

Ramallah recall: On India's Palestine policy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Palestine underlines the delicate balance New Delhi has adopted in this long-standing and seemingly intractable conflict. India, which has been a champion of the Palestinian people's national aspirations, has built strong ties with Israel in recent years. Last year Mr. Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel; the Ramallah visit has come just weeks after his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, visited India. On the other hand, late last year India voted along with a vast majority of member-states at the UN General Assembly against U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Last week in Ramallah, the Palestinian National Authority's administrative headquarters, Mr. Modi reiterated India's support for the Palestinian cause, saying it "hopes that Palestine soon becomes a sovereign and independent country in a peaceful atmosphere". Both sides also signed a number of agreements for India-funded projects in the West Bank. India's policy objective is clear and rooted in political realism. It wants to maintain the balance in its relationship with both Palestine and Israel, and strengthen bilateral ties with each separately.

Modi reiterates support for Palestine

This balance is vital for India, for which Israel is a source of defence equipment and agricultural technology. But Israel also faces political isolation internationally over its occupation of the Palestinian territories and does not have diplomatic ties with most countries in West Asia. As reflected in the UNGA vote, international public opinion is overwhelmingly against the occupation. India, which has vital interests in the Gulf and enjoys good ties with the region's Muslim countries, cannot afford to be seen to be politically closer to Israel at the expense of ties with Palestinians. So it is not a coincidence that the Prime Minister's visit to Palestine took place against the backdrop of India's deepening ties with Israel. With the Ramallah visit, the message Mr. Modi is sending out is that India's partnership with Israel is not at the expense of its principled support for the Palestinian cause. Still, changing nuances in India's position were on display during the visit. Traditionally, India has supported the creation of an independent Palestine within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. According to this line, Israel would have to withdraw from the West Bank and East Jerusalem and either pull out the Jewish settlements or do a land-swap with the Palestinians as part of a final agreement. Mr. Modi carefully avoided any reference to the borders or to the capital. In effect, India's support for the two-state solution remains, but it has now stopped short of the specifics.

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