Chinese-Palestinian Relations: What’s Really Going On?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On December 23, 2017, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi observed that “it’s been seventy years since the UN adopted the decision to create a Palestinian state, but seventy years later, a Palestinian state is yet to be created.” Other Chinese voices in recent years have made similar statements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Why the Chinese preoccupation with this issue? Perhaps because words and gestures allow Beijing to show involvement while avoiding intervention.

On December 23, 2017, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi noted in an interview on China’s main TV channel (CCTV) that “it’s been seventy years since the UN adopted the decision to create a Palestinian state, but seventy years later, a Palestinian state is yet to be created.” His statement was delivered at an Israeli-Palestinian peace symposium that took place in Beijing on December 21-22, and it took its place among similar recent Chinese statements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Relations between Beijing and the Palestinians began in the 1960s and 1970s and consisted primarily of material and conceptual support given by the Chinese government, headed by Mao Zedong, to the PLO. China was also the first non-Arab state to form diplomatic relations with the PLO, which it did in 1965. After Mao’s death and the subsequent drastic change in Chinese public policy led by successor Deng Xiaoping, which included a shift from dealing with politics to attempts to reeducate the Chinese people to build a strong economy, Chinese support for the Palestinian issue was reduced. In parallel, Israel’s importance to China rose for economic reasons, with a particular eye to Israeli innovation and its potential to assist China’s growth.
Despite this, the general Chinese attitude towards the Palestinians and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has remained unchanged, with Beijing continuing to support the Palestinians’ demand for statehood. Chinese involvement in this matter has increased in recent decades, leading the Palestinians to hope Beijing will help them achieve their goal.

Beijing supported Hamas after it won the 2006 parliamentary elections, declining to label it a terrorist organization and referring to it instead as the “chosen representative of the Palestinian people.” That year, the prominent Hamas official Mahmoud Zahar was invited to Beijing. In response, China’s ambassador to Israel was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem, where he was strongly criticized for Beijing’s policy towards Hamas.

On November 29, 2012, to Israel’s dismay, China voted in favor of the 67/19 UNGA resolution giving the Palestinians observer status at the UN. And in April 2017, the Chinese Foreign Minister said, during a meeting with a Palestinian representative: “[the fact that the Palestinians don’t have a state] is unfair, it’s a historic injustice that must come to an end. It can’t continue this way.”

Chinese President Xi Jinping has also made several statements on the subject. During Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit to China in March 2017, Xi told him: “Life in peace, one next to the other [Palestinians and Israelis] will be good for both peoples, as well as for the entire region” and offered a four-stage plan meant to lead to an agreement.

The first stage of the Chinese plan was to promote a two-state solution. The second was to strengthen the idea of security cooperation and ensure Israel’s security while it commits to ceasing building in the settlements. The third and fourth stages included confidence-building steps designed to lead to economic cooperation between both parties that would be followed (so it was hoped) by prosperity throughout the region.

No one disputes Xi’s statement that peace is preferable to war, but there is serious doubt whether his four-stage plan would lead to that outcome. Xi said on another occasion – repeating one of the five basic principles of the Chinese communist party – that it is the parties themselves who must move towards resolving the conflict through direct talks, with Beijing assisting only if both parties request its support. In the current scenario, in which the Palestinians oppose returning to the negotiating table without prior conditions, it is hard to believe the Chinese peace plan – or any other possible solution, for that matter – can be implemented.

US President Donald Trump’s announcement that Washington will move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem has, of course, aroused vociferous reactions
among the Palestinian people and their leadership. PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas announced that the US can no longer be a fair mediator and said he is not willing to cooperate in US-led negotiations. China also declared its opposition to Trump’s declaration, which it believes will only worsen the status quo.

Beijing’s effort to demonstrate its involvement in the region took the form of the December symposium, which was convened by President Xi and included representatives from both sides. The event was led by the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, his deputy, and the Chinese envoy to the Middle East; the Israeli side was represented by MK Yehiel Bar of Israel’s Labor Party (the Knesset’s deputy speaker and chairman of the Israel-China lobby); and the Palestinian side was represented by Nabil Shaath, foreign affairs advisor to Chairman Abbas. The symposium paper calls on both parties to renew negotiations, declare their commitment to the two-state solution, and maintain the status quo in Jerusalem.

Could this paper be the beginning of a new era of Chinese mediation and assistance in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Probably not, despite Beijing’s evident interest and the presence of delegations from both sides. First of all, the delegations weren’t official, meaning they didn’t represent their governments – they were there simply to voice a generic call for peace. Furthermore, as noted, Chinese intervention would require the explicit will of both sides. It is difficult to see why Israel would prefer intervention by the Chinese, who have, after all, been demonstrably pro-Palestinian for many years, over the Americans, who have been fairly consistently pro-Israeli. And in any case, Beijing’s own policy is against intervention. To this day, China has studiously avoided inserting itself into the heart of the conflict.

That being the case, why did Beijing bother convening the symposium, and why does it come out from time to time with statements on the conflict?

China, as one of the world’s two largest economies and a permanent member of the Security Council, has growing influence on the international stage. It has to pay a price for its size and power, and a part of that price is to take responsibility – or at least appear to be taking responsibility – for easing global tensions. There are valid grounds for contending that a Chinese intervention in this long conflict, which some view as impossible to solve, would earn Beijing points on the global stage while easing pressure on China to interfere in other, bloodier conflicts closer to home. The Chinese government can always point out that neither the Americans nor the Europeans have managed to reconcile the parties, so there are no grounds to blame China for failing in the mission.
Viewed in this light, the Chinese preoccupation with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be seen more as an effort to demonstrate involvement than to provide practical intervention.

The bottom line is that any support for the long effort to reach peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians should be blessed. China’s approach – that it is possible to form economic connections between enemies – could possibly be applied in an attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (China does know how to do business simultaneously with bitter foes, for example Iran and Saudi Arabia.) For this to occur, however, Beijing will need to be prepared for a long and deep intervention. Until Beijing demonstrates such a willingness, the parties would be well advised to look to different channels to establish communication between them.

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