

Biased Neutrality: China's Rhetoric Amid Escalating Tensions in the Middle East

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Since October 7, China has intensified its support for the Palestinians in the international arena while consistently avoiding any condemnation of Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and the Houthis, framing all cases of escalation in the Middle East as a result of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. At the same time, China continues to maintain economic and diplomatic relations with Israel and has even strengthened them. The contradiction between the overt discourse and actual conduct illustrates the biased neutrality that characterizes Beijing's strategy in the region—a policy that allows it to preserve its advantages in the region with minimal risk.

Israel–China relations have undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly since the events of October 7, 2023, amid the backdrop of a more active and supportive Chinese political position toward Israel's rivals in the Middle East. Before the Hamas attack, relations between China and Israel were characterized by economic prosperity, especially in trade and infrastructure. Bilateral trade expanded, and Chinese imports became a key component of the Israeli economy. Israel pursued a pragmatic approach, seeking to strengthen economic ties with Beijing while navigating American sensitivities. Whereas China, which officially claims to maintain neutrality and avoid involvement in other countries' internal affairs, has in practice consistently expressed support for the Palestinians in its public declarations. Hamas's attack on October 7 marked a sharp turning point in relations between the two countries. China's refusal to condemn Hamas, its vocal support for Palestinian demands in UN institutions, and the harsh tone directed at Israel have contributed to a growing sense of alienation among Israeli decision-makers and the public. These positions have reinforced the perception in Israel that China is aligned with the pro-Iranian, pro-Palestinian axis. As a result, Israeli public trust in China has significantly eroded, and bilateral relations have entered a period of ongoing tension.

Alongside China's assertive rhetoric in multilateral forums, a notable dissonance has appeared in its conduct toward Israel at the bilateral level. The appointment of Ambassador Xiao Junzheng at the end of 2024 was accompanied by a conciliatory public posture and discourse toward Israel. Meanwhile, areas of bilateral cooperation, such as trade and the employment of Chinese workers in Israel, continue as they did before the war and have even expanded. Therefore, China's diplomatic conduct in the Middle East reflects a pattern of outwardly biased neutrality while internally demonstrating flexible diplomatic pragmatism and audience-specific messaging tailored to the Israeli domestic arena.

Chinese Rhetoric in the International Arena—Patterns, Deviations, and Trends

In recent years, and especially since the outbreak of the Swords of Iron war in October 2023, China has sought to establish itself as a regular and prominent voice in the international discourse on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Its positions have been regularly articulated in official statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in forums with Arab states, and across official Chinese media outlets. These positions are often conveyed through platforms of the UN General Assembly and the Security Council, where China is using its role as rotating president (most recently in February 2025). China has initiated emergency meetings on various issues related to conflicts in the Middle East and has drafted declarations on behalf of the Security Council’s president, aiming to direct the Security Council’s activities and positions. Despite repeated declarations of neutrality, an analysis of Chinese statements reveals a consistently biased position, expressing full support for the Palestinians while routinely condemning Israel and refraining from acknowledging the role of armed terror organizations in the escalation.

This review is based on a wide range of public statements by Chinese officials, including representatives of the Foreign Ministry, the United Nations, ambassadors, and official spokespeople, since the outbreak of the war in Gaza until mid-2025. The analysis identifies recurring ideological and rhetorical patterns through which China articulates its stance on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, as well as other arenas of conflict involving Israel.

Gaza and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

1. Consistent support for the Palestinians—China’s support for the Palestinians is not a new phenomenon, but since October 7, it has intensified [its calls](#) for support of “the just cause of the Palestinian people in restoring their legitimate national rights.” It has used rhetoric such as injustice, national rights, [a call to “end the Nakba,”](#) and the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. These statements have also expressed support for the right of return, aid to UNRWA, and the strengthening of Palestinian national institutions, including the Palestinian Authority, as well as legitimizing Hamas through intra-Palestinian reconciliation initiatives hosted by China in Beijing. The ambassador of the West Asia and North Africa Department in China’s Foreign Ministry even [clarified](#) that “the Hamas movement is part of the Palestinian national fabric, and China is interested in relations with it.”

Chinese officials have used language that combines empathetic terms (such as, “[the tragedy in Gaza violates the conscience of humankind](#)”) with legal terminology (for example, “[forced transfer](#)”) and [allegations](#) that Israel has violated international and humanitarian law. These statements consistently present Israel as the sole aggressor, with Hamas almost never mentioned, while the Palestinian people are depicted as victims. Statements of support for the Palestinians have also been issued jointly with other countries such as Egypt, Malaysia, and Qatar (e.g., “[China and Malaysia](#) oppose the forced transfer of Gaza residents and call for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state based on the two-state solution”).

2. Lack of moral symmetry—Party-affiliated media have depicted Israeli political demands, such as removing Hamas’s rule or advancing conditions for a ceasefire, as illegitimate or “[absurd](#).” In most published statements, Israel has been accused of “slaughtering civilians,” perpetrating “[collective punishment](#),” and “[indiscriminate military attacks](#).” Additionally, Israel has consistently been portrayed as the source of instability, even when responding to attacks by terror organizations. [For example](#), “Tel Aviv justified the strikes by demanding that Hamas must release more hostages, and its requirement that Hamas should relinquish control of the Palestinian territory is simply absurd.”

While condemnations of Israel have been direct, detailed, and harsh, Chinese statements have consistently avoided naming Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, or the Houthis. Hamas was not acknowledged as a party in the conflict, even after the October 7 attack; Hezbollah was not mentioned in relation to rocket fire toward Israeli communities; and the Houthis were referenced only when targeting Chinese vessels. The term “terror” has been largely absent from most official statements (except when applied to terrorist groups in Syria). The kidnapping and murder of civilians, as well as the use of civilian facilities as human shields, have not received any direct attention.

3. Framing the Middle East conflicts as derivatives of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—China has consistently portrayed other regional conflicts and flare-ups as a result of the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Even when other actors have initiated attacks or escalations, China has framed this as legitimate resistance or recurring cycles of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. For instance, China’s *Global Times* described the Houthis’ attacks on commercial vessels as “[a manifestation of the spillover effects of the ongoing Palestine–Israel conflict](#).” Similarly, the Chinese representative during an emergency UN meeting after the Iranian missile attack in April 2024 [said](#) that the conflict is “another reminder that the Palestinian question remains central to the Middle East issue and bears on the peace, stability, and long-term security.”

Iran

During the direct confrontations between Iran and Israel in April and October 2024, Chinese rhetoric emphasized the principle of defending Iran’s sovereignty, combining consistent political support with [calls](#) for restraint and strong condemnations of the Israeli strikes. China explicitly distinguished between attacks initiated by Israel and Iranian responses. Even when Iran launched missile attacks against Israeli territory, Beijing did not directly condemn it and sufficed with a [general call](#) for an immediate ceasefire and the maintenance of regional stability.

In contrast, China’s responses to Operation Rising Lion were more cautious. Alongside issuing [condemnations](#) of Israel and the United States for creating violent precedents, Beijing refrained from direct public support of the operation. In a scenario of escalation with the United States and a tangible risk of broader conflict, Chinese policy reflected wider priorities of preventing further escalation, avoiding confrontation with the United States, and

preserving ties with the Gulf states. This policy allowed China to present itself as a conciliatory actor while incurring minimal diplomatic risk.

Lebanon and Hezbollah

During the fighting in Lebanon, China frequently condemned Israel for violating Lebanon's sovereignty while consistently avoiding mention of Hezbollah, even when the organization targeted civilian population centers in Israeli cities (e.g., no official Chinese response was found to the killing of 12 children in a missile attack by Hezbollah on Majdal Shams in July 2024). The contrast in China's responses can be illustrated by two statements issued within a single week: Following Hezbollah's first missile fire on Tel Aviv, the [Chinese Foreign Ministry urged](#) the "relevant parties to take measures immediately to cool down the situation." Yet in response to the Pagers' Operation in Lebanon on Hezbollah's operatives, China's representative to the Security Council [said](#) that "China urges Israel to abandon its obsession with the use of force and its illusion of seeking a complete military victory." The disparity between rhetorical caution toward Hezbollah, marked by the absence of its condemnation, versus the severity of the criticism toward Israel is evident and illustrates a trend in China's diplomatic discourse: blaming Israel for escalation while downplaying the actions of armed groups affiliated with Iran, even when those groups initiate the attacks.

Yemen and the Red Sea Arena

China has described the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea as a consequence of the conflict in the Gaza Strip and has refrained from directly condemning them. Official spokespeople have limited themselves to [calling](#) on the Houthis to cease the attacks, uphold international law, and protect maritime trade routes.

Syria

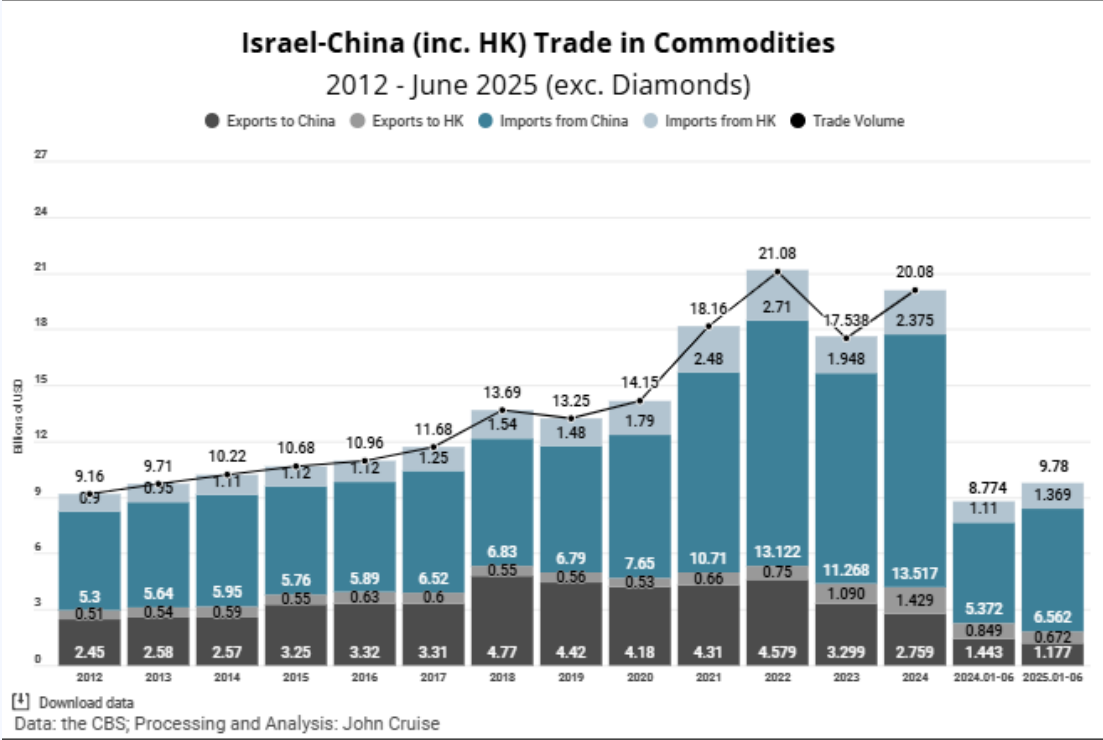
China has systematically [condemned](#) Israeli strikes in Syria, framing them as a violation of Syrian sovereignty and a threat to regional stability. Israel has been [portrayed](#) as an occupying force, especially in the Golan Heights, whose status as "occupied territory" is consistently emphasized. Since the establishment of Ahmed al-Sharaa's regime in Damascus in early 2025, China's [rhetoric](#) has shifted to include support for the regime's domestic and foreign policies, supporting counterterrorism efforts as well as stressing the principles of upholding the rule of law. One of China's concerns is the presence of fighters from the [East Turkestan Islamic Movement](#) (ETIM) in Syria and their integration into the new military system. China fears that the presence of thousands of Uyghurs, some of whom are combatants, in Syria could strengthen an external terrorist infrastructure linked to the Uyghurs from the Xinjiang region in northwestern China. China claims that these militants could gain operational experience, mobilize resources, and provide inspiration in a way that would threaten China's security and stability.

China's Policy in the Israeli Arena – Between Biased Neutrality and Pragmatism

Despite political tensions and China's harsh positions toward Israel in international forums, bilateral trade between the countries remains high. Data from June 2025 shows that the total trade volume reached approximately \$9.78 billion—an increase of 11.5% from the same

period in 2024. Although still below the 2022 peak of \$21.08 billion, and despite a decline since October 2023 (see Figure 1), imports from China remain a critical component of Israel’s economy, particularly in automobiles, electronics, and infrastructure.

Figure 1. Trade Between Israel and China (Including Hong Kong) 2012–June 2025 (Excluding Diamonds)



In contrast, investment trends have spiraled downward. Since the peak in 2018, with 76 investments, the number and value of Chinese investments have steadily declined, dropping sharply from 42 investments in 2022 to 13 in 2023. However, a partial recovery occurred in 2024, with 18 investments.

In recent years, China has emerged as a [dominant player](#) in the export of cars to Israel. It has surpassed Japan and South Korea, ranking only second to the European Union in vehicle exports to Israel, with a market share exceeding 23.5% in the last quarter of 2024, particularly in electric vehicles.

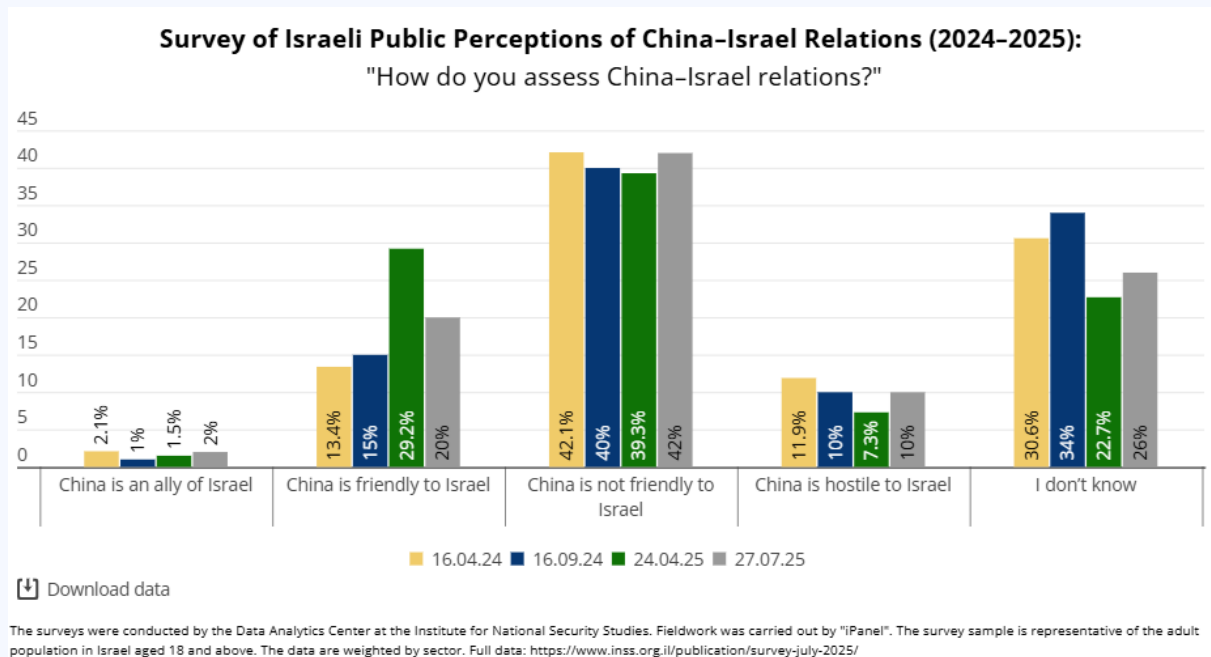
One sector that has recorded a sharp increase is the number of Chinese workers in the construction industry. In 2024, their number stood at 23,754—nearly triple the figure in 2020 (see Figure 2). Although their percentage of the total foreign construction workforce has declined (from 63% in 2024 to 42% in 2025) due to the arrival of workers from other countries, the absolute number of Chinese workers continued to rise. This trend reflects Israel’s continued reliance on Chinese labor as an emerging alternative to Palestinian workers, which has persisted despite Chinese travel warnings and evacuations.

Figure 2. Chinese Workers in the Construction Sector in Israel (2017–2024)



The trends of recovery in economic cooperation do not necessarily reflect a change in Israeli public perceptions of China. Public opinion data collected by the [Data Analytics](#) Center at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) indicates that the dominant view among the Israeli public is that China is not friendly toward Israel (see Figure 3). Throughout the examined period (April 2024–July 2025), the percentage of respondents who regarded China as an unfriendly or hostile state remained high and stable, averaging around half of those surveyed. In contrast, only 20% saw China as a friendly partner or ally. Nevertheless, during this period, there was a moderate increase in the share of respondents with a positive view of China, peaking at around 30% in the spring of 2025. In a survey conducted in July 2025, however, this figure fell to about 20%—possibly due to the survey’s timing, which coincided with Operation Rising Lion and media reports of Chinese involvement in supplying weapons to Iran.

Figure 3. The Israeli Public's Assessment of Israel–China Relations (April 2024–July 2025)



The findings, indicating erosion in the public's trust in China, align with data from the [Pew Research Center](#), showing a steep decline in favorable views toward China among Israelis—from 66% in 2019 to only 33% in 2024 and 2025 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Israeli Public's View of China According to the Pew Research Center



Against the backdrop of the complex state of bilateral relations and Israeli public opinion, the Chinese embassy's diplomatic activity in Israel stands out. Since his appointment at the end of 2024, the Chinese ambassador to Israel, Xiao Junzheng, has led active public diplomacy aimed at strengthening economic, technological, and social ties with Israel. He has done so through frequent meetings with civil society, appearances in local media, and the consistent use of friendly, approachable language. This strategy reflects a desire to shape public perceptions along positive and apolitical channels while avoiding the political disputes that have intensified since the war in Gaza. This approach differs from that of his predecessor, Ambassador Cai Run, and may reflect an effort to expand China's influence through soft branding at a time when the Israeli public's perception of China has diminished.

Conclusions and Implications for Israel

China's stance during the Swords of Iron war demonstrates the challenge in interpreting the foreign policy of a global power operating in multiple arenas with diverse tools of expression. On the multilateral and official level, China claims neutrality, but in practice, maintains a consistently pro-Palestinian stance, refrains from condemning Israel's adversaries, and portrays Israel as the almost exclusive aggressor in regional conflicts. This has been evident in assertive statements and initiatives at the UN Security Council, with sharp, one-sided condemnations of Israeli actions in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and Yemen, and repeated references to "the just struggle of the Palestinian people." At the same time, on the bilateral level, some economic ties between the countries have been maintained and even expanded, alongside the current ambassador's intensive public activity, characterized by friendly diplomacy and promoting cooperation. In the direct channel with Israel, this functional split in China's policy does not indicate a strategic shift but rather a pragmatic approach, signaling a willingness to return relations to their pre-war state, when economic ties flourished despite China's positions on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The distinction between China's official discourse in the international arena and its local approach in Israel raises questions for Israel's policy toward China. Thus far, Israel's response has been characterized by restraint, with few comments on Chinese statements remaining mostly at the diplomatic level. However, given China's firm alignment in the diplomatic and strategic spheres with Israel's adversaries, it is worth considering actions that reflect Israel's value-based, political, and security sensitivities. Given China's prominent role in global affairs, it is essential to formulate a measured and clear diplomatic message. If it chooses to balance its positions and recognize the complexity of the threats facing Israel, China could play a meaningful role in advancing solutions to conflicts in the Middle East. In this context, Israel can also signal the limits of its patience, emphasizing that a stable partnership also requires mutual responsibility in both discourse and action.

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