

Continuity and Change in Chinese Rhetoric Toward Israel Since October 7

Galia Lavi | No. 1914 | November 14, 2024

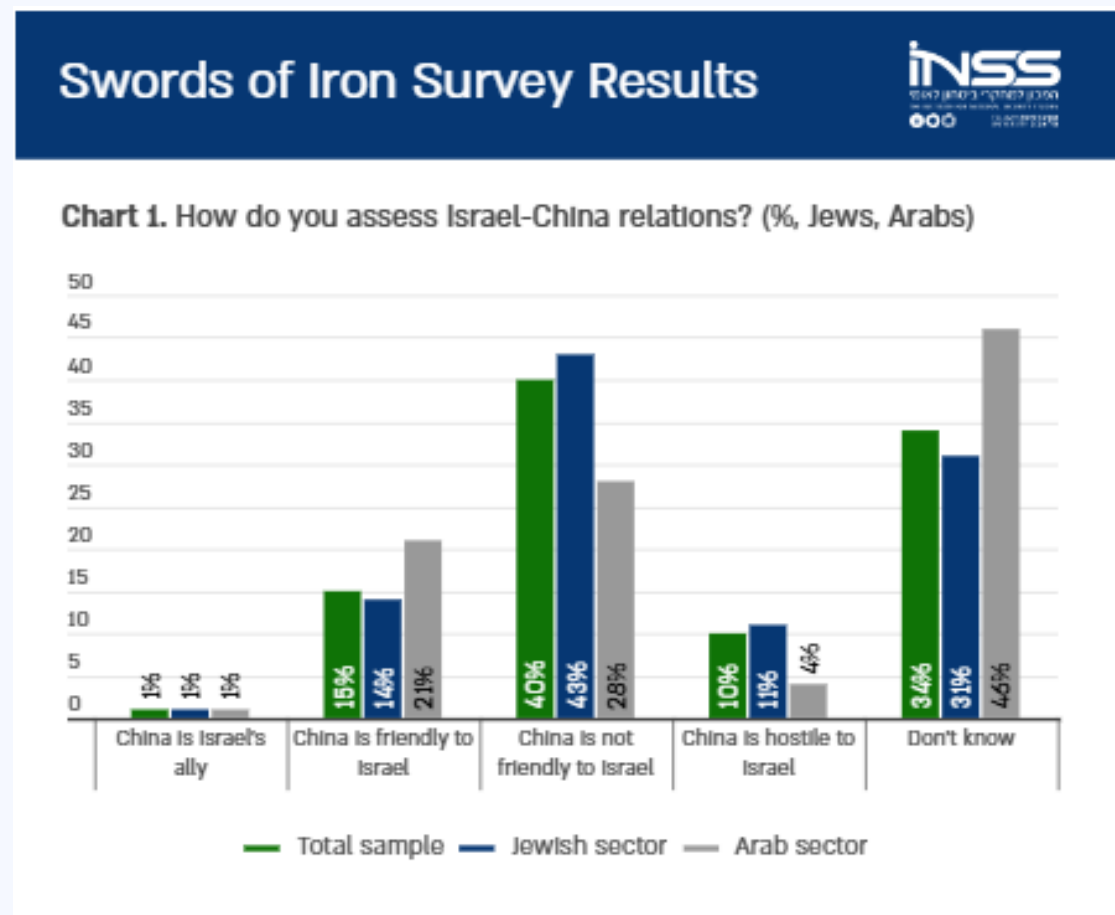
Over the past year, Beijing has taken a distinctly anti-Israel stance; however, recent official statements from China have included messages perceived as more positive toward Israel. These statements have included calls to consider Israel's security interests alongside refraining from directly condemning Israel's ground maneuvers in Lebanon, the assassination of Nasrallah, and even its direct attacks on Iran. Nonetheless, the change in Chinese rhetoric is minimal and does not necessarily indicate a shift in Beijing's policy toward Israel.

Since October 7, 2023, China has adopted a clearly pro-Palestinian stance, largely ignoring Hamas's attack in Israel's western Negev and additional attacks on Israel from other fronts, while condemning Israel's retaliatory actions. For instance, Beijing, which frequently opposes violations of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, completely ignored the breach of Israeli sovereignty on October 7 and subsequent attacks on Israel by Hezbollah, Iran, Iraq, and the Houthis. Many of these attacks also violated the sovereignty of other regional countries, including Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In contrast, Beijing did not hesitate to condemn the assassination of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, though it did not directly attribute the incident to Israel. Furthermore, after Iran's attack on Israel on April 14, 2024, China's UN ambassador [justified](#) the attack, stating that "Iran declared that its military action was a response to Israeli aggression." The Foreign Ministry spokesperson also [claimed](#) that "[Iran's] action was restrained and was an act of self-defense," adding that he "appreciated Iran's emphasis on not targeting regional and neighboring countries and its reiteration of its continuing commitment to a good-neighborly and friendly policy."

Similarly, China frequently opposes violations of international law—but only when it concerns Israel. For instance, Beijing has repeatedly urged Israel to implement UN Resolution 2728, primarily calling for an immediate ceasefire, but has ignored the second part of the resolution, which demands the immediate, unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas. Beijing also disregards UN Resolution 1701, which stipulates that Hezbollah must withdraw from southern Lebanon and that weapons should not enter the region. References to the Geneva Convention or its principles—forbidding the torture of prisoners and requiring Red Cross visits to them—are also absent in Chinese statements. A minor yet infuriating detail in all official statements from Chinese officials at various levels has been the use of the term "detainees" (被扣

押人员), equating Israeli hostages to Hamas militants detained in Israel, instead of using the appropriate term “hostages” (人质), which accurately reflects civilians taken from their homes.

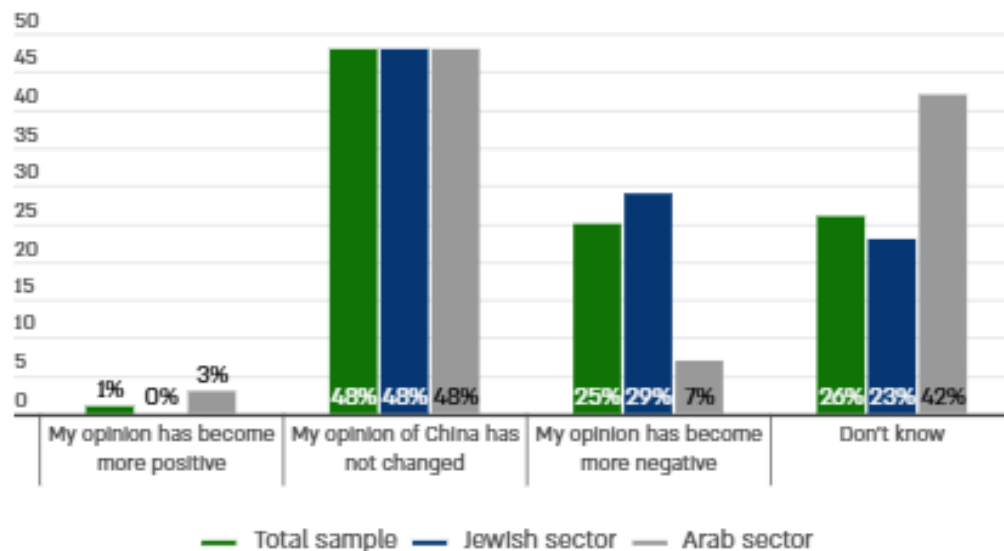
China’s antagonistic positions may explain the sharp decline in Israeli public opinion toward China. In 2019, 66% of Israelis held positive views of China, according to a PEW survey. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and subsequent criticism of China led to a drop in favorable public opinion to 48%. In a PEW survey published in July 2024, this approval rating fell further to only 33%. Additional surveys conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies following October 7, 2023, show that Israeli public opinion of China continues to wane. As of [September 2024](#), only 16% of the sample population viewed China as a friendly country or ally of Israel.



Swords of Iron Survey Results



Chart 2. Has your opinion of China changed since the outbreak of the war?
(%, Jews, Arabs)



In October 2024, it appeared that China was slightly softening its tone toward Israel, with its statements becoming somewhat less adversarial. For instance, on October 8, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [responded](#) to a journalist’s question by stating that “the reasonable security concerns of Israel need to be paid attention to.” On October 14, Foreign Minister Wang Yi [spoke](#) with Israel Katz, then Israel’s foreign minister, calling, among other things, “to release all hostages,” using a term that had so far been absent from previous Chinese official statements. Additionally, on October 28, following Israel’s attack in Iran, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [responded](#) indifferently to a journalist’s question on the matter, saying that “China opposes violating the sovereignty and undermining the security of other countries and opposes the abuse of force.” However, there was no condemnation, and Israel was not mentioned.

Researchers [identified](#) this shift in Chinese rhetoric and suggested several explanations: One theory is that Israel’s successes in the war may have made China realize it had “gambled on the wrong horse.” Another theory relates to China’s usual balancing policy, suggesting that Beijing felt its extreme rhetoric had created an unbalanced situation and is now attempting to rebalance its stance. Another explanation focuses on Israel’s operation in Iran on October 26, suggesting that Wang

Yi's conversation with Katz, which took place before the Israeli attack, was an attempt to move closer to Israel and persuade it to refrain from or minimize the extent of the attack. All these theories assume there was indeed a shift in Chinese rhetoric toward Israel; however, an examination shows this is not necessarily the case.

Statements acknowledging Israel's security concerns are indeed rare but have been made before by Chinese officials. The first instance was in 2014, during Operation Protective Edge, when China proposed the "Five-Point Plan" to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Clause 2 of that plan explicitly [states](#) that "Israel's legitimate security concerns should also be taken seriously." This statement reappeared about two weeks after the October 7 massacre, on October 23, 2023, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [spoke](#) with Eli Cohen, then the foreign minister. Wang told his counterpart that China condemns all acts that harm civilians and referred to Israel's security concerns, claiming that "Israel's legitimate security concerns can only be completely resolved by adhering to the direction of political settlement." It should be noted that the Chinese term frequently translated as "legitimate" or "reasonable" (合理) could also mean "fair," "just," or "equitable." The latter translation likely better captures Wang's intention, as he later told Cohen that "the legitimate security concerns of all parties will be truly and completely resolved."

An analysis of China's condemnatory statements also shows that they rarely condemn Israel directly; instead, they settle for general condemnations of harm to civilians, use of force, or violations of sovereignty. China uses similar rhetoric toward other countries, often avoiding specific names and instead referring to "relevant actors" or "influential countries."

Unlike these two forms of phrasing, which do not indicate any change in the Chinese approach, the use of the correct Chinese term for "hostages" for the first time—instead of "detainees"—is indeed a significant and welcome change. This terminology, used by both the Foreign Ministry spokesperson and the Chinese ambassador to the UN, suggests that this change was intentional, although it does not necessarily indicate a policy shift in favor of Israel. More likely, after many months of repeated appeals from Israel's Foreign Ministry, the Israeli embassy in Beijing, and numerous researchers—and after "hostages" had become the widely accepted term worldwide, including in the Arab world—China recognized that the term "detainees" was inappropriate, if not absurd. Even if this was a gesture toward Israel, it is a minor and belated one.

As of the time of writing, the change in Chinese rhetoric is purely cosmetic and holds no substantial policy implications for Israel. In general, the main issue is not what China says, but what it does not say. As long as Beijing ignores the actions of the other side—

Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran—there is no reason to celebrate, even if it does not directly condemn Israel.

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