

Reverberations Across Asia: The Partition of Palestine & U.S. Investments in Indian Higher Education

Abstract

While the global order was being reorganized in the post-colonial period, the United States was faced with the decision of which new states to back, especially in fragile regions that could fall prey to communism. Following the Partition of Palestine in 1947, the US chose to publicly support Pakistan over India, a decision that was largely driven by the need to preserve relations with Arab states after choosing to support the creation of Israel. Pakistan would serve as a symbolic Muslim ally for the US, allowing them to preserve goodwill with Arab nations that they relied on for oil reserves. As a result, investments in India looked substantially different from investments in other new states like Pakistan or Israel, focusing on subtler forms of human development in the country. This paper will follow the trajectory from the fallout of the Partition of Palestine to educational investments in India, seen most clearly through the Kanpur Indo-American Program. Tracing this trajectory reveals that such technical assistance, especially in Indian higher education, allowed the US to advance long-term development in India while reinforcing its soft power in Asia, and now, globally, as the Indian diaspora continues to influence the global order.

Project Introduction

Post-colonial era: Newly independent states like India emerged as arenas for Cold War competition between the US & USSR.

Partition of Palestine (1948) and U.S. support for Israel --> Strained relations with Arab states, whose oil supplies were critical to U.S. postwar reconstruction efforts in Europe (Marshall Plan).

Public Alignment with Pakistan: To preserve Arab goodwill, the U.S. publicly aligned with Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country with closer ties to the Middle East, sidelining direct military and political support for India.

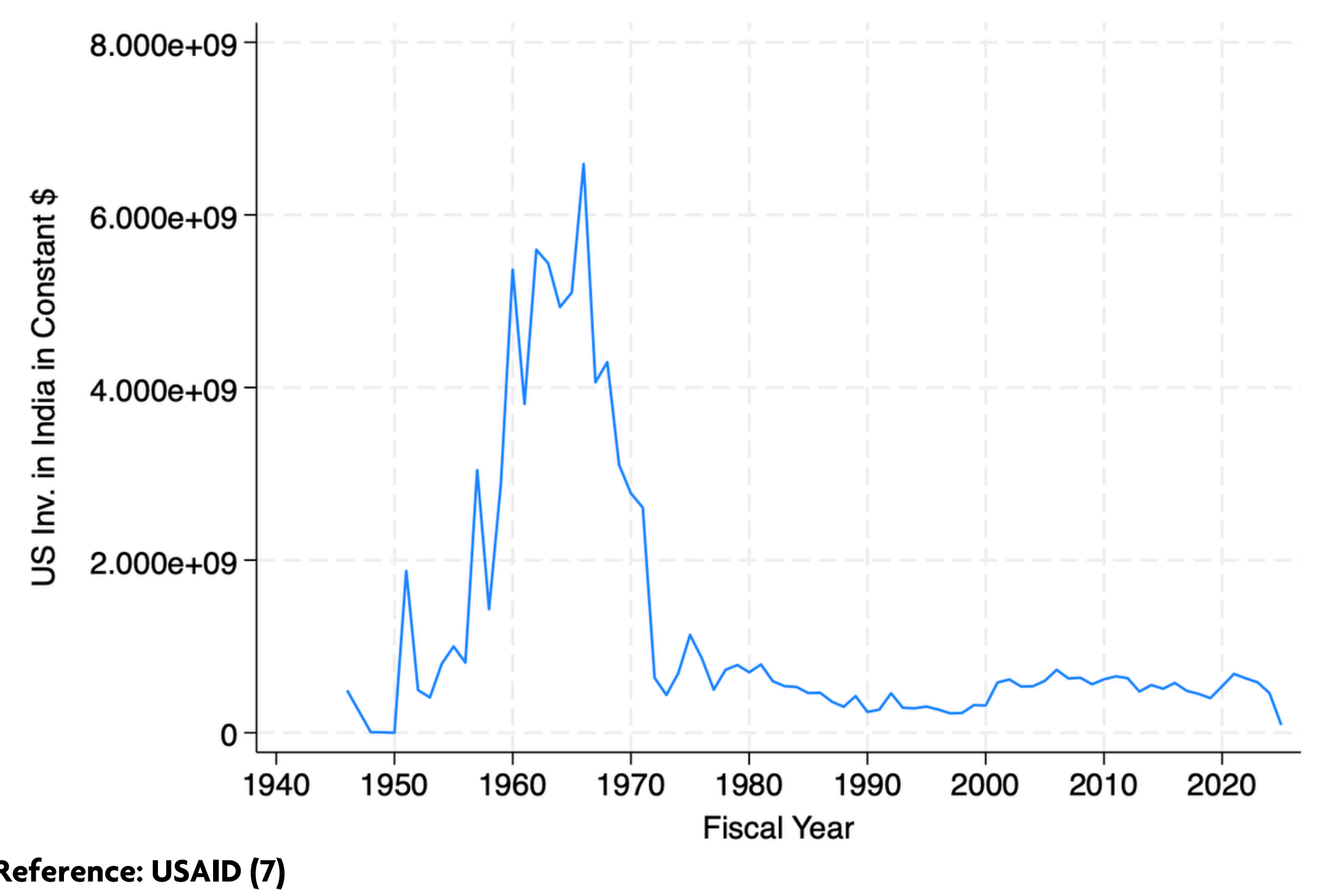
This research establishes a direct connection between U.S. educational investments in India and the diplomatic consequences of the Partition of Palestine, an underexplored link in Cold War and post-colonial studies.

Research Question

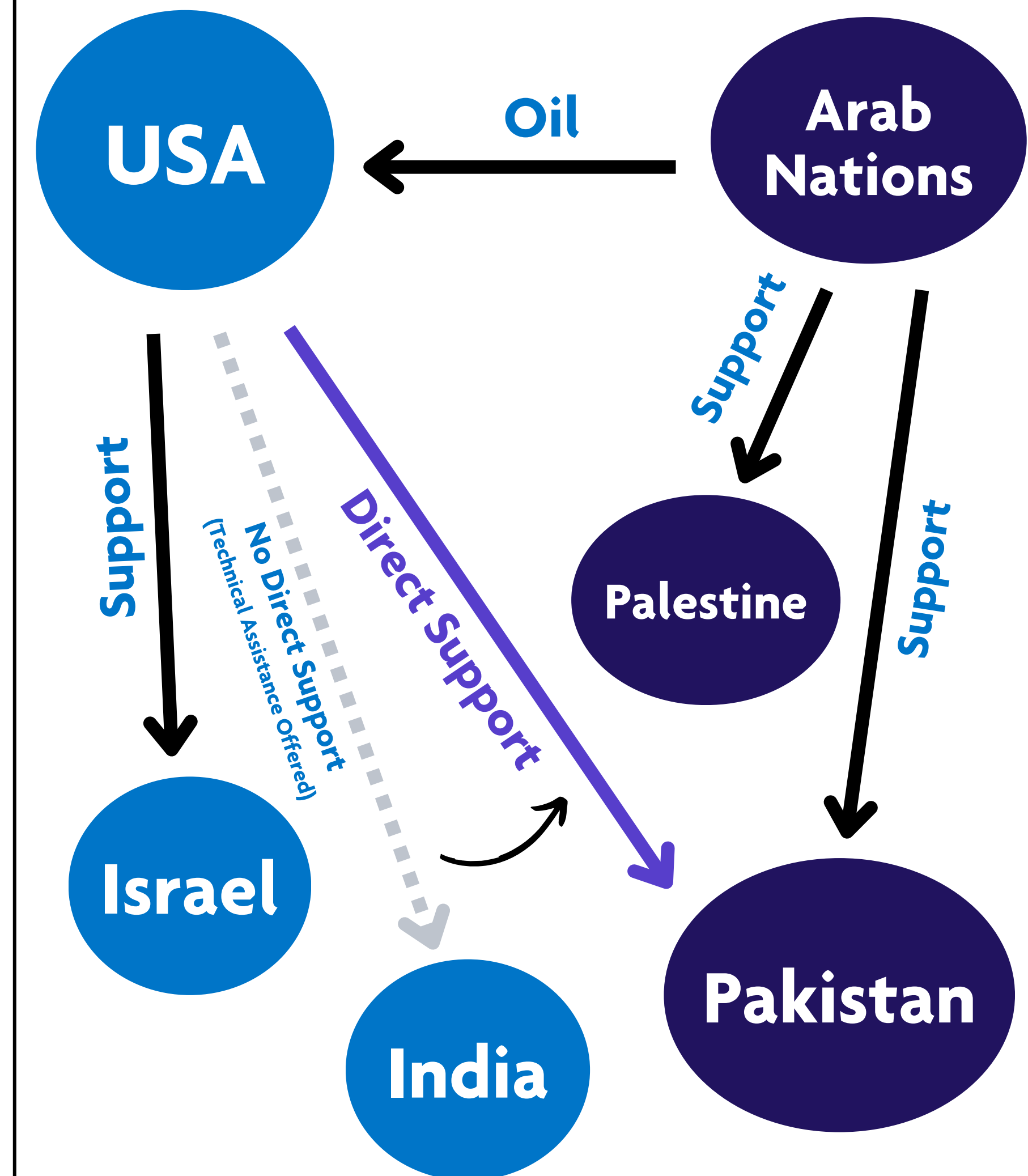
What were the motivations for U.S. investments and involvement in education in India, particularly through the establishment of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)?

Working Hypothesis: U.S. involvement in India's higher education sector was a strategic diplomatic effort to counterbalance its support for Israel diplomatically and maintain influence in Asia.

US Investments in India Over Time



Historical Context



This graphic illustrates the various relationships present during the Cold War period across the Middle East and South Asia. Dark blue shows Islamic nations, while lighter blue shows non-Muslim majority countries. Each arrow shows the connection and type of relationship between countries, with the purple arrow representing a new/unexpected relationship.

Case Study: The Indian Institutes of Technologies (IITs)

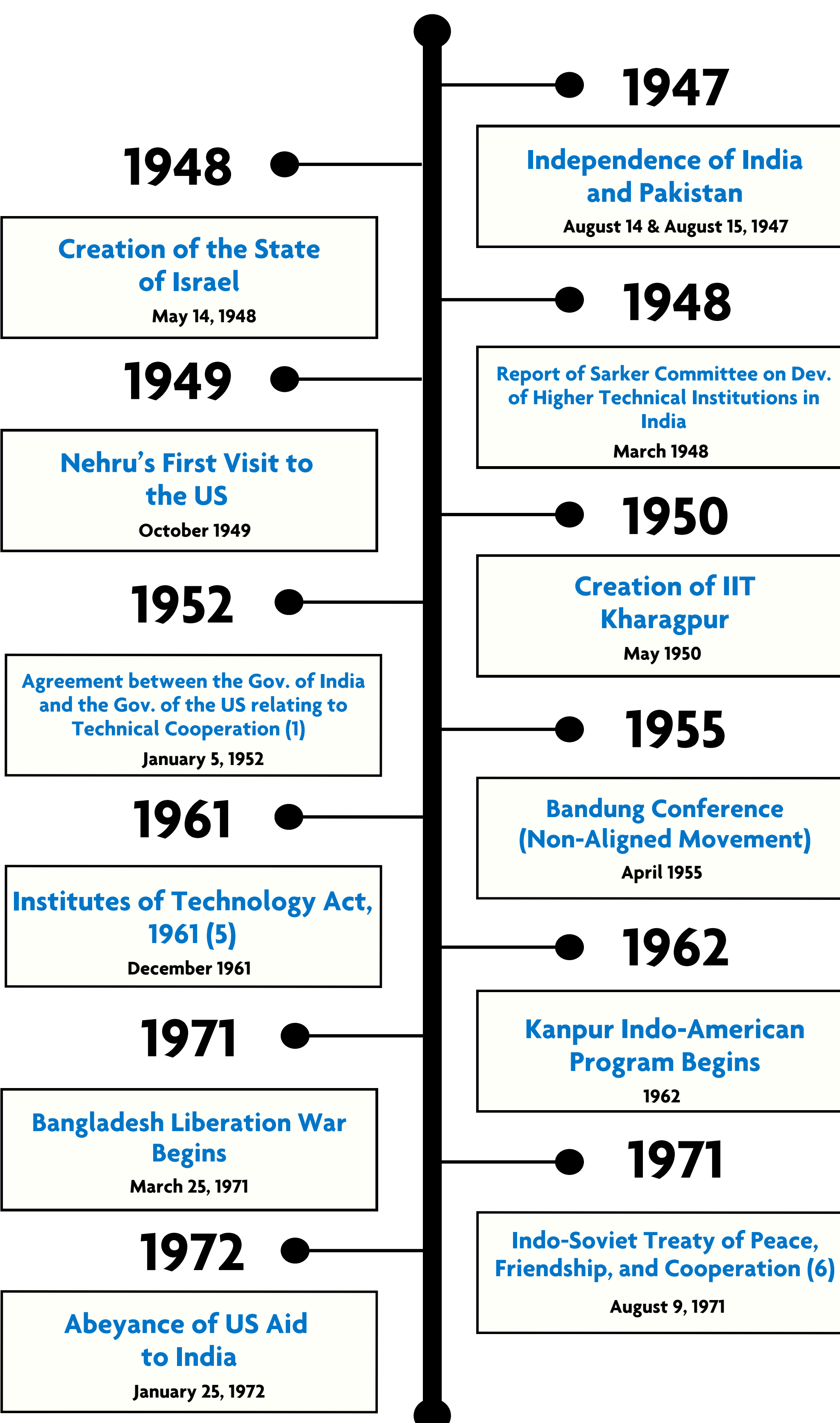
Kanpur Indo-American Program (2): A 10-year partnership between IIT Kanpur, nine U.S. universities, and USAID to develop IIT Kanpur.

Funding: From PL-480 wheat loans, approximately \$176.7 million in current US \$.

Objectives: US-like technical education system, self-sufficient educational institution, & long-term development of India.

Impact: US Soft Power - gained influence in South Asia & produced global leaders in tech, academia, and policy.

University	Year	Funding Equalized (in current US \$)	Funder
IIT Bombay	1958	\$12.8 million	USSR
IIT Madras	1959	\$41.7 million	West Germany
IIT Kanpur	1959	\$176.7 million	USA



Conclusions

US foreign policy after the Partition of Palestine balanced several goals, choosing to both publicly align with Pakistan to garner support from crucial Arab partners, while simultaneously investing in India's technical and educational development. American aid to India took on a distinctive form, unlike the economic or military aid that was given to countries like Pakistan and Israel, focusing on projects like the Kanpur Indo-American Program. US investments in India, focusing primarily on agriculture and education, continued, despite souring relations between both countries in the wake of the Bangladesh Liberation War. Over time, the elite group created by this technical education became a fundamental component of American soft power, as this carefully curated group of Indian elites continues to influence both global and Indian politics.

Devesh Kapur writes that the development of these higher technical education institutions fostered the rise of a socioeconomic Indian elite in the United States. These institutions created a supply of "excellent talent" to the US that maintained very close ties to India, creating "strong bridges between the two countries." Kapur explains that even if "just 1% of their communication with family touched on economic or policy issues, the sheer scale of interaction amplified the flow of new ideas." Diaspora Indians contributed not only to America's human capital but also continued to influence policy issues within their home country. As a result, the United States was able to extend its soft power in India well beyond the Cold War, continuing to shape India's development through the institutions it helped cultivate.

References (Abbreviated)

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