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ISRAEL-INDIA STRATEGIC COOPERATION AND PRIME MINISTER SHARON'S VISIT: The Added Dimensions.

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Note: The contextual background for this paper is provided by the following earlier papers of the author:

1. "India-Israel Relations: The Imperatives for Enhanced Strategic Cooperation". SAAG Paper No 131 dated 1-8-2000
2. "India's Pay Back time To Israel". SAAG Paper No 442 dated 10-4-2002.

Introductory Observations: India's Nehruvian policies kept India and Israel politically apart for over forty years despite sharing many attributes in common. India and Israel emerged as nation states within months of each other. Following India's emergence as an independent nation on August 15, 1947, Israel emerged as a nation state on May 14, 1948 as a result of a decision by the United Nations, the first such nation.

It has been rightly observed by Moshe Yegar of Israel's Ariel Center for Policy Research, writing on the normalization of Israel-India relations that for 44 years India "demonstrated reservations, unfriendliness and even hostility towards Israel. Israel for its part invested many efforts to bring about change in India's policy, but to no avail".

Relations with Israel were normalized in January 1992, in a bold move by then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao who over-ruled objections by sections within the Government and the ruling Congress Party.

It needs to be noted that India and Israel are democracies and have survived in a sea of hostility, surrounded by implacable adversaries and a heavily militarized security environment. Both nations have fought wars in nearly every decade of their existence. No other two countries in the world have suffered so much at the hands of state-sponsored Islamic Jehadi terrorism as India and Israel.

Fully appreciative of the imperatives of India's quest for strategic cooperation with Israel, the latter rose to India's expectations generously in the field of provision of sophisticated defence equipment and military hardware, provision of expertise in counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing on Islamic Jehadi terrorism. Nowhere was this more pronounced when Israel went out of the way to rush emergency supplies of India's military hardware requirements at the height of the Kargil War.

The striking question in the evolving Israel-India strategic cooperation is that who has more stakes in the maturing of this relationship? My papers referred above would indicate that it is India which has more vital stakes in this strategic cooperation than Israel has.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Historic Visit to India: Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to India is a historic one. It comes at a time when Israel has invested far more than India in the nurturing of what one may now term as an Israel-India strategic partnership.

The Israeli Prime Minister's visit comes at a critical juncture, when the entire strategic calculus in the Middle East and South Asia stands totally changed due to the events of 9/11, the Afghanistan War and the Gulf War II. All these call for a re-casting of India's foreign policies and in the emerging strategic calculus, Israel emerges as an important actor.

The forthcoming visit of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to India should be used by India to explore the possibilities and prospects of the following crucial subjects:

- * Israel-India-United States Strategic Cooperation.
- * Israel-India Strategic Cooperation in the Indian Ocean in the nuclear context.
- * Israel-India Enhanced Defence Cooperation.

Israel-India-USA Strategic Cooperation: During Prime Minister Sharon's visit this topic is likely to figure in a major way. India's National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra himself set the stage for this when in May 2003 in an address to the American Jewish Congress in USA, he made the following important observations:

- * "India-US-Israel have some fundamental similarities"
- * "Strong US-India and India-Israel relations have a natural logic".

Prime Minister Sharon's visit to India has excited interest world-wide as indicated by the concern expressed on websites in Pakistan, Middle East and even in Europe. On one website in a dispatch dated August 8, 2003 attributed to a Brussels report the following is highlighted:

- * Sharon's trip would be concentrated on the issue of developing a "triad" or a "core alliance" of India-Israel-USA."
- * One of the aims of the above would be "commitment of evolving a joint strategy to fight international terrorism".
- * "Sharon's visit (to India) may change the military equilibrium in West Asia and South Asia".

What this author would like to emphasise on this 'core alliance' is that:

- * In the entire stretch from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, there exist only two functional democracies i.e. Israel and India, committed to liberal values that the United States espouses.
- * In this entire stretch despite the temporizing strategic relationships that the United States has with despotic regimes extending from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan (The Other Axis of Evil), the United States has only two "natural allies" namely, Israel and India.

No wonder that US Congressman, Gary Ackerman was constrained to state in a recent address that: "Strong India- Israel relations is very critical to ensuring peace and stability in the part of the world that is characterized by instability, fundamentalism, religious bigotry, hatred towards the West and its values, and murder and mayhem spawned by the acts of cross border terrorism."

The Israel -India-USA convergences do not necessarily focus on international terrorism only (since the USA was a late entrant as a victim of Islamic Jehadi terrorism) but strategically encompass a wider field. One commentator on a Israeli website has made the following striking observations:

- * An alliance between India and Israel openly endorsed by USA would create a potent stability force in the region.
- * For USA to counter China, a powerful and progressive India, bolstered by Israeli technological expertise, appears as the most practical alternative.

It is therefore hoped that during the forthcoming visit of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, these aspects would be discussed thread bare and that the Indian political leadership would not shy away on flimsy excuses of attempting a political consensus on the subject.

Israel-India Strategic Cooperation in the Indian Ocean in the Nuclear Context: One must admit that Indian analysts, including this author have completely missed out on the significance of this crucial aspect, whereas this aspect does figure in Israeli perceptions.

It must be recalled that both Israel and India are potential targets for first-use nuclear strikes by their adversaries (in both cases the Islamic nuclear bomb). In Israeli perceptions, the striking strategic imperative that is emerging is the development of sea-borne second strike capability. This strategically has to be operative from the Indian Ocean and hence strategic cooperation with the Indian Navy is an imperative.

India's perception cannot be otherwise as the credibility of its second strike capability would largely rest on the sea borne leg of its nuclear triad.

Needless to say, that India-Israel joint efforts in this direction should form an important part of discussions with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon during his forth coming visit.

Israel-India Enhanced Defence Cooperation: The fundamentals and details of Israel-India defence cooperation stand discussed in my first paper referred above. The follow-up in terms of enhanced defence cooperation between Israel and India incorporates:

- * Israel will train up to four battalians of Indian Army for special operations.
- * India has signed \$30 million agreement with Israeli military industries for provision of 3,400 Tover Assault Rifles and 200 Galil Sniper Rifles.
- * Provision of night vision devices and thermal imaging equipment.

- * India has signed a sizeable contract with Israeli Aircraft Industries for upgrading of MIG-21s, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and laser guided bombs.
- * Israel is providing two Elta Green Pine Long Range Radars which form part of the Arrow Ballistic Missile Defence system.
- * India's HAL and Israel's IAI will undertake joint marketing of India's Advanced Light Helicopter fitted with advanced Israeli avionics.
- * Israeli provision of advanced avionics system for India's MIG 27s.
- * Discussion on joint India-Israel development of Ballistic Missile Defence system based on Israeli Arrow system.
- * Israeli sale of Phalcon Airborne Early Warning and Control system to India with US concurrence. This itself is reflective of the Israel-India-USA strategic cooperation as earlier USA had vetoed the sale of this system by Israel to China.

India continues to face many voids in her defence preparedness in terms of sophisticated military equipment and PM Sharon must be invited to fill them up.

India's Domestic Opposition to Israeli Prime Minister's Visit to India: India's domestic opposition to Prime Minister Sharon's forthcoming visit to India as articulated in number of lead articles in newspapers is marginal and center on the fossilized remains of the Nehruvian school of foreign policy and non-alignment. For them 'real politik' is alien.

It is hoped that the Indian political leadership will dismiss the outbursts of these groups fossilised views as irrelevant to India's national security interests. India's democracy should allow them their say, but not their dictates.

While freedom of expression is a laudable phenomenon but objectivity must not be lost sight of by such commentators. Terrorism and suicide bombers of the Islamic Jihad whether in Palestine or in Kashmir cannot be dealt with politically, and the use of force in the service of one's national security interests is perfectly in order.

Concluding Observations: Israel-India cooperation transcends the strategic field into growing trade, scientific cooperation, cultural exchanges and tourism. However the strategic cooperation pre-dominates all exchanges between the two countries as evidenced by the fact that today Israel has emerged as the Number Two supplier of the defence requirements of India's Armed Forces.

The two major determinants of any country's foreign policy are national security and economics. In the case of Israel-India relations the national security determinant has evolved as the pre-dominant factor due to convergence of national security interests. India needs to be

realistic and transparent about the predominance of the strategic determinant in the Israel-India context.

Neither does India have to be apologetic about the Israel-India-USA “core alliance” as it serves magnificently India’s core national security objectives.

Therefore Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s historic visit to India in September 2003 should be utilised both by Israel and India to set the stage for moving their relationship from “strategic cooperation” to “strategic partnership”.

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