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Israel-India Strategic Partnership 2017: “Seizing the Future”

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“Seizing the Future” in the words of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, most aptly and precisely, captures the essence of the iconic yet overly belated Israel-India Strategic Partnership forged by the meeting of the hearts and minds of the two dynamic and assertive Prime Ministers PM Netanyahu and PM Narendra Modi last week during the first –ever visit of an Indian Prime Minister to Israel in 70 years.

The Israel-India Strategic Partnership can really be defined as the “Advent of the Inevitable” though the inevitability was long delayed by successive Indian Prime Ministers till PM Modi assumed office in New Delhi. Now that the joint journey has well-begun in 2017, let the Indian political and policy establishment invest persistently in taking this Strategic Partnership to greater heights. India as an Emerged Power bears the onus of a greater responsibility in this direction. Within India this Strategic Partnership should receive bipartisan political support and should not be politicised in the name of minority vote-banks or adherence to the fossilised remains of Non-Alignment.

The Israeli President and the Prime Minister broke all protocols in welcoming the Indian Prime Minister and this itself was reflective of the tremendous regard and affection that the leaders and people of Israel have for India. The warmth extended by Israeli leaders was overwhelming. Similar was the Israeli media coverage.

Israel as PM Netanyahu stated in his welcome at the airport reception on PM Modi’s arrival that “We have been waiting for you” was an assertion well-timed and well-stated. It was aimed as a personal tribute to PM Modi for his audacious strategic reachout to forge a strategic partnership with Israel. No Indian Prime Minister, not even the first BJP Premier Vajpayee had taken the initiative to visit Israel, even after Israel’s unhesitating rushing of military supplies during the Kargil War.

But more significantly it was aimed at the Indian nation-State signifying that Israel had patiently waited for 70 years for India to break-out of its self-imposed shell of political and strategic diffidence towards Israel arising from misplaced sensitivities towards Indian Muslims sentiments and the reactions of Arab and Muslim nations, an Indian policy that brought no dividends from the targeted segment.

Israel needs to be given credit by India that despite India's lack of political and strategic reachout to Israel in the last 70 years, Israel extended much-needed political support and military aid to India in the aggressive and unprovoked wars of 1965, 1971 and the Kargil War of 1999. Expressed by me in the last decade was the sentiment that it is now India's payback time to Israel.

PM Modi's visit to Israel stands widely and extensively covered both in the Israeli and Indian media and so also the all-encompassing outcome of the Israel-India Strategic Partnership. The Joint Communique issued during the visit is appended with this Paper for Partnership 2017. However, this Paper instead of repeating the same and media reports will attempt to analyse the overall significance of the Israel-India Strategic Partnership 2017 in its political and strategic dimensions.

In Israel-India Strategic Partnership it is difficult to separate the political, strategic and military strands as they are intertwined. It is therefore best to analyse the dimensions under the generic heads of "Politico-Strategic" and "Strategic Military". Even the economic dimension gets subsumed in both these terms as in my view that dimension only addedly contributes to the two intertwined dimensions mentioned.

In politico-strategic dimensions the overall implications are significant and far-reaching. Historicity and rich civilisational shared heritage aside, the contemporary significance has best been captured in an article in the UK Daily, 'The Independent' which makes two pertinent observations. The first observation made is that "Indian PM Modi's visit to Israel puts him firmly on the side of Trump and his international strongmen". More significantly, the second observation asserts that "What we are watching in slow motion is the biggest realignment of the global order since the Second World War,"

Emergence of a strong and vibrant Israel-India Strategic Partnership in 2017 exactly portends that when analysed laterally suggests that Israel and India get positioned in an overarching strategic grouping comprising the United States, Japan, India and Israel. Not to be forgotten is that Israel is in the process of evolving a strong political and military relationship with Vietnam, with India also so involved with Vietnam for decades.

These nations may not be tied in any formal alliance structure but their complementarity of overall strategic convergences and their strong bilateral bonds existing or being forged does qualify for the assertion that the Israel-India Strategic Partnership has set in motion a new major realignment of global balance of power with implications not only for the Middle East but also the contiguous region of South Asia and the wider Indo Pacific Asia.

The emergence of the Israel-India Strategic Partnership which portends to now grow into an open and assertive strategic partnership, with India no longer weighed down by political diffidence, promises to add considerable strategic ballast to the informal strategic grouping outlined above. This in turn places a heavy burden on India now to live upto the strategic expectations of the nations stated above. I daresay that in living upto the strategic assertiveness expected of India, Israel will play a significant and unhesitant role especially in the military capacity- building of India as without military muscle to back it India's foreign policy cannot reach its full fruition.

In terms of politico-strategic significance two more points need to be highlighted. Israel investing and underwriting a strong and vibrant Strategic Partnership with India indicates two determinants. Israel has significantly invested in India's potential as a Great Power, so highlighted by the Israeli Prime Minister. Secondly, it marks an Israeli 'Pivot to Asia' when viewed in the context of Israel so far had foreign policy focus on the West. In this direction, India can be expected to assist Israel with its considerable foreign policy footprints in Indo Pacific Asia.

In terms of Middle East politico-military implications two things stand out in relation to the Strategic Partnership. Israel no longer would feel isolated in the region with India expectedly standing strongly by its side. India having come out of the closet and strongly affirming its Strategic Partnership with Israel has sent strong politico-strategic signals to the region of its departure from its established foreign policy which in essence spun around appeasement of Arab and Muslim nations. It is for record that no Arab or Muslim nation has supported India on Kashmir but sided with Pakistan on grounds of Islamic affinity.

With the Israel-India Strategic Partnership being a tipping point in the global and regional balance of power, reverberations are obviously taking place. Initial reactions suggest that Pakistan is seriously disturbed on this development. Reactions within Pakistan and in the Pakistan media are rabid and panicky. The reactions from the Middle East are muted. This arises from the reality that Israel has Peace Treaties with two Arab nations--Egypt and Jordan, and Saudi Arabia as the leading nation of the Islamic world has its diplomatic mission in Israel.

The United States, Japan, Vietnam and the European countries seem to view the emergence of this Strategic Partnership in positive terms. No noticeable reactions have emerged from Russia. China is noticeably muted on this development. This could possibly be due to China having military sales relationship and with sizeable Chinese FDI invested in the tourism sector in Israel. However, it cannot be believed that China is not concerned about the new realignment affecting the global balance of power.

Some in India are concerned that Israel's close military relationship with China could prospectively dilute the Israel-India Strategic Partnership. Israeli PM Netanyahu seems to have implicitly hinted that Israel views its military relations with China strictly in terms of sale of military technology which in many cases is subject to restrictions by the United States. On the other hand when PM Netanyahu defines its Strategic Partnership with India as one of "Seizing the Future" the implications and long-range perspectives should be obvious.

Analytically, it should strike any observer that if Israel is getting extensively involved in India's modernisation and build-up of its Armed Forces, does it not imply that this Israeli effort tends to militarily strengthen India against its confirmed military threats emanating from China with Pakistan in tow?

Turning attention to the strategic-military dimensions of the Israel-India Strategic Partnership, the canvas is wide and colourful and very promising. Without listing the detailed inventories of military sales that have already flowed-in and those in the pipeline, it can be pointed out that items of innovative and technological defence collaboration gets highlighted in three critical areas of military concern to India in relation to India's military asymmetry with China, namely, space systems, cyber warfare and ECM, besides missiles and anti-ballistic missile systems.

Lastly, Israel and India are two nations under sustained assault by Fundamentalist Islamic Terrorism and both nations have decided to cooperate in a big way to combat this menace including more integrated terrorism intelligence-sharing so vital for both countries counter-terrorism operations. Unlike other countries which incorporate the terrorism menace as routine references in Joint Communiqués, in case of Israel it can be analysed as here that the Israeli assistance in terrorism intelligence and counter-terrorism expertise sharing would be considerable and substantial. Israel can play a vital role in improving India's counter-terrorism deterrence against Fundamentalist Islamic Terrorism. This should be a strong message to Pakistan which shelters Islamic Jihadi Terrorism.

In the strategic dimensions that propel the Israel-India Strategic Partnership well into the future would be two geopolitical perceptions gaining ground lately. The first is the perceived or misperceived as I would put it, of the decline of the United States as a Superpower. The second is the perception that China's not so benign military rise and its aggressive military brinkmanship on its peripheries and elsewhere is unstoppable.

There is yet another dimension in the Israel-India Strategic Partnership and that is a convergence on the Indian Ocean. Little discussed but the potential is vast. In one of my SAAG Papers in the last decade I had touched on this. Besides the geopolitical convergence, Israel is involved in a major way in terms of build-up of its capabilities in missiles, UAVs and surveillance systems.

Finally, in terms of concluding observations, it needs to be emphasised that unlike India's other Strategic Partnerships where the overall intent gets subsumed by the Major Powers, regional interests and away from India's national interests, in the case of Israel-India Strategic Partnership the geopolitical and strategic convergences are strong and unambiguous. This will be an enabler as both Israel and India strive to "Seize the Future."

Appendix:

India-Israel Joint Statement during the visit of Prime Minister to Israel (July 5, 2017) July 05, 2017

1. Marking the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India visited Israel from 4-6 July 2017 at the invitation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. This historic first-ever visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Israel solidified the enduring friendship between their peoples and raised the bilateral relationship to that of a strategic partnership.
2. Noting that they represent two cradles of civilizations that have nurtured their respective heritages over the centuries, the two leaders affirmed their intention to build a broad-based relationship that will realise the full potential of their association. In doing so, they recognized that throughout history, the Jewish Communities have always had a home in India and have been treated with warmth and respect.
3. Reviewing the development of the relationship after a quarter century of diplomatic ties, the two leaders agreed on initiatives and policies that would reflect the goals and aspirations of both nations and widen their collaborative endeavours in a broad range of areas. They visualized that the two countries will become close partners in development, technology, innovation, entrepreneurship, defence and security.
4. Recognizing its centrality for development, India and Israel agreed to establish a "Strategic Partnership in Water and Agriculture". This will focus on water conservation, waste-water treatment and its reuse for agriculture, desalination, water utility reforms, and the cleaning of the Ganges and other rivers using advanced water technologies. It will also include the reinforcement and expansion of the existing Centres of Excellence (COE) under the stewardship of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MASHAV) and the Ministry of Agriculture of India to promote commercially viable business models involving Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs); the provision of quality planting material; and the transfer of post-harvest technical know-how and market linkages involving the private sector through PPP, B2B & other models. The two leaders also agreed on the establishment of a Joint Working Group to steer this Partnership.
5. The two Prime Ministers noted the importance of realizing the full potential of bilateral trade and investment. They tasked the India-Israel CEO Forum to come up with early recommendations in this regard. Both leaders underlined the need to boost bilateral cooperation in innovation and entrepreneurship and called for greater collaboration in the field of start-ups.
6. Recognizing the importance of facilitating movement of businessmen and women, India and Israel underlined their expectation that the granting of multiple entry visas to business people for up to five years will encourage greater economic and commercial exchanges.
7. The two Prime Ministers agreed that negotiations would be conducted on an agreement for the Protection of Investments in order to encourage bilateral investments from both sides.
8. The two Prime Ministers welcomed the conclusion of the Memorandum of Understanding for establishing the India-Israel Industrial R&D and Innovation Fund (I4F) by the Department of Science and Technology, India and the National Authority for Technological Innovation, Israel with a contribution of US\$ 20 million from each side. This MoU will play a seminal role in enabling Indian and Israeli enterprises to undertake joint R&D projects leading to development of innovative technologies and products that have potential for commercial application.
9. Recognising the importance of fostering wide ranging knowledge-business partnership for industries, R&D institutions and government agencies from both countries, Israel warmly welcomed India's offer to be the "Partner Country" for the annual Technology Summit to be held in India in 2018.
10. Both leaders welcomed the ongoing cooperation between the Israel Space Agency (ISA) and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). They expressed satisfaction over the signing of three MoUs and Plan of Cooperation in the areas of Cooperation in Atomic Clocks; GEO-LEO Optical Link; Academic collaboration and Electric propulsion for small satellites which would further enhance cooperation between the two countries. They also encouraged the two Space Agencies to further enhance the growing relationship for mutual benefit. The two leaders acknowledged that the recent launching by ISRO of an Israeli nano satellite is an important milestone in this arena.
11. The Prime Ministers noted with satisfaction that both sides have agreed to upgrade their scientific and technological collaboration by supporting joint research and development projects in the cutting edge areas, including 'Big Data Analytics in Health Care'. They directed the India-Israel Joint Committee on Science and Technology to explore the possibility of further advancement of scientific collaboration including setting up of Networked Centres of Research Excellence in the cutting edge areas of mutual strength and interest.

12. Reaffirming the importance of bilateral defence cooperation over the years, it was agreed that future developments in this sphere should focus on joint development of defence products, including transfer of technology from Israel, with a special emphasis on the 'Make in India' initiative.
13. India and Israel are committed to promote security and stability in cyberspace on both the governmental and private levels. The Prime Ministers emphasized the importance of enhanced dialogue between their national cyber authorities and expressed their commitment to expand and accelerate their cooperation in this sphere including laying a mutual roadmap for its implementation. Both sides also recognise the value of enhancing and further institutionalising their broad-based cooperation on cyber issues through a Framework for cooperation in the area of cyber security.
14. Recognizing that terrorism poses a grave threat to global peace and stability, the two Prime Ministers reiterated their strong commitment to combat it in all its forms and manifestations. They stressed that there can be no justification for acts of terror on any grounds whatsoever. The leaders asserted that strong measures should be taken against terrorists, terror organizations, their networks and all those who encourage, support and finance terrorism, or provide sanctuary to terrorists and terror groups. They also underscored the need to ensure that terrorist organizations do not get access to any WMD or technologies. Both leaders also committed to cooperate for the early adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT).
15. Both leaders reaffirmed their commitments as envisaged in the agreement on cooperation on Homeland and Public Security and encouraged the various Working Groups to implement the agreement in an efficient and effective manner.
16. The two Prime Ministers underlined the importance of enhanced collaboration in the field of Higher Education and Research and agreed to promote this through relevant agreements and the Joint Research Grant Programme.¹⁷ Noting the importance of growing people to people contacts between India and Israel, the two leaders agreed to facilitate the promotion of travel & tourism in both directions, including through the further enhancement of air links between India and Israel.
18. Appreciating the contribution of the Jewish community in India and Jews of Indian origin in Israel in bringing the two societies closer, Prime Minister Modi announced the opening of an Indian Cultural Centre in Israel. This was warmly welcomed by Prime Minister Netanyahu who expressed his deep respect for Indian culture and recalled Israel's strong support and sponsorship of PM Modi's initiative to promote the practice of Yoga by designating June 21 as International Yoga Day.
19. The two Prime Ministers recognized the contribution of Indian care-givers in Israel and expressed their intention to reach a mutually agreed-upon arrangement which will provide for their continued arrival in a regulated manner.
20. The two Prime Ministers discussed the developments pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process. They underlined the need for the establishment of a just and durable peace in the region. They reaffirmed their support for an early negotiated solution between the sides based on mutual recognition and security arrangements
21. During the visit, the following Agreements were signed:
 - i. MoU between the Department of Science & Technology, India and National Technological Innovation Authority, Israel for setting up of India-Israel Industrial R&D and Technological Innovation Fund (I4F).
 - ii. MoU between the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation of the Republic of India and the Ministry of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources of the State of Israel on National Campaign for Water Conservation in India
 - iii. MoU between U.P. Jal Nigam, Government of Uttar Pradesh, of the Republic of India and the Ministry of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources of the State of Israel on State Water Utility Reform in India
 - iv. India-Israel Development Cooperation - Three Year Work Program in Agriculture 2018-2020

v Plan of Cooperation Between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the Israel Space Agency (ISA) regarding cooperation in Atomic Clocks

vi MoU between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the Israel Space Agency (ISA) regarding cooperation in GEO-LEO Optical Link

vii MoU between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the Israel Space Agency (ISA) regarding cooperation in Electric Propulsion for Small Satellites

22. Prime Minister Modi thanked the people and Government of Israel for their gracious hospitality and extended a warm invitation to Prime Minister Netanyahu to visit India at a mutually convenient time. Prime Minister Netanyahu accepted the invitation.

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