

From Hooghly to Hormuz:

Waterways, Mobility and Connectivity in the India-Israel Special Strategic Partnership

August 17, 2026 | 17:00 hrs to 21:00 hrs | Raajkutir, Kolkata by IHCL SeleQtions

Chair: Professor Khinvraj Jangid

I. Executive Summary

On August 17, 2026, the India Israel Centre convened a closed-door roundtable in Kolkata, the third in a pan-India series of conversations on the India-Israel relationship, under the title "**From Hooghly to Hormuz: Waterways, Mobility and Connectivity in the India-Israel Special Strategic Partnership**" Chaired by **Prof. Khinvraj Jangid**, the discussion brought together diplomats, retired military officers, researchers, entrepreneurs, and an Israeli public intellectual to examine the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) through a lens rarely applied in Delhi-centric conversations, i.e., the relevance and readiness of India's eastern seaboard, and Kolkata and Haldia in particular.

II. Key Discussion Areas

A. Historical and Civilizational

- The conversation was placed within a much longer civilizational story, going back to the pre-1948 Jewish longing for Eretz Yisrael, and extending to the outsized Jewish contribution to modern science and philosophy.
- The October 7 attacks were called out plainly as an atrocity against civilians. No state, it was said, could be expected to absorb an attack like that without responding.
- The wider regional conflict was tied to the actions of Iran-backed proxy networks, including Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas. These groups were seen as trying to block the kind of region-wide normalisation seen in the Abraham Accords.
- India's own approach was described as a mature balancing act, i.e., firm opposition to terrorism in every form, while still keeping up strategic and diplomatic engagement across the region.
- A personal reading list was shared to show how the Zionist story reached ordinary readers over the years. It included *O Jerusalem!* by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, Leon Uris's novel *Exodus*, and William Stevenson's *Strike Zion!*.

B. Maritime Chokepoints and the Security Architecture Question

- It is secure maritime chokepoints and sea lanes that would drive the commercial success behind corridors like IMEC and the International North-South Transport Corridor.
- Disruptions in the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, caused by cheap drones, anti-ship missiles and loitering munitions used by non-state actors, have already pushed shipping onto longer, costlier routes around the Cape of Good Hope. This has driven up both freight costs and war-risk insurance.
- Traditional naval deterrence doesn't really work against this kind of threat. Kinetic responses to shore-based non-state actors risk escalating things regionally, and multilateral coalitions often struggle because intelligence-sharing is patchy and littoral states have different priorities.

- Regional and outside powers must structurally move past symbolic joint statements and actually build a security setup that's institutionalized and interoperable, and must be able to protect both the sea routes and the land infrastructure that these corridors rely on.

C. Complementary Nature of the Special Strategic Relationship

- In any bilateral relationship between two nations, one side's gap is often the other side's strength.
- India brings scale, land, affordability and a large trained workforce to the table, including a sizable pool of retired defence personnel with technical and logistical skills that could complement Israel's smaller demographic base.
- Israel, in turn, offers technological and agricultural know-how that speaks directly to India's capacity gaps.
- The conversation double clicked on India's underused strategic geography, stretching from West Asia through the East African coast to Southeast Asia, as something IMEC hasn't fully tapped into yet.
- Long hauled connectivity projects like the Kaladan Corridor and the Siliguri Corridor were flagged as areas where Israeli help with infrastructure planning could speed things up, along with possible collaboration on building up capacity in Northeast India and transferring agricultural technology.

D. Fintech and Cybersecurity

- Thoughts built on the existing MoU between NPCI International Payments Limited and Israel's Masav payment operator, signed around Prime Minister Modi's February 2026 visit. This was seen as the foundation for a bigger digital trade-finance corridor.
- A plan called for a permissioned blockchain or distributed-ledger platform connecting port authorities, customs, banks, insurers, shipping companies and logistics providers. Bills of lading, letters of credit, invoices, certificates of origin and insurance papers could all be digitally authenticated and linked to specific container movements. Anything unusual, like changed consignees, duplicate paperwork or odd payment patterns, would get flagged for extra screening.
- Another area of collaboration could potentially be AI-driven financial risk-scoring, drawing on the kind of capabilities Israel has already shown at Ashdod port's cybersecurity ecosystem, to help catch trade-based money laundering, sanctions evasion and cargo fraud.
- The concrete ask was setting up a joint India-Israel Maritime Fintech and Cyber Resilience Centre, starting small with a pilot on just one trade corridor and one commodity. Key outcomes could be drops in documentation fraud, cargo release times and how fast cyber incidents get handled.

E. China Angle and Freedom of Navigation

- A clear parallel was drawn between the recent tension around the Strait of Hormuz and the older worries about the Strait of Malacca. Hormuz has basically joined a watchlist that's long been dominated by concerns over assertive Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea.
- Malacca's importance comes largely from carrying Middle Eastern energy to East Asia, so if energy flows start shifting away from Hormuz, it raises real questions about whether Malacca stays as strategically important as it is now, especially as it's already facing scrutiny over China's growing footprint in both the Middle East and Iran. While indirect, it is a growing concern for India.
- Kolkata, being India's oldest port, has trade links that nothing else can match, serving Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the landlocked economies of Nepal and Bhutan. But its infrastructure just hasn't kept up.
- Since Kolkata and Haldia are riverine ports, they deal with constant siltation and shallow draft, which means relying on smaller feeder vessels and doing expensive dredging all the time. Tidal forecasts

also make shipping schedules unpredictable. The port sites sit in dense urban areas, so there's not much room for container storage, and congestion hurts connectivity further inland.

- Kolkata and Haldia are facing competition, both from private ports elsewhere in India like the Adani-owned Krishnapatnam and Kattupalli, and from Chattogram and Mongla just across the border in Bangladesh. On top of that, plans for deep-sea alternatives haven't gone anywhere either. The Sagar project got cancelled, and the Tajpur project still hasn't started.
- However, recent shifts in India-Bangladesh relations have brought attention back to Kolkata as the main gateway for Nepal, Bhutan and India's Northeast. This is exactly the kind of infrastructure gap where Israeli technology in dredging, port digitization and tidal-prediction systems could actually make a difference.
- The chair added a historical note, pointing to David Ben-Gurion's stopover at Kolkata's Dum Dum airport (remembered as a 1957 visit), Moshe Sharett's later visit to the city, and the long history of the Baghdadi Jewish and Sassoon families in Kolkata, all seen as underused threads of people-to-people connection.

III. Fireside Chat

- Baghdadi Jews, a term used broadly for migrants who came from a number of Middle Eastern, Arabic-speaking lands rather than from the city of Baghdad alone, entered India between the 1790s and 1830s through the port of Surat, before Bombay rose up and overtook it in importance. Over time, Bombay and Kolkata went on to become the two major centres of Baghdadi Jewish life in the country.
- In Kolkata specifically, unlike the older Jewish communities already settled there, the Baghdadi Jews were a mercantile people, and they grew considerably wealthy through their involvement in the opium trade. The Sassoon dynasty, based out of Bombay, built a trading network that stretched across Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, Kolkata and even into Europe. Much of this migration was driven by the decline of the Ottoman Empire, persecution under the governor Daud Pasha, and a genuine hope that the British Empire would offer both religious tolerance and fresh opportunities for trade.
- Kolkata, in fact, became the world's largest centre of Judeo-Arabic publications, a practice where Arabic was written using the Hebrew alphabet, both for religious reasons and to keep trade communications secret from rivals, something Greeks and Armenians living under Ottoman rule also practiced in their own way. Within just a single generation, English had fully replaced Arabic as their first language, a shift that helped bring them closer to the British, for whom they served as intermediaries and as proxies in the opium trade.
- One particularly notable figure to emerge from this community was Lieutenant General J.F.R. Jacob, who was born in Kolkata to a devout Baghdadi Jewish family, and who would later go on to play a pivotal role in India's victory in the 1971 war, most notably in securing Pakistan's surrender.
- The community had a supreme sense of Jewish identity, above every other identity they carried, and they maintained close matrimonial ties across far-flung Baghdadi communities in Bombay, Singapore, Shanghai and Hong Kong.
- India and China were, historically speaking, two of the rare places in the world where Jewish communities lived for centuries without facing persecution, largely because the majority religions practiced in both countries were non-proselytizing in nature. And yet the fates of these two communities diverged quite dramatically over time. In China, Jewish communities eventually assimilated so completely, through intermarriage and the gradual loss of the Hebrew language, that they ceased to exist as a distinct group altogether. In India, by contrast, the endogamous nature of the caste system, as was

practiced then, played a role in the Jewish community to preserve its separate identity across the generations. Today there are more Indian Jews in Israel than in India who play a key role in the ties underpinned in civilizational resilience amongst the two countries!

IV. Recommendations

- Dredging, tidal-prediction systems and port digitization should be treated as the most urgent priorities, since these are the immediate technical constraints holding back any meaningful scale-up of eastern corridor capacity. A phased infrastructure upgrade plan, potentially drawing on Israeli expertise in these specific areas, would allow India to address these bottlenecks in a systematic rather than piecemeal manner, with clear milestones tied to reduced siltation, more predictable shipping schedules and improved cargo throughput.
- The recent positive shift in India-Bangladesh relations presents a timely window to reestablish Kolkata's role as the principal maritime gateway for Nepal, Bhutan and India's Northeast. This should be pursued through coordinated diplomatic and logistical planning that reduces dependence on alternative routes through Chattogram and Mongla, while strengthening hinterland connectivity to the landlocked economies that rely on Kolkata's legacy trade linkages.
- Rather than treating shifts in the Strait of Malacca's strategic salience and China's expanding footprint near Hormuz as peripheral concerns, these should be incorporated into ongoing strategic assessments. Policymakers should specifically evaluate whether India-Israel maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal warrants an explicit freedom-of-navigation dimension, beyond its current framing as primarily a port modernization and trade-facilitation initiative.
- Historical and cultural connections, including Kolkata's Baghdadi Jewish heritage and past high-level visits, along with active university exchange programs, should be resourced and expanded to a greater extent. These softer forms of engagement form the civilizational underpinning of the bilateral relationship would help sustain the relationship through periods when infrastructure or security cooperation faces political or logistical setbacks. It would enhance the relationship from a mere G2G to a P2P.
- Since the corridor's progress depends heavily on factors India cannot control, such as security conditions in the Red Sea, the direction Israel's domestic politics takes, and the unresolved Palestinian question, planning should factor for uncertainty from the start. Rather than locking into a fixed, step-by-step timeline, the strategy should include de-risking mechanisms and alternate routing options.
- Areas with fewer structural obstacles, such as expanding Israel's agricultural Centers of Excellence in India and advancing Northeast India capacity-building programs, should be prioritized for near-term implementation. These initiatives can generate early, visible outcomes and build institutional momentum while the more complex infrastructure and maritime security components continue to be developed over a longer horizon.