

## INDIA DITCHES ITS 'NEUTRALITY'?

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



### Introduction

Within hours of Hamas' attack on Israel, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a bold move by expressing his full solidarity with Israel on X (formerly Twitter).<sup>1</sup> India has traditionally projected itself as maintaining 'neutrality' and pursuing a 'non-aligned' foreign policy, especially during conflicts. However, the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict has exposed the hollowness of such claims and demonstrated that India is only pursuing its strategic interest, with no regard to its past position of principle or sense of balance.

Many experts argued that there could be a shift in the Indian policy towards Palestine as India has been historically committed to advocating for the rights of the Palestinian people, while others suggested a possibility of alteration in Indian foreign policy of neutrality and non-alignment; however, more evidence supports the notion that India's so-called neutrality is driven by a rather strategic agenda. Despite an array of diplomatic pressures from the West, New Delhi fought hard to preserve its so-called 'neutrality' or 'strategic autonomy' on the Russia-Ukraine conflict due to its close strategic, diplomatic, economic and historic ties with Russia. The high bar of strategic ties with Russia, in comparison with Ukraine or the West, was the reason for New Delhi's rejection of the West's calls of condemnation of Russia. Somewhat similar hues of kindredness are apparent in the

<sup>1</sup> Narendra Modi, Twitter Post, October 7, 2023, <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1710614655620534296>.

case of New Delhi's ties with Tel Aviv. Hence, the Indian Prime Minister could not restrain himself from supporting its strategic partner Israel while giving up their so-called 'neutrality' as soon as the 'war' began between Israel and Hamas.

### **Ministry of External Affairs to the rescue**

Though a very calculated approach was adopted by the Indian Prime Minister, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) came forward to control the damage caused by his tweet, which invited abundant criticism. The MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi, however, took a contrasting stance to state that India had "always advocated for direct negotiations towards establishing a sovereign, independent and viable state of Palestine." Reiterating his country's position on the Palestine issue, the spokesperson stated that the Indian government would like to see a diplomatic solution of the matter leading to a Palestinian state "living within secure and recognised borders, side-by-side (and) at peace with Israel. That position remains the same."<sup>2</sup>

The statements by the Indian Prime Minister and the Indian Foreign Ministry seemed vastly different from each other and it appeared that the two were referring to different incidents. The tweet by PM Modi did not make a mention of Palestinians. Likewise, the statement by the Indian Foreign Ministry made no mention of the PM's unqualified support for Israel. It appeared as if there was possibly a divergence of views. While the Indian Foreign Ministry sought to balance relations and thus avoid disapproval from its vast Muslim population, a similar approach is not being followed by the Indian Prime Minister who appeared bent on advancing his political objectives. This became more apparent in the subsequent telephonic exchange between the Indian PM and the Israeli Prime Minister, where the Indian PM again expressed solidarity with Israel yet stopped short of upholding India's long-standing principled position of support for the Palestinian rights and resolving the matter through diplomatic means.<sup>3</sup>

Experts have argued that there is an evident shift in India's foreign policy from idealistic to pragmatic, which has become the basis of its foreign policy choices. This shows that the façade of 'neutrality' and 'non-alignment' is more like a red rag to a bull. This was evident in the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and is so in the Israel-Hamas conflict now. In the UN General Assembly (UNGA) session of October 27, 2023, on the 'humanitarian truce between Israel and Hamas,' India

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<sup>2</sup> Wesley Rahn, "Israel-Hamas war tests China and India's diplomatic reach," *DW News*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/israel-hamas-war-tests-china-and-indias-diplomatic-reach/a-67092795>

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, "Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi speaks with Prime Minister of Israel" press release, October 10, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37180/Prime\\_Minister\\_Shri\\_Narendra\\_Modi\\_speaks\\_with\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_Israel](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37180/Prime_Minister_Shri_Narendra_Modi_speaks_with_Prime_Minister_of_Israel)

'abstained' from voting.<sup>4</sup> Previously, on various occasions in the UNGA India has 'abstained' from voting in favour of either Israel or Palestine; however, there are a number of recorded incidents where India blamed Israel for 'excessive' use of force against Palestinian civilians in Gaza, and even believed Israel's actions against the Palestinian civilian population were 'illegal.' India even voted against the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which was at odds with its ally the United States but New Delhi maintained its 'principled' position on the Israel-Palestine issue regardless.<sup>5</sup> This showed that over time, even when the U.S. was on the opposite side, India chose to stand by its principled stance. However, in the latest instance, India has chosen to openly align with Israel due to its close and expectedly growing strategic relations.

### India-Israel Strategic Partnership

India and Israel have expanded the scope of their cooperation since the BJP government came to power in 2014, especially in the domain of military engagements, cybersecurity and defence equipment. The two countries upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2017, and since then Israel has been one of the biggest arms exporters to India, according to SIPRI.

Exporter	Share of global arms exports (%)		Per cent change from 2012–16 to 2017–21 <sup>a</sup>	Main recipients (share of exporter's total exports, %), 2017–21					
	2017–21	2012–16		1st	2nd	3rd			
1 United States	39	32	14	Saudi Arabia	(23)	Australia	(9.4)	South Korea	(6.8)
2 Russia	19	24	-26	India	(28)	China	(21)	Egypt	(13)
3 France	11	6.4	59	India	(29)	Qatar	(16)	Egypt	(11)
4 China	4.6	6.4	-31	Pakistan	(47)	Bangladesh	(16)	Thailand	(5.0)
5 Germany	4.5	5.4	-19	South Korea	(25)	Egypt	(14)	USA	(6.1)
6 Italy	3.1	2.5	16	Egypt	(28)	Turkey	(15)	Qatar	(9.0)
7 United Kingdom	2.9	4.7	-41	Oman	(19)	Saudi Arabia	(19)	USA	(19)
8 South Korea	2.8	1.0	177	Philippines	(16)	Indonesia	(14)	UK	(14)
9 Spain	2.5	2.2	10	Australia	(51)	Turkey	(13)	Belgium	(8.6)
10 Israel	2.4	2.5	-5.6	India	(37)	Azerbaijan	(13)	Viet Nam	(11)

**Figure 1: Top 10 exporters of major arms and their main recipients, 2017–21**

**Source:** Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers," SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2022, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs\\_2203\\_at\\_2021.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf)

It is also believed that PM Modi's 2017 visit to Israel (the first by any Indian Prime Minister) resulted in acquiring a sales package of sophisticated weapons gear that included the controversial spyware

<sup>4</sup> UN General Assembly adopts Gaza resolution calling for immediate and sustained 'humanitarian truce', UN News, October 26, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142847>

<sup>5</sup> Shairee Malhotra, "Explaining India's UN Vote on Jerusalem," *The Diplomat*, December 28, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/explaining-indias-un-vote-on-jerusalem/>

Pegasus and missile system worth US\$2 billion.<sup>6</sup> This deal worked as a magnet between New Delhi and Tel Aviv as India was seen shedding its neutrality at the UN Economic and Social Council in June 2019, when it voted in support of Israel to deny observer status to a Palestinian human rights organization.<sup>7</sup>

Most recently, in 2022, during Israeli Defence Minister Benjamin Gantz's visit to India, the two countries signed a comprehensive 10 year roadmap to expand on the 'India-Israel Vision on Defence Cooperation,' which would include cooperation on emerging and futuristic defence technologies.<sup>8</sup> The Indian military is already operating several Israeli defence platforms. Armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, missiles and radar systems dominate India-Israel defence cooperation, said to be worth US\$ 4.2 billion (2001-2021). Furthermore, Israel's defence exports include, Beyond Visual Range Air to Air Missiles (BVRAAM), Air to Surface Missile (ASM), guided bombs, anti-tank guided missiles, loitering munition, SPICE-2000 guided bombs, which were used during so-called Balakot airstrikes; various types of sensors and radars including early warning radar systems, electro-optical infrared sensors, naval radars and so on, elaborated in figure 2 below:

<b>Missiles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Derby Beyond Visual Range Air to Air Missile (BVRAAM)</li> <li>● Harop loitering munition</li> <li>● Python-5 BVRAAM</li> <li>● SPICE-2000 guided bombs</li> <li>● Popeye-1 Air to Surface Missile (ASM)</li> <li>● Griffin guided bombs</li> <li>● Spike anti-tank guided missiles</li> <li>● Popeye II (Crystal Maze) ASM</li> <li>● SkyStriker loitering munition</li> </ul>
<b>Unmanned Aerial Vehicles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Heron</li> <li>● Searcher MkII</li> <li>● Harop</li> </ul>
<b>Sensors and Radars</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● EL/M-2075 Phalcon airborne early warning radar system</li> <li>● EL/M-2248 MF-STAR multi-function radar</li> <li>● EL/M-2084 multi-mission radar systems</li> <li>● EL/M-2238 naval radar system</li> <li>● EL/M-2052 airborne AESA fire control radar</li> <li>● Litening electro-optical infrared sensor system</li> </ul>
<b>Air Defence Systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Spyder medium-range Surface to Air Missile (SAM) system</li> <li>● Barak SAM system</li> </ul>
<b>Small arms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Negev NG-7 light machine guns</li> </ul>

**Figure 2: Major Israeli defence equipment purchased by India**

**Source:** SIPRI Arms Transfers Database and IISS Military Balance 2022

<sup>6</sup> Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti, "The Battle for the World's Most Powerful Cyberweapon," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/28/magazine/nso-group-israel-spyware.html>

<sup>7</sup> Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti, "The Battle for the World's Most Powerful Cyberweapon."

<sup>8</sup> Sameer Patil, "The deepening of India-Israel defence ties," *Observer Research Foundation*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-deepening-of-india-israel-defence-ties/>

India has also imported Israeli Air Defence Systems with Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAM).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, last year India leased four Heron II armed unmanned aerial vehicles,<sup>10</sup> which are believed to be deployed for surveillance across the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan and Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. The exhaustive list of defence equipment shows Israel is outdoing itself when it comes to India, which has persuaded India to overlook its long-standing policy of 'neutrality' in terms of the Israel-Palestine issue.

## Conclusion

Israel has become the second top arms supplier to India replacing France.<sup>11</sup> Given India's expanding strategic partnership with Israel, New Delhi's interest lies in supporting its strategic partner, as it is doing in the Russia and Ukraine conflict. The only difference is that this time India explicitly supported its strategic partner Israel, whereas due to different dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India tilted towards Russia more implicitly.<sup>12</sup> Neither of the two instances showed that India has a 'neutral' and so-called 'non-aligned' policy. Rather, a critical analysis of the two situations reveals that New Delhi used 'neutrality' as a pretext to avoid criticism while actually promoting its core strategic objectives.

If India truly pursued a 'neutral' and 'non-aligned' policy it would have sought ways to promote peace and stability in the region, including calling for immediate ceasefire and a diplomatic resolution of the matter. Given the current circumstances, it remains unlikely that the Indian PM would call for a ceasefire or end of hostilities by Israel. Although India has sent humanitarian assistance to Gaza, it remains to be seen as yet if the Indian PM would maintain the principled position of India, call out the ongoing genocide in Gaza, or at least express sympathies for the Palestinian civilian victims of the relentless Israeli attacks. Notwithstanding its earlier principled stance on the Israel-Palestinian issue, India has evidently ditched the balance in the ongoing conflict and openly aligned itself with Israel due to its close and growing strategic relationship with Tel Aviv. The ongoing conflict has been a litmus test for India's foreign policy, and its decision to ditch 'neutrality' has made clear that India is willing to prioritize strategic interests over principled stance or the much-touted 'strategic autonomy.'

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<sup>9</sup> SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, March 13, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

<sup>10</sup> SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, March 13, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

<sup>11</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers," SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2022, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs\\_2203\\_at\\_2021.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf); Anat Bernstein-Reich, "Why Does Israel Sell India So Many Weapons?," *Haaretz*, December 11, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-12-11/ty-article/.premium/why-does-israel-sell-india-so-many-weapons/00000184-f247-d887-a98c-f3c731150000>

<sup>12</sup> Maheen Shafeeq, "India's Neutrality Over Russia-Ukraine War," *Modern Diplomacy*, March 2, 2023, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/03/02/indias-neutrality-over-russia-ukraine-war/>