

# AN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR, THE ISRAEL LINK AND THE GEOPOLITICS

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A the G-20 summit | Photo Credit: ANI

The 2023 summit of the G-20 under India's presidency went exceptionally well given the group's limited economic approach to the complex issues that the world faces, from climate change and underdevelopment, wealth concentration and poverty and, most critically for our times, falling democratic norms and principles of peace. India's remarkable success at the summit this year, in early September, was captured by the global press, except in China, for various outcomes such as the inclusion of the African Union in the G-20, a tangible offer of clean energy through a biofuel alliance, increasing substantial aid for Asia-Africa, an economic corridor that connects India, West Asia and Europe using an ambitious rail and shipping link, and the Delhi Declaration which was a joint statement of all the group.

The joint statement called the Delhi Declaration is newsworthy because of the fractured international order and power struggles between India and the United States with China or the U.S. with Russia. Despite the absence of China's President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the summit, India still got their agreement for the declaration which sums up the achievement. Substantially speaking, the statement is *pareve* (the Hebrew word for characterless things; read banal here) as it does not name Russia for aggression against Ukraine; but it does evoke the United Nations charter and principles of territorial sovereignty. An Indian official revealed the recipe for this over-applauded collective statement: "India needed a text that had something for everyone, so that each member can go back with a win."

But the boldest outcome, and unanticipated by many, was the announcement of the economic corridor (the "India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor"), of a rail-ship route, to transport goods to Europe from India via the United Arab Emirates-Saudi Arabia-Jordan-Israel. Such a project will change the geopolitics for the future. The fact that it challenges China's Belt and Road Initiative is beside the more significant point. U.S. President Joe Biden called it 'a real big deal', which is transformative for all those involved and the rest of the world. Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was prompt to show that Israel has been eager to be a part of such a project.

Interestingly, in the statement, Mr. Netanyahu thanked Mr. Biden, and did not mention Mr. Modi for this idea and initiative to which Israel will provide all its skills and support. Mr. Netanyahu is

forbidden from diplomatic trophies due to his domestic politics and not paying attention for long to the expectations of Mr. Biden's foreign policy goals. If he persists on this path, Israel's foreign policy will suffer. The normalisation of ties with Saudi Arabia is a precondition for this economic corridor to materialise.

In its report on the G-20, Arab News found that 'India's G20 leaders' summit had an unprecedented Middle Eastern Presence'. India 'set a precedent in G20 history by inviting the most Middle Eastern countries ever to take part as guests in the group's key summit', and one wonders why Israel, India's strategic partner also from the region, was not given such an invitation. As a host, India invited nine non-member countries — Bangladesh, Egypt, Mauritius, Netherlands, Nigeria, Oman, Singapore, Spain, and the United Arab Emirates — to the summit. It is all the more perplexing when the economic corridor was to be announced at the same summit and Israel is a part of the plan. Mr. Modi and Mr. Netanyahu share a good friendship. Perhaps factors such as a meet between Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Mr. Netanyahu may have been impossible unless there was diplomatic normalisation. Mr. Biden might have also preferred an event without Mr. Netanyahu because he has avoided him for the last eight months due to his domestic politics.

Saudi Arabia is willing to end the diplomatic boycott of Israel. It is a historical change because such an acceptance of Israel by the most important, religiously speaking, Muslim country, will help Israel with other countries such as Pakistan (already willing), Indonesia and Malaysia. For such a change, Saudis demand that Israel commits to the two-state solution and the well-being of the Palestinian people, even if the occupation does not end soon. Currently, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Saudi Arabia, in partnership with the Arab League and the European Union, has joined forces with Egypt and Jordan to launch a 'Peace Day Effort' aimed at incentivising Israelis and Palestinian leaders to compromise. Israel-Palestine peace is a very challenging aim and given the rise of extremism on both sides, it appears all the more impossible. Saudi Arabia is aware of it and is still interested in having deliberations to walk smoothly among Arabs and other Muslims while working with the Biden administration to make peace with the State of Israel. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor will have to wait until this happens.

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