



Time for Israel to Rethink its China Policy

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4 March 2010

In spite of the current global financial–economic–commercial crisis, China is likely to continue its success story in the coming decades. Jerusalem should therefore reconsider its relations with Beijing. It perhaps even needs to welcome greater Chinese involvement in various diplomatic and security issues relating to the Middle East. This is certainly so if, as Immanuel Wallerstein and many historians and political scientists have recently argued, the United States is in a geopolitical decline economically, politically, and even militarily.

Washington's Commitment

Now, in 2010, it is quite clear that the United States has become increasingly entangled in its own economic morass. The United States cannot expect to impose its political line onto China. The Obama administration notified the US Congress in late January 2010 that the United States was planning to sell US\$ 6.4 billion in arms to Taiwan, and three weeks later US President Obama had a historic meeting with the Dalai Lama in which he offered 'strong support' for preserving the identity of the Tibetan spiritual leader. Still, these developments do not seem at the moment to have altered the overall balance between the two powers.

In some respects Beijing has intimidated—and seems to be continuing to intimidate—the planners in Washington by demonstrating a delicate yet firm response to Washington's intent to check China's global interests. Beijing continues to be present in South America, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and many other countries. Similarly, even though the US administration would have liked China to assume a secondary role in the Middle East, Beijing continues to invest heavily in the region and is increasingly involved there. These are undoubtedly crucial developments for the Israeli government to consider.

The United States seems to be in dire straits at home and abroad—politically, militarily and strategically. Obviously, the economic crisis has worsened an already difficult situation. This reality could very well result in Washington altering its traditional commitment towards its allies and close partners, including Israel. Indeed, in an emerging crisis, the economic and strategic needs of client countries might therefore be put at risk. Israel should take this into serious consideration. It should rethink its relations with China and look again at its overall diplomatic and economic attitude towards Beijing. Moreover, Jerusalem should seriously consider the option of periodically reassessing Israel's policy towards China. Perhaps the traditional line between mere 'maintenance' or 'servicing' of Israel's relations with China, and qualitative upgrading of these relations, should be crossed and a more assertive policy towards China should be adopted.

Encouraging Beijing's Deeper Involvement in the Middle East?

Israel might do well to stimulate Beijing's deeper involvement in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, as well as in addressing the strong tensions between Jerusalem on the one hand, and Damascus and Tehran on the other. China is a member of the so-called 'P5+1' group (the five

permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany), which calls upon Iran to implement UN Security Council resolutions regarding the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's safeguards and urges Iran to meet without delay the requirements of the International Atomic Energy Agency's Board of Governors. As such, China cannot remain aloof and should be encouraged to help in the creation of some sort of collective security effort to find a solution to the present crisis.

This is far from easy, as Beijing's policies are not always understood by Western powers. Traditionally, China has had its own unique approach to international affairs. At the moment, China advocates what it terms a 'new pathway' (*xin daolu*), which does not signal entering a global conflict with any regional bloc; rather the contrary, it tries to signal to the world that Beijing seeks to manage its rise as a great power in such a way as to prevent conflicts. Since late January 2010, this admittedly seems a rather difficult policy to practise in view of Washington's tougher line towards China.

Sino-Israeli relations are important, especially in light of Israel's military-strategic role and position in the Middle East equation. This is the case even in the wider global arena, such as if Israel decides to attack Iran's nuclear installations. Beijing hopes to continue enjoying Israel's potential to serve as one of China's main suppliers of advanced technology and perhaps even—once again—military supplies and technologies. This applies, for example, to the advanced field of the unmanned, or drone, industry. Beijing should thus take note of the signs that Israel would like China to contribute more to collective security efforts.

Moreover, Beijing has already shown that it is in principle interested in becoming more involved in the Middle East peace process. This can be clearly seen, for example, by the fact that it appointed special envoys for the Middle East issue, who periodically confer with various parties on the current situation, particularly on the Palestinian-Israeli issue. In 2009 Wu Si-ke, China's present envoy for the Middle East, toured Middle Eastern countries. In Jerusalem he met with Israel's President Shimon Peres and Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman. Wu maintains that the region is facing 'historic opportunities' and expresses the Chinese government's hope that parties to the conflict will resume negotiations on the basis of the two-state principle. During summer 2009, following the riots in Xinjiang, Wu focused on some Islamic countries in an attempt to underline the common factor between them and China, whose population includes around 22 million Muslims.

Closer Sino-Israeli Ties

In light of the re-emergence of a new bi- or multi-polar international system in which the United States and China are the main actors, Jerusalem should not only consider stimulating deeper Chinese involvement in the Middle East but should also reassess its overall policy towards China. Growing criticism in the United States and Europe towards Israel's policies in the West Bank and Gaza may weaken Israel's position in the UN and the international arena even further. While Israel can aim to increase its exports of civilian products and technologies to China, renewed exports of military materiel are unlikely, at least for the foreseeable future. Even the export of products with dual-use characteristics appears difficult. In light of such constraints, Israel should seriously examine whether all proper efforts have been exerted to strengthen trade with China. Administrative obstacles should be removed and specific initiatives should be launched in order to enhance Israeli exports to China.

Jerusalem should calculate the proper diplomatic means to approach decision-makers in Beijing in a more effective fashion. Concrete steps should be taken in order to strengthen pro-Israeli sentiments among Chinese intellectuals and Communist Party cadres and within wide circles of the Chinese public, especially the young people. Other means of approaching Beijing, such as collaboration in 'neutral' fields—such as agriculture, sciences, and research and technology—should be encouraged and enhanced. In addition, more frequent visits by interested parties in both countries should be encouraged, and informal academic contacts with various quarters in Beijing should be strengthened. 'Trial balloons' to gauge opinion should be sent out, aimed at emphasizing to the Chinese public and emerging decision-makers that some Israeli scholars and independent strategic thinkers maintain that a new and

different policy towards China should be adopted by the Israeli government. And finally, there should be greater and more intense collaboration with China's mission at the UN headquarters (even though—in light of the Iran issue, for example—this seems an almost impossible task at times), through the creation of an integrative bi-national dialogue. Upgrading Sino-Israeli relations along such lines would help Jerusalem to refine its position in the Middle East as the broader geopolitical context shifts.

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