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Israel as factor India-Iran Relations

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Abstract:

The peoples of India and Iran, two ancient neighboring civilizations, had enjoyed close historical links through the ages. They had a common homeland and shared a common linguistic and racial past. The view from West Asia of India - Israel ties had been interlinked not only with the region's negative perception of Israel, but also with Israel's evolving position in the West Asian geo-political framework. Both countries are important for India. India-Iran relations and India-Israel relations are significant for geo-politics and geo-strategy in West Asia.

Keywords: Strategic cooperation, India – Israel, Cold War, NPT, Iranian nuclear programme, Israel-Arab war.

Introduction:

The view from West Asia of India - Israel ties had been interlinked not only with the region's negative perception of Israel, but also with Israel's evolving position in the West Asian geo-political framework. The growing economic and political power of India in the last two decades and its deepening economic ties with countries in West Asia, however, had brought new factors into play. These perspectives, along with the promise of the positive role India could play in West Asian affairs, now encompasses the Arab appreciation of India - Israel ties as well. The Israeli opposition to the activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its allies and proxies in the region had added another dimension to the Arab perspective.

India's strong relations with Iran had surely confounded West Asia watchers. India and Iran had collaborated on a wide range of issues. There were significant trade ties, particularly those related to crude oil import into India and diesel exports to Iran. They had not so overt strategic ties, which included cooperation on a shared threat of terrorism emanating from Pakistan and

Afghanistan. Iran was also India's gateway to the Central Asia region and Afghanistan theatres, where India was keen to deepen its economic activities and more importantly, consolidate its presence by projecting greater power. Iran thus, had a complex relationship, combined with important policy drivers such as energy security and strategic considerations.

Following the normalisation of relations between India and Israel in 1992, both countries have strengthened and consolidated a wide range of political, economic, cultural and above all strategic cooperation. Despite criticism from some sections, the bilateral relationship had been stable and had enjoyed widespread domestic support and endorsement in India.

Moreover, in recent years, India obtained a host of military inventories from Israel including Remotely Piloted Vehicles (RPVs), Barak-8 ship - borne anti - missile systems for the navy, ammunition for the Bofor field guns during the Kargil operations and upgrading of its MiG jets. Management of porous borders with Pakistan was a new avenue for cooperation and India had sought to curtail, if not eliminate cross border infiltration from Pakistan through Israeli electronic surveillance and boarder fencing system. After months of negotiations, both sides had agreed to the supply of Phalcon Airborne early warning system to India.

Media reports in India suggest that India had also expressed its interest in the supply of the Arrow anti - ballistic missile defense system. When Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visited India in September 2003, both sides discussed Israeli partnership in the development of a new class of attack submarines for the Indian navy. Both sides had also explored new avenues of cooperation in missile and space technology.

All said and done, we now focus on the role and impact of Israel on relations between India and Iran. With passage of time and also due to the changing international equations between different countries, we now focus on the significant impact by Israel on relations between India and Iran. Israel had become India's largest foreign military supplier and civilian trade had jumped significantly in the past few years. There were vigorous co-operation in areas of agriculture and science and technology. India had associated Israel publicly with its sophisticated space programme by launching Israeli satellites from its rockets. Their bond, to begin with, was boosted by the fact that both countries had hostile relations with Muslim neighbours, although the Indian side was reticent to articulate this aspect in public. The above substantive thrust in India's relations with Israel, was largely as old as the demise of the Cold War. With the fall of communism and its eventual removal, the vision of a bipolar contest between the first and the second world became redundant.

On non - aligned movement, India's foreign policy witnessed an inevitable reorientation - ideology - based engagements gave way to interest based relations. In West Asia, India became more clear - eyed and aggressive in pursuing its interests. Consequently, countries that had received insufficient attention during the years of the Cold War, viz., Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia - acquired

centrality in India's new West Asia policy. India had sought to balance its ties with the two regional actors by indicating its intent to pursue bilateral relations consistent with its interests and requirements, irrespective of the conflicts they had with each other. This 'strategic autonomy' in its dealing with countries locked in outstanding disputes, had been the hallmark of India's foreign policy behavior since independence and also accounted for its sophisticated and complex set of bilateral and multilateral relations. India's relations both with Iran and Israel were tenuously balanced, largely independent and non-parallel, although contentious issues had intermittently upset the much sought after equilibrium.

While Iran had been generally indifferent towards India's proximity to Israel, the latter had expressed concerns over many issues in New Delhi -Tehran relations. A look at India's extensive ties with both Iran and Israel, would explain why India had constantly sought to balance the two relationships, even as it aspires to fashion bilateral relationships that did not impact any third country.

While Iran had been indifferent about India's relations with its regional adversary, Israel had frequently expressed its misgivings over Indo - Iranian ties. Given India's attempt to institute bilateral relations independent of one another, Israel did not figure significantly in India - Iran relations. Iran, regardless of its anti-Israel rhetoric, had not allowed the "Israeli factor" to obstruct its relations with India. Bearing in mind that Iran was the only West Asian country to oppose India's effort to normalize relations with Israel. Both India and Iran had since come a long way in developing an understanding of each other's strategic imperatives. On the other hand, Israel had expressed concerns over India - Iran ties from time to time.

One of the persistent Israeli fears about India - Iran relations was the possibility of nuclear cooperation between the two countries. Some reports had suggested that India had trained Iranian nuclear scientists in the past. The issue of nuclear cooperation reportedly emerged in October 2004, at a meeting in Tehran between Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini and India's then National Security Advisor J.N. Dixit. India's former External Affairs Minister K. Natwar Singh visited Tehran and was reported to have pledged support for Iran's peaceful nuclear energy programme.

While responding to a query as to why India was not with the US, Israel and other Western countries in supporting sanctions against Iran, Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna in January 2012 reiterated the widely known India's track – “We respect Iran's right to pursue nuclear energy ambitions, but it had been our consistent position that this right was subject to the IAEA parameters.” During his visit to India, Israeli's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had expressed his fears about the possible "leakage" of Israeli technology to Iran.

Indo - Israeli security cooperation was also based on a shared perception of dangers from terrorism and its purveyors. At the same time, this was not as strong an impetus, as was commonly believed. In fact, this factor had often put India in an awkward position, vis - a - vis., when Indo -

Iranian strategic ties were taken into consideration. Israel's depiction of Iran as the "epicenter of terrorism" carried little resonance on the Indian side. In an international environment, where Iran had faced increasing international isolation over its nuclear programme, the Islamic Republic had emerged as a serious challenge to India's bilateral relations with Israel. Iran's belligerent rhetoric towards Israel had made Tel Aviv extremely apprehensive. Besides, Israel saw a nuclear - armed Iran as an existential threat and had threatened to carry out military strikes to destroy it. In contrast, India had always stood for a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear crisis, even as it voted in the IAEA, as well as, in the Security Council, to oppose a nuclear - weapons - capable Iran. India also believed that Iran had the right to develop a peaceful nuclear programme for civilian purpose, provided it adhered to the NPT, which it had freely and voluntarily signed in 1968.

While Iran was pivotal to India's strategy in Central Asia and Afghanistan, energy security and power projection beyond the South Asian region, Israel was critical to the strengthening of India's defense infrastructure and counterterrorism efforts. In effect, both were vital to India's various interests. At the same time, India was skeptical of endorsing the Israeli position on Iran, whether it was on transfer of technology, terrorism or the Iranian nuclear programme. Nevertheless, there were explicit red lines that New Delhi, conceivably recognised. For instance, any cooperation with Iran on the nuclear issue would have damaged Indo -Israeli relations. Conversely, support for the Israeli position on military strikes on Iran would not only spell trouble for India, vis - a - vis, the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also with other Muslim countries of the region in particular and the world in general. It was pertinent here to recall Pakistan's rhetoric of "Indo - Israeli axis" against the Islamic world and its potential for distorting perceptions about India's foreign policy. However, by placing national interest at the core of its strategic calculus, India had kept a balance between the two regional adversaries in an essentially non -aligned fashion. Predictably, then India would had been at ease, hosting the heads of governments of both Iran and Israel in the same year and signing agreements of cooperation in non - overlapping areas, far from the shadow of conflict and discord between the two regional adversaries.

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