

Israel's New Asian Allies Deepening Ties between Tel Aviv and Beijing

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It was another difficult week for Israel.

In Britain, 700 artists, including many household names, pledged a cultural boycott of Israel, and a leader of the Board of Deputies, the representative body of UK Jews, quit, saying he could no longer abide by its ban on criticising Israel.

Across the Atlantic, the student body of one of the most prestigious US universities, Stanford, voted to withdraw investments from companies implicated in Israel's occupation, giving a significant boost to the growing international boycott (BDS) movement.

Meanwhile, a CNN poll found that two-thirds of Americans, and three-quarters of those under 50, believed that US foreign policy should be neutral between Israel and Palestine.

This drip-drip of bad news, as American and European popular opinion shifts against Israel, is gradually changing the west's political culture and forcing Israel to rethink its historic alliances.

The deterioration in relations between Israel and the White House is now impossible to dismiss, as Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Barack Obama lock horns again, this time over negotiations with Iran.

The US was reported last week to be refusing to share with Israel sensitive information on the talks, fearful it will be misused. A senior Israeli official described it as like being evicted from the "deluxe guest suite" in Washington. "Astonishing doesn't begin to describe it," he said.

The fall-out is spreading to the US Congress, where for the first time Israel is becoming a partisan issue. A growing number of Democrats have declared they will boycott Netanyahu's address to the Congress next month, when he is expected to try to undermine the Iran talks.

Things are more precarious still in Europe. Several leading parliaments have called on their governments to recognise Palestinian statehood, and France rocked Israel by backing just such a resolution recently in the UN Security Council.

Europe has also begun punishing Israel for its intransigence towards the Palestinians. It is

labelling settlement products and is expected to start demanding compensation for its projects in the occupied territories destroyed by the Israeli army.

This month 63 members of the European Parliament went further, urging the European Union to suspend its “association agreement”, which allows Israel unrestricted trade and access to special funding.

None of this has gone unnoticed in Israel. A classified report by the foreign ministry leaked last month paints a dark future. It concludes that western support for the Palestinians will increase, the threat of European sanctions will grow, and the US might even refuse to “protect Israel with its veto” at the UN.

Israel is particularly concerned about the economic impact, given that Europe is its largest trading partner. Serious sanctions could ravage the economy.

One might assume that, faced with these drastic calculations, Israel would reconsider its obstructive approach to peace negotiations and Palestinian statehood. Not a bit of it.

Netanyahu’s officials blame the crisis with Washington on Obama, implying that they will wait out his presidency for better times to return.

As for Europe, Netanyahu blames the shift there on what he calls “Islamisation”, suggesting that Europe’s growing Muslim population is holding the region’s politicians to ransom. On this view, the price paid for the recent terror attacks in Paris and Copenhagen is Europe’s support for Israel.

Instead, Netanyahu has begun looking elsewhere for economic – and ultimately political – patrons.

In doing so, he is returning to an early Israeli tradition. The state’s founders were inspired by the collectivist ideals of the Soviet Union, not US individualism. And in return for attacking Egypt in 1956, Israel was secretly helped by Britain and France to build nuclear weapons over stiff US opposition.

In response to recent developments, Netanyahu announced last month that he was courting trade with China, India and Japan – comprising nearly 40 per cent of the planet’s population.

Last year, for the first time, Israel did more trade with these Asian giants than with the US. Much of it focused on the burgeoning arms market, with Israel supplying nearly \$4 billion worth of weapons in 2013. A region once implacably hostile to Israel is throwing open its doors.

India, plagued by border tensions with Pakistan and China, is now Israel’s largest arms purchaser – and such trade is expected to expand further following the election last year of Narendra Modi, known for his anti-Muslim views.

He has lifted the veil off India’s growing defence cooperation with Israel, one reason why Moshe Yaalon last week became the first Israeli defence minister to make an official visit.

Ties between Israel and China are deepening rapidly too. Beijing has become Israel’s third largest trading partner, while Israel is China’s second biggest supplier of military technology after Russia.

Last month the two signed a three-year cooperation plan, with China keen to exploit – in addition to Israel’s military hardware – its innovations on solar energy, irrigation and desalination.

Emmanuel Navon, an international relations expert at Tel Aviv University, claims that, despite its poor public image, Israel now enjoys a “global clout” unprecedented in its history.

Israel’s immediate goal is to future-proof itself economically against mounting popular pressure in Europe and the US to act in favour of the Palestinian cause.

But longer term Israel hopes to convert Chinese and Indian dependency on Israeli armaments – based on technology it tests and refines on a captive Palestinian population – into diplomatic cover. One day Israel may be relying on a Chinese veto at the UN, not a US one.

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