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**Autumn Chills:**  
**Israel-China Relations and the Normalization Agreements with the Gulf**  
**States**

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**China responded coolly to the normalization agreements between Israel and the Gulf states, due to its concerns that these accords, sponsored by the United States, derived inter alia from the United States' intention to damage China's relations with friendly countries in the Middle East and create alliances against China. Against a background of Chinese-American tensions, there are a number of signs of cool winds blowing from China toward Israel, such as the delay in appointing a new ambassador to Israel, and the lack of contact between the leaders, who have not spoken for some months. Israel must be mindful of changes in China's perception of relations in the general context of relations with the superpowers, and examine all the options available to it within the triangle, including promotion of a free trade agreement with China and collaborations on matters of innovation. While maintaining its strategic relations with the United States, Israel must avoid public moves that could, in Beijing's eyes, mark it as a member of the anti-Chinese camp.**

A central and oft-repeated principle of Chinese foreign policy is the call to solve conflicts through negotiations and dialogue, and not through force. This is what China called for during the nuclear crises with Iran and North Korea. The Abraham Accords on peace and normalization between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are the outcome of a long dialogue between Israel and both Arab countries, and they could also be a constructive stage in the promotion of further peace agreements in the Middle East. Why, then, is China reluctant to congratulate Israel on the Accords?

Indeed, the Chinese response to the Abraham Accords was decidedly chilly. In [its official response](#) of August 14, 2020, one day after the announcement on normalization, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said that "China has noted relevant reports, including those saying that Israel will stop annexing part of Palestinian territories and is committed to reaching a comprehensive, fair and enduring solution to the Palestinian issue." Exactly one month later, the day before the September 15 signing of the Abraham Accords under the sponsorship of US President Donald Trump, in response to a question about the decision of Israel and Bahrain to launch diplomatic ties, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman

[responded](#) that “China noted media reports on [this subject]. We are pleased to see measures that help to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East and promote regional peace and stability. We hope the pertinent sides can make concrete efforts to take the Palestinian issue back to the track of equal-footed dialogue and negotiation at an early date.” The spokesman, representing the official Beijing line, ignored the festive ceremony at the White House, and the Chinese media emphasized that the events were designed to help President Trump’s election campaign. The headline [of an article](#) in the Chinese language edition of Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, read, “Can the Political Show by the United States Bring Peace to the Middle East?”

Chinese experts on the Middle East, whose statements in the media are an unofficial expression of China’s position, assess that the Accords represent a limited bilateral achievement, while creating a deeper problem, as the Palestinian issue has been pushed to the sidelines and will be a time bomb that could ignite a new conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. In the opinion of Chinese analysts, the Accords are intended to isolate Iran, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey, by creating an axis that includes Israel, the Gulf states, and the United States.

The chilly response is apparently due to China’s view of the Accords as part of the strategic competition with the United States, and their suspicion that any development worldwide under US sponsorship necessarily damages Chinese interests. Thus, as China sees it, the normalization agreements derived mainly from Washington’s decision to make the Middle East another focus of global competition, while creating regional alliances that will push China out of the countries where it has achieved a political and economic foothold over the past decade, among them Israel and the Gulf states.

In July 2018 President Xi Jinping visited the United Arab Emirates – the first visit by a Chinese leader for almost 30 years – and relations between the countries were upgraded to “comprehensive strategic partnership” (the term for China’s relations with over 20 countries, but not Israel), and included 13 signed economic agreements and collaborations in the field of energy. President Xi defined the relations as an example of building mutual trust and cooperation on regional and international issues. At that time, before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, relations with Israel were also progressing to the satisfaction of the Chinese. In October 2018 Vice President Wang Qishan visited Israel; he was the most senior leader to visit Israel since the Phalcon crisis in 2000. His appointment as co-chair with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of the fourth meeting of the China-Israel Joint Committee on Innovation Cooperation was a Chinese declaration of their intention to upgrade the Innovative Comprehensive Partnership agreement signed by the two countries.

However, two years later, it appears that the growing tension between China and the United States affects how other countries, including Israel and the UAE, see their relations with China, and the Chinese are aware of this. Their response to the normalization agreements repeated that “they have noted the relevant reports,” reflecting how insulted they feel because two Middle East countries that are defined as friends of China, one on the level of “strategic cooperation,” failed to inform them officially of the moves leading to the Accords, and by the fact that no Chinese representative was even invited as a guest to the signing ceremony. The Accords have contributed to China’s sense that this is another American move, this time in the Middle East, designed to damage China’s global development. It is even possible that this feeling will lead to a Chinese reassessment of its political relations with Israel in the new era.

The Chinese response to the new agreements with the Gulf states ties in with other aspects that indicate, indirectly as is typical of the Chinese, of a certain cooling of Beijing’s attitude to relations with Israel. For example, for over four months the Chinese leadership has delayed appointing a new ambassador to Israel, to replace Ambassador Du Wei who died suddenly of heart failure on May 17, 2020 at his home in Herzliya. During this period there have been at least two rounds of appointments, including the appointments of ambassadors, approved by President Xi Jinping, to key countries such as Pakistan and South Africa, but no ambassador to Israel was announced. In addition, in recent months China’s President and Foreign Minister have held many talks with colleagues worldwide, including the Middle East. For example, President Xi held talks with the King of Saudi Arabia and the King of Morocco. Foreign Minister Wang Yi had a video meeting (on July 6) with all the foreign ministers of the Arab League, and held bilateral talks with the Egyptian Foreign Minister (on July 5, and June 29), the Saudi Foreign Minister (July 24, September 17) and the Foreign Ministers of Iran, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria. But they did not request any top level talks with Israel, even when the President held talks (July 20) with Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (in the past, the Chinese kept a balance in top level talks with Israel and the Palestinians). Rather, China maintained political contact with Israel at lower levels: Deputy Foreign Minister Le Yucheng held a video meeting on June 18 with then-Director General of the Foreign Ministry Yuval Rotem, and the Chinese Foreign Ministry reported a video meeting with Israel (September 24) at the divisional head level on the subject of the Iranian nuclear agreement (JCPOA), at which China stressed that it was opposed to US unilateral moves and the withdrawal from the agreement, and would act to preserve it.

However, on the occasion of China’s National Day (October 1), the chargé d'affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Israel said that the two countries would continue to work on promoting their relations, adding that “negotiating teams from both countries had summed up the last round of talks on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) by expressing their willingness to reach

an agreement earlier than planned. By the end of this year a meeting will be called to prepare for the fifth meeting of the China-Israel Joint Committee on Innovation Cooperation and formulate plans for future cooperation.” These issues involve interests of importance to Israel in the field of trade, as well as Chinese interests in the field of technological innovation. In view of the developing competition between the superpowers, and in view of the cold winds blowing from Beijing, Israel is advised to examine carefully and intelligently its approach to each of these issues, and while maintaining close strategic ties with the United States, should avoid public moves against China. The Israeli leadership must maintain direct links with the Chinese leadership, to enable the exchange of direct messages on issues such as the Iranian nuclear program. It must strive to continue to receive the careful attention of political elements in Beijing, rather than hostile dismissal, which could have future repercussions for diplomatic activity against Israel in the Middle East and international forums.