Great Power Rivalry and Israeli Selective Neutrality: 'Walking Between the Drops'

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The concept of neutrality is not new in international relations, though its definition has always been situational. Israel, however, was never considered a neutral state during the Cold War period. It was involved in great power rivalry in the Middle East on the side of the West, most prominently the United States or France, in order to pursue its own security and policy goals. This alignment was more a function of the Soviet Union's support for Arab states, particularly Egypt and Syria. Israel's policies were always about Israeli security. The fall of the USSR, however, changed the strategic situation. Though the process of normalisation with Arab states began in the 1970s, the 1990s changed the balance of forces in the Middle East and gave temporary hope that the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts could be resolved. While the latter remains unsettled, the former has been in many ways achieved. Such a realignment of forces changed the strategic positions of the State of Israel. This helped the Jewish state break international isolation and made cooperation with countries for which it used to be 'untouchable' possible.

While the US remains Israel's most important ally, Jerusalem has developed mutually beneficial relations with other important international players. For these parties, contacts with Israel usually fit into a wider strategy, and the once diminished importance of the Arab-Israeli conflict eventually served long- term foreign policy goals. The newly established (or resurrected) relations, however, have their issues and challenges. Despite the 'shadow' of the US and its security concerns – which proved decisive in certain cases – Israel's autonomy in its foreign policy choices remained significant, as it was in the Cold War. Therefore, it has continued to develop mutually beneficial contacts with all sides. At times, this resulted in Israel preserving a neutral stance even when the great power rivalry left few choices but to join one of the 'camps'. The 2022 Ukraine crisis became one of the latest examples of such positioning.

This chapter examines the historical roots of Israel's strategy towards the great powers, by briefly describing the Cold War period, then focusing on its aftermath in more detail – whilst analysing the role of neutrality. The study specifically focuses on the case of Israeli-Russian relations as the most illustrative in this respect, with Israeli-Chinese relations providing additional context. Principally, the analysis examines how the Israeli strategy of 'selective neutrality' manifested itself during the war in Ukraine.

The Foundations of Israeli Foreign Policy Strategy: The Great Power Factor

Just like the vast majority of the countries newly established as a result of the decolonisation process, Israel was haunted by the seemingly unavoidable task of choosing of a side at its inception, at the beginning of the Cold War. A tiny state in the midst of hostile neighbours, its foreign policy has always been closely intertwined with its security policy – the latter quite often substituting the former. In such circumstances, the attainment of short and long-term strategy goals turned out to be especially challenging. In the words of the first Israeli ambassador to the People's Republic of China, Zev Sufott (2000, 94), Israel's foreign policy in its early days 'was primarily focused on the need to obtain international recognition and material support in the face of hostility and boycott from its neighbours and in

doing so had to seek help from greater powers to survive'.

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, (1966, 317) wrote that 'America's entry into the war made it clear that the decisive force when peace came would not be Britain but the United States'. Only the US 'had both the ability and the will to provide the massive economic aid that Israel required', which was demonstrated by a $100 million loan granted to Israel by the United States in 1949 (Telhami 1990, 403–404). Israel's early years as an independent state were characterised by the official politics of 'non-identification' – which it would have preferred to preserve but for the bipolar international system and the new great power rivalry unfolding in the Middle East as it became a frontier in the Cold War. A significant factor in that respect was the fact that the Jewish communities existed all over the world, both in socialist and in capitalist states, and Israel needed emigration channels open for all of them. Besides, many of the 'founding fathers' of Israel, including David Ben-Gurion, were socialists, and the first Israeli government had a left-wing majority (Zvyagelskaya 2012, 94).

It is possible to claim that initially Israel tried to pursue a 'small state' strategy. While it is questionable whether today's Israel can be considered a small state in terms of power, in 1948 it had to 'rely fundamentally on the aid of other states, institutions, processes, or developments' (Rothstein 1968, 29). Thus, it needed reliable partners with a vested interest in its survival while it simultaneously avoided antagonising other great powers. Even after decisively choosing a side during the Korean War in 1950, it still sought to maintain channels of communication with the Soviet Union. Besides, Israel sought to establish at least trade contacts with Beijing during the 1950s even though the US attitude towards that endeavour was, at times, quite adverse (Sufott 2000, 99–105).

Concurrently, Israel has pursued a strategy of self-reliance from its inception (Inbar and Sandler 1995, 45). An alliance with the US gave security benefits, including military and economic aid, but the US' withholding of arms transfers to Israel for several days during the Yom Kippur War of 1973 (Kober 2016, 210) confirmed the strategy of never fully relying on any one partner had proven wise. The alliance with the US remained crucial for successful deterrence of its adversaries, and therefore Israel had to take certain interests and concerns of Washington into consideration. Despite that, even during the Cold War, Jerusalem preferred to preserve its operational freedom and to hedge its risks. Consequently, its foreign policy was quite independent, largely characterised by self-reliance and constrained mainly by the logic of the Cold War confrontation.

Israeli Foreign Policy: A Multi-vector Approach

Israeli foreign policy after the end of the Cold War was in a way similar to the one it had been trying to pursue at the turn of 1940s–1950s. There was a range of new external and internal factors, however. The end of East-West politics brought a relief to tensions in the most contentious areas of the world, opened new ways for cooperation, but also gave rise to new challenges. There were crucial shifts in the strategic balance of power in the Middle East during the Gulf War of 1990–1991, principally via the weakening of Iraq. With the 'Arab threat' greatly diminished and Israeli military capacities significantly improved, Jerusalem's opportunities for successful manoeuvring were enhanced. Instead of a liability, being on good terms with Israel became a potential regional asset.

One of the main reasons for a change in attitude towards Israel on the international stage was the negotiations between Jerusalem and the Palestinians, first during the Madrid and the Moscow conferences in 1991 and 1992 and later in the course of the Oslo process, accompanied by Israeli-Palestinian mutual recognition and the conclusion of several relevant agreements. Despite the fact that the Oslo Accords did not eventually lead to a successful resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, they served as a demonstration of good intentions. A direct consequence was the establishment of official diplomatic relations between Jerusalem and a range of states – a leap forward in Israel's standing on the world stage. Regionally, the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan can be seen as the most significant development in this vein. African countries, which severed official relations with Israel after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, also embarked upon a process of gradual restoration. As Efraim Inbar (2020, 244) puts it, 'for Israel, the upgrading of relations with Russia, India, China, Turkey, (and) Nigeria … was an end to its relative international isolation'.

While Israel was enthusiastic about new partnerships in the 1990s, their significance has only increased gradually.

There were several factors that influenced the further development of the multi-vector approach in Israeli foreign politics. The start of the United States' gradual withdrawal from the Middle East beginning in 2009 demonstrated that the region was no longer as central for Washington. This, coupled with disagreements between US president, Barack Obama, and Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution, led Israel to the conclusion that it needed to further diversify its international relations. Besides, developing relations with other significant extra-regional powers like Russia and China demonstrated that Jerusalem had 'other options' and wasn't overly dependent on Washington. This served as a continuation of Israel's previous policy of self- reliance, the relevance of which has never disappeared. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, wrote the following:

Nothing could replace our indispensable alliance with the United States, a partnership rooted in common civilizational values. But this did not mean that the United States should be our *only* ally. Thus, in my first term, I sought to warm ties between Israel and two other global powers, China and Russia (Netanyahu 2022, 270).

A feature of Netanyahu's approach frequently exercised with regard to other world powers is its occasionally demonstrative nature. One example of such positioning took place in 2023. While Netanyahu has not been invited to the White House since his re-election in late-2022, he informed the members of a US Congressional delegation during a meeting in June 2023 that he had received an invitation to visit China, which would be his fourth trip there (Prime Minister's Office 2023). Though probably done as part of the aforementioned strategy to show that Israel had 'other options', the real effect of this gesture was questioned even by Israeli experts who warned against antagonising the US – especially in the context of strained relations because of Israel's right- wing coalition government (Inbar 2023).

Going back to the Obama era, a serious bone of contention between Israel and the US during the Obama administration was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or the Iran nuclear deal, which Israel vehemently opposed. While the relevance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was gradually diminishing for Jerusalem at this time, the importance of the 'Iranian issue' was progressively growing. The Iranian nuclear program and the risks its further development entailed for Israel have been attracting the limelight of its foreign and security politics since the 1990s. In that context, the development of relations with countries that could have leverage on Tehran turned into a strategic asset. That way, Israel could inform both Moscow and Beijing of its concerns. Israeli-American ties endured despite the political contradictions and strained personal relations between Netanyahu and Obama. In 2016, Obama signed a 10-year Memorandum of Understanding for 2018–2028, which became 'the largest single pledge of military assistance in U.S. history', totalling $38 billion. This demonstrated the strategic character of bilateral relations and the US' profound commitment to Israeli security (Fact Sheet: Memorandum of Understanding Reached with Israel 2016).

Returning to the present, one of the most illustrative examples in this respect was the quick US reaction to the October 2023 Israel-Gaza war, which started with a brutal Hamas attack against Israel and which involves risks of a broader regional escalation involving Hezbollah and Iran (among others). US aircraft carriers, which Washington sent to the Eastern Mediterranean, were meant to serve as deterrents against any further anti-Israeli actions by Tehran and its proxies (Lamothe and Sands 2023). The reasons for such US policy lie in ideological considerations (supporting Israel as 'the only democracy in the Middle East' and as the nation-state of the Jewish people), though strategic calculations (common security/threat perceptions) also play their part (Weinberg 2014, 63–65). There is also the factor of American domestic politics, which manifests itself most starkly during election campaigns. The Jewish community, which also has a network of lobbying organisations, and evangelical Christians, who tend to be favourable towards Israel, are influential electoral groups – with the latter comprising around a quarter of the US population.

Israeli foreign policy is focused on preserving the Jewish state and encouraging Jewish immigration to their 'national home'. In all other respects, Jerusalem's foreign policy is profoundly pragmatic and non-ideological – especially when compared to the American and European approach. For Israel, the government system that exists in a partner state is of no relevance and remains as was formulated during the Cold War in the 1969 Basic Foreign Principles of the Government of Israel:

The Government will continue to work for the establishment of friendly ties and mutual relations between Israel and all peace- loving States, irrespective of their internal regime, and without injuring the interests of other nations.

Likewise for Russia and China, promoting a certain ideology has not been central for their foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Their interest towards the Middle East was dictated by security and economic considerations. In that respect, Israel was treated as a key player and one of the most promising partners in the region, with its highly developed military technologies, strong tech sector, and a vibrant economy. For many of the newer Israeli partners, relations with Jerusalem were also one of the potential ways to 'pave the road' to Washington – either to gain an additional channel of communication or to curry favour with one of the most influential international players (Inbar 2020, 243–244). One of the most recent examples of such an approach was the case of Sudan which was removed from America's State Sponsor of Terrorism list as part of, reportedly, an Israeli-Sudanese normalisation deal signed in 2021 (Zaidan 2023). Hence, beside economic and technological benefits, cooperation with Jerusalem can potentially bring strategic dividends.

One reason for Israel's successful manoeuvring lies in the fact that it doesn't have any vital strategic contradictions with extra-regional actors. The Israeli- Palestinian conflict is certainly a contentious issue, but an agreed solution is not always a top priority even on the US agenda, let alone other great powers. The only significant exception in this respect is the EU, and this has affected the otherwise productive Israeli-European relationship. There's also the topic of the Iranian nuclear program, nowadays central for the Israeli rhetoric, which also draws significant criticism from the world community because of its potential military aspects. Other than that, there are no real foundations for significant rivalry with Israel, as the main goal of Israeli foreign policy (the preservation of its security) is not questioned by any major external power.

During the post-Cold War period, Israel's strategic positions have gradually improved. The Arab-Israeli conflict (Israel's historic conflicts and disputes with Egypt, Jordan, and other Arab neighbours) has all but disappeared from the international agenda, while its Israeli-Palestinian component has been largely deprioritised by most regional players (at least before 7 October). Meanwhile, countering the 'Iranian threat' has taken a central place in Jerusalem's foreign policy strategy, a concern it shares with the bulk of Arab states. In these conditions, Israel, witnessing a gradual diminishing of the US interest in the region, started forging new partnerships aimed at strengthening its strategic positions. Israel's self-positioning became in many ways unique. Nowadays, Jerusalem is not only a major US non-NATO ally, but also a state that has a 'special relationship' with Washington. Historically, Israel has been the leading recipient of American military aid (Davydov and Samarskaia 2020). In addition, Israel enjoys thriving economic relations with China and a mutually suitable partnership with Russia, both of which are perceived as key strategic adversaries of the US. Despite superficial similarities between Israeli-Chinese and Israeli-Russian relations, they differ in significant ways. Each have their specific traits, determined by the history of their development and the character of these two states' interests in the region.

Russia: Security First

Israeli relations with Russia, and earlier with the Soviet Union, have always been complicated. On the one hand, the USSR supported the partition of Palestine in 1947 – which eventually led to the creation of Israel. The Soviet Union was the first country to recognise Israel both *de jure* and *de facto* in 1948 – while the US at first recognised Israel *de facto* only, withholding *de jure* recognition until 1949. The USSR was also behind the significant arms supplies to Israel (transferred by Czechoslovakia and through Yugoslavia) before and during Israel's War of Independence 1948–1949, which played a crucial role in Israel's military successes and its very survival. While the Soviet government had its own pragmatic considerations in making these decisions, namely to weaken British influence in the Middle East (Kober 2016, 209), Israel has never forgotten these important gestures.

On the other hand, the logic of the Cold War placed Israel and the USSR on opposite sides. This became quite evident by the early 1950s, when Israel supported the UN resolution condemning North Korea's invasion of South Korea. Relations then worsened in 1967 when bilateral diplomatic relations were severed as a result of the Six-Day War, as the USSR had armed and assisted the Arab states that had attacked Israel – principally Egypt. There was also the issue of Jewish emigration, which the Soviet Union vehemently opposed for ideological reasons, and the

problem of Soviet state-supported antisemitism, which reached its peak at the beginning of the 1950s with the Slansky trial (1952) and the 'doctors' plot' affair (1951–1953) (Nosenko and Semenchenko 2015, 22), but transformed later into intense anti-Zionism.

The situation changed with the launch of reforms in the USSR in the 1980s, accompanied by gradual liberalisation, which led to an opening of the gates to emigration for Soviet Jewry. Israel's official diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union were restored at the very end of the Cold War period, in 1991, and Israeli- Russian ties became their logical continuation. The substantial upgrading of relations was not immediate. After initial enthusiasm, by the middle of the 1990s the rapprochement somewhat slowed down. The first Russian (and the last Soviet) ambassador to Israel, Aleksandr Bovin, despite being generally optimistic of further positive shifts in contacts, explained it in the following way in 1994:

The reasons [were] twofold. On the Russian side – the general instability of the situation, conflicts in the 'near abroad', the inertia of the pro-Arab tradition. On the Israeli side – mistrust inherited from a quarter-century long period of hostility, fear of Russia sliding back to pro-imperial, right-wing nationalist positions (Bovin 2001, 407).

Despite such challenges, cooperation agreements were signed in various spheres, including trade, security, technology, agriculture, and tourism. Further steps were taken later under improved personal relations under the premiership of Ariel Sharon and presidency of Vladimir Putin at the turn of 2000s (Rumer 2019, 12–13). In this period, one of the factors that brought Israel and Russia together was a common perception of Islamist terrorism as a foremost security threat. An example of that was the fact that Jerusalem did not criticise Moscow on its Chechnya military campaign, in contrast with a vast majority of Western countries. During his second period as prime minister (2009–21), Netanyahu's personal relations with Putin preserved the prior momentum. As a sign of symbolically 'special' relations between Israel and Russia, Netanyahu was one of the few foreign leaders to be invited to Moscow in 2018 for the 9 May Victory Day celebrations. This emphasised the factor of collective memory in bilateral ties. The Israeli and Russian approaches to the historical memory of World War Two are in many ways similar – and that is appreciated by both sides (Aharonson 2018).

Relations in this period have not always been smooth. After the Russo-Georgian conflict in 2008, during which Moscow accused Jerusalem of providing military aid to Tbilisi, Israel has been careful to not antagonise Russia on such issues. Additionally, in 2010, a five-year military agreement was signed which included Israeli UAV sales to Moscow and even setting up joint drone production on Russian territory (Hilsman 2015). Whilst this initiative made an important contribution to the Russian UAV industry, it was later curbed because of American concerns and Israeli fears of potential technology transfers to Iran and its regional proxies. Economic relations between the countries have also been unremarkable. In 2022, total trade volume barely exceeded $1 billion, with Russia only being in the top twenty of Israel's trade partners in Europe (Israel's Foreign Trade in Goods, by Country, June 2023). Israel, on the other hand, was one of the top ten trade partners for Russia in the MENA region in 2021 (Russia Exports by Country 2023; Russia Imports by Country 2023).

In the broader sense, post-Cold War relations with Russia have had a strategic significance for Israel for two reasons. On the one hand, Russia's balancing politics in the Middle East allows it to maintain contacts with all the key powers in the region – which makes Moscow a potentially valuable mediator. Additionally, in several cases, direct Israeli-Russian dialogue helped postpone or cancel Russian arms sales to Iran or Syria. Russia's presence in Syria since 2015 (following its civil war and the rise of Islamic State) also made it Israel's 'northern neighbour', which presented both challenges and new opportunities.

As Syrian territory was used by Iranian proxies, Israel needed significant freedom of action in the Syrian sky to prevent unwanted arms transfers or establishments of terrorist military bases in proximity to its territory. This led to the setting up of an Israeli-Russian deconfliction mechanism which effectively forestalled cases of 'friendly fire' and a deep Iranian entrenchment on Syrian territory, which was undesirable for both sides. That way, while Russia served as a balancing factor against Iran for Israel – Israel played the same role for Russia, which has not been eager to share its sphere of influence with Tehran (Rumer 2019, 15–16).

An additional challenge for bilateral relations arose during the October 2023 Israel-Gaza war, the consequences of which are still unfolding. The Russian stance on the 7 October Hamas attack initially proved to be much less critical than what could have been expected in case of such a serious act of terror, especially considering Russia's recent history of combating terrorism. The invitation of Hamas leaders to Moscow just weeks after the start of hostilities became an additional cause for Russian-Israeli tensions. While the calls for a ceasefire and negotiations to reach the two-state solution have always been an integral part of Moscow's position during such escalations, the criticism of Israel's actions and the US' policies in the MENA in general was exceptionally intense (Osborn 2023).

At the same time, harsh Russian rhetoric in this case can be perceived more as a consequence of its wider confrontation with Western countries, the US in particular, due to the war in Ukraine, rather than specific enmity towards Israel. In a way, that partially resembled the Soviet attitude towards Israel, with the USSR not wishing Israel's destruction and being mainly concerned with great power rivalry. Despite this new public stance, which is highly critical of Israeli actions in Gaza, there are no signs of Russia's practical involvement on Hamas' side. In that respect, Moscow's position on the Israel-Hamas escalation seems in a way similar to Jerusalem's attitude towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which will be discussed later in this chapter. While Israel reciprocated by voicing stronger criticism of Russia's contacts with Hamas and closer interaction with Iran, it has nevertheless not taken any concrete confrontational steps (Erlanger and Sella 2024). Therefore, for now, it is possible to assume that the influence of the 2023 Israel-Gaza war on Russian-Israeli relations may not be as significant as current rhetoric might suggest.

The case of Russian-Israeli relations is in many ways unique. One of the main reasons for this is the large Russian-speaking population of Israel. During the perestroika period, hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews emigrated to Israel. They formed a large Russian-speaking community, which at one time amounted to nearly 20 per cent of the Israeli population – becoming an important factor in Russian-Israeli relations. In a 2022 poll, Russia was named the most important country for Israel (not considering the US) by 40 per cent of the population (The Israeli Foreign Policy Index 2022). The dynamics of Israelis' attitude towards Russia, however, demonstrates a decisive downward trend: while in 2019 the percentage of Israelis who viewed it favourably reached 45 per cent (a high point during the last 15 years), by 2023, as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, it had plummeted to 13 per cent (Fagan et al. 2023). This marks the reality that Israeli-Russian relations have passed through different periods: From the 'honeymoon' at the end of the 1940s, through ideological confrontation from the 1950s until the 1980s, and to pragmatic and productive ties after the end of the Cold War. While technically both are aligned with mutually antagonistic powers (the US and Iran respectively), they manage to maintain constructive dialogue which is beneficial for both sides, despite the curbing of cooperation in sensitive military spheres. Israeli-Russian ties are in many ways guided by their own logic which is based on special pages in their history, ongoing cultural and social contacts, strategic considerations, and, perhaps most importantly, a similar perception of security threats. This all makes both sides susceptible to their respective concerns. This makes the Israeli choice of neutrality in certain cases quite natural, and its position with regard to the war in Ukraine is the most illustrative in this respect.

The War in Ukraine

One of the starkest examples of Israel's politics of neutrality has been its position on the war in Ukraine, which started in February 2022 with Russia's 'special military operation'. While voicing opposition to Russia's invasion, supplying humanitarian aid to Ukraine and hosting thousands of fleeing Ukrainians, Israel has refrained from joining Western countries in imposing sanctions on Russia (just like it did after the annexation of Crimea in 2014), has avoided supplying any offensive weapons to Ukraine, and has maintained dialogue with both sides. Despite internal and external criticism (Shavit et al. 2022), Jerusalem's stance hasn't significantly changed since February 2022. The most it has done was arrange to set up an early warning system against missile attacks in Ukraine and, most recently, electronic warfare systems defending against drone attacks (Times of Israel staff 2023).

Another feature of (and justification for) Israel's neutral stance was an attempt by then-prime minister Naftali Bennett to serve as mediator between the sides. Bennett, being an Orthodox Jew, flew to Moscow on Shabbat – thus breaking it, which, according to Halakha (the Jewish law), is allowed only if it can save a human life (Zilber 2022). The attempt proved futile, though it highlighted Israel's possible capacity to be an actor able and willing to talk

directly to both sides. In that respect, Israel's behaviour was similar to that of several other Middle Eastern states (such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and UAE), Asian states (such as China, India), Latin American states (such as Brazil), and African states (such as South Africa), which can be broadly described as representing 'the Global South' and which also took a neutral position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict while trying to resolve it through diplomatic means.

The main reasons Israel cites to justify its neutral stance with regard to the conflict are again derived from security concerns. First, it strives to preserve its relative freedom of action over Syria. Second, it is not ready to risk its arms and weaponry falling into the hands of Iran and its proxies (whether through Russia or any other way). Finally, it has to worry about the fate of the Jewish community in Russia which, while not directly threatened, still remains vulnerable to any deterioration of bilateral ties. The latter was demonstrated when, in the summer of 2022, a case was opened against the Russian branch of the Jewish Agency (Sokhnut), which works on Jewish immigration to Israel. The Russian Ministry of Justice demanded the Sokhnut's closure because of personal data collection breaches (Gross 2022). This further underlined the need to preserve direct channels of bilateral contacts which could defuse any arising tensions.

Even in the joint US-Israel Strategic Partnership Declaration signed in Jerusalem on 14 July 2022 during President Biden's visit to the Middle East, the wording concerning the war in Ukraine was cautious and obscure. No mention of Russia was made and no direct accusations were voiced:

The United States and Israel reiterate their concerns regarding the ongoing attacks against Ukraine, their commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and affirmed the importance of continued humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine (The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration 2022).

Closer Russian-Iranian cooperation since 2022 has not significantly changed the Israeli position for several possible reasons. Because of the factors listed above, Russia probably has more leverage over Israel than the reverse. Therefore, confrontation with Moscow could be detrimental to Israeli security. Additionally, Israel's decisive practical alignment with Ukraine could well lessen the incentive for Russia to stay neutral in the Israel–Iran relationship in the Middle East, thus strengthening Tehran's position.

The war in Ukraine starkly demonstrated that Israel's politics of 'selective neutrality' does not depend on domestic politics. While the public rhetoric varied from one prime minister to the other and from minister of foreign affairs to his successor, a constant political and strategic line has been preserved. Despite condemning Russian actions, most Israeli citizens approve of the more or less neutral stance of the Israeli government. In a poll conducted in 2022, 53 per cent of the respondents agreed with the government's policy of 'walking between the drops', while 28 per cent expressed full support of 'Ukraine and the position of the liberal-democratic world', with only two per cent fully siding with Russia (The Israeli Foreign Policy Index 2022). In another poll, also conducted in 2022, 60 per cent agreed that Israel's decision to refrain from imposing sanctions on Russia was correct, with 68 per cent claiming that Israel should not supply Ukraine with military equipment (Hermann et al. 2022).

Israel's positioning in the context of the war in Ukraine was in many ways a logical continuation of its previous politics towards the great powers, and towards Russia in particular. The 'selective neutrality', or 'walking between the drops', or 'sitting on the fence', was a strategic choice motivated largely by security considerations. The US pressure in this case evidently turned out to be relatively minor, with Washington likely respecting Israel's concerns, allowing Jerusalem a greater level of flexibility to reflect its unique security needs.

Conclusion

Since its inception, Israel has had to seek the support of greater powers. The reliance on external forces, however, has never been complete. Just as the British were only temporary allies in Israel's formative years, Jerusalem, while fully appreciating the 'special relationship' it enjoys with Washington, still prefers to preserve a wide policy space and to manoeuvre accordingly. With Israel, neutrality – or rather, a multi-vector approach – has served as a successful strategy during the post-Cold War period. While relations with the United States have remained of vital importance

for both sides, with chances for a significant reconfiguration remaining relatively low, Israel's ties with Russia and China have also developed extensively. Even as Israeli-Russian and Israeli-Chinese developments in the military sphere were mostly curbed by the beginning of the 2020s, economic relations continued, security contacts intensified (mostly with Russia due to its presence in Syria), and cultural and educational programs widened. As the war in Ukraine has unfolded, Russian-Israeli relations have become somewhat frozen, though both sides have an interest in their preservation and have navigated comparably difficult waters in the past. On the whole, the Israeli strategy of neutrality is part of a wider strategy of maintaining productive relations with the world's greater powers, deriving from the perception of a constant existential threat that haunted Israel since its inception – and continues to this day.

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