

# **China's Ambassador to Israel: "China-Israel relations are an independent and voluntary choice...and should not be affected by any third party"**

Galia Lavi | May 18, 2022

**January 24, 2022 marked 30 years since the start of diplomatic relations between Israel and China. Over these three decades the relations between the parties have experienced ups and downs. Israel sees China as a rising power with enormous economic potential, yet there are differences between the countries, particularly over China-Iran cooperation and China's voting pattern at the UN, which does not always support Israel's interests. In recent years, the relations have likewise been affected by the competition between the great powers. Against this background, and to mark 30 years of diplomatic relations, the Chinese Ambassador to Israel Mr. Cai Run was interviewed. The Ambassador referred to present and future opportunities and challenges before the two countries.<sup>1</sup>**

January 24, 2022 marked 30 years since the start of diplomatic relations between Israel and China. The occasion was marked with a virtual meeting of the China-Israel Joint Committee on Innovation Cooperation (JCIC), headed by Vice President Wang Qishan and Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid. At this meeting, the fifth time the JCIC has met, a 3-year joint work plan and a series of professional bilateral agreements were signed. The President, Prime Minister, and Foreign Minister of China also held talks with their Israeli counterparts and exchanged [greetings](#), "stressing the shared past and the warm relations existing between Israel and China," according to the announcement from the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

Over the past 30 years, relations between Israel and China have experienced ups and downs. Today, however, both parties apparently prefer to leave the past behind and focus on possible collaborations and the blossoming economic relations between them. The Israeli Foreign Ministry [sees](#) China-Israel relations as "characterized by regular political dialogue, close trade and economic relations,

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first in a series of articles by the INSS China Program to mark 30 years of diplomatic relations between Israel and China.

and a variety of collaborations linking the two peoples.” Chinese Ambassador Cai Run remarked that “China-Israel relations have maintained healthy and stable development, and cooperation in various fields has yielded fruitful results.” He added that mutual political trust has increased over the last 30 years, and that “the leaders of the two countries have maintained close interaction,” as shown by the JCIC, an inter-governmental mechanism. Ambassador Cai recalled that in 2017 the countries announced an Innovative Comprehensive Partnership, that took their relations to “a new level of bilateral ties.”

Relations between Israel and China focus on the economy, and commercial ties between the two countries have drawn closer. According to Chinese figures, trade between the countries rose from \$50 million when relations were first established to \$22.8 billion in 2021. Note that there is a difference between the data presented by the two parties, apparently due to differences in calculation methods. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, bilateral trade with China was worth \$50 million in 1992 and reached \$14.95 billion in 2021. The Chinese Ambassador added that his country “became Israel’s largest trading partner in Asia and the second largest in the world,” and that tourism has also benefited from “direct flights between Israel and the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Chengdu, and Hong Kong.” Businesses from both sides have “cooperated in such landmark projects as the new port of Haifa,<sup>2</sup> the red line of the Tel Aviv Light Rail, the China-Israel Changzhou Innovation Park, and the China-Israel Shanghai Innovation Park.” These collaborations, he says, “make innovation cooperation a highlight and a driving force for bilateral relations.” The two countries are working toward signing a free trade agreement at an early date.

Ties between China and Israel continued to grow closer even during the Covid pandemic. Notwithstanding the difficulty of meeting in person, the leaders continued to maintain contact and China-Israel Innovation Committee meetings were held virtually. Ambassador Cai warmly mentioned Israel’s support for China in its struggle against the virus and recalled how the Tel Aviv Municipality building was lit up with the colors of the Chinese flag in a show of solidarity. For its part, “China has provided assistance and facilitation for Israel to purchase and transport medicines and supplies in China.” Trade links also continued to flourish during the pandemic. According to Chinese statistical data, the volume of bilateral trade increased to \$17.54 billion in 2020, a rise of 18.8 percent compared to the previous year, and rose by a further 30 percent to \$22.8 billion in 2021. Here too, the figures from the Israeli side are lower; according to the CBS, in 2020 the volume of trade between China and Israel reached \$11.88 billion, a rise of less than 6 percent from

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<sup>2</sup> Haifa Bay Port

the previous year; the volume of bilateral trade in 2021 increased by more than 25 percent to \$14.95 billion.

Notwithstanding the increasingly close ties between China and Israel, in recent years the growing competition between China and the United States has cast a shadow on Israel-China relations. The US has pressured Israel's policymakers to cut back Chinese investments in national infrastructures and advanced technologies. Ambassador Cai was asked how he sees Israel-Chinese relations in this context, and his full reply was as follows:

China's diplomacy is committed to fostering a new type of international relations and building a community with a shared future for mankind, and China stands ready to join hands with other countries to take a new approach to developing state-to-state relations featuring win-win cooperation.

Mutual benefit and win-win results are the essence of China-Israel cooperation, which is conducive to the development of both countries and beneficial to both peoples. China-Israel cooperation features mutual respect, equality, and win-win spirit. It's an independent and voluntary choice that doesn't target any third party, and nor should it be affected by any third party.

Another subject that casts a shadow over bilateral relations is China-Iran cooperation. In Jerusalem, this link is seen as an ongoing risk for a leak of advanced weapons to its deadliest enemy, as well as undermined regional stability. But Ambassador Cai does not believe that China-Iran relations should affect China-Israel relations. He said, "China and Iran maintain normal state-to-state relations, and exchanges between the two countries are not targeted at any third party." At the same time, "China understands Israel's legitimate security concerns, believes that Israel's right to existence and development should be earnestly respected, and opposes any words or deeds that lead to escalation." In the context of the nuclear treaty taking shape in Vienna, the Ambassador admitted that "the JCPOA is not perfect and cannot solve issues beyond the Iranian nuclear program," but "it could serve as a starting point for solving other issues." He pointed out that "the vast majority of the international community believes that maintaining and implementing the JCPOA is the only effective means to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue." The Ambassador hopes that in addition to the nuclear treaty, "the relevant sides can discuss and resolve legitimate concerns and promote common security by establishing other channels of communication and dialogue." In this context, he noted that "China will always play its role as a

responsible major country, and China is committed to promoting lasting peace and stability in the Middle East.”

Another issue where there are differences of opinion between Israel and China is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On numerous occasions, Chinese officials have presented China’s position – support for the two state solution, based on the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state. Although it also asserts the need to respond to Israel’s security needs, China supports the Palestinians in its UN votes, and during Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021, when it was China’s turn to serve as president of the Security Council, it initiated discussions and helped to formulate a proposal demanding that Israel “exercise restraint.” Under these circumstances, it is hard for Israel to think of China as a neutral broker, but given these differences between the parties, it is important to understand the Chinese point of view. Therefore, the Ambassador was asked how China could play a constructive role in this issue. His reply in full:

As a responsible major country, China has always been endorsing the Middle East peace process and making constructive efforts to promote peace and facilitate talks on the Palestinian issue. Over the past year, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi has put forward a five-point initiative on achieving security and stability in the Middle East and a three-point vision on materializing the two-state solution. Last July, China hosted the fourth Palestine-Israel Peace Symposium, during which State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi delivered a speech, providing a platform for Palestine-Israeli peace advocates to communicate, with a view to exploring the road to peace and pursuing the way of coexistence. In March this year, the Chinese government’s Special Envoy on the Middle East Zhai Jun issue visited Israel and Palestine, and had in-depth communication with both sides. China supports the holding of an international peace conference led by the UN with the participation of the permanent members of the UN Security Council and all stakeholders of the Middle East peace process.

Both Israeli policy and Chinese policy reflect a decision to set political disputes aside and focus on shared concerns. Israel sees China as a rising and friendly power, with clear economic advantages, while China sees Israel as a bridge to the West and a source of advanced technologies. For Ambassador Cai, the shared history of the two countries is “a mirror that illuminates the present and the future,” and therefore past experience should be harnessed for the future. First, there is “traditional friendship. The Chinese and Jewish people have been respecting and supporting each other, laying a historical and emotional foundation for China-Israel relations.” Second, “mutual respect ...We need to stick to basic norms governing international relations such as mutual respect for each

other's sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs." Third, "mutually beneficial cooperation. China and Israel share similar visions and complementary strengths, and we have every reason to achieve win-win results."

Looking ahead, Ambassador Cai believes that "We need to...look at our bilateral ties from a strategic and long-term perspective. No matter how the international landscape may change, we must stick to the right direction of bilateral relations and not let floating clouds block our vision. The key to friendship must be held in our own hands." As he put it, China is promoting a new paradigm of development, and cooperation between China and Israel is beneficial and promising. Therefore he believes that both parties are "more than capable of drawing on each other's strength to achieve common development." He concluded by saying that "China-Israel relations in the next decade are bound to move towards a better tomorrow."