China and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

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La Chine peut-elle faire la différence dans le conflit israélo-palestinien? Pour répondre à cela, l'article se réfère à deux formes principales de paix selon les travaux de Galtung : la paix négative (c’est-à-dire l’absence ou l’élimination de la violence) et la paix positive (c’est-à-dire la résolution des causes d’un conflit). Un certain nombre d’éléments nous permettent d’évaluer ce rôle : la présence croissante de la Chine dans la région, son souci de la stabilité et de l’ordre régionaux ; ses intérêts commerciaux croissants et approfondis avec les parties au conflit, son engagement dans le processus d’Oslo, ses contributions au dialogue entre les deux parties, et son manque d’engagement avec la dynamique locale en cours dans les sociétés politiques et civiles israéliennes et palestiniennes. Au final, ces facteurs, conjugués aux évolutions récentes, laissent penser que la Chine envisage un scénario de paix négative et qu’il est donc peu probable qu’elle joue un rôle important dans la résolution du conflit.

Can China make a difference to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? To address this, the article identifies two main forms of peace: negative (i.e. the absence/removal of violence) and positive (i.e. resolution of a conflict’s
causes). China’s position in relation to these peace models and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are then considered. Attention is drawn to: China’s rising regional presence and concern with regional stability and order; its growing and deepening commercial interests with the conflict parties; its commitment to the Oslo process; its contributions towards dialogue between the two sides; and its lack of engagement with the local dynamics taking place in Israeli and Palestinian politics and civil societies. These factors alongside recent developments suggest that on balance point China envisages a negative peace scenario and so is therefore unlikely to be a significant player in resolving the conflict.

The past two decades have coincided with China’s growing regional and global economic and political influence. Additionally, since 2013 the Xi Jinping government has promoted a massive infrastructure and development program – the Belt and Road Initiative – across Eurasia, Africa and Europe and using Chinese finance and firms. To support the BRI in the Middle East, President Xi announced $23bn towards development and humanitarian assistance during the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in Beijing in July 2018, of which $15m would be allocated to the Palestinians. Alongside, Beijing seeks to engage non-Arab partners like Israel - a high value and high-tech economy. Can China translate this economic influence into politics and help overcome and resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?

To consider this, the article is structured in the following manner. The first section looks at what it means to make a difference in relation to a conflict and distinguishes between positive or negative peace. The second section then sets out China’s past relations with Israel and the Palestinians. This provides context for the third and fourth sections, which consider the arguments for and against China making a difference. The concluding part states that China is unlikely to offer an alternative approach, owing to a lack of political will to leverage what influence it has over Israel, preparedness to concede to US President Trump’s so-called “Deal of the Century” and the Palestinian failure (so far) to internationalize the conflict.
In essence, the main argument made here is that China is unlikely to take a more high-profile and proactive role, or to invest in the time, effort and resources necessary to deliver a positive peace. In part this may be a calculation that non-involvement is better than trying and failing and thereby damaging China’s self-image and presentation of its growing global power to the rest of the international community. China’s prioritization of economic concerns over political ones means that the separation between the two in relation to the conflict will widen. This will enhance Israel’s position as the stronger party and discourage further any pressure from or on China to adjust its stance or accommodate Palestinian demands.

**Making a difference in conflict: negative and positive peace**

The causes of violent conflict range from individual to collective grievances and can be either direct (e.g. based on immediate needs) or indirect (e.g. structural economic factors that result in exploitation of one group over another). Third parties can intervene in conflicts, whether out of altruism or self-interest. They can use diplomacy and mediation or more coercive actions like imposing sanctions or peacekeeping. These activities can lead to what the renowned critical peace studies scholar, John Galtung, distinguishes as either negative and positive peace. The former involves curbing or containing violence already taking place. However, negative peace is limited: it does not remove the reasons why conflict started. For that, positive peace is needed. Positive peace seeks to resolve the root causes of conflict and realize reconciliation in society. Third parties may play a greater role and invest in security sector provision, development projects for marginalized and discriminated groups and support transitional justice measures.

For the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Oslo accords and their associated peace process has been the main framework since 1993. They sought to establish negative peace on which a more positive peacebuilding development would occur. Israel’s Prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s (PLO) chairman Yasser Arafat signed the Declaration of Principles (DOP) which provided the basis for bilateral negotiations between the two sides. The US was to mediate the talks which would help build confidence and trust, eventually leading to a full and final settlement, including final borders and the status of refugees and Jerusalem.
On the surface Oslo portrayed Israel and the Palestinians as equals. But in reality it masked a power imbalance between a strong Israeli state and the non-state Palestinian nationalist movement. Moreover, the hoped-for positive peace did not follow on from the negative peace which had been established with the DOP. Some critics were prescient even at this early stage: the prominent Palestinian scholar, Edward Said, called it “a Palestinian Versailles” in which the Palestinian leadership made concessions and Israel made none. The Palestinian recognition of Israel’s right to exist was not reciprocated; at most, Israel recognized the PLO as a legitimate movement representing and defending Palestinians’ rights. Khalil Shikaki at the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, also noted that the agreement did not prevent Israel from making changes on the ground during the transition process, thereby undermining the prospects for Palestinian self-rule. Alongside, significant veto players, such as the Israeli religious and settler movements and the Islamist Hamas party, slowed down progress while the US failed to act as an honest broker, aligning with Israeli security concerns over the Palestinians.

After Oslo’s failure to deliver a settlement within the five-year timeframe and the Second Intifada in 2000-05, it is largely a shell, but one that the international community, including China, has continued to endorse. Rhetorically, Israel’s government also maintains support for the process while showing little interest in substantive discussions. This reflects Israel’s advantage with the status quo, even as the Palestinian leadership and people chafe against their situation. With Oslo’s promise of a two-state solution diminishing, the PLO leadership has tried to internationalize the conflict, while in civil society a more grassroots, bottom-up approach emerged in the form of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The BDS was formed after the Second Intifada in 2005 by 170 formal organisations and individuals. It defends Palestinian rights and demands and end to Israel’s occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, an end to discrimination against Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel and their equal treatment, and the right of Palestinian refugees to return. It works transnationally, seeking solidarity and cooperation from groups and movements abroad to put pressure on Israel to deliver these goals.
China’s relationship with Israel and the Palestinians

Despite Oslo’s effective redundancy, China continues to support the process. This contrasts with its previous relationships with Israel and the Palestinians. Broadly, China’s interactions with the conflict parties can be summarized in three parts. The first lasted between the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the change of leadership from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping in the mid-1970s. The second took place during the 1980s and resulted in greater balance in relations between the two (at least in Chinese eyes). The third began with the Oslo process and has continued into the present. This last period is also important because it also overlaps with the change in China’s global status, from a limited regional presence to a rising global power.

During the first period China was cool towards Israel and warm towards the Palestinians. China was interested in cultivating the Arab world, whose leaderships were strongly opposed to Israel’s existence. Despite this, Israel tried to establish ties with China in 1950, but it was rebuffed, partly because of Chinese disinterest, but also because of its focus on the Korean war in 1950-53.7

From the mid-1950s China sought a greater leadership role in the global South. It participated in the non-aligned movement’s Bandung Conference in 1955 and adopted its pro-Palestinian stance. It engaged emerging Arab nationalist and anti-colonial leaderships, including Gamal Nasser in Egypt, the Baathists in Iraq and Syria, and the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria. The PLO fit in this framework, especially following Fatah’s takeover of the movement in 1969. During these years China provided financial and military assistance to the PLO in its struggle.8

In the second period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, China’s relationship with Israel began to thaw and led to diplomatic relations in 1992 (which was motivated in part by China’s interest in participating in the Arab-Israeli peace process after the first Gulf War in 1991). By contrast, the Sino-Palestinian relationship cooled.

Under Mao, China’s foreign policy had been ideological and revolutionary. Following his death, Deng opted for a more pragmatic approach. He prioritized the country’s economic development and put foreign policy at its service. This eventually led to trade with Israel for its solar power and agricultural technology. But that interaction began earlier in a clandestine arms trade from the late 1970s. China needed
to upgrade its military equipment, much of which was Soviet-made. But its relations with Moscow at the time were poor. Israel served as a third-party supplier, as it had acquired Soviet-made equipment from the battlefield, following wars with its Egyptian and Syrian allies in 1967 and 1973.

Publicly, China and the PLO portrayed their relationship in a positive light. But underneath differences were emerging. On one side, China was moving away from its support for the Palestinian armed struggle and towards a negotiated settlement. It prioritized regional stability at the expense of resolving the Palestinians’ plight, which was reflected in its support for the Camp David peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1978. China welcomed the development as it weakened its Soviet rival, especially as Egypt moved from the Soviet orbit into the US one. On the other side, the Palestinians prioritized their ties with Moscow. Although good relations with China were welcome, they did not offer the same level of diplomatic and material assistance as that offered by the Soviets, themselves a super power at the time.

In the third period, from the early 1990s until today, China has sought good relations with both sides. It has maintained support for a negotiated settlement, despite the fact that there is a significant power disparity between the two. China’s position has also coincided with significant change both in the international environment and its own status within it. Compared to the earlier periods, China has become a rising power and the world’s second largest economy since 2000. The Middle East is an important source of Chinese economic activity: in 2000, China exported $7.7bn to the Middle East and North Africa and imported $10.2bn. By 2017 these figures had increased to $124.5bn and $114.9bn respectively. Much of the focus has been in the Gulf, which has also seen a diversification beyond energy cooperation and infrastructure development to include investment in each other’s financial markets. Both Saudi Arabia’s and Qatar’s sovereign wealth funds have invested in China’s property markets and health care sector, for example.

The focus on economic matters has downgraded attention to political considerations. In Israel this has led to increased trade, from $383m in 2000 to $4.7bn in 2017, of which Chinese exports are now double those from Israel. Israel has also offered China opportunities in the form of infrastructure projects (e.g. the “Red to Med” railway and contracts to develop the Ashdod and Haifa ports) and its hi-tech sector has begun to attract increasing Chinese interest and investment.
For their part, Israel’s political and economic leaders view China’s growing commercial weight has been welcomed as a way of diversifying its partners and hedging against potential risks. The last includes the possible future loss of North American and European markets, especially should they become more susceptible to BDS pressure to boycott, divest and sanction Israeli goods, services and firms which directly contribute towards and sustain the occupation.

The case for China

Given China’s growing economic interest in Israel, could this contribute to a resolution of the conflict between it and the Palestinians? Could China’s disproportionate trade surplus with Israel enable it to press Israel back into negotiations with the Palestinians?

The answer to this is perhaps. Perhaps, if China’s presentation of itself as a benign regional power is sustained. To that end, China’s leaders have pointed out their country’s “peaceful” and non-confrontational rise, suggesting they could act as honest brokers in any talks between Israelis and Palestinians. Regional examples of this included talks to enable a UN peacekeeping presence in the Darfur region of Sudan in 2006 and in reaching an agreement with Iran over its nuclear programme in 2015. In both instances, China positioned itself between the regimes and the Western powers to reach a compromise.

China’s honest broker status could be helped by its supposedly distinct model of mediation, according to observers. Chaziza, for example, claims Chinese engagement emphasizes collective goals over (Western) individualism. Sun and Zoubir, meanwhile, propose “quasi-mediation,” which is modest and risk-averse. Setting itself against “traditional” Western forms of mediation, it focuses on deescalating conflict and reducing tension by incremental measures and in which the mediator plays a collaborative rather than a leading role. Where China has an economic presence, its leadership will become involved.

Additionally, regardless of whether one accepts these claims of a culturally specific form of Chinese-led mediation, the present state of the region may be conducive for Chinese action. Both the decline in the conflict’s salience (especially when compared to other, more violent instances in Libya, Syria and Yemen, for example) and the fragmentation between Arab elites and masses over how to proceed could provide space for Chinese activity.
The case against China

An alternative view is that China will not make much difference in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This is evident in its support of the Oslo Accords and its own public statements on the conflict, including its Four-Point Plan in May 2013 and its revised version in July 2017. The 2013 plan stressed Beijing’s commitment to a two-state solution, negotiations as the means of achieving peace, and the principle of land for peace. Four years later, the Four-Point Plan was modified to reflect regional changes and the rising importance of the BRI. This included a “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security,” a supportive role to be played by the international community and the integration of peace and development.

However, in neither version of China’s Four-Point Plan is there any engagement regarding the power asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians. Indeed, China’s idea of peacebuilding echoes that of Oslo, namely achieving peace through economic development. It therefore offers no response to the political causes of the conflict nor its economic consequences, including Israel’s occupation and Palestinians’ lack of independence (leading to a captive Palestinian market on Israel and dependence on foreign aid).

Despite the depoliticized and decontextualized nature of China’s Four-Point Plan, it was soon sidelined by the then US Secretary of State, John Kerry, when he announced plans to pursue shuttle diplomacy in 2013-14. Beijing did not criticize the move, suggesting that they might not be able to do much better than the US. Indeed, Kerry’s efforts ended in failure nine months later.

Perhaps recognizing the difficulty inherent in mediating the conflict, China’s practical interventions have been low-risk and driven by failure-avoidance. In 2002 China appointed a special envoy to the region, but did not offer to mediate. Instead it organized meetings to examine the conflict in 2003 and 2006 and then again in December 2017, following the revised Four-Point Plan.

The expectations for the 2017 meeting were low. Israeli delegates who attended the talks said that China’s intention was not to solve the conflict, but instead explore low-level forms of dialogue. The PLO sent senior advisors while the Israeli delegation consisted of civil society activists and a lone Member of the Knesset, Hillel Bar. Yet despite even these modest goals, Chinese organizers struggled to achieve consensus and get the two sides to sign a non-binding resolution.
China’s 2017 meeting revealed another problem: that peace cannot be achieved through “normalization.” Critics of normalization point to the fact that Palestinian and Israeli leaders can and have been communicating with each other directly for the past 25 years and it is they—not civil society—that will be the principal decision makers in any future final agreement. Anti-normalization critics believe that any dialogue that is simply limited to ending violence and establishing co-existence will fail to deal with the reasons that drove the conflict in the first place. It will fail to deliver a just peace, fail to secure rights for victims or account for the past actions of aggressors. 

This anti-normalization critique echoes the distinction previously noted between negative and positive peace, where the former is directed at deescalating conflict and the former at building peace between conflicting parties.

This highlights another limitation of Chinese policy, that its interactions do not reflect changing attitudes on the ground. Its 2017 meeting failed to acknowledge the declining support for the two-state solution across both societies. Between 2008 and 2018 Israeli support fell from 69% to 49% and among Palestinians from 68% to 43%. The changes demonstrate shifts within the two societies: in Israel a lack of pressure to seek an agreement alongside increasing rightwing sentiment and political representation by the religious and settler movements; in Palestinian society, because the creation and expansion of settlements is making the prospects for a Palestinian state unviable.

China’s unwillingness to grapple with these developments will make it hard to successfully apply quasi-mediation. Because quasi-mediation is predicated on not leading negotiations and instead following the conflict parties’ interactions, this will arguably further entrench the power disparity between Israel and the Palestinians.

A further doubt is whether China can really be an honest broker. Historically, China was aligned towards the Palestinian cause, reflecting its Cold War support for national liberation movements. Today, China’s interests in Israel outweigh those which it has with the Palestinians. Sino-Israeli trade is larger than that between China and the Palestinians, by nearly 70 times in 2017. Additionally, Israel’s hi-tech economy and site for Chinese investment offer greater returns than the Palestinians can offer. Indeed, the recently proposed Sino-Palestinian FTA is likely to be of more symbolic than actual value.

Perhaps China’s trade surplus with Israel means that it has leverage to press for a more meaningful dialogue with the Palestinians. But this
needs to be set against the previous observation that Israel has sought to diversify its economic interactions, so as not to be reliant and therefore vulnerable to any one market. At the same time, applying leverage requires political will, which does not seem evident. Part of the reason for this is that Israel offers greater regional stability and order for China. Israel has sought to contain and control any challenges in its immediate neighborhood (e.g. against Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon), putting it in the same position as status quo powers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These two Gulf Arab monarchies took the lead as the state actors most opposed to the protests resulting from the 2011 uprisings, a phenomenon which China watched with considerable concern. Beijing feared the demonstration effect it might have, especially among its Muslim minorities and in Tibet. It also worried about the implications they might have for its commercial interests in the region. At home it clamped down on any dissent or sympathy towards the protests. In the Middle East, it expressed commitment to a strong Westphalian interpretation of respect for states’ territoriality and non-interference in their internal affairs. This included opposition to intervention in Libya as well as vetoes of draft UN Security Council resolutions directed against the Assad regime in Syria. In addition, since 2011, Israel and Gulf Arab interests have converged, especially regarding their mutual suspicion of Iran and its support for proxies like Hamas and Hezbollah. This growing rapprochement complements China’s preference to avoid political involvement in the region.

At the same time though, it is important to note that China’s current affinity with Israel is not absolute. Israel’s primary ally is the US and it will prioritize American demands over Chinese ones. Following US pressure in 2000, Israel pulled out of selling its Phalcon airborne early warning system to China. The decision was financially costly and led to a short-term deterioration in relations. More recently, the US has complained that Israel’s decision to allow Chinese contractors to upgrade its ports threatens the security of American warships docked there, as they may be spied on by China.

**Conclusion: Looking Ahead**

This article posed the question of whether or not China can make a difference to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The arguments in favor and against Chinese capacity were presented, the former relying on
China’s rising power and the expansion and extension of its commercial influence into a more political form. Against this is the fact that China has shown little inclination to depart from the Oslo model, despite the imbalance which exists between Israel and the Palestinians and alongside both domestic and regional changes and developments since 2011.

Throughout, the Oslo process has been maintained by the international community, including China, as the means to resolve the conflict. However, the process has been effectively redundant since the Second Intifada and little has been done to overcome the imbalance between a strong Israeli state that favors the status quo and a weaker Palestinian movement which seeks change. In absence of an active process, the Palestinian leadership has opted for an alternative internationalization strategy, to obtain membership of international organizations like UNESCO and the ICC as a way of obliging other states to act against Israel’s occupation. However, it is not evident that it has delivered: 70% of states already have full diplomatic relations with the Palestinians and have largely failed to hold Israel to account. Additionally, the Palestinians have not found China to be especially receptive to its strategy: Beijing allegedly advised against the internationalization strategy, partly out of self-interest and its fear that it might encourage minorities such as the Uyghurs or Taiwan to do the same.

More recently, the Palestinians have pressed for international support, especially in the wake of President Trump’s unilateral measures. They include his decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem and his own, alternative peace deal, which reflects much of the Israeli leadership’s preferences. At the time of writing, Abbas has rejected the US plan and called for an international conference to restart talks with Israel.

To date, Abbas’s efforts have gained limited traction and neither has China offered an alternative or followed up on the dialogue which it hosted in December 2017. At the same time, China’s failure to follow up must be set in context. Earlier in 2017 France hosted an international conference to push the process on and which Israel refused to attend. More recently, in March 2019, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin offered to host Abbas and Netanyahu in direct talks. Although the Palestinians expressed interest, Israel’s response has shown similarly little interest. Like the French, the Russians have not pushed on the matter, even though they have some leverage in
In this light then, China’s approach appears little different to that of other external powers. In part China’s response to the conflict demonstrates the extent to which internal dynamics in the conflict have contributed to the current situation. Indeed, the objectives originally set out in the Oslo accords have largely deteriorated since 1993. Initially set up to provide negative peace, the aim of negotiations was to achieve a final settlement that would provide positive peace. But the capacity for positive peace has diminished as stop-start negotiations failed to build trust between the two sides and to tackle the causes of the conflict, thereby achieving a resolution that may be just and satisfactory to all. That situation has continued and may now be further out of reach, owing to changes in the underlying domestic and international dynamics since the 1990s.

Certainly, the deteriorating prospect for peace between Israel and the Palestinians cannot be laid entirely at China’s door. However, it does seem that China’s stance towards the conflict is one that is more associated with inertia than with activism. Assuming that current trends continue, it seems unlikely there will be any significant alteration, either in the conflict itself or in China’s response to it. Finally, whether the decision (not) to act is deliberate, by offering only rhetorical support and failing to provide substance to those words, China may well be guilty of pursuing a policy of omission rather than commission and its claims to be an honest broker in the conflict and the region will ring hollow.

Notes
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10. Israeli, “The People’s Republic of China and the PLO.”


13. World Integrated Trade Solution, China exports, imports and trade balance By Country and Region, not dated.


La Chine : nouvel acteur méditerranéen


26. World Integrated Trade Solution, China exports, imports and trade balance By Country and Region.


