

China, the United States, and the Gaza Crisis: Israel for Xinjiang?

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China identified the crisis between Israel and Hamas in Gaza as a political opportunity to bolster its national interests, particularly in the context of Xinjiang, through vehement opposition to the United States policy towards Muslims. As rotating UN Security Council president in May 2021, China sponsored a statement calling for an immediate halt in the violence against the Palestinian Muslims, while accusing the United States of thwarting a joint declaration through its one-sided support for Israel. At the same time, China claimed that the United States was acting hypocritically with false accusations against China regarding Chinese policy toward Muslims in Xinjiang. China has made Israel an unwitting part of the dispute between the two major powers by using it to attack the United States image. No high-level contacts have taken place between China and Israel over the past year, which has not helped Israel present its interests to the Chinese leadership. Israel should make it clear to China that taking a one-sided position and ignoring Israel politically will make it difficult for Israel to regard China as an unbiased mediator in future contacts for solving the conflict in the Middle East.

The recent crisis between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip began not long after China assumed the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council. For China, this was an opportunity to bolster its national interests, particularly in the context of Xinjiang, through vehement opposition to the United States attitude toward Muslims and by highlighting its ability to play a more significant role in the Middle East conflict, inter alia by proposing to host direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons and Chinese scholars used the Gaza crisis as an additional opportunity to accuse the United States of practicing what they regard as a one-sided and discriminatory policy by continuing its support for Israel and failing to uphold the human rights of the Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip. Responding on May 14, 2021 to a question by al-Jazeera about what action should be taken concerning Israel, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Hua Chunying [said](#).

As the president of the UN Security Council for May, China has been actively playing a mediating role...The US stood alone in opposing the release of a press statement...The US claims to care about the human rights of Muslims. However, as the recent Israel-

Palestine clashes swept a large number of Palestinian Muslims into war and sufferings, the US turned a blind eye to their sufferings and even risked universal condemnation to stop the Security Council from speaking up on this. In the meantime, the US, together with a handful of its allies like the UK and Germany, held a meaningless meeting on the so-called Xinjiang-related issues falsely in the name of the UN based on lies and political prejudice. What is the true intention behind this political farce? The US should know that the lives of Palestinian Muslims are equally precious.

The decision by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to personally lead the May 16 special Security Council session devoted to an open discussion of the crisis in the Gaza Strip was designed to contrast the importance attached to the issue by China, and China's view on finding a just solution to the Palestinian problem, with the policy of the United States. In information disseminated by the Chinese ahead of the special Security Council session, talks by Wang and Chinese Ambassador to the UN Zhang Jun before the session were reported. Wang made it clear in a talk with the Pakistani foreign minister that the main reason for the current situation was the mistaken policy followed by the Trump administration in recent years of ignoring the need to continue the Middle East peace process and promote a two-state solution, which consequently caused prolonged damage to the rights of the Palestinian people. Zhang released information about preparatory meetings with the Arab League troika before the meeting and expressed "understanding for their concerns." At the same time, no talks between China and Israeli representatives were reported, despite the obvious importance of understanding the motives of both sides before the session took place. Nor did China include the Israeli view in its proposed drafts for a Security Council resolution, avoiding mention of the rockets fired by Hamas and Islamic Jihad against cities in Israel. This omission resulted in a United States veto of the Chinese-proposed draft resolutions.

At the public [Security Council special session](#), the Chinese foreign minister called for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. Although he did not attack Israel directly and called for all of the parties to halt the violence against civilians and agree to an immediate ceasefire, he added a call for Israel to exercise restraint in its use of force. The Chinese foreign minister emphasized that only "one country" was responsible for the Security Council's failure to pass a joint resolution, and declared that the Security Council should play a more active role in striving for a two-state solution. He asserted that China was a "true friend of the Palestinian people" and would redouble its efforts to promote negotiations, in accordance with the Four Points plan of Chinese President Xi Jinping from 2017. In this context, China repeated its invitation to Israel and the Palestinians to come to China for direct talks.

Making the recent crisis part of China's ongoing conflict with the United States, while enhancing the narrative whereby China is a friend of the Palestinians and the Muslims, was designed to help China in a number of aspects involving its national interests. It did not necessarily reflect concern about a solution to the Palestinian problem.

China's goals include the following:

- a. Portraying China to many countries as a responsible and moderate power that is constantly striving to find a peaceful diplomatic solution to a severe humanitarian crisis affecting Muslims, in contrast to the United States, which is allegedly preventing this.
- b. Utilizing the current crisis in the Middle East to divert media and political attention from developments in Xinjiang. China contends that the United States is simultaneously conducting deceitful propaganda against China for allegedly harming Muslims and refusing to help residents of the Gaza Strip in an attack against Muslims.

The Chinese are angry about the growing calls in the United States to boycott the February 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing because of China's treatment of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. During the first week of the campaign in the Gaza Strip, while many pictures illustrating injury to Palestinian civilians were published in China and the Muslim world, the Chinese media also published photographs of the Eid al-Fitr celebrations in Xinjiang in order to highlight the freedom enjoyed by Muslims in China, as opposed to the American and Western assertions that China suppresses this minority. As the campaign in the Gaza Strip continued, the Chinese media stepped up its messages about Israeli attacks against the Muslim population and the American support for those attacks.

China has made Israel an unwilling part of the rift between the two major powers. No high-level contacts have taken place between China and Israel over the past year, while senior Chinese leaders, among them the foreign minister, visited the Middle East and held many talks with their Arab and Muslim counterparts. The Chinese foreign minister's most recent visit to the Middle East (in March 2021) included stops in Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. While the Chinese formerly regarded Israel as one of the five most important countries in the Middle East (together with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey) and strove to tighten cooperation with it in a range of areas, China's current ignoring of Israel may indicate an inclination to promote Chinese relations with other countries in the Middle East, particularly Iran, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, rather than with Israel, which is perceived as a close strategic partner of the United States.

The ongoing tension between China and the United States on various global issues reinforces the Chinese tendency to continue strengthening its political ties with countries with shared interests, among them Russia, Iran, and Muslim and Arab countries. As part of this trend, the crisis in the Gaza Strip has further widened the existing political gaps between Israel and China. China's enhanced status and its demonstrated ability to play a more substantial role in the Middle East theater, including inviting the Israelis and Palestinians to conduct direct talks in China, mandate that Israel make it clear to China that ignoring Israel politically and presenting only one side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including in Chinese statements and votes at the UN, will make it impossible for Israel to regard China as an unbiased mediator in future contacts toward a resolution of the crisis in the Middle East.