



## **Swords of Iron: The Response in Asia**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Hamas's surprise attack on October 7 and the Swords of Iron War that followed have implications for the countries of the Indo-Pacific. On the one hand, China has clearly taken an anti-Israeli stance. It has essentially abandoned its neutral position in the region, stood against the United States, and strengthened the China-Russia-Iran-North Korea axis. But India, as well as Japan and South Korea to some extent, have stood by Israel's side. This represents a clear expression of the (mainly security-related) rapprochement that has occurred among India, Japan, and Israel in recent years. It also reflects growing concern about the strengthening anti-Israel axis and raises questions about global stability and the future of Taiwan. Another issue troubling these countries is the potential impact of the war on energy stability.

On October 7, the terrorist organization Hamas conducted a brutal and unprecedented attack against Israeli civilians. The terrorists committed heinous crimes against the civilian population, with an emphasis on children, women, and the elderly. In response, the State of Israel launched the Swords of Iron War against the Hamas terrorist organization in the Gaza Strip.

The countries of the Indo-Pacific have a number of fears arising from the crisis in the Middle East. First, they are apprehensive that the next war (either concurrently with or following the Russia-Ukraine war) is likely to take place in their region, particularly between China and Taiwan. They are also concerned that the Swords of Iron War will have consequences for their energy security. They rely on oil and

gas imports from the Persian Gulf that might be undermined due to instability in the region.

## **China**

China's conduct during the Swords of Iron War has not been neutral. In the past, China has tried to navigate in a somewhat balanced manner between Israel and the Palestinians. But China is Iran's largest trading partner, and earlier this year it played a significant role in mediating between the two major rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Swords of Iron War raises the potential for entanglement between these two adversaries.

Since the outbreak of the war, statements in the Chinese media and by senior government officials have indicated a shift. This was reflected on the ground in a stabbing incident involving an employee of the Israeli embassy in Beijing and an unprecedented antisemitic wave on Chinese social media. Alongside Russia, China vetoed the American proposal at the UN Security Council. China's ambassador to the UN referred to Israel as an "occupying force," demanded an immediate lifting of the siege on Gaza, said the root of the conflict is the "illegal occupation" of Palestinian territories, and made no mention of Hamas at all.

China sees itself as an important neutral mediator for peace in the Middle East, but it is no longer perceived as such by the relevant parties. This is a severe blow to Beijing's diplomatic approach. It aims to strengthen its position in the region and be a meaningful part of shaping the new order, leading to a distancing from the United States that does not create drastic changes in the region. Providing support to extreme Islam could entail possible costs.

In addition, Israel must now recognize that China is not a friend. Countries in the Indo-Pacific expect that Israel's relationship with China, as well as that of other Western countries, will change, strengthening their support in the face of their own serious tensions with China. There is also concern that China might exploit the conflict in Gaza to implement change in the current order concerning Taiwan.

## **India**

One of the most striking condemnations of the events of October 7 came from Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi. He tweeted, "I am deeply shocked by the news of terror attacks in Israel. Our thoughts and prayers are with the innocent

victims and their families. We stand in solidarity with Israel in this difficult hour." The UN General Assembly passed an essentially symbolic resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire without mentioning either Hamas or the events of October 7. The resolution passed with 45 abstentions, including India. This marks a continuation of a trend that began in 2014 with Modi's rise to power. In contrast to his predecessors, Modi significantly elevated the level of relations between India and Israel.

Support for Israel can also be seen as a continuation of India's positioning as a significant player in the Persian Gulf and the entire Middle East. This was particularly evident in the vision announced by Modi and President Biden in September at the G20 summit in Delhi, according to which they aim to connect India to Europe through the Persian Gulf and Israel. The importance India places on the region can be seen in its participation in the I2U2 framework (India, Israel, US, UAE), which strengthens its presence vis-à-vis Israel and the UAE. It should be noted that there is one issue where India remains consistent in its stance: the need for a two-state solution to resolve the conflict.

Another common denominator is the challenge India and Israel share in dealing with severe terrorism committed by extreme Sunni Islamist organizations. This bond facilitates the garnering of support for Israel from India, which has been dealing with the threat of these organizations for many years. It has been necessary to continue monitoring the responses of the Muslim population in India, especially in light of the violence that occurred at the end of October in the state of Kerala, governed by the Congress Party. The upcoming year is an election year in India, and Modi is aiming to preserve stability and avoid exacerbating tensions between Hindus and Muslims against the backdrop of the Swords of Iron War.

## **Japan**

In recent years there has been a trend toward rapprochement between Japan and Israel, particularly in the security domain. In 2022, Israeli Minister of Defense Benny Gantz visited Japan when the countries marked 70 years of diplomatic relations. Japan, like other countries in the Indo-Pacific region, is adjusting its security policy to incorporate lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine war.

For many years, Japan refrained from direct involvement in the Middle East. The current war is prompting it to reconsider this approach. The Japanese are

particularly interested in cooperation with Israel on missile defense (given the threat from North Korea) as well as cyber defense.

At the center of Japan's interest in the Middle East is energy security. Approximately 90% of its energy needs are supplied by regional countries, so there is a strong Japanese interest in preserving stability in the region. Hamas's surprise attack puts a big question mark on this stability. Another Japanese interest during the war is the effectiveness of Iron Dome. Israel's air defense superiority, of which Israel is proud, is a big contributor to Israel's prestige in the Indo-Pacific region.

Diplomatically, Japan initially responded to the war in a neutral manner and criticized Israel's airstrikes in Gaza. Until October 11, Japan did not address Hamas actions at all and did not explicitly acknowledge Israel's right to self-defense. Only in the past two weeks has there been a noticeable shift in this approach: Japan expressed a willingness to convey messages to Iran to prevent escalation and decided to impose sanctions on companies and individuals transferring funds to Hamas. However, it also called on Israel to suspend its attack on Gaza to allow for the entry of humanitarian aid. Unprecedented expressions of support for Israel are taking place in the streets of Tokyo.

Japan is watching and learning regarding the Western response to events. The approach of Russia and China, especially in light of the war in Ukraine; their similar conduct in relation to the Swords of Iron War; and the positioning of North Korea beside them indicate clear axes in the global system that is also shaping the Indo-Pacific.

## **South Korea**

A few days after October 7, South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol condemned the indiscriminate killing of Israeli civilians and soldiers and the abduction of hostages to Gaza. While South Korea did not express a clear stance in favor of Israel, this constituted an official public condemnation of Hamas.

Yeol also initiated an emergency cabinet meeting aimed at examining the effects of the war on South Korea's economy and security. At the meeting, concerns were raised about the impact of the conflict between Israel and Hamas on the regional and global scene.

Another important concern for South Korea is North Korea's involvement. The Israel Defense Forces revealed that North Korea is supplying military technologies to Hamas, and Kim Jong-Un has declared support for the Palestinians and expressed a willingness to send aid to them. All of this clearly places South Korea at odds with the axis in which North Korea actively participates. As the axis countries take more and more anti-Western action, South Korea's and Japan's ability to leverage their own interests and needs is strengthened.

## **Conclusion**

The Swords of Iron War has wide-ranging implications for the Indo-Pacific countries, which are grappling with threats such as radical Islam and the tensions resulting from inter-power competition. While the perceived threats in the Indo-Pacific region include China and North Korea, the overall strategic picture is much more broad and complex.

For these countries, the preservation of energy security is critical, and the situation in the Middle East is posing a threat to that security. In addition, the countries of the Indo-Pacific are concerned by the position of the Iran-Russia-China-North Korea axis regarding the war. While Iran is considered a friend, its alignment with China and North Korea creates tensions with India, Japan and South Korea.

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