till today because of Kashmir, over which India and Pakistan are bitterly fighting. In 2008, India experienced its '9/11' when a terrorist attack killed 166 people, including Israelis, according to official figures. The target of the attack was tourist and Jewish establishments in Mumbai.

The Israeli concept of homeland defence subsequently found great favour in India. Armed forces and police were to benefit from the 'Israeli experience'. Due to public pressure, the Indian government has since practised a tougher militaristic approach against suspected terrorists. An Indian delegation visited Israel, and, as a result, an Israeli-trained commando unit was set up in Mumbai. With Israeli technical support, India created a central electronic monitoring system capable of extensively monitoring private communications. The notorious Israeli spy software Pegasus was also used in the process.

The Israel-India relationship has progressed through their respective counter-terrorism efforts and has remained untroubled since Modi's visit to Israel in 2017 and Netanyahu's return visit in 2018. Both the 25th and 30th anniversaries of diplomatic recognition have been occasions for further expansion of relations. India can be expected to continue to maintain this policy as long as it suits its interests.



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