

Israel and India: A Sensible Alliance?

At first glance, Hindu-majority India, with approximately 1.2 billion people and an entire subcontinent, would seem to have little in common with Jewish-majority Israel, which has only about eight million people living on territory that's roughly 15 times the size of India's capital city.

While full diplomatic relations were established between Jerusalem and New Delhi only in 1992, the two countries actually have much in common.

Both countries are homelands for ancient peoples who gained their independence from the British in the 1940s. Both states have gone on to create vibrant, multicultural democracies that have experienced dynamic, technology-driven economic growth. India and Israel each also has a large Muslim minority population, and each faces an ongoing terrorism threat from foreign and domestic Islamic extremists; indeed, both Israelis and Indians were targeted and killed in the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks.

Even more serious, India and Israel each faces ballistic missile threats from at least one close, hostile Muslim state. India already faces the nuclear threat posed by Pakistan, and Israel may soon confront the same threat from Iran, if Iranian nukes aren't stopped.

There is also a blossoming military and commercial relationship between India and Israel. Israel is India's second largest arms supplier after Russia, and Israeli-Indian military cooperation extends to technology upgrades, joint research, intelligence cooperation, and even space (in 2008, India launched a 300-kilogram Israeli satellite into orbit). Israel has upgraded India's Soviet-era armor and aircraft and

provided India with sea-to-sea missiles, radar and other surveillance systems, border monitoring equipment, night vision devices, and other military support. Bilateral trade reached US \$6 billion last year and negotiations began this year for a free trade agreement.

Israeli-Indian cooperation in agriculture and water technology is growing both through government-sponsored initiatives and private business deals. Last year, Israeli and Indian government institutions jointly launched an online network that provides real-time communications between Indian farmers and Israeli agricultural technology experts, and Israel is in the process of setting up 28 agricultural training centers throughout India.

Israeli Professor Yoram Oren has been studying the potential use of nano-filtration to filter out harmful textile dyes from India's polluted Noyyal River. Last June, a delegation of 16 high-ranking Indian officials from the water authorities of Rajasthan, Karnataka, Goa and Haryana traveled to Israel to visit waste-water treatment plants and meet with some of Israel's leading environmentalists and agronomists to learn about the desert country's newest green technologies.

Tata Industries, the multi-billion-dollar Indian company, recently invested \$5 million to kick-start the Technology Innovation Momentum Fund at Tel Aviv University's Ramot technology transfer company. Tata Industries hopes to capitalize on future Israeli innovation, like the algorithm for error correction in flash memory (which is one of the patents filed by Ramot and now inside billions of dollars worth of SanDisk products).

These are but a few examples of the remarkable cooperation between India and Israel. Such a synergistic relationship is unsurprising, given the historically harmonious relations between the peoples of Israel and India.

Judaism was one of the first foreign religions to come to India: the Cochin Jews arrived about 2,500 years ago and settled in the city of Kerala, where they flourished as traders. In addition to the few thousand Jews who live in major Indian cities like Mumbai, there are also some larger Indian communities, like the 8,000 "Bnai Menashe" (from the northeastern Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur) who claim descent from one of the Lost Tribes of Israel.

While Jews have always been a minuscule religious minority in India, they have historically encountered very little anti-Semitism. In Israel, about 1 percent of the Jewish population has Indian ancestry.

In addition to the many historic and economic reasons for India and Israel to strengthen their ties, there are also strong geopolitical motivators. Israel's tiny land mass (about 21,000 square kilometers) makes the Jewish state particularly vulnerable and compels it to make strategic use of seaborne offensive and defensive military capabilities. A vital component of those capabilities is Israel's submarine force, which requires friendly waters in which to deploy and maintain such a force—something that the Indian Navy can provide with its dominance of South Asian waters.

With the ongoing security threats posed by India's nuclear-armed rival, Pakistan, the Kashmir conflict (which recently claimed five Indian soldiers), and potential conflict with the other Asian heavyweight (China), India needs the kind of military edge that Israel can help it to obtain. Insofar as India provides an Asian counterweight to Chinese dominance, a powerful India bolstered by Israeli technological expertise is also in the interest of smaller Asian countries and the United States.

One area where India could deepen its alliance with both Israel and the U.S. is on the issue of Iranian nukes. India, the second largest importer of Iranian crude oil after China,

won its third 180-day waiver from U.S. sanctions last June after reducing its oil purchases from Iran. But in 2012, Iran and India agreed to trade in rupees for shipments of oil, rice, sugar and soybeans, to circumvent U.S. financial sanctions on Iranian oil shipments.

And Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals is now reportedly receiving a cargo of Iranian crude, after a 4-month hiatus, with Hindostan Petroleum also restarting imports soon. Iran may also become the top buyer of soybean meal from India for a second straight year, as Iran turns to Asia's biggest exporter to replace imports disrupted by Western sanctions.

While India has its own commercial interests, India also has a strong interest in a peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue. India's economic and diplomatic clout can help to pressure Iran into a compromise that prevents a catastrophic Middle East war. Such a regional conflagration could spread beyond the Middle East and, in any case, would send India's energy costs skyrocketing, disrupt global trade, and dangerously destabilize India's geopolitical backyard.

India's history of religious tolerance stands in stark contrast to that of Iran's. Indeed, one of India's religious minorities, the Zoroastrians, have been fleeing persecution in the territory that is today Iran (Persia) for about 1,200 years. Since Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has been regarded as one of the world's worst offenders against freedom of religion. Iran's vicious human rights abuses and undemocratic political system are also well known. Would India want such a country to have nuclear weapons? Isn't Pakistan enough?

As a responsible member of the nuclear club, a fellow democracy, and one of the greatest rising world powers, India should approach the Iranian nuclear issue as an opportunity to demonstrate how growing Indian clout can promote global security and curb extremist, undemocratic regimes like the

Islamic Republic. By deepening India's ties with other innovative and economically advanced democracies like the United States and Israel, India can better secure its own interests and position itself for continued growth and leadership in a more stable world.

Noah Beck is the author of *The Last Israelis*, a war novel about Iranian nukes and an Israeli submarine with an Indian Jew on board.