

“The Beijing Declaration”—Palestinian Reconciliation with Chinese Characteristics

Galia Lavi | No. 1886 | August 1, 2024

The “reconciliation meetings” sponsored by China between Palestinian factions, primarily Hamas and Fatah, reflect a new development in Beijing’s approach to the Middle East. Although China is essentially indifferent to the outcomes of the talks and has no direct interest in Palestinian internal reconciliation, the mere existence of the talks is intended to present China as a responsible power and an effective “mediator” that cares about the rights of the Palestinian people. By hosting terrorist organizations in its capital and legitimizing groups such as Hamas, who committed crimes against humanity and war crimes against the civilian population in Israel, China places itself on the side that supports terrorism. However, Israel is the main one affected by this.

From July 21 to 23, representatives of 14 Palestinian factions, led by Hamas and Fatah, met for a second reconciliation meeting in Beijing. The path to the talks, reflecting a new development in Chinese involvement in the Palestinian arena, was fraught with ups and downs. After Iran and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement to renew relations in Beijing in March 2023, and despite China only providing the venue for the signing ceremony, Chinese officials set their sights on the next “mediation” targets for Beijing, including Russia and Ukraine, Israel and the Palestinians, and reconciliation between the Palestinian factions. The events of October 7 and the subsequent Swords of Iron war have spurred China to try to get involved in these matters. Despite its practical support for the Palestinians being quite minimal, amounting to just a few million dollars of humanitarian aid, Beijing abandoned its much-vaunted “neutrality” and showed clear and decisive support for the Palestinian side of the conflict. A review of statements by Chinese officials indicates a significant increase since October 2023 in statements on the two-state solution, permanent membership for Palestine in the UN, and even support for the right of return.

While China provides extensive rhetorical support for the Palestinians, especially in the UN, hosting reconciliation talks between Palestinian factions is a step toward bolstering its status as a “mediator” and a peace-loving power. At the same time, it aims to improve China’s image in the Arab world after suffering some damage when regional leaders realized that China is not an adequate alternative to the United States in terms of security issues. Accordingly, in April 2024, the first reconciliation meeting between the factions took place, which included “deep and honest discussions,” but no significant progress was reported. At the end of the meeting, a Chinese Foreign

Ministry spokesperson emphasized the parties' agreement to the "Chinese way" of solving problems and [declared](#) that "both sides fully expressed their political will to achieve reconciliation through dialogue and consultation." In practice, while the parties only agreed that a follow-up meeting was needed, the mere holding of the meeting allowed China to strengthen its image as an "alternative" in the Middle East.

Since the "reconciliation talks" in April, there has been no rapprochement between the factions, and Abu Mazen even [accused](#) Hamas of unnecessarily prolonging the war in Gaza at the expense of the suffering of the Palestinian people, who are being used as human shields. The follow-up meeting, scheduled to take place in June in Beijing, was canceled, with each side blaming the other for the cancellation.

Such behavior could be interpreted in China as "losing face," an insult to the Chinese leadership. Not surprisingly, spokespersons for the Palestinian Authority and Hamas quickly [clarified](#) their commitment to the efforts of "our friends in China to achieve Palestinian national unity," as a Hamas representative put it. Fatah spokesmen stated that they have "great appreciation" for the Chinese effort and are working to create "the appropriate climate for the success of the esteemed and respected Chinese mediation." In turn, the Chinese Foreign Ministry exercised extra caution ahead of the second meeting, refusing to provide details about it and [noting](#) that additional information would be published at the "appropriate" moment.

Not everything went smoothly during the second meeting held in Beijing in July 2023, either. Palestinian sources [reported](#) that at some point Hamas refused to hold bilateral talks with Fatah, and there were even reports of heated arguments between the various representatives. The Chinese probably did not like this conduct of the Palestinians. Beijing does not usually undertake missions whose success is not guaranteed in advance. Although China had no expectations that the meeting would end in actual reconciliation, a failure is a result that China finds hard to accept. Therefore, Beijing lowered expectations in advance and maintained ambiguity until the end of the summit. At the same time, the state-controlled [media](#) emphasized that whether the meeting succeeds or fails, the mere bringing together of the factions to the table is a diplomatic move that proves China's degree of responsibility, bringing "dialogue instead of confrontation, partnership instead of alliance, a win-win game rather than a zero-sum game" to the Middle East.

It is unclear whether and what kind of pressure the Chinese exerted on the participants. However, at the end of the talks, another twist in the plot was noted. In the "Beijing Declaration" that summarized the talks, the participating factions announced the establishment of a "temporary unity government" under the PLO, which would be committed to "establishing an independent Palestinian state with

Jerusalem as its capital—in accordance with UN resolutions” and would support “the Palestinian people’s right to resist occupation.” At the closing ceremony of the summit, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [honored](#) the participants with his presence, welcomed the agreement, and laid out Beijing’s three-step approach: promoting a ceasefire in Gaza, international support for the Palestinian factions based on the principle that “Palestinians govern Palestine,” and promoting recognition of Palestine as a permanent member of the UN and the implementation of a two-state solution.

The ink on the “Beijing Declaration” was barely dry when some factions announced that they did not support it. Despite the widespread belief that the chances of the Palestinian factions moving toward reconciliation in the foreseeable future are slim, especially at present and particularly between Fatah and Hamas, it seems that China has gained from the summit in terms of its image, regardless of actual success. First, the event ended with a positive statement presenting the platform and the way that China offers as essential. Second, China received praise from Arab countries and even UN Secretary-General [António Guterres](#) for its attempt to mediate in the complex case. Third, the meeting opens the door for follow-up meetings, as many as there may be, if they take place.

Indeed, none of the parties participating in the “reconciliation talks”—guests and hosts alike—have a real interest in their success but rather in their very existence and continuation. This was evidenced by the low level of representatives from the factions at the two meetings held so far. Moreover, the senior factions in the Palestinian arena came to the meeting with the aim of promoting different, even contradictory, goals. For Fatah, the talks provide a platform for discussing leadership in “the day after” the war in Gaza, while enlisting China to continue the struggle in the UN for Palestinian rights. For Hamas, the mere existence of the talks and hosting a senior delegation in Beijing provides it with international legitimacy and possibly a place in a future settlement in Palestinian leadership in “the day after.” For China, the “reconciliation talks” allow it to present itself to countries belonging to what it calls the “Global South” as a responsible power and an effective “mediator” that cares about the rights of the Palestinian people. However, in reality, China is indifferent to the practical results of the talks as their existence is the goal. In addition, the talks allow Beijing to protect itself from betting on the losing side in the competition between Fatah and Hamas for leadership in the Palestinian arena. Moreover, the continuation of the war in the Gaza Strip, and in this context, the ongoing rivalry between Fatah and Hamas, works in China’s favor, as a limited-scale conflict in the Middle East diverts the United States far from Southeast Asia and provides Beijing with an opportunity to challenge the United States and present itself as an “alternative.”

The main party affected by this show is, of course, Israel. Even if the road to reconciliation between the conflicting parties is long, the mere holding of meetings in Beijing, alongside China's support in the UN, provides Hamas with legitimacy that might make it difficult for Israel to prevent the murderous organization's involvement in "the day after" in Gaza. Moreover, especially given China's positions regarding the "Swords of Iron" operation and its efforts to restrict Israel's actions, including its actions in the UN in this context, Israel has no interest in Beijing's involvement in the current or future settlement process.

However, China's giving legitimacy to Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist organizations should be a red line for Israel and should not be passed over in silence. It is important for Israel to emphasize to China through conventional diplomatic means that China's hosting an organization that committed a horrendous massacre of a civilian population, while also committing war crimes and crimes against humanity, is unacceptable. In doing so, China places itself on the side supporting terrorism. Israel should demand clarifications from China about its sponsorship of the declaration bearing the name of its capital, which accuses Israel of "genocide" and approves "the right of peoples to self-determination and to struggle by all available means." Does this right also include the means used by Hamas on October 7? Shrugging shoulders and taking comfort in the fact that internal Palestinian reconciliation will not really happen is turning a blind eye to China's consistent effort, even if it is just at its beginning, to gain a foothold in a future settlement process between Israel and the Palestinians.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg