



China Enters the Middle East

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Does a visit here by a top defense official spell a shift in China's positions?

Following Israel's media these days, everything looks like business as usual: strikes, scandals, another public commission, another damning report by the State Comptroller, Tzipi once again sniping at Bibi, another day of Arab soldiers slaughtering Arabs... nothing new.

But there is one item that overshadows all others, though few Israelis seem to have paid any attention to it.

This week was the first-ever visit by a Chinese Chief of Staff, General Chen Bingde, to Israel. The visit "signals warming bilateral ties," writes the official China Daily, somewhat innocuously.

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In fact, the visit signals much more.

For years this rising super-power has been entering the Middle East as quietly as possible, strengthening its economic, political and military presence, while declining Europe has struggled to maintain its presence.

There have been several recent signs – some of them public– that China may be planning to become more assertive and even-handed in its treatment of the region. China may be moving away from some of its traditional support for Arab positions. There is little doubt that Chen's visit (his itinerary did not include other regional countries, just Ukraine and Russia) was followed closely and with suspicion by Ankara, Cairo, Teheran as well as Ramallah.



Sino-Jewish and sino-Israeli relations have a long and, on balance, very positive history. In January 1950, Israel became the first country in the region to recognize the People's Republic of China. In November 1973, Zedong remarked to Henry Kissinger that he had nothing against the Jews, on the contrary – a remarkable statement at a time when anti-Semitic campaigns were reaching a new high in the Soviet bloc.

After China and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1992, bi-lateral relations and mutual high-level visits developed at a brisk pace, including ties in the defense sector. These relations came to a precipitous halt in 2000, when massive American pressure forced Israel to cancel a contract to sell China an Israeli-developed airborne early warning system, the Phalcon.

In 2004 a similar incident occurred regarding Israeli-made aerial drones sold to China. This time the US accompanied its pressure with temporary sanctions. Israel had little choice. Its friendship with the US is still indispensable.

Chen's visit comes at a time when Israel is increasingly concerned by multiple efforts to isolate and delegitimize it. His visit sends a signal: China doesn't share those sentiments. It's important that this opportunity to restore trust in the bi-lateral relationship not be missed. Indeed, improved Israel-China ties could have a positive impact not only on Israel but on the whole region. It could signal the Iranians and their Arab followers, Hamas and Hezbollah, that notwithstanding the help that some of them may have received from China in the past, China has no time and no sympathy for wild, genocidal ranting. China's rapid ascendance and its interest in maintaining regional stability in the Middle East means China may be more ready to play a role in regional affairs and in the Middle East peace process.



That said, when China makes policy changes in important areas there is never one sole reason. It is virtually certain that China is troubled by the spreading unrest in the Arab world.

The extent of the current unrest came as a surprise to them, and now Israel may appear as a stable anchor.

The United States' reaction to growing Israel-China ties will be crucial. All efforts should be made to convince Israel's closest ally that it is in its own interest to let China lend a helping hand in stabilizing the Middle East.

The Arabs and Iranians listen to China because they have to. China was their great neighbor for thousands of years before the United States was even formed, and before Europe become a power in the Middle East.

Today China is their most important Asian energy market, and provides political cover because it does not ask them for political or human-rights concessions.

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In his recently published book *On China*, Henry Kissinger continues his most important struggle – to help avoid the clash between a traditional and a rising great power which has occurred so often in history. He suggests that America can and must cope with China's peaceful rise, but also asks the Chinese to become more involved in maintaining peace and stability on a global level. Have the Chinese already listened to him on the Middle East? Has the United States?

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