



Israel's Quest to Seek Stronger Ties with Russia: Reasons behind It

*Dr. Indrani Talukdar**

On November 6, 2012 the then Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres said that Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama should shoulder the responsibility for the entire human race. Russia, since President Putin's tenure in 2000, has been consistently trying to influence global and regional issues particularly in West Asia through its adroit diplomacy, and to a large extent has been successful; whereas the role of the US in that region is diminishing.

The changing dynamics in West Asia due to the Arab Spring and its aftermath has catapulted Russia into limelight. It is emerging as a major player in the decision-making process for peace and stability in the region. Its success is best reflected persuading Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to dismantle the Syrian chemical weapons in September 2013 and helping in clinching the breakthrough in the Iranian stalemate on the nuclear weapon programme on November 24, 2013 between Iran and P5+1 group, has helped in building Russia's image of solving challenges through 'consistent and insistent' diplomacy rather than through sanctions and military strikes.

The new developments such as the Syrian chemical weapons dismantlement and partial resolution of Iran's nuclear imbroglio where Russia has been able to bring the West especially the US close to Iran has caused concern to Israel. The turnaround in the US' attitude on the Iranian issue has made Israel anxious. The statement of the Israeli Foreign Minister Abigdor

Lieberman on November 20, 2013 in Moscow seeking stronger ties with Russia highlights Israel's anxiety in securing its security in the region. Mr. Lieberman emphasised on the shift from the previous 'one-dimensional' to a 'multi-dimensional' foreign policy which showcases Israel's scepticism regarding US' possibility in compromising Israel's security in lieu of US' interests in West Asia.

Israel's fear could be sensed during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's meeting with President Putin on November 20, 2013 in Moscow where he urged Russia to apply lessons from the Moscow-led agreement of the Syrian issue on the Iranian challenge. However, he was not successful because Russia too does not want Iran to get a nuclear bomb but it does not share Israel's insecurity over the issue. While Israel supports tighter economic sanctions and total dismantlement of Iran's nuclear program, Russia supports Tehran's right to develop a civilian nuclear industry. Russia has maintained its support to Iranian nuclear technology since 1990's. With the successful diplomatic win by Russia over the Iranian nuclear issue has made Israel see the importance of having an enhanced partnership with Moscow which could be crucial for its security. With the unpredictability of US' position in the region and its belligerent relationship with Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran, Israel is widening its diplomatic options.

The relationship between Russia and Israel was established from 1948, though contacts between Russians and Jews date back to the 20th century. The reasons that bind both the countries are their security and geo-strategic interests in West Asia. Israel wants to access Russian markets and the fossil fuels available in the country. It also wants to use Russia's political influence to moderate the growing anti-Israel public opinion in the region. Likewise, Russia is interested in harnessing Israeli technologies for its industrial modernization. It has shown keenness in exploring Israel's hydrocarbon deposits on the continental shelf in the Mediterranean Sea. The bilateral trade between both the countries was US\$3 billion in 2012 and according to President Putin, in his joint speech along with Netanyahu on November 20, 2013, the trade figure might not be an outstanding figure, but it was a positive trend in spite of global economic problems. Both the countries also have beneficial cooperation in air and space industry, energy and pharmaceutical sectors.

Peculiarity in the Russia-Israeli relationship is also evident; both have similar areas of interest in West Asia but conduct their foreign policies with different approaches which appear appeasing as well as defensive. Russia's cancellation of the supply of S-300 missiles to Iran in 2007 and Israel's abstention from criticizing Russia's armed forces' conduct in Caucasus during the Chechnya War of 1999 and a moratorium on arms sales to Georgia are examples of appeasement. While Russia's warning to Israel against attacking Iran in 2012, expressing concern about the plight of the Palestinian people and continuation of Russia's contacts with the elected administration in Gaza, including President Dmitry Medvedev's meeting with Hamas leaders in Damascus on 2010, are sensitive issues for Israel shows the peculiarity of Russia-Israel partnership. Both the countries understand their respective 'special circumstances' in the region. Though Israel has reservations regarding Russia's way of dealing crucial issues in West Asia but it is more interested in cooperation.

In the coming years, the relationship between Russia and Israel would be constructive given Israel's insecurities especially till the US is able to 'recuperate' itself from the economic recession and regain its stand in West Asia. Israel's shift to an active multi-dimensional foreign policy without tampering its relationship with the US can be seen as a strategy to protect its security. There could be a possibility to alleviate the tension between Israel and Iran in the future helped by Russia. Meanwhile, Russia's foreign policy which is based on the principle of non-intervention in others internal matters through force but with diplomacy, which is in contrast to the US' based on intervention with military force, has helped it to play an important role and also make a comeback to its 'great power' status.

**Dr. Indrani Talukdar, Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*