



Pompeo's Visit to Israel and the Chinese Connection

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently made a swift visit to Israel—his first trip overseas since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Although Iran and the application of Israeli law over parts of the West Bank were discussed, his priority was to pressure Israel to limit its economic ties to China. Two weeks later, it was announced that Hutchison Whampoa, a Chinese company, had not won the construction tender for a major Israeli desalination plant. Israel has little choice but to accede to American wishes in such matters, but it should not give up its relations with China entirely.

On May 13, 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo landed in Israel for an eight-hour visit. His trip attracted a lot of attention, not only because it was so brief but because it occurred in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, when diplomatic travel has all but ground to a halt.

Why did Pompeo make the trip in the midst of the pandemic? To send a message to Israel about China, with which the US is vying for hegemony. The People's Republic was not Pompeo's only topic for discussion with the Israeli PM— application of Israeli law over parts of the West Bank and Iran were also on the agenda—but his main focus was China.

The clash between China and the US has been rising ever since Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign, during which he [claimed](#) that the Chinese were stealing jobs from the American people. Upon Trump's ascent to the presidency, those tensions increased with the trade war. They have since reached a new high during the global coronavirus crisis, which began in China. Recently, Trump and Pompeo have stepped up their claims that China is responsible for the virus that has paralyzed the US economy and resulted in

[historic levels of unemployment](#) and [more than 100,000 US deaths](#). Trump is trying to paint China as a clear opponent ahead of the November presidential election, which will probably have a lot to do with coronavirus.

The spokesman of the Chinese Embassy in Israel published a harsh [response](#) to Pompeo's visit, rejecting the American attempts to criticize Beijing's conduct, both in the context of coronavirus and in terms of its developing relations with Israel. He claimed that Chinese-Israeli cooperation benefitted both parties and urged China's "Jewish friends" to defeat "the 'political virus'" along with coronavirus and "choose the course of action that best serves their interests".

Israel finds itself trapped between the two giants, each of which has many and varied interests around the globe. While it is understandable that Israel leans closer to its longstanding American ally, it does not wish to dispense with its emerging relationship with China, the world's second-largest economy. The window of opportunity in which Israel can have relationships with both countries without significant interference from either seems to be closing.

[The Phalcon crisis](#) of 1999, during which Israel withdrew from an agreement it had signed with China to sell it an Israeli airborne radar system, offers insight into Israel's current predicament. That crisis undermined China-Israel diplomatic relations for some time, though they eventually resumed and indeed flourished within their limits (i.e., no military relations). The reason for China's moderation of its initial anger was an [Israeli apology and compensation payment](#) that helped it avoid losing face.

Beijing also understood that the deal's cancellation was instigated by the US, not Israel, which in fact lost out by it. Costly though the cancellation was to Israel, it was necessary to preserve the health of Jerusalem's strategic relations with Washington.

Today as in 1999, Israel must accede to American wishes. Sure enough, two weeks after Pompeo's visit, IDE Technologies—an Israeli company—was [announced](#) the winner of the construction tender of a major Israeli desalination plant, not the Chinese company Hutchison Whampoa.

Israel's relations with the US are critical, but they should be maintained in such a way as to minimize damage to its relations with China. This means avoiding situations in which the Chinese lose face. Israel-China relations do not compete with Israel-US relations, but they are nevertheless valuable and advantageous and Israel should not give them up entirely.

Jerusalem should make clear to Washington that Israel is choosing the US, but should also make clear to China that it has no choice but to acquiesce to US demands given Israel's dependence on that country. In addition, Israel should reiterate to Beijing how much it values their relationship and hopes to develop it further. Israel can perhaps offer to establish a quiet channel for US-China dialogue, which could work to all parties' benefit.

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