
China's Approach to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

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Abstract

The research examines China's engagement model in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with the surge of the Gaza War 2023-2024, posing a key question: how will China choose to engage with this complex geopolitical issue? The decisions made by China could have far-reaching implications for the future of the Middle East. Beijing has sought to balance its political and economic interests in the Middle East region, while also navigating the delicate geopolitical dynamics. On one hand, China has maintained long-standing ties with the Palestinians and has provided diplomatic and economic support. However, it has also sought to preserve its relationship with Israel, a crucial Middle East partner. The research first traces China's interests in the Middle East and its approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to then highlight why China has kept a reactive diplomacy at the core of its moves as the Gaza war raged on, opting for supporting the Palestinian cause, while balancing its relationship with Israel, given the US involvement in the Gaza war. This balancing act has led China to adopt a cautious approach, calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict while employing reactive diplomacy and avoiding direct intervention.

China's position and impact in the region will likely continue to evolve to further drive its interests in the Middle East region, yet, its role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict following the Gaza war will likely remain a subject of debate, as it requires Beijing to focus more on a proactive approach to the conflict instead of a reactive one.

Keywords: China, Palestine, Israel, Regional Stability, Gaza War 2023-2024

Introduction

The Middle East reset amid the Gaza war 2023-2024, has revived the Palestinian question and opened doors for new Middle East dynamics. The recent conflict in Gaza has reignited the long-standing Palestinian issue, prompting a reconfiguration of the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. This shift has created opportunities for new power dynamics and potential realignments within the region. This research analyzes China's evolving engagement model in the long-standing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, particularly in the context of the recent surge of conflict during the Gaza War of 2023-2024. As a rising global power, China has sought to engage cautiously in mediating this intractable geopolitical conflict, which has been a source of instability in the Middle East for decades.

A year after Beijing's landmark and active engagement in Middle East politics, culminating with the Saudi-Iran reconciliation, the region witnessed a surge of events, with the Gaza War 2023-2024 erupting, which brought the United States back into the scene and raised questions about the limits of China's role in the region. Beijing's approach to the conflict has shifted over time, moving from a largely hands-off, non-interventionist stance to a more active diplomatic engagement. In the lead-up to the 2023-2024 Gaza War, China intensified its efforts to bring the two sides; the Palestinians and the Israelis to the negotiating table, leveraging its economic and political influence in the region. However, the outbreak of war in Gaza presented China with a significant challenge, as it sought to balance its longstanding support for the Palestinian cause with its growing strategic and economic ties with Israel. China's response to

the crisis involved a delicate diplomatic balancing act, as it sought to condemn the violence and call for a ceasefire, while also maintaining its relationships with both parties and stressing on the importance of implementing the two-state solution.

The research examines China's approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, particularly in light of the Gaza War 2023-2024, and its potential involvement in Middle East politics. In what way will China engage with the complexity of Middle East dynamics, and how actively will it mediate the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? First, the research explores China's core priorities in the Middle East region. Next, it examines China's approach and involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Third, the research delves into China's stance on the recent Gaza War of 2023-2024, shedding light on the potential for China to play a more substantial role in fostering regional stability.

2- China's primary interests in the Middle East

China cautiously navigates Middle Eastern affairs, avoiding direct involvement in political conflicts or rivalries unless they threaten Chinese national security or economic interests (Laarid 2022: 40-57). Nevertheless, recognizing the potential consequences of a full-blown conflict in the Middle East, particularly in terms of its impact on global energy markets, Beijing strategically positions itself as a mediator, offering a platform for dialogue and compromise. This approach is evident in the Saudi-Iran conflict, in which Beijing successfully facilitated rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran in 2023, easing tensions and reaping the benefits of a more harmonious Saudi-Iran relationship (Torres 2023; Sameer 2023: 1-2).

This strategic approach serves multiple purposes for China. First, by positioning itself as a neutral arbiter in global disputes, China is able to enhance its international standing and reputation. By successfully mediating conflicts, China can demonstrate its diplomatic prowess and cement its status as a major global power. Second, China's role as a mediator provides it with valuable opportunities to expand its sphere of influence. Through its involvement in conflict resolution, China can forge closer ties with various parties, increase its access to critical regions, and strengthen its economic and political leverage (Sameer 2023: 1-2). This, in turn, enables China to advance its long-term strategic objectives, which may include securing resources, securing trade routes, and increasing its geopolitical dominance (Torres 2023: 4-5). Moreover, China's adeptness in conflict mediation serves to counterbalance the influence of other major powers, such as the United States. By positioning itself as an alternative to traditional Western-led mediation efforts, China can challenge the established order and assert its own vision for global governance (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies 2023:5). This strategic positioning allows China to undermine the dominance of its rivals and carve out a more prominent role for itself in international affairs.

The drivers for China's ascendance in the region can be partially attributed to the perpetual cycle of strife that the US was reluctant to resolve in the region, but more important, Beijing's strategic interests in the region. The redirection of US priorities towards the Asia-Pacific region before the Gaza war 2023-2024, has shifted US focus on Middle East issues, ultimately resulting in a power vacuum

that China has taken advantage of and creating an opportunity for China to step in (Torres 2023: 3-4; Sameer 2023: 1). Strategically, a calculated balance between diplomacy and economic pragmatism is witnessed in Beijing's moves, to secure its political and economic interests in the region. China's primary strategic concerns in the Middle East revolve around securing its energy resources, advancing its geostrategic objectives, and bolstering its status as a major global player (Laarid 2022: 2). Therefore, its approach to the Middle East is pragmatic, focusing on maintaining good relations with various countries and parties, regardless of their ideological or political differences (Fulton 2021; Watkins 2019). This allows China to pursue its interests without getting entangled in regional conflicts or power struggles.

Nevertheless, China's reliance on imported energy is a major weakness. If a conflict breaks out in the region, the United States has the ability to deny China access to international trade routes, particularly in the Middle East (Fulton et al. 2019). In connection, the strategic position of the Middle East as a crucial hub for trade routes and sea lanes across Asia, Europe and Africa makes it an essential element of the success of China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI), which aims to make China the central player in global trade networks and creates an economic system outside Washington's control (Fulton et al. 2019; Grant and Kieff, 2021: 262). On one side, the Silk Road Economic Belt, which forms the overland component of this initiative, establishes a railway connection between China and Iran via the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. This railway from Tehran to China significantly reduces the

journey time for cargo trains (Fulton 2021: 214-215). On the other side, the sea route; the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), offers China and the Gulf favorable opportunities by linking the port cities of the Arabian Peninsula to multiple ports in the Indian Ocean, thus, facilitating the integration of business clusters and advancing Chinese commercial interests. Partnerships with UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Palestine align with Beijing's BRI objectives, bolstering intraregional connectivity in key geostrategic areas, and although the land connection to Iran offers an additional gateway to the Gulf, its commercial utility is limited due to Iran's isolation from its neighboring countries, thus, the Gulf offers a strategic opportunity for Beijing (Fulton 2021: 214-215).

In essence, China's strategic hedging is a calculated attempt to enhance its overall power and influence on the global stage. By leveraging its unique capabilities and leveraging its presence in global hotspots, China aims to secure its long-term interests and solidify its status as a leading player in the emerging multipolar world order. This prompted China to offer its services in mediation in a historically US dominated region as the Middle East, particularly as the rivalry between China and the United States has reached its peak (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies 2023: 5). This may explain Beijing's approach, which is focused on maximizing its relative power, weaken US influence in the region over the long-run, while simultaneously increasing its own power share and influence. For China, balancing against US global hegemony is a strategic objective, and a critical balancing domain is the Middle East region.

3- China's Engagement Model in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

The Chinese approach to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict is pragmatic, emphasizing non-interference while maintaining good relations with various parties, regardless of ideological or political differences. This engagement model has been part of Beijing's long sought peaceful yet pragmatic strategy to secure its political and economic interests in the turbulent Middle East region. On one hand, there are several logical principles that underpin China's relationship with the Palestinians and the Israelis (Burton 2021: 373-375). Historically, China has long supported Palestine; its firm position has been strongly supportive of Palestinian national rights and constant criticism of Israel's illegal actions. Traditionally, China has long sought to demonstrate the viability and applicability of the Chinese revolutionary model throughout the third world, and although there are differences, the Palestinian arena has been the closest to the Chinese experience of revolution against imperialism (Harris 1977: 125-126).

On the other hand, traditionally, the fact that Israel belongs to the camp of western capitalist imperialism, made allying with it in the early phases unattainable for China. However, such cognition has changed as China re-adjusted its Middle East policy upon recognizing the importance of maintaining stability in the region, to allow the free flow of energy, which also remains a pillar of US interests (Ran 2015; Pollack and Sachs 2014: 10). Consequently, China managed to adopt a pragmatic attitude in making its policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; it supported Palestine in accordance with anti-imperialist ideology, yet formed relations with Israel in terms of national interest (Ran 2015).

It is therefore significant to highlight that although China's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has generally been consistent with its non-interventionist and practical approach. Yet, this position has evolved over time, undergoing some changes and modifications (Chen 2017). A closer look at these twists and turns can be demonstrated in three pivotal periods: period of close Sino-Palestinian relations; followed by a period of balancing relations between the Palestinians and Israel; and more active participation in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict following the 2011 Arab Spring.

3.1 Close Sino-Palestinian Relations

China has long stood by the Palestinians, tracing its support back to the 1960s when the Palestinian national movement was gaining momentum. This solidarity stemmed from a shared revolutionary spirit and opposition to colonial oppression. Similarly to Palestine and the majority of the Arab world, China has been invaded and attacked by foreign imperialist powers (Cooley 1972: 20). Following the Asian-African Bandung Conference in 1955, which declared its support of Palestinian rights and called for the implementation of the United Nations Resolutions on Palestine (Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference 1955), Israel has been put in an isolated situation in the Asian and African world, and the Chinese government sided with the Arab countries and established diplomatic relations with Egypt, Syria, and Yemen.

Beijing's support to the Arab countries was further enhanced following the tripartite aggression of Israel, Britain and France on Egypt in October 1956, which was condemned by the Chinese government, while relations between China and Israel has entered a pe-

riod of freezing for 20 years (Chen 2017). Subsequently, Sino-Palestinian relations were warm, and China expressed its unreserved support for the struggle of the Palestinian people, agreeing to provide material assistance to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) including diplomatic, economic and military support (Chen 2017). Hence, China became one of the first non-Arab countries to diplomatically recognize the PLO as an independent entity in 1965 (Cooley 1972: 25).

Nevertheless, Chinese support for Palestinian groups, including the PLO, gradually waned after the mid-1970s as a result of China's new openness policy that was determined to shrink hostilities with the West and focus on China's economic growth and development, which subsequently entailed interacting with western countries and Israel (Ran 2015). Essentially, China has not cut off relations with the PLO, just reduced them from a special to a general supportive relationship, while still criticizing Israel (Chen 2017).

3.2 Balancing Relations

Even though it started to balance relations with Israel, China remained committed to the Palestinian cause during this phase, and it supported the adoption of UNSC Resolution 478 (S/RES/478, 1980), condemning Israel's attempted annexation of East Jerusalem, as well as criticizing Israel's 1980 Jerusalem Law, which declared Jerusalem to be Israel's unified capital, in violation of international law (Ran 2015: 13). Moreover, China recognized Palestine as a state in 1988, which led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between both sides, and in the same year, the PLO office in Beijing became the Embassy of the State of Palestine (Ran 2015; Interesse and

Huld 2023). Further to these developments and with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict drifting toward diplomacy, China established an Office to the Palestinian National Authority (PA) in Gaza in 1995, which was relocated in 2004 to Ramallah (Interesse and Huld 2023).

Concurrently, this period saw China and Israel collaborate in commercial and defense-related sectors, forging mutual partnerships across various domains. China needed a partner to develop military technology in the 1980s after the Soviet Union imposed an arm embargo during the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979. As a result, Israeli military industry saw the potential of the Chinese market, and seized the opportunity to form a bilateral military tie with Beijing. Such efforts laid the foundation for future political ties between both sides. China is today one of the largest markets for Israel's extensive military industries and arms manufacturers and Israel is China's second largest arms supplier, following Russia (Ran 2015). Parallel to this, China has also held diplomatic relations with Israel since 1992, and has sought to expand bilateral trade and investment ties in recent years (Interesse and Huld 2023).

With the fall of the Soviet Union, and the Arab world, including the Palestine Liberation Organization committing to the US sponsored Madrid conference and the Oslo process in the 1990s, there was little reason for China not to follow suit (Aluf 2021). Yet, it is also evident that although China has significantly strengthened ties with Israel, it remained reluctant to alter its political attitude towards Tel-Aviv and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which advocated a peaceful resolution to the conflict based on Oslo peace process (Aluf 2021). Research suggests that Beijing and Tel-Aviv have

chosen to cultivate their rapidly expanding economic relationship in a manner that is somewhat isolated from the political tensions existing in other domains (Orion 2019: 118; Catarivas 2019). This approach allowed both sides to concentrate on mutually beneficial commercial and financial opportunities, creating an “economic bubble” that operates largely independent of their broader political landscape (Orion 2019: 118).

In this period, and with the change in China’s global status, from a limited regional presence to a rising global power, China continued to support the Oslo process despite Oslo’s effective redundancy (Burton 2021). Its position has also been influenced by significant changes in the international environment and its status as the world’s second largest economy since 2000, with the Middle East playing a significant role in Chinese economic activity (Burton 2021). However, after years of endless negotiation rounds, throughout the Oslo process that has been maintained by the international community, including China, the process has been effectively redundant since the second Intifada. There has been little progress in resolving the imbalance between an Israeli state that prefers the status quo and a Palestinian movement that desires change (Burton 2021).

3.3 Active participation in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

Amid the Arab Spring in 2011, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been pushed to the sidelines, especially with the stagnating peace talks since 2014. Despite decades of mediation by the United States, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains unresolved. Furthermore, the US pro-Israel and anti-Palestine approach particularly under Donald Trump administration has brought the Palestinian ques-

tion into a more dangerous situation and complicated the regional dynamics (Chen 2017). Even so, Beijing's engagement model in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict showed more consistency than change in emphasizing peace and challenging US unilateral measures. China supported Palestine's status upgrade to non-member observer state at the UN in 2012, which allowed Palestine to file war crime complaints against Israel in the International Criminal Court, despite the largely symbolic nature of the move (Ran 2015).

Nevertheless, Sino-Israel economic and trade relations also developed rapidly following the Arab Spring, especially with the unfolding events in the newly shaped Middle East following the uprisings (Chen 2017; Chaziza 2018). Even so, it appears this relationship has not spread into the political realm; as Beijing refused to declare Hamas a terrorist organization, and it consistently voted against Israel at the UN (Aluf 2021), as a means of urging Israel to comply with the norms of the international community, but to no avail.

Beijing realized it must come up with constructive participation in the stalled peace process, therefore, it took concrete steps to that end, by hosting Palestinian and Israeli leaders to China in May 2013 in attempt to engage more actively in mediating a peaceful settlement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Chen 2017). In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a four-point approach to promote the Palestinian issue, including a two-state solution, sustainable security, and a comprehensive policy for peace through development, considering Palestine and Israel as partners in the "Belt and Road Initiative". Beijing also hosted a dialogue for Palestinian and Israeli peace advocates in December 2017, and reiterated its

support for the Palestinian cause at the 2018 UN General Assembly, calling for action to address the marginalized status of Palestinians and emphasizing the importance of implementing a two-state solution (Chen 2017; Aluf 2021; Statement by H.E. Wang Yi 2018). Furthermore, during China's rotating presidency of the UNSC in May 2021, Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi emphasized the four-point proposal to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, urging restraint and immediate ceasefire, particularly for Israel, following Israeli settlers' raids on Al-Aqsa Mosque and Israeli plans to deport the residents of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem (Kobierski 2021; Aluf 2021).

From Chinese perspective, this plan served as a comprehensive framework for Beijing's endeavors to facilitate a political resolution to the Palestinian issue, instilling a positive reaction from all stakeholders, with the aim of achieving a breakthrough in the settlement of this longstanding conflict (Chen 2017). Hence, Beijing's efforts have been aimed at building a credible image as a mediator in the Middle East, in line with its economic involvement and the relocating of US troops from the region, where a gap may be filled partially by China in the long run (Kobierski 2021).

Nevertheless, although the choices made by China may greatly impact the future of the Middle East, but the relationship between China and Israel is also significantly influenced by the interests of the United States in the region. According to (Chaziza 2018), China's hedging relationship with Israel is confined to economics and technology, and Chinese relations with Israel cannot replace Israel's strategic and special relationship with the US. Therefore, Washing-

ton's dominance in the Middle East region is likely to continue. China-Israel economic relations have been growing, with China investing in high-tech, transportation infrastructure, and key Israeli industries. Israel benefits from foreign and economic independence, while China seeks a hedging relationship to boost its growth (Catarivas 2019). Hence, both sides conduct hedging primarily in the economic-technology sphere, and the future of their relationship depends on US-China relations in the Middle East (Chaziza 2018).

China's engagement model in the Palestinian-Israeli dynamics following the Arab Spring, has shown little willingness to depart from the peaceful model of the two-state solution in the Palestine-Israel conflict, despite the imbalance between Israel and the Palestinians and alongside both domestic and regional changes and developments since 2011 (Burton 2021). Therefore, it is sometimes argued that China adopts a negative peace in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, especially that it has not offered an alternative to the dialogue which it hosted in December 2017, and is therefore unlikely to be a significant player in resolving the conflict (Burton 2021). Further to this argument, China's almost nonexistent military presence in the region, according to some analysts, would make it difficult for it to seriously enforce the peace it seeks to establish, while others argue that China is merely trying to appear responsible rather than actually being on the ground (Aluf 2021). Eventually, while Chinese policy in the Middle East has long been premised on being friendly to everyone (Aluf 2021), the complicated Palestinian-Israeli conflict with the surge of Gaza War 2023-2024, shows just how challenging it may be for Beijing to maintain that goal.

4- China's Perspective on the Gaza War 2023-2024: towards a pivotal role?

Since the outbreak of the Gaza war, China has been attempting to leverage its credibility through multilateral engagement, urging partners to uphold international accountability measures through the United Nations Security Council and international courts, without significantly compromising its non-interference principles (Abdel Ghafar et al. 2024).

It is thereof logical to clarify that China's non-interference policy does not imply a lack of involvement in Gaza war. While Beijing has not directly intervened in the internal affairs of either side, it remained engaged in the war dynamics, finding mutually beneficial solutions mostly through diplomatic channels (Rumley and Redlich 2024). Since October 7, 2023, Beijing's unease over the war in Gaza can be witnessed throughout a number of measures. On a humanitarian level, the Chinese government dedicated substantial financial resources to support the provision of essential goods, such as food, medicine, and shelter, to the civilian population caught in the cross-fire (China International Development Cooperation Agency 2024 a). While the Chinese government has responded with compassion, providing essential humanitarian relief and food supplies through various aid efforts aimed at alleviating the challenges faced by the Gaza community (UNRWA 2024; China International Development Cooperation Agency 2024 a; China International Development Cooperation Agency 2024 b), China's financial contribution, despite being the second-largest economy, remains relatively modest. (Table 1) depicts notable aid provided by Beijing to the people

of Gaza through the Palestinian government and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) from October 2023 to August 2024.

Beyond the immediate crisis, China also sought to address the root-cause of the conflict by advocating for a comprehensive and sustainable solution, through international forums, pushing for the resumption of the peace process and the establishment of a durable ceasefire (Rumley and Redlich 2024). For instance, upon assuming the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council for November 2023, China paid particular attention to the situation in Gaza, calling on the Security Council to fulfill its responsibilities under the UN Charter, demonstrate its commitment, ease tensions, and support diplomacy (Zhang 2023). Hence, China called for an immediate ceasefire and urged all parties to exercise restraint while emphasizing the importance of finding a peaceful resolution through diplomatic means.

Beijing has repeatedly stressed the underlying reasons for the conflict and the importance of resolving it through diplomatic means, especially as the war in Gaza continued. In March 2024, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi explained that the tragedy in Gaza should be a wake-up call for the world, as the long-standing occupation of Palestinian territories can no longer be overlooked, and that Palestinians' long-cherished dream of independence cannot be denied any longer. Hence again, amid Gaza war, China clearly positioned itself in support of Palestine; calling for Palestine's full membership in the UN and working out a timetable and road map for the two-state solution (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Repub-

lic of China 2024). Furthermore, China, as the rotating president of the UN Security Council for April 2024, has reiterated the call for an immediate ceasefire and a return to dialogue to resolve the ongoing conflict and urging the international community to work together to find a peaceful solution that addresses the root causes of the conflict.

Such measures, in addition to the meeting held in Beijing in April 2024, to bridge the gap between the two major Palestinian groups Fatah and Hamas and another one that took place in July 2024 and concluded with Palestinian unity declaration, reflect China's longstanding position of supporting a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its desire to play a constructive role in promoting regional stability and peace (Jerusalem Post 2024; Shepherd et al. 2024; Ragson and Wang 2024).

A careful assessment of China's approach however, indicates that Beijing's perspective on the war has remained largely unchanged, echoing its previous stances about Gaza expressed during former Palestinian-Israeli war rounds in 2008, 2014, and 2021. Consistently, China has advocated for a cessation of hostilities and a negotiated settlement to resolve the situation (Colville 2023).

It is true that Beijing's tone on Gaza war 2023-2024 has witnessed a more determined stance in the rhetoric surrounding the war. Alongside the typical demands for a ceasefire, a return to the negotiation table, and the realization of the two-state plan, Beijing has taken a more forthright stance in condemning Israel's reaction to the Hamas attack on October 7 (Rumley and Redlich 2024). Chi-

nese leaders have been making regular statements and carrying out activities on the Hamas-Israel war, which reflected the growing importance of settling the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to Beijing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples Republic of China, October 2023; November 2023 a; November 2023 b; November 2023 c; February 2024; May 2024; June 2024; July 2024). Although these high-level statements and activities reflect Beijing’s desire to play a significant part in addressing the ongoing conflict (Rumley and Redlich 2024). However, the key question is whether its efforts will be truly effective. A significant challenge for China is its ability to carefully navigate the sensitive geopolitical environment to solidify its status as a crucial participant in any resolution.

(Table 2) depicts China’s most notable activities and diplomacy technique throughout 10 months since the outbreak of Gaza war in October 2023 until July 2024, which indicates that Beijing has relied mostly on reactive engagement with structured dialogue at some intervals. It is considerable to highlight that the table does not track all the activities carried out by Beijing since the outbreak of the war chronologically, it rather demonstrates China’s most notable activities and diplomacy techniques during the research period.

Table 1 Notable Chinese humanitarian aid provided to Gaza from October 2023 to August 2024. Source: Author’s illustration according to data from (Rumley & Redlich 2024; China International Development Cooperation Agency 2024a, 2024b; UNRWA 2024; Office of the people’s republic of China to the state of Palestine 2023a, 2023b)

Date	Aid	Destination
October 26, 2023	Food supplies, medicine, \$2 million in emergency humanitarian cash assistance	The Palestinian National Authority and the UNRWA
November 29, 2023	Food supplies, medical supplies through the Egyptian Red Crescent Society	The Palestinian National Authority
November 29, 2023	\$1 million provision in cash assistance	UNRWA
December 5, 2023	\$1 million provision in cash assistance	The Palestinian National Authority
March 28-April, 2024	Food supplies, medical supplies through the Egyptian Red Crescent Society	The Palestinian National Authority
August 2, 2024	US\$ 3 million donation to support health services and emergency humanitarian food assistance in Gaza	UNRWA

4.1- Prospects for a broader Chinese role in promoting regional stability

While some arguments advocate that China's stance on the conflict is more associated with inertia than with activism, with little indication of significant changes unless China takes more substantial action beyond just diplomatic or rhetorical support (Burton 2021), however, the current trends in the conflict may still provide China with an opportunity to provide more substance to its words and diplomatic efforts.

China may need to reconsider its stance on the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis as the crisis in Gaza could have significant

ramifications for regional stability and Chinese interests. Additionally, the economic impact of the conflict may be more extensive than currently perceived, and if Beijing is willing to challenge its traditional neutrality and step up its position, this could benefit China's standing among those looking for alternatives to Western powers like the US and Europe (Abdel Ghafar et al. 2024; Yousef 2024). Gaza war has been largely dictated by Israel and its Western allies, who have largely supported Netanyahu's war aims, and their biased support for Israel has inflamed tensions and hindered conflict resolution efforts (Youssef et al. 2024).

Although Beijing tried to leverage its nuanced approach, yet its diplomacy has mostly remained reactive than proactive, and despite that it has been more direct in criticizing Israel's response to Hamas October 7 attack, nevertheless, it refrained from acting proactively to take concrete punitive measures against Israel as a pressure card to stop its continued genocide in Gaza, and resorted more to usual condemnation rhetoric (see Table 2). For instance, in its diplomacy technique throughout October 2023 to July 2024, China resorted to reactive engagement, focusing mostly on condemning Israeli actions that harm innocent Palestinian civilians, calling for an early ceasefire, ending violence, and resuming peace talks on the basis of the two-state. Even as Israel escalated its atrocities through ground invasion of Rafah and expanded mass killings against the Palestinians, Beijing continued its reactive rhetoric, calling for Israel to fulfill its international obligations, stop its military operations, and ensure that the lives of Palestinians and Israelis are equally important, while also stressing the right of all countries to self-defense (see

Table 2). Hence, it seems that China has been trying to keep good relations with both Israel and Palestine, which makes the Hamas-Israel war a highly unfavorable situation for China, making it challenging for Beijing to have much influence (Colville 2023).

In fact, China's influence can go beyond just criticizing rhetoric and offering decent humanitarian aid. It can either collectively impose punitive actions against Israel with its partners, or unilaterally escalate punitive measures against Israel, possibly going as far as severing ties. For instance, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Israel to halt operations in Rafah on May 24, 2024, following a previous ruling requiring Israel to take measures to avoid genocide in Gaza, and China intervened in the ICJ case, opposing Israel's perpetuated military occupation of Palestine (Van den Berg and Deutsch 2024). Therefore, if China were to pressure its Global South partners to enforce a court decision against Israel, it could showcase China's dedication to international laws and norms, and this could establish China as a peacemaker, granting it leverage over Israel, potentially altering the costly status quo in Palestine. In turn, the US, protective of Israel, could lose influence internationally, prompting it to be more inclusive in negotiations (Lu 2024). The problem with this perspective however, is that China may be reluctant to aggressively confront the United States over the issue of Israel, given Washington's strong support and protection of Israel, including threats of sanctions against Judicial authorities (Abdel Ghafar et al. 2024). This close relationship has led the US to vehemently support Israel militarily and diplomatically, including threats of sanctions against the International Criminal Court

if it attempts to investigate war crimes committed by Israeli forces against the Palestinian people (Lu 2024).

China's reluctance to aggressively confront the United States over Israel is likely driven by its desire to avoid a potential diplomatic or economic backlash from the US, which could undermine China's own strategic interests in the Middle East region and globally (Leonard 2024). Therefore, Beijing has been cautious in its criticism of Israel, as it does not want to be perceived as jeopardizing its own relationships with key players in the region (Aboudouh 2023). Nevertheless, China needs to consider proactive engagement and proximate diplomacy in addressing the Palestinian issue. The essence of such proactive engagement is preparedness to take initiative and independent action, which in turn could contribute to alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people and would demonstrate Beijing's commitment to regional stability (Collins and Packer 2006: 17-18). Simultaneously, Beijing should assume a more proactive role in proximate diplomacy with Israel amid the current crisis. This may involve forceful negotiation tactics, including a readiness to threaten severe punitive measures against any non-compliance (Collins and Packer 2006: 17-18).

Some analysis suggest that the growing divide between Washington and the Global South is playing out in Beijing's favor (Lu 2024), however, China's influence in the region remains limited compared to the United States, which continues to wield significant political, economic, and military leverage over the dynamics in the Middle East region (Leonard 2024). Eventually, a stable Middle East is critical to realize China's ambitious mega-infrastructure campaign, and

to prove throughout tangible measures Beijing's long-held conviction that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the root cause of the region's woes (Aluf 2021). Therefore, the ball remains in China's court, which must decide whether it genuinely wants to step-up its approach toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict following the Gaza war.

5- Conclusion

China's pursuit in maximizing power and influence in the Middle East region, takes into consideration the limits of peaceful rise, which adheres to non-interventionist engagement (Bolt and Gray 2007: 1). While embarking on a project that aims to expand its reach into untapped markets in the Middle East, which holds immense strategic value for China (Laarid 2022: 53), Beijing has aimed to strike a balance between its political and economic interests in the Middle East region. China has upheld its longstanding ties with the Palestinians, offering diplomatic and economic assistance. Yet, it has also sought to preserve its relationship with Israel, a vital ally in the region. This delicate balancing act has led China to adopt a nuanced approach, advocating for a peaceful resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict while refraining from direct intervention. With the unfolding of the Gaza war, China's influence and role in the region has become more in question.

Beijing's involvement in the Gaza war 2023-2024 has been a complex and multi-faceted issue. As the war raged on, China has seized the opportunity to support diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, by pushing for ceasefire resolutions at the UN Security Council. This also included high-profile visits to the Middle East, and reconciliation talks with Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas. However,

despite its interest in greater engagement and mediation, China's efforts have remained relatively modest, reflecting its long-standing approach characterized by non-interventionism, and caution towards the region's conflicts. China has taken mostly a reactive approach toward the crisis in the Middle East. While it has criticized Israel and the United States, its engagement model remained mostly limited, as it refrained from directly challenging the US on Israel, mindful of the potential consequences of such a confrontation (Aboudouh 2023).

The need for China to play a more assertive role is emphasized due to the United States' biased support for Israel and its failure to achieve a political resolution for Palestinian statehood. China's potential as a mediator is hindered by its commitment to non-interference and reluctance to confront the US over Israel, which limits its ability to influence the parties and provide security guarantees. Despite this, Gaza war offers China the opportunity to stabilize a region it heavily invests in. Beijing for instance may take collective and independent initiatives to alleviate Palestinian suffering and may adopt a more assertive proximate role with Israel, employing forceful tactics, including the threat of punitive measures to ensure compliance. Gaza war offers the opportunity for China to adopt a more assertive stance to expand its role and safeguard its interests in the region, potentially participating in future dynamics and negotiations, and contributing to post-war Gaza's reconstruction.

Table 2 China's notable activity and diplomacy technique on Gaza from October 2023 to July 2024. Source: Author's illustration according to data from (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples

Republic of China, October 2023; November 2023 a; November 2023 b; November 2023 c; February 2024; May 2024; June 2024; July 2024; Collins & Packer, 2006; Rumley & Redlich, 2024)

Date	Activity	Diplomacy Technique	Purpose
October 12, 2023	China's Special Envoy calls Israel's foreign ministry	Reactive engagement	Condemn actions that harm civilians, and call for an immediate ceasefire.
October 13, 2023	Statement by UN Ambassador at foreign ministry press conference	Reactive engagement	Stress the importance of restoring to the two-state solution, and establishing an independent Palestinian State.
October 14, 2023	Foreign minister phone call with Saudi foreign minister	Reactive engagement	Criticize Israel's actions and calling on Israel to heed the demands of the international community.
October 18, 2023	China UN ambassador statement at UNSC emergency briefing	Reactive engagement	Urge Israel to fulfill its obligations under international humanitarian law and stop the airstrikes around the Rafah crossing.
October 22, 2023	China's Middle East special envoy attend Cairo summit on the Palestinian Question	Reactive engagement	Work for a comprehensive and lasting solution to the Palestinian question.

Date	Activity	Diplomacy Technique	Purpose
November 20, 2023	Foreign Minister and Vice President hold talks with the Arab-Islamic foreign ministers in Beijing	Reactive engagement, Structured dialogue	Call for implementing relevant UN resolutions, implementing the two-state solution and convening of an international peace conference.
October 23, 2024	Foreign minister speaks with Israeli foreign minister	Reactive engagement	Emphasize all countries have the right to self-defense, and they should respect international humanitarian law.
November 9, 2023	Special Envoy attends humanitarian conference for Gaza	Reactive engagement	Emphasize that the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis hold equal value.
February 13, 2024	Remarks at foreign ministry press conference	Reactive engagement	Urge Israel to halt its military actions, prevent civilian harm, and avert a worsening humanitarian crisis in Rafah.
February 22, 2024	China addresses the International Court of Justice regarding an advisory opinion on Palestine	Reactive engagement	Elaborate on China's propositions on nation's self-determination rights and Israel's long-standing oppression of the Palestinians.

Date	Activity	Diplomacy Technique	Purpose
March 1, 2024	Remarks at foreign ministry press conference	Reactive engagement	Call on Israel to immediately cease hostilities, protect civilians, and ensure access for humanitarian aid.
May 10, 2024	Remarks at foreign ministry press conference	Reactive engagement	Condemn Israel's attacks on the Jordanian humanitarian aid convoys.
May 28, 2024	Vice Foreign Minister meets in China with the Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations	Reactive engagement, Structured dialogue	Promote China-Palestine strategic partnership, implement relevant Security Council resolutions, and support Palestine's accession to full membership in the United Nations.
June 11, 2024	Chinese ambassador attends international conference in Amman on Gaza humanitarian crisis	Reactive engagement, Structured dialogue	Promote a constructive role in alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian question.
July 23, 2024	Beijing hosts Palestinian factions' reconciliation talks and witnesses signing Beijing Declaration	Structured dialogue, Proactive engagement	Mediate Palestinian factions' declaration on ending division and strengthening Palestinian national unity.

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