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
council 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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