

The Israel-Hamas War: China's Interests & Crisis Diplomacy

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This document offers a brief analysis of China's response to the Israel-Hamas war following the October 7, 2023, attack. It discusses China's crisis diplomacy and provides an assessment of the interests and risks that are driving Beijing's engagement in the region.

I. Key Assessments:

- China's diplomatic efforts since Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, indicate a clear decision to lean in favour of the Palestinian side. This decision appears to be driven by a mix of economic and strategic interests, particularly China's strategic competition with the US. In this context, Beijing appears to be viewing Israel as an extension of American power in the region, and seems to be willing to accept a damaged future relationship with Tel Aviv. In return, it is seeking to build deeper partnerships with Arab states and position itself as a leader of the Global South.

- Instability in the Middle East does not serve China's economic and strategic interests. It does, nevertheless, add another serious foreign policy stressor for the US, drawing American energies away from the Indo-Pacific. Since October 7, Beijing's efforts to cool down the situation in Gaza indicate a serious lack of will and capability. In fact, China's diplomacy has been high on rhetoric and low on substance. It has repeatedly talked about the importance of a new security architecture in the region and called for a new peace conference to address the Israel-Palestine issue. But there has been very little tangible investment towards these goals. For instance, Chinese aid and humanitarian support commitments for Gaza have been dwarfed by American commitments. Likewise, compared to the intense diplomatic engagement by Washington, which has included visits by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and President Joe Biden, the most senior Chinese official to visit the region since October 7 has been special envoy Zhai Jun.
- The above points cast a shadow over Beijing's seriousness with regard to the Palestinian cause. Instead, it appears to be leveraging the current turmoil to close ranks with Arab states and Iran, positioning itself as an arbiter to shape a new regional order as and when the dust settles. However, the lack of substantive actions taken by the Chinese side, apart from rhetorical support and diplomatic coordination at the UN, will likely raise questions within Arab capitals about their estimation of Chinese power and the risks of dependence on Beijing in the event of a conflict.

II. Beijing's Crisis Diplomacy

A day after the October 7 attack by Hamas, the Chinese foreign ministry [issued](#) a brief statement expressing “concern” “over the current escalation of tensions and violence between Palestine and Israel.” It called on “relevant parties to remain calm, exercise restraint and immediately end the hostilities to protect civilians and avoid further deterioration of the situation” while reiterating the importance of the two-state solution.” The lack of condemnation in the statement was a sign of Beijing’s early leanings. A day later, as an acknowledgement of Hamas’ actions, following the [prodding](#) of a US Congressional delegation, the Chinese foreign ministry [stated](#) that Beijing was “saddened by the civilian casualties caused by the conflict”. Tel Aviv was [quick to express](#) its “deep disappointment” with China’s announcements and statements, which lacked an “unequivocal condemnation of the terrible massacre committed by the terrorist organisation Hamas.”

A few days thereafter, Beijing acknowledged Chinese casualties amid the fighting, backed the resolution adopted at the emergency meeting of the Arab League foreign ministers on the Palestine question, and [called](#) for a ceasefire as the “immediate priority”. While the foreign ministry’s spokesperson said that Beijing was “in touch with relevant parties”, there was no publicly known engagement at the leader or foreign ministerial level between China and the Israeli or Palestinian leadership.

Instead, on October 12, Foreign Minister Wang Yi discussed the situation with Celso Luiz Nunes Amorim, chief advisor to the President of Brazil. This was in the context of Brazil calling for an emergency UNSC meeting to discuss the Israel-Palestine issue. Wang said that China supported the meeting, emphasising that “China opposes acts that harm civilians and condemns

violations of international law. China calls on all parties to exercise restraint, de-escalate regional tensions as soon as possible and prevent further expansion of the conflict...the top priority is to ensure the safety of civilians, and open corridors for aid so as to avoid a serious humanitarian crisis in Gaza.” He further [stated](#) that the “crux of the matter is that justice has not been done to the Palestinian people.”

Two days later, in a call with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Wang was far more pointed in his criticism of Israel. He said:

“Israel’s actions have gone beyond the scope of self-defence, and it should carefully listen to the appeals of the international community and the United Nations Secretary-General to cease the collective punishment of the people of Gaza. All parties should not take any action to escalate the situation and should return to the negotiating table as soon as possible. China is communicating intensively with all parties to promote a ceasefire and an end to the war. The top priority is to make every effort to ensure the safety of civilians, open humanitarian relief channels as soon as possible, and safeguard the basic needs of the people of Gaza. China believes that the historical injustice against Palestine has lasted for more than half a century and cannot continue.”

Speaking to Türkiye Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, Wang [emphasised](#) the importance of a ceasefire, adding that “the right to self-defence should be exercised in accordance with international humanitarian law, and should not be at the cost of innocent civilian casualties”. Wang [reiterated](#) that in his conversation with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, adding

that, “China supports Islamic countries in strengthening unity and coordination and speaking with one voice on the Palestinian issue, urging the international community to act against the harm done to civilians by any party.”

In his discussions with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Wang [warned](#) that the “situation is at the risk of losing control.” Following talks with the visiting EU foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, Wang [outlined](#) Beijing’s four immediate priorities:

1. First, “stop the fighting as soon as possible” and “prevent it from spreading endlessly”
2. Second, it is imperative to observe the international humanitarian law, make every effort to ensure the safety of civilians, open up a humanitarian rescue and assistance passage as quickly as possible
3. Third, relevant countries should stay calm and exercise restraint
4. Fourth, the UN should play its due role in resolving the question of Palestine

Wang also made an impassioned plea, which further shed light on Beijing’s priorities and leanings.

“The root cause of this question lies in the long delay in realising the dream of an independent State of Palestine and the failure to redress the historical injustice suffered by the Palestinian people. Israel has the right to statehood, so does Palestine. The Israelis have obtained the safeguards for survival, but who will care about the survival of the Palestinians? The Jewish nation is no longer homeless in the world, but when will the Palestinian nation return to its home? There is no shortage of injustices in the world, but the injustice to Palestine has dragged on for over half a century. The sufferings that plagued generations

must not continue. The answer to the question is the two-state solution and an independent State of Palestine. This is how Palestine and Israel could coexist in peace and how the Arabs and Jews could live in harmony. Only when the two-state solution is fully implemented can the Middle East truly enjoy peace and Israel enjoy lasting security.”

The Chinese government also announced that its Special Envoy on the Middle East Issue Zhai Jun would be visiting the region soon. Prior to that visit Zhai met with ambassadors of Arab states in China and Israeli ambassador to China Irit Ben-Abba Vitale. Zhai's visit to the region, however, did not entail a trip to Israel. He travelled to Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Prior to Zhai's departure, in his first [remarks](#) on the crisis, President Xi Jinping told the visiting Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly that China “stands ready to strengthen coordination with Egypt and other Arab countries to work for a comprehensive, just and enduring solution to the Palestinian question at an early date.” He added that “the top priority is to stop the fighting as soon as possible, prevent the conflict from spreading or even getting out of control and causing a severe humanitarian crisis. The fundamental way out of the recurring Palestinian-Israeli conflicts is to implement the two-state solution”.

The first direct public engagement between Beijing and officials in Israel and Palestine came on October 23. In a conversation with Israel's Foreign Minister Eli Cohen, Wang stressed the importance of the two-state solution, adding that China was “deeply worried about the continued escalation of the conflict and the exacerbation of the situation.” In a direct rebuke of Israeli actions, Wang told Cohen that “all countries have the right to self-defense, but it is important to observe international humanitarian law and protect civilians.” In a separate call with Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki, Wang [said](#) that

“China strongly condemns and opposes all acts that harm civilians and violate international law, and calls for an immediate ceasefire to ensure the most basic survival needs of the people in the Gaza... What the Gaza Strip needs the most is efforts to end the fighting and promote peace, rather than geopolitical calculations.” He also said that China calls for “a more authoritative, broad-based and effective international peace conference as soon as possible to realize the early resumption of peace talks between Palestine and Israel, and to formulate a specific timetable and road-map to this end.”

At the same time, Beijing [sought](#) to coordinate its actions with Russia and Arab states at international forums, including the UN General Assembly and Security Council. Through October, the UNSC remained divided. The US vetoed the first proposed resolution, which had the backing of Moscow and Beijing.

US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield [argued](#) that the resolution “did not mention Israel’s right of self-defence.” Subsequently, Russia and China and Russia subsequently vetoed an American draft. China’s ambassador Zhang Jun [argued](#) that the US resolution was “seriously out of balance”, “failed to mention the root causes of the current crisis in Gaza” and “if adopted, would completely end the possibility of a long term two-State solution”. On October 27, the UNGA adopted a resolution, proposed by Jordan, calling for an “immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce leading to a cessation of hostilities”. The US [voted](#) against this resolution.

On the same day, an authoritative [commentary in the People’s Daily](#) criticised the bombing of the Al Ahli Arab Hospital, saying that “acts of killing innocent lives must be unanimously opposed and condemned by the international community.” It

added that “military operations should not go beyond self-defence, let alone impose collective punishment on a population. The protection of civilians in armed conflicts is a red line stipulated in international humanitarian law, and the indiscriminate use of force is unacceptable.” The article also accused “certain major powers” for paying “lip-service to the notion that the Security Council should take the right actions” on the issue. Meeting Blinken and US NSA Jake Sullivan in Washington in late October, Wang Yi [called for](#) major countries to “remain calm, be objective, and uphold justice”, “prevent a humanitarian catastrophe on a larger scale” and movement towards a two-state solution through “the provision of more effective international guarantees.”

In early November, China took over the presidency of the UN Security Council. Ambassador Zhang Jun [was clear that](#) “the top priority” for China’s presidency was to tackle the Israel–Palestine conflict. Beijing’s focus in this regard, Zhang added, would be to “work towards calling for a ceasefire, ensuring the protection of civilians, and preventing a further deterioration of tensions, as well as the humanitarian catastrophe.” Speaking to Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi about the Israeli bombing campaign in Gaza, Wang [said](#) that “no responsible country with a conscience can allow such a tragedy to continue”, and promised that “China will strengthen coordination with all parties, especially Arab countries.” China’s leadership of the UNSC coincided with reports of Israeli bombing of refugee camps in Gaza. Beijing [condemned the bombings](#) and said that UNSC chair it “supports the Arab states in their important proposal on a ceasefire and the maintenance of peace” and emphasised the importance of “a more authoritative international peace conference” to resume talks for a two-state solution.

Over the next few weeks, Beijing sought to mobilise support for a UN Security Council resolution. Its frustration in this regard was evident in Ambassador Zhang Jun's [criticism](#) of the US and Israel during an Emergency Meeting on the Palestinian-Israeli Situation on November 10th.

“Enough is enough. In the face of all this, the Security Council must do away with the obstruction and interference of some member and take immediate, responsible, and meaningful action to uphold justice and maintain peace. A ceasefire and end to the fighting cannot be delayed. A ceasefire is by no means a diplomatic statement. It is the only hope for the people of Gaza to survive. We call on all parties, especially the major power that has a unique influence on the parties, to put aside all geopolitical considerations and double standards and focus all efforts on the goal of a ceasefire and an end to the fight. We urge Israel to curb the intensifying settler violence in the West Bank, so as to avoid the concurring hotspot and the spread of conflict. The protection of civilians cannot be delayed. We condemn all violence and attacks against civilians. We express our grave concern over and strong opposition to the clear violations of international humanitarian law in Gaza. We urge an end to the collective punishment of civilians. We demand the safety and humanitarian needs of hostages be guaranteed and call for diplomatic efforts to facilitate their early release... We support the Council to take emergency actions in this regard to facilitate a sustained truce of multiple days and an immediate opening of a green corridor for specialized agencies and equipment to enter Gaza to carry out search and rescue operations...”

A few days later, the Council would [adopt its first resolution](#) on the war in Gaza since October 7. Resolution 2712 (2023), adopted on November 15, 2023, called for “urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors throughout the Gaza

Strip”, “immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and other groups”, and for “parties to refrain from depriving the civilian population in the Gaza Strip of basic services and humanitarian assistance indispensable to their survival.” The resolution was approved by a 12-0 vote, with the US, UK and Russia abstaining. The former two abstained because of the resolution’s failure to condemn Hamas’ October 7 attack, while Russia abstained because the resolution did not call for a humanitarian ceasefire. The [Chinese side described](#) the resolution as being based on the “minimum consensus” at the Security Council and “an initial step towards a ceasefire.”

The passing of Resolution 2712 (2023) was a significant achievement and an example of Chinese pragmatism in dealing with international affairs, along with its focus on broader strategic competition with the US rather than the specific issue of Palestine. It demonstrated Beijing’s understanding of Washington’s unease with the Israeli bombing campaign and a willingness to work together on common interests. It showed that China could count on Russian silence, if not acquiescence, when needed. It highlighted Beijing’s ability to mobilise Arab states behind its leadership, while Arab leaders also appear to be acting to support the Palestinian cause. And it clearly underscored that China’s primary objective in terms of the war is to contain a spillover while demonstrating leadership, commitment to peace and multilateralism and earning reputational credibility across the Global South vis-a-vis the US.

Towards the end of November, Beijing was the first stop for a joint delegation of foreign ministers from Arab and Islamic countries. The delegation told Wang Yi that it was seeking “closer coordination with China to prevent the crisis from

spreading, restart the peace talk process, promote the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the basis of the two-state solution.”

Wang told them that “China is a good friend and brother of Arab and Islamic countries. China has always firmly upheld the legitimate rights and interests of Arab and Islamic countries and firmly supported the just cause of the Palestinian people to restore their legitimate national rights and interests.” Wang articulated China’s proposal on the Gaza situation. He said:

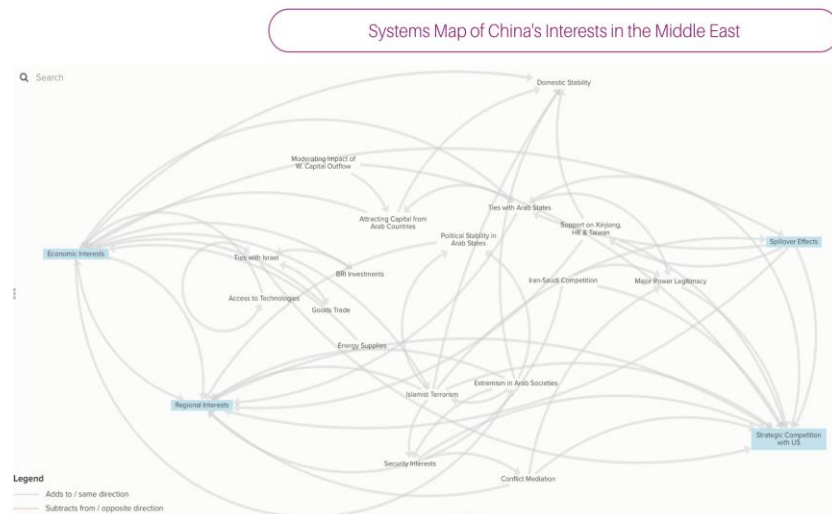
- A ceasefire was “top priority”
- “Israel should stop its collective punishment of the people in Gaza.”
- “Any solution to the current situation should not deviate from the two-state solution and should be conducive to regional peace and stability.”
- “The UN Security Council should heed the call of Arab and Islamic countries and take responsible actions to de-escalate the situation. As the rotating presidency of the Security Council, China will continue to strengthen coordination with Arab and Islamic countries to build consensus and push for further meaningful actions by the Security Council on the situation in Gaza.”
- China calls for an early convening of an international peace conference with greater scale, scope and effectiveness, and a timetable and roadmap for this purpose.

Xi Jinping [echoed](#) these points in his remarks at the extraordinary BRICS leaders summit on the Gaza conflict on November 21. He also warned that the international community must act with practical measures to prevent the conflict from spilling over and endangering stability in the Middle East as a whole.

As an indicator of the limited tangible role that Beijing has thus far played through this crisis, the visiting Arab ministers' delegation was quoted as saying that they "expect China to play a greater role in ending the Palestine-Israel conflict." Ever since October 7, Beijing has merely provided \$2 million in emergency humanitarian assistance and emergency humanitarian supplies worth RMB 15 million for Gaza. In comparison, soon after the conflict began, the US [committed](#) at least \$100 million in humanitarian assistance for the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank.

III. Understanding China's Calculus

For the longest time, Beijing approached the Middle East primarily from the perspective of safeguarding its economic interests and garnering legitimacy for its policies in Xinjiang. While it has been critical of the US's role, it has eschewed entanglements in the region's political disputes, choosing to instead freeride on American security policy in the region. The past few years, however, have seen China adopt a more proactive approach, demonstrating greater intent to engage with a broader set of issues. China's role, although very limited, in brokering the restoration of Saudi–Iran ties is an example of more proactiveness by Beijing. The Chinese leadership [has also repeatedly](#) expressed a desire to play a greater role in addressing the Israel–Palestine conflict. Such statements and engagement are as much a reflection of Beijing's expanded economic and security interests as they are of the region's significance for China in the context of its strategic competition with the US.



China is the largest trading partner for Arab countries. The [value of trade](#) between them reached a record \$430 billion in 2022. Energy, of course, is the key component of this trade. China is [increasingly dependent](#) on oil imports from the Middle East, which account for over 50% of Chinese oil imports. Official data [assesses](#) China's dependence on crude oil imports at over 70%. While China's energy imports from Russia have spiked sharply following the war in Ukraine, Saudi Arabia [remains](#) among China's top two suppliers of crude oil, and oil imports from Iran have significantly risen to more than one million barrels a day. Qatar, meanwhile, ranks as among China's top sources of liquefied natural gas. Speaking at the first China-GCC summit in December 2022, Xi Jinping [underscored](#) the importance of the region to China's economy, as he called for building a "new paradigm of all-dimensional energy cooperation" under which China would "continue to import large quantities of crude oil on a long-term basis from GCC countries." Instability in the region, therefore, would seriously jeopardise China's energy security. This would in turn have significant domestic stability implications. In addition, the Middle East is key to the success of the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing has [already invested billions of dollars](#) in Gulf economies in the form of construction projects, infrastructure investments, joint technology projects, etc. Protecting Chinese capital, enterprises, assets and manpower in the region, therefore, is crucial for Beijing. At the same time, China is also keen to [attract financing sovereign wealth funds](#) from the region.

In contrast, while China's economic engagement with Israel has expanded, the scale and strategic significance is limited when compared to ties with Arab states. China is Israel's second-largest trade partner, with goods trade crossing the \$20 billion mark. A large chunk of this is Chinese exports to Israel. Chinese imports from Israel in 2022 were merely \$4.5 billion, with key

products being computers, electronic and optic equipment, minerals and mining materials, chemicals, metals, food and beverages, etc. None of these imply critical vulnerabilities, unlike energy imports. Moreover, since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese [investments](#) in infrastructure, ports and technology assets in Israel have also spiked significantly.

Economic interests remain the primary prism through which Beijing views the region. However, given the intensification of Sino-US strategic competition and changes in American policies in the Middle East, there has been a shift in China's engagement too. This change is a product of the Chinese leadership's evolving worldview about the unprecedented changes that it believes that world is currently experiencing.

From Beijing's perspective, the world is in a new era of turbulence and volatility. A "great transformation", which engenders a "great state of disorder", is currently underway, and the international balance of power is undergoing "unprecedented" and "revolutionary changes". These are reflected in the rise of developing countries and emerging economies; the shifts in patterns of globalisation and the emergence of protectionism, populism and unilateralism; and key changes taking place in scientific and technological domains. In this situation, while the West continues to enjoy relative superiority, the geopolitical and geoeconomic balance of power is shifting toward the East. Within this context, it believes that China possesses significant strategic advantages and opportunities but also faces increasing risks and challenges in pursuing national rejuvenation and emerging as a global power. This situation, therefore, demands a more forceful and proactive approach to shape a "new type of international relations".

Viewed from this prism, Beijing is approaching the Middle East as one of many theatres where it is competing with the US. Within this context, there appears to be [enduring suspicion of Israel](#) as an American partner in Beijing. This is coupled with an alarming [rise in anti-semitic paranoia](#) among Chinese commentators and analysts. In contrast, Arab states are viewed as historical partners with a shared perspective on issues of values such as sovereignty, human rights, interference in internal affairs and independent choice of development paths. This is not merely strategically salient but also critical for China domestically, as Beijing relies on Arab states' endorsement to legitimise its repressive assimilationist policies against Uighur Muslims.

Beijing's decision to throw its lot behind the Palestinian side, therefore, can be understood as a product of this mix of economic and strategic calculus. Israeli analyst Gedaliah Afterman explains the trade-off succinctly, [arguing](#) that "China has shown that Israel does not rank highly in its strategic calculations and that damage to its relationship with Israel is manageable collateral in the more important regional and geopolitical strategic game." The key risks, however, are the eruption of a larger regional conflict along with the resurgence of radicalism and terrorism across the region.