

Why China Is Taking Sides Against Israel—and Why It Will Likely Backfire

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Nov 29, 2023

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Brief Analysis

Beijing’s sharply anti-Israel response to the Gaza conflict, prompted by its increased focus on challenging Washington, exposes the limits of its diplomatic reach in the Middle East and the broader tensions in its foreign policy strategy.

When news broke of the Hamas attack on Israel last month, the silence from Beijing was conspicuous amid the din of international statements. When the government finally [addressed the conflict \(https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202310/t20231008_11157299.html\)](#) at a press conference the day after, its words were remarkable for being unremarkable. An unnamed Foreign Ministry spokesperson expressed “deep concern,” called on “relevant parties to remain calm, exercise restraint, and immediately end the hostilities,” and lamented the “protracted standstill of the peace process”—a diplomatic endeavor in which Beijing has never shown more than a passing interest. The wording was nearly identical to China’s reactions during past Gaza conflicts, despite the fact that the circumstances were radically different. Because the brief remarks failed to condemn Hamas or even recognize the scale of the horrors that occurred on October 7, [Israeli commentators \(https://www.reuters.com/world/israel-expected-stronger-condemnation-hamas-china-beijing-embassy-official-2023-10-08/\)](#) interpreted them not as neutral, but as hostile.

Beijing soon confirmed that interpretation. On October 14, Foreign Minister Wang Yi [asserted \(https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202310/t20231017_11162147.html\)](#) that Israel’s actions went “beyond the scope of self-defense” and demanded that it stop imposing “group punishment” on Palestinians, while still refusing to condemn Hamas. (For a full listing of Beijing’s official statements on the conflict, see The Washington Institute’s [statement tracker \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-](#)

analysis/tracking-chinese-statements-hamas-israel-conflict.) Chinese media have likewise presented the war as one of Israeli aggression—despite being heavily censored, their early reports were rife with anti-Semitic, anti-Israel commentary claiming that Hamas was defending the two-state solution, even though the group’s **past** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-critique-and-condemnation-hamas-october-7-2023>) and **present** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/putting-hamas-massacre-and-hamas-denials-context>) actions are patently bent on destroying the Israeli state. Notably, the strident tone in online Chinese commentary moderated in the run-up to President Xi Jinping’s November 15 meeting with President Biden, underscoring the government’s **well-established influence** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/beijing-social-media-trolling-biden-over-gaza>) over such messaging.

This approach is a stark departure from Beijing’s past impassivity toward Middle East conflicts, in which Chinese officials had usually sought to avoid entanglement. Rather, it reflects the government’s new inclination to use far-flung conflicts as opportunities to undermine the United States and score points in the “Global South.” Yet it could also hold longer-term consequences for China, particularly regarding the government’s three-decade effort to improve relations with Israel. In addition, using the current crisis to take potshots at Washington may constrain Beijing’s ability to project impartiality in other regional conflicts.

Follow the Money?

China’s attitude toward Israel has long been a function of its shifting geopolitical strategy. During the Mao era, Beijing was the foremost sponsor of the Palestine Liberation Organization, viewing its struggle as one facet of the broader struggle against “Western imperialism.” Yet as China began to focus more on economic development under Mao’s successor, its support for the PLO faded and ties with Israel began to bloom—initially through arms sales and security cooperation, then later via the reestablishment of formal diplomatic ties in 1992. The relationship continued to grow into the twenty-first century, with the two states signing an “Innovative Comprehensive Partnership” in 2017 as China became Israel’s largest trading partner.

While Beijing’s stance on the Palestinian conflict did not become quite pro-Israel during this period, neither was it objectionable to Jerusalem. There was an accepted compartmentalization whereby both countries would pursue economic, academic, scientific, and other ties even as China continued to lean toward the Palestinians politically. For example, despite criticizing Israel’s construction of the West Bank “separation barrier,” condemning its 2010 raid on the Gaza flotilla, and voting for a UN war crimes investigation after the 2014 Gaza conflict, Beijing took little actual initiative on these matters, preferring to blend into the international crowd. Even when President Xi issued his “Four Points” plan on Israeli-Palestinian peace in 2017, it seemed designed more to illustrate China’s great power ambitions than to substantively address the conflict. As various Israeli experts have noted, the annual peace talks that Wang Yi hosted afterward gave China an opportunity to accrue political capital, but Israeli and Palestinian participants saw no real benefits in return.

On Gaza, Beijing’s statements followed a well-worn script whenever fighting erupted there in the past, calling for “all sides” to exercise restraint, avoid violence, allow humanitarian access to civilians, and return to negotiations on a two-state agreement (though often adding “especially Israel” to these exhortations). This approach seemed carefully calibrated to avoid losing Arab support while maintaining deep economic relations with Israel.

Indeed, China’s true priorities could be most easily discerned by following the money—in 2014, it invested \$4 billion in Israel but provided the Palestinians with just \$1 million in assistance (for comparison, Japan provided \$200 million in Palestinian aid that year). In the decade since then, China-Israel trade has doubled from \$11 billion to more than \$23 billion.

Regional Policy as a Cudgel Against Washington

Even as China's ties with Israel grew cozier, its relations with the United States were becoming frosty, and Jerusalem was caught in the middle. Washington became particularly concerned about Israel's apparent lack of strategy toward (or even full understanding of (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/closing-washingtons-china-gap-middle-east-partners>)) Chinese global intentions at a time when Beijing was rapidly becoming a major investor in Israel's tech sector, thereby gaining access to cutting-edge innovations in biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and other emerging sectors targeted by its "Made in China 2025" strategy. When the state-owned Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG) won a tender in 2015 to operate a new terminal in Haifa, where U.S. Navy vessels had long paid calls, the resultant anger in Washington sparked a dramatic uptick in U.S.-Israeli coordination on China policy, including a new process to subject its investments to security reviews. Chinese investment in Israel subsequently diminished, partly as a result of this policy shift and partly due to a change in Beijing's economic calculus.

The increasing focus on competition with the United States also appeared to affect China's strategy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the May 2021 round of fighting in Gaza, Beijing departed from its longstanding approach of evenhandedness, using its position as rotating chair of the UN Security Council to lambaste the United States (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-stance-operation-guardian-walls>) for supporting Israel and supposedly ignoring the suffering of Muslims (without a trace of irony about its own treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-states-give-china-pass-uyghur-crackdown>)). A government spokesman also declared that the United States had been "isolated at the UNSC unprecedentedly" and was "standing on the opposite side of mankind's conscience and morality." As the conflict proceeded, China introduced UNSC resolutions demanding a ceasefire (each vetoed by the United States) and characterized Israeli actions in Gaza as violations of international law. In response, Israel voted (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-rare-move-israel-said-to-accede-to-us-pressure-to-condemn-china-abuses/>) in favor of a UN Human Rights Council resolution criticizing China's treatment of the Uyghurs.

These dynamics foreshadowed Beijing's stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where China has essentially practiced "pro-Russian neutrality" by offering untenable peace plans, blaming the conflict on NATO, and refusing to condemn Moscow's actions. Like Israel, Ukraine had previously enjoyed cordial and profitable relations with China. Yet once Russia invaded, Beijing's posture mirrored its approach to the current Gaza war—it used an attack on a U.S. ally as an opportunity to accuse Washington of stoking instability and violence while simultaneously painting itself as a peacemaker.

By repeatedly taking this stance, China has likely aimed to capitalize on the Global South's tendency to view U.S. policy with skepticism and accept the narrative advanced by Beijing and Moscow (and Iran)—namely, that what Washington describes as "great power competition" is really a rearguard effort to maintain America's global primacy at the expense of local populations. The Chinese Foreign Ministry summarized this argument well during the May 2021 Gaza conflict, claiming that "China upholds international fairness and justice" while the United States "only cares about its interests." As an alternative to the U.S.-led international order, Beijing has also been touting its so-called "Global Security Initiative (https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202311/t20231102_11172214.html)," formally unveiled last year.

Policy Recommendations

If U.S.-China competition were a popularity contest waged at the UN General Assembly, then Beijing's strategy would be a winning one. In reality, however, its turn toward traditional hard-knuckle great power politics highlights the dilemmas of its foreign policy.

First and foremost, Beijing's actual diplomatic influence in the Middle East remains limited

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-track-record-middle-east-diplomacy>). Despite the region's vocal skepticism toward U.S. policy, Washington has long been able to act as an honest broker in Middle East crises because it meets two prerequisites—it enjoys close (if not always warm) relations with most of the key parties in the region, and it is willing to bear costs (whether economic or military) to effect change and safeguard outcomes there. Neither is true of China, which has failed to gain substantial diplomatic influence over any country in the Middle East (even Iran) or show any willingness to expend blood and treasure in pursuit of its goals there. The same is true in today's crisis—despite its heated rhetoric on Gaza, Beijing has shown no ability to play a meaningful diplomatic role itself, much less affect the posture of its partners in Iran, who have further stoked a conflict that China avowedly seeks to end. In addition, Beijing does not seem to fully understand that Washington's Arab partners—whatever their public rhetoric—do not want an outcome in which Iranian proxies like Hamas gain influence or Israel's national security is compromised.

In short, China is not yet a serious diplomatic player in the Middle East, in contrast to the United States, whom Arab states regard as indispensable to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict even if they disagree with U.S. policy on the issue. And in the current crisis, China is unlikely to gain a significant diplomatic role in shaping the conflict or its aftermath unless U.S. officials give Beijing a seat at the table—something they should consider only if China is willing to earn that seat through constructive policies. Yet Washington should not make such an offer based solely on the vain hope that it will lessen broader bilateral tensions.

The Gaza crisis also demonstrates the limits of China's "friends with everyone" approach to diplomacy. Beijing previously sought to avoid taking sides in conflicts it was not directly involved in, preferring to position itself for trade and influence while forgoing the security partnerships favored by the United States and Europe. More recently, however, it has appeared to view such conflicts as opportunities to turn international diplomatic pressure and public opinion against Washington—an approach that has essentially forced it to take sides against U.S. allies like Israel and Ukraine, probably generating long-term resentment in both countries and perhaps undoing decades' worth of relationship building. Other regional leaders will surely note the apparent ease with which China cast aside these relationships simply to score points against the West, even if they share Beijing's views on Gaza. Indeed, Washington should include this China-Israel cautionary tale in its long-term regional diplomacy, as further proof of why partners should be wary of depending on Beijing or putting stock in its supposed alternatives to the U.S.-led international order.

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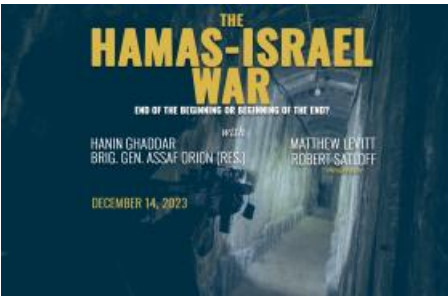


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