

The road still runs through Ramallah

Narendra Modi's visit to Israel last year, the first by an Indian Prime Minister, stood out for his decision not to visit the Palestinian territories. Two months before Mr. Modi's visit, even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's closest ally, U.S. President Donald Trump, had coupled his visit to Jerusalem with a trip to Bethlehem to meet the Palestinian leadership. The decision, India had said, came from a determination to "de-hyphenate" relations with Israel and Palestine. This was underlined in the India-Israel joint statement, which didn't refer to the two-state solution, didn't mention the status of Jerusalem, and didn't even call for an early resumption of the Israel-Palestine peace process.

Instead, the two countries focussed on burgeoning bilateral ties, most notably the defence and strategic partnership. By one estimate, India accounts for 41% of Israel's defence exports, and a possible sale of Spike anti-tank missiles during Mr. Netanyahu's visit to India will give this steadfast relationship an added fillip. Counter-terrorism cooperation remains a cornerstone of India-Israel cooperation and there will be a powerful joint remembrance ceremony during Mr. Netanyahu's visit to Mumbai's Chabad House, one of the targets of the 26/11 attack. The biggest growth areas in bilateral ties will also come from memorandums of understanding in agriculture and water technology, given Israeli expertise in this area.

During Mr. Netanyahu's visit to Ahmedabad, where he and Mr. Modi will undertake a roadshow together, he will hand over two desalinisation vehicles that Mr. Modi saw in Haifa. Showing how little he believed the political context matters to the bilateral relationship anymore, Mr. Netanyahu said that neither China nor India conditioned their relationship with Israel on the basis of the Palestinian peace process. "[Mr. Modi said], I need more water, clean water...where will I get it? Ramallah?" Mr. Netanyahu had told a group of European officials a few days after Mr. Modi's visit.

However, the decision to de-hyphenate doesn't seem quite as set in stone as it had just a few months ago. Expectations are that unlike in Jerusalem, Mr. Modi will raise the need to pursue the two-state solution with Mr. Netanyahu directly during the India visit. Mr. Modi is also expected to travel to Palestine in the next few months, and receive Jordanian King Abdullah II in New Delhi, during which the need for the peace process will be highlighted.

At a Non-Aligned Ministerial in September, calling India's support to the Palestinian cause a "reference point" in its foreign policy, Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj affirmed that India's "expanding relations" in the region will "only strengthen the Palestinian cause", not weaken it. And in a letter ahead of the UN International Solidarity Day with the Palestinian People in November, Mr. Modi wrote that India's vision for the creation of a separate Palestinian state remains, and called for an "early resumption of dialogue".

The biggest shift from what seemed to be a set trajectory for the Modi government, however, came on the floor of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on December 21, when India chose to vote for a resolution criticising the U.S. for recognising Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, and also called on Israel to end its "occupation that began in 1967". The Foreign Ministry defended its decision as consistent with past policy, but in fact the reverse is evident. In the past three years, barring a vote at the UNGA in 2014, India has turned from its traditional pro-Palestinian stance, to one of abstention. In 2015, India abstained on a UN Human Rights Council resolution criticising Israel for an aerial bombing of Gaza that had left 2,200 people dead. It repeated its abstention in 2016. Also in 2016, at UNESCO in Paris, India changed its vote from voting 'for' to an abstention on a resolution criticising Israel for encroachments at the Western Wall and near the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

Clearly, India could have easily made a case for abstaining on the UNGA resolution on Jerusalem as well, especially given this recent record. The decision was taken despite strong lobbying from Israel in the run-up to the vote, and despite Mr. Trump's open threats to all those voting for the resolution. Another possible tack came from Mr. Trump's own statement when he announced his decision to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, saying it was not a "final status" position, including on the extent of "Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem". Bhutan has used that statement to explain its breaking ranks with India at the vote, by choosing to abstain.

Meanwhile, the bogey of "domestic compulsions" used by several governments in the past, a euphemism for objections from India's Muslim minority on the Israel-Palestine issue, has long since been called out: there has been no major 'street' reaction to or protest of any of India's overtures to Israel, or to the visits by the leaders thus far, and the Modi government had no cause to worry about a public reaction to an abstention in this case.

As a result, India's position can only be explained by a desire to reassert its leadership role on the multilateral stage, and to regain its leverage on the Israel-Palestine issue, a re-hyphenation of sorts. This is in keeping with the special place and moral position India has always assumed on the peace process, and its support to a just solution. It is also a rejection of the false equivalence often built between Palestine and Kashmir, or comparisons between de-hyphenating the India-Pakistan relationship and the Israel-Palestine issue. De-hyphenating relations with Israel and Palestine can only follow a peaceful resolution of the issue, which even Israel's founding fathers believed was the two-state solution. "The future of the Zionist project depends on [Israel's] embrace of the two-state solution," former President Shimon Peres wrote in his memoirs. "The danger, if Israel abandons this goal, is that the Palestinians will eventually accept a one-state solution. Because of demographics, this would leave Israel with a choice: stay Jewish or stay democratic." It is this solution that Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated for espousing, and Mr. Peres died hoping for — but Israel's current dispensation is moving away from this long-standing consensus.

Weeks after winning on principle at the UNGA to have its candidate overwhelmingly elected to the International Court for Justice, India could not have been seeing bowing to pressure or to the diktats of 'realpolitik' on the Jerusalem vote at the same forum. More to the point, the government appears to have affirmed that in calculating the national interest, it is necessary to value the role of India's leadership on the international stage as well. If there is a realpolitik calculation to be made, it is that India's influence in West Asia cannot be squandered away so casually, and advocating the peace process with Mr. Netanyahu will be an important step. The road to India's prosperity may well run through Jerusalem, but the road to its leadership aspirations on the world stage cannot bypass Ramallah either.

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