



PERSPECTIVES

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Is China Intervening in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 558, August 13, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On July 18, 2017, PA President Mahmoud Abbas met with Chinese President Xi Jinping. According to the media, the meeting was productive. “Beijing will create a dialogue mechanism between Israel and the Palestinians, with China being the mediator, and later this year China will hold a peace conference and try to resolve the conflict”, according to Xi. This sounds good, but Beijing has more pressing priorities. It is not interested in forging deals with little chance of success.

On July 18, 2017, PA President Mahmoud Abbas met for the fourth time with Chinese President Xi Jinping in China. The meeting was apparently good, judging by the declarations of continued cooperation between the sides.

President Xi called the Palestinian people “true friends, partners, and brothers”, and voiced support for “independent Palestinian sovereignty”. In addition, Zhang Ming, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, said in Xi’s name that “Beijing will create a dialogue mechanism between Israel and the Palestinians, with China being the mediator, and later this year China will hold a peace conference and try to resolve the conflict”.

This is not the first time the Chinese have made declarations like this. Similar sentiments were expressed when Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu visited China last March.

The war in Syria, which started more than five years ago, has prompted Chinese representatives to say they are working to reduce the fighting. President Xi told Abbas that China had sent a representative to try to mediate

between the sides in Syria, and the Chinese hosted the competing sides at a convention in Beijing. In 2015, the Chinese government sent economic representatives to Syria to discuss Chinese support for the development of the Syrian transportation system.

Syria is in an area of great geopolitical influence for China. It could serve to expand Chinese interests, most significantly regarding railway and civil aviation projects. With that said, none of the assorted declarations and conferences resulted in any actual planning of the transportation routes discussed in 2015.

The Chinese government understands full well that responsibility goes hand-in-hand with geopolitical and economic growth on an international scale. An important part of that responsibility is helping other nations, even those that are not of economic interest, to solve conflicts.

Though China sees itself as a great power, it reaches out primarily to countries within its own sphere of direct influence; i.e., eastern Asia and parts of central Asia. However, the Chinese economy is rated second in the world and continues to grow despite negative forecasts. There is a growing expectation among international observers that Beijing should reach out to other nations outside its sphere of influence.

This comports with the image the Chinese want to create of China as a caring nation, one that is aware of the world around it. It is therefore fitting that the Chinese would express a willingness to help resolve the Israel-Arab conflict. It is, after all, a conflict that receives widespread publicity. That publicity could give China many "credit points" at the UN and among the international media.

It is early for anyone to get excited, however. The Chinese have claimed an interest in the Israeli-Palestinian problem before without result, and similar declarations were made about the Syrian conflict with no real change. The Chinese have a strong economic orientation and are not interested in forging deals with little chance of success. And the chance of a successful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian problem, whether mediated by the US or by China, remains small.

China does not have a strong enough military to be a deciding factor in these conflicts. This does not mean the Chinese won't send a representative, or even official representatives, to Jerusalem and Ramallah and possibly even to Gaza. It is quite possible that they will appoint a representative to stay in the area on a regular basis. A peace summit, led by the Chinese president, could also be held. It can be expected to produce impressive photos of the three leaders.

But nothing will come of any of this. The Chinese are growing financially, and they are smart enough to understand where it is – and is not – worthwhile to stick their noses. In addition, they will not want to risk ruining their steadily improving relations with Israel in exchange for a few photos and articles that boost China's reputation as a mediator. To be the powerhouse they want to be, they need Israeli innovation much more than they need those photos.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family