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## China: Mastermind of Middle East Turmoil

by Gordon G. Chang | September 2024

On July 23, 14 Palestinian factions, including arch rivals Hamas and Fatah, signed the Beijing Declaration, a unity pact, in the Chinese capital. China's *Global Times*, the Communist Party's semi-official tabloid, termed the deal an "epoch-making event."<sup>1</sup>

In July, Xi Jinping appeared to be driving events in the Middle East. Yet in the following weeks, tumultuous developments resulted in one setback after another for Chinese diplomacy in the increasingly troubled region.

Beijing's approach to the Middle East this decade has quickly evolved and matured. Not long ago, Chinese policymakers had maintained a "balancing act," as Afshin Molavi, senior fellow of the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, characterized it in comments to me.<sup>2</sup> Beijing was nurturing relationships with all sides, steering clear of the region's multiple—and seemingly intractable—conflicts.

Beijing during this period gained influence with skillful maneuvers but was little more than a bystander. Chinese diplomats, for instance, remained on the sidelines as the Trump administration reshaped the region with the four Abraham Accords, historic agreements with two Gulf states, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, and two in North Africa, Sudan and Morocco. Peace with Israel, thanks to Washington, was possible.

China responded by changing its general approach and becoming more assertive. The result was two landmark deals it brokered, one in March of last year between Riyadh and Tehran and the other this July among the Palestinians.

The Saudi-Iran deal led the pair to reestablish diplomatic relations, but the agreement has yet to bring about the reconciliation that many had hoped for.<sup>3</sup> The Palestinian pact, on the other hand, looks like it is failing in important respects, at least from Beijing's perspective.

China, according to the *Jerusalem Post*'s Seth Frantzman, was part of a group of countries hoping to make Hamas the undisputed leader of the Palestinian movement.<sup>4</sup> The Beijing Declaration was an integral part of that plan.

That plan, however, is now in ruins. On July 31, a bomb planted in a Hamas guest house in Tehran killed Ismail Haniyeh, the terrorist group's political leader. "Haniyeh was being groomed to be the man who would take over the Palestinian Authority in the coming years," writes Frantzman. "October 7 was designed to catapult Hamas from its isolation in Gaza to controlling Ramallah and the West Bank, uniting the Palestinian fronts."<sup>5</sup>

Hamas quickly replaced Haniyeh with the even more militant Yahya Sinwar, the group's chief inside Gaza, but Israel's ferocious campaign there has decimated Hamas's hold over the strip as desperation grows.<sup>6</sup> There is little evidence that Hamas has been able to reconstitute itself during ceasefire talks.

Unfortunately for Beijing, the October 7 war has not gone well for the Palestinians. Or for China. China abandoned its balancing role and came down firmly on Iran's side, severely undermining ties to Israel. Beijing backed what looks like the loser.

China, however, can still count its support of the Palestinians as a consolation prize for two primary reasons. First, that support enhances its role as a defender of what it calls the "Global South." "For Beijing, this is about narrative," argue Gedaliah Afterman and Allie Weinberger of Israel's Reichman University. "This move serves as a strategic, low-cost method for China to enhance its regional influence and present itself as a counterbalance to the United States."<sup>7</sup>

Second, Beijing, despite its talk of driving world events, still views the world in U.S.-centric terms. "The Israel-

Gaza war will reduce the global political influence of the United States," Tsinghua University's Yan Xuetong told Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* in July. "As the U.S.'s strategic relations with other major powers will be undermined, the strategic balance between China and the U.S. will become less favorable to the U.S."<sup>8</sup>

Afterman and Weinberger put it this way: "With tensions between the United States and China growing, Beijing has leveraged the war in Gaza to challenge the United States in the region and the developing world more broadly."<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately for Beijing, the Gaza war has brought the United States back into the Middle East. For years, Washington had been trying to extricate itself from the region, in part because the U.S. didn't need to stay. America, as it is now called, is the "new Saudi Arabia," pumping more crude oil than any other country in history for six years in a row.<sup>10</sup> Also, no country now produces more natural gas. China, with the U.S. focused elsewhere, tried to fill what it perceived to be a vacuum. One of its vacuum-filling tactics was the October 7 war. Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthi militia are clearly Iran's proxies. Iranians think they are no one's proxy, but China certainly views them that way.

Whether it is China's proxy or not, Iran could not have gone to war against Israel without Beijing, which both before and after October 7 has provided almost everything but troops.

Most important, Beijing has thrown Iran a direct economic lifeline. Last year, Iran's crude oil exports reached a five-year high, in large part because of strong Chinese demand. According to Kpler, a European research firm, China took about 90% of Iran's exports of crude last year.<sup>11</sup>

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Beijing also provides diplomatic cover. Propaganda support is also evident: Some 96.5% of the videos on Hamas carried on Chinese-owned TikTok support the terrorist group.<sup>12</sup>

China's Communist Party uses that platform's sophisticated curation algorithm to amplify favored geopolitical narratives.

Furthermore, China has for years been supplying arms. "The proof of Iran's status as a Beijing proxy is the continual flow of both Chinese weapons to Iran and Chinese components for Iran's own arms," Jonathan Bass of Argent LNG, an energy firm, told me. "Everybody in the region knows this."

Bass, who since October 7 has spoken to senior leaders of Arab League states and four of the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, says the region is now especially concerned about the continuing flood of Chinese weapons into the hands of the Iran-backed militants.<sup>13</sup>

Beijing always calls itself a "peacemaker,"<sup>14</sup> but that is not an appropriate term for an arsonist. China has set the Middle East on fire, something especially evident after the killing of Haniyeh, the Hamas leader.

Wang Yi on August 11 told Iran's acting foreign minister that Beijing supported the Islamic Republic defending its "sovereignty, security, and national dignity." Wang, China's foreign minister, said that the killing of Haniyeh in Tehran violated Iran's sovereignty and threatened regional stability.<sup>15</sup>

Countries around the world were then pressuring Tehran to not strike Israel—Iran blames the Jewish state for the bomb that killed the Hamas leader—but China was, in effect, publicly goading Iran to act. It is hard to understand the Chinese motive. Perhaps Beijing believed that its friend Iran was losing the war and had to change the trend of events.

More fundamentally, Wang's comments should be viewed in the context of Xi Jinping's overall approach to the world. China's bold leader, apparently taking a page out of Mao Zedong's "peasant movement" playbook, is a disrupter. "Great chaos under Heaven

achieves great order under Heaven," wrote Mao in 1966 in a letter to his wife, Jiang Qing.<sup>16</sup> "Great order" was code for worldwide Chinese rule. Xi seeks to take down the current international order, so the destruction of societies, such as Israel's, is an intermediary step to China's complete control of humanity. Iran is a master of creating the chaos that Xi believes serves his purpose.

The irony is that China's fomenting of chaos—the October 7 war, for instance—has, as mentioned, brought the U.S. back into the region, something especially evident from the increasing presence of the U.S. Navy. As a result, China, once again, is watching the Middle East from the sidelines. As Bass told me in August, "leaders in the region believe that only Washington can end the Gaza war because Beijing, for all its new-found power, is not capable of bringing the parties together." "The Chinese," he says, "have burned all their bridges to Israel."<sup>17</sup>

China has burned no bridges with Tehran, but its relations with the Islamic State are not always stable. "Indeed, Iran's new president has already been pressuring the People's Republic of China to fulfill its commitments to the Iran-PRC accord, which committed Beijing to investing up to \$400 billion in Iran and its oil industry, little or none of which has actually arrived in Iran," Gregory Copley, president of the International Strategic Studies Association, told me in August.

Also, Russia and China vie for influence there, Copley, also editor-in-chief of *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, points out. China and Russia, for example, sponsor competing transportation projects that run through the Islamic Republic. Iran is a crucial piece of Moscow's North-South Transport Corridor, which undermines Beijing's east-west Belt and Road Initiative. Russia's route, which begins in St. Petersburg on the Baltic, passes through Bandar Abbas, the Iranian port near the Arabian Sea.

"Iran, in reality, is not even close to being a Beijing proxy," Copley said.<sup>18</sup>

Even if Copley is right on this score, China's position in the Middle East depends on Iran. When Iran succeeds, so does China. When Iran fails, China fails. At the moment, both Iran and China are failing in the Middle East.

# Endnotes

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- 18 Gregory Copley, e-mail message to author, August 1, 2024.

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