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The Indo-Israel Strategic Ties 2000-2020: An Analysis

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Abstract

The growing Indo-Israel strategic partnership in the first two decades of the 21st century was seen as the major game changer in broader Asia and the world politics. Both states share many commonalities but the strategic collaborations played a pivotal role in bringing them closer politically and diplomatically. This paper examines the evolution of Indo-Israel strategic ties and how both states enabled them to strengthen their defense collaboration, information sharing, technology transfers, and geopolitical convergence in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific. The paper scrutinizes the close collaborations of India and Israel in defense and security domains, especially in the areas of sophisticated military technologies, cyber security, and counterterrorism. The study also explores how the diplomatic and political support of the Jewish and Indian-American lobbies in Washington contributed to enhancing this strategic cooperation. The research further investigates that Israel not only upholds shared interests but also expands their global strategic reach by placing it within the larger Asian strategic equation.

Keywords: India, Israel, US, Geopolitics, Defense, Diplomacy

Introduction

India's foreign policy saw numerous shifts in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These modifications diverted India away from the Nehruvian principles of supporting people's rights under colonial (imperialist) rule or advocating their fundamental right to choose their own destiny (Nehru's Panchsheel; the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, a 1952 treaty signed by Jawaharlal Nehru and his Chinese counterpart Zhou Enlai to cooperate for regional peace against the backdrop of the subcontinent's decolonization; these five principles were later adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1957) ((Maxwell, 1974). Global political transition ultimately compelled Indian policymakers to embrace changes in the context of the end of the Cold War and the success of an open market capitalist economy, as well as to adapt to the dominant international

system. In order to meet its economic and defense requirements, India was forced to establish closer connections with the US following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These shifts influenced how the nation thought about India's place in the modern world as well as how it dealt with the outside world in the past.

Indo-Israel ties in the post-Cold War period strengthened at a very fast pace but if we explore the history of bilateral diplomatic relations of two nations we come to know that they were not very cordial in the beginning. Indian Prime Minister Nehru and other nationalist leaders of India believed that Israel was a fabrication of colonial imperial powers and that its establishment would jeopardize regional peace in the Middle East. Despite recognizing the state of Israel in the 1950s, India remained neutral and showed no desire to forge stronger diplomatic ties. On the contrary the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) opened its embassy in New Delhi in the 1960s as a result of the Indian leadership's (particularly Indira Gandhi's) cordial relations with Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO, and their acceptance of Palestine's independence (Sharma & Bing, 2015). India's estrangement from Israel was caused by a number of internal and international circumstances in addition to ideological disagreements with the US and UK, which backed Israel. One of the contributing causes was the sizeable Muslim population at home, and India's strong relations with Israel would have prompted a response from them. During his October 1949 visit to the US, Nehru told Israeli Ambassador Eliahu Elath that the Israel-Palestine conflict was a constant source of agitation and that Indian Muslims were concerned about it. Nehru was more considerate of India's decisions with Israel since Indian Muslims were sensitive to the Palestine issue (Kumaraswamy, 2010). Another reason for India's chilly relations with Israel was its reliance on the oil resources of the Gulf states (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates). The migrant Indian workforce in the Gulf States was and still is in charge of sending large amounts of money home: in 2018, the overall share of remittances from Saudi Arabia was \$11.2 billion, Kuwait \$4.6 billion, Qatar \$4.1 billion, Oman \$3.3 billion, and UAE \$13.8 billion (Rahman, 2019). According to statistics that Minister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita presented to parliament last month, India has one of the largest diasporas, numbering 35.4 million. According to a remittances study published in March by the Reserve Bank of India, diaspora members contributed \$118.7 billion to India's foreign exchange inflows for the fiscal year 2023–2024. Nearly 40% of this total was made up of

Indians who lived and worked in the six Gulf Cooperation Council nations, with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar having the largest percentages 19.2%, 6.7%, and 4.1%, respectively (Sanjay Kumar, 2025). India was therefore compelled to delay forging friendly relations with Israel shortly after gaining independence due to concerns over energy and economic security. It was also crucial for India to avoid establishing close diplomatic ties with Israel because of its prominent role in the non-aligned movement and representation of the third world (former colonies and recently independent nations with a majority of Muslims), which could have sparked a strong backlash against India.

India began to open up to Israel from the end of the Cold War, during the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress government (1984–1989). The relationship between India and Israel underwent a visible change in the early 1990s. At the same time, India was looking to the US and its allies for its financial and defense requirements following the fall of the Soviet Union. The terms and conditions of India's international involvement were altered by the conclusion of the Cold War's bipolar politics and power struggle. Charles Krauthammer (1991) and Michael Mastanduno (1997) identified the new global order as a unipolar world system, which helped India overcome its stale socio-political and economic preferences both domestically and internationally.

A major factor in the altered perspective of India's foreign policy toward the US and Israel was the shifting internal political landscape. The Indian National Congress' monopoly in Indian politics ended with the rise of new political groups and the murder of Rajiv Gandhi. Since neoliberal capitalist policies happened to serve their interests better than socialism in a nation with a growing middle class, new political parties were more supportive of the neoliberal open market capitalist economy than of the socialist policies of Nehru and Indira Gandhi (Pollard, 2011). In order to materialize the goal of India playing a major role in the region and the world, they were also more eager to fortify their connections with the western bloc. The severe balance of payments crisis in 1991 forced India to seek financial support and a structural adjustment plan from the World Bank and IMF (Cerra & Saxena, 2002). India was forced to accept reforms to both its political and economic structures under IMF terms. It became essential for India to establish connections with the United States and its allies when the country adopted the new political and economic system. In that regard, India demonstrated her readiness to negotiate

constructively with Israel in the late 1980s under Rajiv Gandhi. Bilateral sports and other activities were started, and the Israeli consulate was set up in Bombay (Kumaraswamy, 2010).

India used every strategic tactic at its disposal to try to placate the US after 1990. In an attempt to strengthen ties between the two nations and obtain financial and defense advantages, Indian authorities, lobbyists, and the business community attempted to work with Jewish lobby groups in the US Congress, such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Jewish Institute of National Security Affairs (JINSA) (Naaz, 1999). India was forced to compromise her excellent relations with the Arab states and acknowledge the state of Israel. India was able to overcome the distances it had with the US during the Cold War by appeasing the US-based Jewish lobby. This in turn offered the US an advantage to influence India-Israel relations and was crucial in bringing all three nations closer for more extensive bilateral and trilateral collaboration in several fields. India established its embassy in Israel in 1992, bilateral ties between Israel and India considerably improved in the early 1990s (Blarel, 2017). Along with its links to Israel, India's reliance on the US grew over time, initially in response to the balance of payments issue and then for financial help and defense supplies.

India supported the US-led efforts in the UN General Assembly to repeal Resolution 3379, which was approved in November 1975 and links Zionism to racism, as a courtesy gesture to Israel (United Nations, n.d.). The Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) to strengthen bilateral relations and multilateral collaboration were discussed in high-level meetings between the officials of the two nations (Gerberg, 2005). In contrast to Israel-China defense interactions, Israel has steadily risen to the top of the defense export rankings to India. The George W. Bush administration in 2004 compelled Israel to renounce its agreement with China to upgrade the Harpy missile system from Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) in 1994, China had paid roughly \$55 million to Israel for the upgrade. The US viewed the agreement as a security threat because the missile system used US technology (Berton, 2010), but as Harsh V. Pant notes, the US is unconcerned with India-Israel cooperation and arms trade due to shared interests and US confidence in India in regional affairs (Pant & Sahu, 2019).

India and Israel have similar ideologies. Both nations share territorial aspirations; Indian Hindutva Brigade's long-standing dream of Akhand Bharat (Undivided India) and Jewish

community's the Greater Israel (Masalha, 2000, p. 107) are both expansionist plan based on historical claims. Since they maintain that India's "natural borders ran from the Indus to the Eastern Sea, and from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari," (Corbridge, 2002) Hindu nationalists support the idea of reestablishing a united single state of India that would include modern-day South Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and a portion of Afghanistan) (Mookerji, 1945). Both nations also share the belief that their Muslim neighbors pose a threat to their existence and enjoy positive relations with the United States. Similar trends may be seen in India's antagonism against Pakistan, a country with a majority of Muslims, and Israel's hatred toward its bordering Arab Muslim nations. They work together in all spheres of economic, military, and geostrategic interests in larger Asia since they share a mutual ally and enemy. The United States and its Western allies have helped India modernize and upgrade its economic system, develop robust defenses, and strengthen its ability to protect its territorial interests in the area.

Indo-Israel Geostrategic Collaborations

Indo-Israel good diplomatic ties, ideological commonalities and good ties with the US eventually exhibited in their security cooperation. India's desire to have advanced weapons has been successfully met by Israel, filling the vacuum left by the former Soviet Union. Regarding the security aspect of establishing Indo-Israeli relations in January 1992, Kumaraswamy (1998) states that Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao of India decided to establish full and normal diplomatic relations with Israel in January 1992, in part because he recognized the potential for security cooperation between the two nations. Indo-Israel strategic common interests solved India's defense concerns (Kumaraswamy, 1998). J.N. Dixit, the former foreign secretary of India, notes in his memoirs that the shift in Indian foreign policy toward Israel can be attributed to the country's urgent need for a robust defense and modernization of its armaments: "Israel had developed expertise in improving the weapons systems of Soviet origin which could be utilized by India" (Dixit, 1996, p. 10).

Indian Air Force (IAF) officials observed how the American strike planes used 2,000-pound smart bombs to destroy Iraqi fortified aircraft shelters in the first Gulf War. In 1995, India and the US inked a military cooperation agreement. Additionally, the US began providing technical

assistance to India's Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) program, and the Indian Air Force (IAF) was given 315 Texas Instruments Paveway bomb-guidance kits (Arnett, 1997). The Indo-American relationship remained unstable in spite of these attempts (Conley, 2000). Pakistan has access to better and more advanced weapons because of its strong relations with the US and its alliance during the Cold War. India became aware of the capabilities of its home grown weaponry and the necessity of upgrading them with assistance from Israel and other Western friends (Thomas, 1993). As a result, the Indian military strongly supported defense cooperation with Israel. Israel was also prepared to assist India in obtaining cutting-edge military technology that India was unable to obtain from Western manufacturers (Hewitt, 1997).

In order to monitor its western border with Pakistan, India purchased Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and other surveillance tools in 1999 as a result of the Kargil conflict between Pakistan and India (Bedi, 2003). India imports all three of Israel's military surveillance systems, which include the Airborne Early Warning (A.E.W.) system and cross-border sensors, which the country has gained unique recognition for creating. In 2001, Israel supplied India the Barak-I AMD systems for missile defense technology (Blarel, 2017). Following its nuclear test in May 1998, India was subject to US sanctions (under the Glenn Amendment, the US immediately placed India and Pakistan under economic sanctions). At that time, Israel became the conduit for India's access to US defense technology, selling it the Green Pine Radar, which is one of the Arrow's sub-elements system (Kumar, 2008). India benefited from Israel's extensive knowledge of Soviet military hardware when it came to improving the combat weapons of its air force, navy, and ground forces (Samuel & Rajiv, 2010). India and Israel inked a new agreement to buy three Phalcon AEW systems for USD 1.1 billion (Ben-Yishai, 2009).

In addition to giving India defense and weaponry, Israeli military participated in Blue Flag Drills, or war drills, with their Indian counterparts in 2017. In order to prevent freedom fighters movement and urban warfare in various regions of India, the Israeli equivalent trains the Indian army on how to deploy exported military hardware in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir (Times of India, 2007). The Indian Cabinet Committee on Security requested Israel for training India's four new Special Forces counter-insurgency battalions for Kashmir were made (Blank, 2005). Given that Israel has a long history of guarding its borders along the Palestinian territories

effectively, India's Border Security Forces (BSF) also suggested using Israel's expertise in training its officers in Israel (Inbar & Ningthoujam, 2012).

The Indo-Israeli strategic cooperation solidified between 2010 and 2020, evolving from a buyer-seller dynamic to one marked by substantial joint research, development, and production (JRD&P) of modern defense weapons. The BARAK-8 medium-range surface-to-air missile system, a key project representing this increased technological synergy, was successfully co-developed at this time (idrw.org, 2025). India's acquisition of Heron TP and Harop loitering munitions greatly improved its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities along its disputed borders, demonstrating how cooperation has extended beyond missile defense to unmanned aerial systems (The Times of Israel, 2025). Additionally, during this decade, New Delhi and Jerusalem's strategic alignment was more frequently articulated in light of shifting global dynamics and perceptions of common threats. India received a vital supply of advanced technology from Israel, a defense partner that was seen as reliable and free from the political conditions that are frequently attached to Western suppliers. Additionally, by strengthening its ties with a significant Asian power and diversifying its export markets, this collaboration gave Israel a strategic advantage over its regional rivals.

Thus, the period was characterized by the maturity of ties, which transformed from a once-secret partnership into a widely recognized and complex strategic pillar of both countries' foreign and defense policies, so transforming the Middle East's and South Asia's security architecture. The growing military and defense cooperation and exchanges between Israel and India over the past three decades demonstrate the close strategic ties between the two nations and their desire to deepen them. The political climate following the Cold War has allowed Indian policymakers to forge strong defense connections with Israel, and their close proximity to the US has further facilitated their military agreements and strategic collaboration.

India-Israel Common Geo-Political Interests

Although they have been working together in the fields of agriculture, technology, surveillance, and medicine, India and Israel's political ties are mostly linked to their defense and geostrategic

needs. Both nations declared their full political support for the US and the War on Terror in the wake of 9/11. During his 2003 tour to the US, India's National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra spoke to the American Jewish Committee, a Jewish advocacy group that was instrumental in getting India to recognize the state of Israel and forging deeper ties between the US and India. He addressed to the AJC he said:

“India, the United States, and Israel have some fundamental similarities. We are all democracies, sharing a common vision of pluralism, tolerance and equal opportunity.... The US, India and Israel have all been prime targets of terrorism. They have to jointly face the same ugly face of modern-day terrorism.... As the main targets of international terrorism, democratic countries should form a viable alliance against terrorism.” (Mishra, 2003).

India's tactical use of its close ties with the pro-Israel Jewish lobbies in the American Congress for geopolitical and economic gains is explicitly visible in Brajesh Mishra's address, “I am pleased to see so many distinguished members of the United States Congress here today”, Brajesh Mishra told the AJC. “They are friends of Israel. They are also friends of India.... The increasing contact between the AJC and the Indian-American community organizations is another positive reflection of shared values of our peoples.” (Mishra, 2003)

Regarding Israel's dispute with the Arab world, India was an outspoken state in favor of Palestine, but after 1992, the situation shifted in favor of Israel on multilateral diplomatic platforms. In a major policy shift, India opposed diplomatic attempts by Arab states to incorporate Israel's anti-Arab practices in the final resolution of the Durban conference on racism in September 2001 (Shehori & Sheleg, 2001). India was a strong advocate for Palestine, but its support for the cause waned as formal diplomatic connections were established with Israel and defense and geostrategic relationships were strengthened. India purposefully avoided bringing up the Palestine problem during Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's September 2003 visit to India, and in the Delhi Statement that followed (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003). India's reluctance to denounce Israel's crimes in Gaza and the West Bank has been obvious on multilateral political platforms. However, India's stance toward Jammu and Kashmir and its rivalries with Pakistan benefited greatly from Jewish powerful lobbying in the US Congress. Together with US-based Indian lobbies, the Jewish Institute of National Security Affairs

(JINSA) and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the largest Jewish lobby in the US, represent Indian interests in Congress (Prashad, 2003).

The China Factor in Growing Indo-US-Israel Strategic Ties

The rise of China in the world geopolitics is the major stimuli behind the convergence of the US, Israel, and India. Cooperation and collaboration are more likely in all areas, particularly in defense and geostrategic politics, as a result of the competition to maintain strategic interests in the maritime domain. The United States is particularly concerned about the security of the naval transportation lines and oil supplies in the Indian Ocean, East Mediterranean, and Arabian Gulf. The US monopoly in this area is in danger due to the growing influence of China in the region. Israel shares US worries because maintaining regional supremacy and stability serves its own objectives. Both have an adversary in Iran, and Tehran's significant influence over its Arab neighbors is seen as a direct danger to Israel's security and well-being. Israel and the US are displeased with Iran's backing of non-state entities in Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. The US and its allies have shown their disapproval of Iran's meddling in these nations by killing Iranian commander Qassim Suleimani in a US strike on the Baghdad airport. Iran's strategic location in the Indian Ocean benefits China and jeopardizes US strategic plans for dealing with any Chinese challenge in the future. Iran previously threatened to shut Hormuz when it came under US economic sanctions, and the ability to seal the Strait of Hormuz for communication or oil supply in the event of confrontation could gravely affect US interests (Dehghan, 2018).

Because of security concerns and Pakistan's strategic alliance with China, the US does not have the same trust-based relationship with Pakistan as it did during the Cold War, so the US and Israel are eager to maintain control of the Indian Ocean by a friendly nation, and India is the best candidate to do so. Israel has an advantage over Iran thanks to the strategic relationship between India and Israel in the Indian Ocean not just from land, but also from the water.

It is possible to interpret the US, India, and Israel's coalition in terms of advancing and defending regional geostrategic objectives. All three nations are motivated to collaborate closely in order to find a more comprehensive solution to the maritime dangers and vulnerabilities. It would be fitting to refer to it as an alliance of shared interests in light of shared dangers and goals. It's interesting to note that India and Iran have very friendly relations and are actively pursuing further bilateral cooperation. Israel and the US always gave concessions to India about Iran before the Trump administration.

Another aspect of the trio's strong strategic cooperation is intelligence sharing. Israel is a major supporter of India's space satellite program (the agreement for cooperation between the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the Israel Space Agency (ISA) was signed during PM Modi's visit to Israel in 2017 (The Economic Times, 2017), which guarantees access to strategically significant installments as well as the significant events occurring in the region. Since 9/11, India, Israel, and the US have been coordinating on intelligence sharing (Inbar & Ningthoujam, 2012). In the framework of the establishment of a loose alliance of three nations, the US remained helpful to India in its growth and global political stature (The Economic Times, 2018) and permitted Israel to share cutting-edge military hardware and combat training with India. A formal strategic partnership is frequently demanded by voices from reliable non-official circles, even though no such alliance has been formally established (Gupta, 2018). Throughout the first two decades of the 21st century Indo-Israel defense and diplomatic ties witnessed a steady growth without any regional or global hurdle and it seems the ties will be growing at the same pace in the times to come.

Conclusion

An examination of Indo-Israeli strategic connections between 2000 and 2020 shows that the two countries' relationship developed from a hesitant, necessity-driven engagement into a sophisticated, multidimensional, and essential cornerstone of their foreign and defense strategies. This two-decade period represented the rapid completion of geopolitical changes that started with the end of the Cold War, rather than a single occurrence. Once carried out behind closed doors because of India's complicated domestic and regional obligations, the cooperation came to light as a distinguishing characteristic of the Asian strategic environment, radically changing security architectures in the Middle East and South Asia.

This partnership's origins may be traced back to India's significant foreign policy reorientation in the wake of the Soviet Union's breakup and the country's devastating 1991 economic crisis. When forced to adjust to a unipolar global order, Indian officials pragmatically abandoned the ideological burden of the Nehruvian era, which had placed a higher priority on ties with the Arab world and the Non-Aligned Movement and had viewed Israel with distrust. Hard-nosed

realpolitik—the pressing need to update its outdated military, acquire cutting-edge technology, and join the US-led global economy—was the driving force behind this change. As a technologically sophisticated country with a track record of adapting Soviet-era technology, which made up the majority of India's arsenal, and one with unmatched clout in the halls of power in Washington, D.C., Israel proved to be the ideal partner in this undertaking. Defense and security cooperation has been and continues to be the foundation of the Indo-Israeli alliance, as the article painstakingly explains. This went through several stages of development. In the first stage (1990s), there was a simple buyer-seller relationship, with Israel filling the immediate void left by Russia by supplying vital weapons such as the Barak-I missile defense system and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in the wake of the Kargil War. After India's 1998 nuclear tests, when US sanctions under the Glenn Amendment went into effect, Israel's involvement became even more crucial. Israel demonstrated its ability to function as a trustworthy partner by serving as a conduit for secret US technology, including the Green Pine radar, while others withdrew.

A qualitative shift from simple transactions to profound technical synergy occurred during the second phase, which lasted the first two decades of the twenty-first century. It developed into a significant Joint Research, Development, and Production (JRD&P) partnership. One significant example of this change is the co-development of the BARAK-8 medium-range surface-to-air missile system. It was now about working together to develop advanced defense technology that was suited to India's unique operational requirements rather than Israel selling completed goods. Advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, such as those provided by the Heron TP and Harop loitering munitions systems, cyber security, and space cooperation (ISRO-ISA agreements) were also expanded during this time.

Regular joint exercises, like the Blue Flag drills, promoted interoperability and common tactical theories, further solidifying military-to-military relations.

Beyond the hardware, a perceived alignment of geopolitical and ideological worldviews reinforced the convergence. The "War on Terror" following 9/11 is appropriately recognized in the article as a potent unifying theme. A turning point was reached in 2003 when Brajesh Mishra, India's national security advisor, suggested a "viable alliance" between the US, India, and Israel

on the basis of their shared status as democratic targets of terrorism. It clearly connected the security paradigms of the three countries. This common sense of threat—from Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Iran-backed non-state actors for Israel, and from Pakistan-based terrorism for India—produced a common operational lexicon centered on urban warfare, border security, and counterterrorism. Despite being a delicate topic, the training given by Israeli organizations to Indian soldiers in Kashmir highlights the extent of this mutual trust and tactical interest.

It is impossible to overestimate the role of the United States in this bilateral relationship as the silent, enabling third player. The strategic backdrop that the US supplied made the cooperation not only feasible but also quite desirable. India was a logical response to Washington's worries about China's growing might and its need for a stable, democratic counterbalance in the Indo-Pacific. In sharp contrast to the US's aggressive intervention to revoke Israel's comparable defense agreements with China, the US's steadfast support for Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) also made sure that technology transfers to India were carefully calibrated to avoid upsetting the regional balance in the Middle East. This revealed a special trust in India. Additionally, Indian interests were bolstered by the strong pro-Israel lobby in Washington, especially AIPAC and JINSA. By joining forces with these organizations, New Delhi and the Indian-American community discovered a very successful strategy to influence US policy, particularly with regard to counterterrorism and Kashmir, while also enhancing the bilateral ties between the US and India.

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