

In this episode of China-Mena titled "China and the Israel-Hamas War: A View from Tel Aviv," host Jonathan Fulton and guest Gedaliah Afterman engage in a compelling discussion on the intricate dynamics between China, Israel, and the ongoing conflict with Hamas. The conversation delves into China's evolving stance, economic interests, potential for mediation, and the consequential effects on China's emerging role in the Middle East. Join us as we unravel the complexities of this relationship and analyze its impact on regional dynamics.

Takeaways

- China's Relationship with Israel-Palestine
- Israel-China Technological Relationship
- China's Response to the Israel-Hamas War
- Unlikelihood of Israel-China Political Partnership
- China's Economic Interests in the Middle East
- China's Role in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
- China's Limitations in the Conflict

Quotes

"Trade between Israel and China is expected to continue, but the prospects of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) may be jeopardized by trust issues and concerns about doing business in Europe and the US." - Gedaliah Afterman

"China's participation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be contingent upon its alignment with regional interests and its relationship with the United States."- Gedaliah Afterman

Featured in the Episode

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Transcript:

Jonathan Fulton:

Welcome to the China MENA podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, and a political scientist at Said University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. When mapping out the season's episodes, I was looking at October for a show on China and the Israel Palestine dispute. Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu had been expected to visit Beijing that month. And after China's role in Saudi Iran earlier this year, there were reports that it might try its hand at mediation in the Middle East's most intractable conflict. The horrific Hamas attack on October 7th and the resulting war has clearly upended all of that. Dr. Gedaliah Afterman is here to tell us more about the China Israel relationship and how Israelis are thinking about China these days. Gedaliah is the head of the Asia policy program at Abba Eban Institute For Diplomacy and Foreign Relations at Reichman University. He previously served as a diplomat at the Australian embassy in Beijing, focused on China's foreign policy and international security. Gedaliah, welcome to the show.

Gedaliah Afterman:

Thank you, Jonathan. Happy to be here.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. Happy you could join us. So can we start just with a brief overview of China's relations with Israel and Palestine before October 7th. We know that Mahmoud Abbas was in Beijing in June. And like I just said, Prime Minister Netanyahu is expected to be there in October. What was the trajectory of China, Israel, Palestine looking like before this attack?

Gedaliah Afterman:

So just to take a few steps backwards, traditionally, China has been supportive of Palestine. It always voted in the UN with the Palestinians, with the Arabs, and the Arab Israeli conflict. China recognized Palestine before it did Israel. But as the relationship with Israel became stronger, as the economic relationship with Israel became stronger, it seemed very clear that Israel would become the more important partner in this triangle, and China, while they talked a lot about the Palestinian cause, didn't have much substance. Over the years, we've seen a few peace plans and peace proposals put forward by the Chinese, including by Xi Jinping himself. But there was always the feeling that it was more lip service than substance. If we're moving forward to the last few years, then the relationship between Israel and China has become much stronger economically. China saw Israel as an important source of technology, of innovation. Chinese companies are involved in some of Israel's most important infrastructure projects. 2022 was a record year in Israel-China trade, reaching 21,000,000,000 US dollars, very close, by the way, to the trade levels between Israel and the US, which I think is quite interesting. As you mentioned, following their approach in March between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which China brokered there was a feeling in Israel that maybe something political can be done with China in the region. You mentioned that China tried to push itself as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That wasn't something that Israel took seriously. But I think Israel maybe thought a little bit more seriously about China playing a role with other players in the region, for example, Saudi Arabia. Mahmoud Abbas visited Beijing in June, and that was a very symbolic visit. Not a lot of substance, mainly focused on positioning China in the region, and positioning China as a possible mediator. Another issue that comes, that's important when we're talking about China's role in the Middle East is getting legitimacy for its policies in Xinjiang, and we saw Mahmoud Abbas come out publicly while in Beijing, in support of China's, positions and policies in Xinjiang. Netanyahu was the father of Israel's Look East policies. The Look East strategy was meant to come to Beijing in October. This visit was canceled because of the war. But the idea was that we'll see, perhaps, an upgrade in the economic relationship, and perhaps talk about regional cooperation between Israel and China. One issue I should mention just very briefly is the issue of the impact of

superpower competition on the Israel-China relationship. So the US has always been an important actor in the Israel-China relationship and has a lot to do with shaping it. And over the last few years, as tensions grew between the US and China, we've seen that shaping the relationship between Israel and China as well. The US has put a lot of pressure on Israel to limit its relationship with China, especially when it comes to investment in technology, especially when it comes to infrastructure. And we've seen China gradually increase its pressure and its criticism of Israel over the Palestinian issue, basically using it as an instrument to attack the United States.

Jonathan Fulton:

There's a lot of really interesting stuff in that. I mean, the last point you made, I guess the whole point you're making about competition between China and the US, I mean, when you're describing this set of relationships, this triangle as you put it, there was nothing in there about, you know, meaningful connections historically or in terms of interest between China and Israel or China and Palestine. It sounded pretty instrumental in a lot of this.

Gedaliah Afterman:

Absolutely. I think when China thinks about the Israel-Palestine conflict, it doesn't think about the Israelis or the Palestinians. It either thinks about its position in the region - in the Middle East or about its relationship with the United States.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. So I was thinking that the last time I was in Israel. I was talking to some folks who are thinking a lot about China. As you know, China has this strategic partnership diplomacy that it uses. And Israel has a very unusual designation. It's not a comprehensive strategic partner or a strategic partner. What is it? An innovative strategic partner?

Gedaliah Afterman:

Yeah. Right.

Jonathan Fulton:

Right. And that was signed, what, in 17. Right?

Gedaliah Afterman:

Yes. So what you can see here again, if you're thinking about the, you know, the parallels between superpower competition, the China-US relationship, and the Israel-China relationship, so you see that as the pressures, the tensions grow between, between China and the US, especially on technology, suddenly, Israel emerges in Chinese eyes as a very important partner. And 2018 was a record year in terms of Chinese investment in Israeli technology. So China recognized Israel as an alternative source of technology as doors were closing in the US and in the West.

Jonathan Fulton:

One of the things that struck me when I was in Tel Aviv last fall, I guess, is that the technological relationship was described in a lot more nuance than I usually hear. You know, like on one hand, a lot of Israelis were saying, we're kind of competitors in this field. Like, in much of the Middle East, China's seen as, you know, on the supply side of tech, you know, whereas these countries are mostly on the consumer side. That's the relationship with China, whereas Israel is also on the supply side. So there's a bit of a competition there in terms of, you know, you're both doing the similar things. And because of that, the Israelis I spoke with said that there's some concern, you know, that they were worried about protecting their their IP, that, you know, working closely with China in a lot of technological areas might not necessarily be in Israel's best interest, especially since you alluded to or since you said the the nature of the Israel-US relationship is such that if an Israeli firm goes to the US looking for investors and you've got a lot of Chinese partners on your books or Chinese investments on your books, it's gonna be a lot harder to do business in Europe or in the US. So it seemed like a pretty complex relationship to me on the tech front at least.

Gedaliah Afterman:

Absolutely. I think if we would have had this conversation, you know, 5 years ago or 7 years ago, I would have said, you know, China has a huge opportunity in terms of Israeli tech, in terms of investment in Israeli tech, but in recent years that has become much less exciting or much less realistic in terms of Israeli tech companies for the reasons you mentioned, and especially because of the growing US pressure in that sense. So bilaterally speaking, I think we've seen a natural drop in Chinese investment in Israeli tech. I think if you think about the regional context, the picture is a little bit more complicated. Because I think you will see more and more Israeli and Chinese Companies cooperating on technology in places like the UAE or Saudi Arabia or other places. I think that's something, looking ahead, that will be interesting to follow.

Jonathan Fulton:

Right. And just going back to your earlier kind of overview, that's the Israeli side. On the Palestinian side, the same logic applies. You don't really get a sense of Palestine being incredibly important to China just for the fact of, you know, it's an important community or society or country or whatever that China's using Palestine for that there are political goals. Almost that it sounds like what you're describing is China's using Palestine to achieve something else.

Gedaliah Afterman:

Absolutely. It's about China positioning itself in, you know, in the Global South, in the developing world, in the Arab world, you know, using the the Palestinian issue as a currency to say the right thing, to position itself in the right place. And like I said, again, I think the issue of Xinjiang is very important, because China has been using it to counter Western criticism of its policies over Xinjiang.

Jonathan Fulton:

So Just so you can you give us a sense, does China have a really - do you believe China's got a very sophisticated understanding, and a sophisticated, you know, team of really deeply rooted diplomats, academics, folks who are, you know, thinking about Israel and Palestine who are informing policy. Is it something that seems important to Beijing, do you think?

Gedaliah Afterman:

No. I don't think the relationship with Israel is particularly important, and I think China's response to the current crisis has made it quite clear. I think if we look at the region at the moment and the way China's used the region, especially over the last 10 years or so, I think Israel has become less important, especially in the last 5 years. Part of that is because of those limitations of technology. So in some ways, from a Chinese perspective, Israel has less to offer to China and China has more to gain by using the Palestinian issue to attack the United States because that's a much more important issue. So I don't think China has a particular or developed expertise on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and I don't think it takes it very seriously or sees it as very important, in a real sense.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. I've gotten the impression just from watching, you know, from this vantage point here in the Emirates that - I think leaders in Beijing have looked at Israel and realized that the relationship between Israel and the US is such that there's very little space for China to really make serious gains. And that means, hey. If you're not gonna be a useful partner, then we can use you as, you know, a way to garner support for other things we're trying to do in the region.

Gedaliah Afterman:

Exactly. I think the Netanyahu visit might have been, you know, an attempt in some ways in Beijing to take advantage of what they thought or what was seen as a crisis in the Israel-US relationship. So Netanyahu was waiting for an invitation to the White House and didn't get it. He got instead an invitation to Beijing. Let's see. The Chinese want to see what they can work with. And like I said, the issue of Israel-Saudi normalization, I think, was one of the issues that they wanted to explore at that time. Obviously, now following October 7th, the reality is quite different, but I think that's the context of that visit at the time.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. So okay. Well, I wanna get to that then because you'd mentioned a minute or 2 ago about China's response to October 7th. Can you just give us, I mean, it's been pretty hard to track. There's been a lot happening over the past 6 weeks, and I really appreciate you taking the time to do this because I know you've obviously got a lot on your plate right now. But what, you know, since October 7th, what have you seen from China? How has the response been?

Gedaliah Afterman:

So I think, generally speaking, China's response was, you know, what we'd expected it to do in a way. You know? It's in accordance with what it's done in the past, quite similar to what it's done with regards to the war in Ukraine. It's basically trying to present itself as a balanced player, you know, calling for stability, calling for peace, calling for a ceasefire. But in this case, I think there were a few things that were different. One, China refused to condemn or single out or even mention Hamas for the atrocities of the 7th October. And, I think that was different, first of all, because I think it was - it should have done that. But also because from an Israeli perspective, this was Israel's 9/11. So the way Israel saw China's refusal to do so was very different to the way to have seen it in the past, or China's policies in the past. But what we've seen as the war

moved forward was that China moved to basically, put the blame on and criticize Israel. We've seen a greater focus on attacking the United States and criticizing the United States and saying that they're basically enabling the attack of Gaza and the killing of civilians in Gaza. We've seen a campaign in Chinese, both official media and social media, which has been extremely anti-Israel and partially antisemitic. And this is something that I see as part of a domestic campaign in China, to create a very anti-American, anti-western narrative. But using Israel, again, as you said, as an instrument to achieve that, we saw, unlike, you know, the United States and other many countries in the west that sent their leaders to the region, and sent foreign ministers to the region, we saw China take a very low key approach of sending its Middle East envoy Jun to the region. And he also visited many countries, but didn't say much, and he didn't visit Israel, which I think is quite telling. And I think that shows two things. One, that China wants to talk. China is happy to make a lot of statements, but is not very interested in taking an active role currently in the conflict. And two, that Israel is not very important for China, when it's thinking about the conflict at the moment. China has also been quite clear publicly in saying that it's aligning its position with the Arab world. And I think that's quite interesting. Another interesting element is that China assumed the presidency of the security council, UN security council, in November. I think we might see China a bit more active with resolutions, with statements. And the idea is to do two things. One, to show that it's aligned with countries like the UAE, like Saudi Arabia, countries in the BRICS plot, in the Global South, and, two, to try and isolate and attack the United States, and, of course, Israel will be part of that as well.

Jonathan Fulton:

So with this messaging that China's sending out to everybody, I mean, how's it being perceived in Israel? Like, are people who think about China in Israel surprised by this, or is anybody really paying attention? Is everybody just so focused on, you know, the bigger concern of the war that, you know, what China's saying isn't really, penetrating the narrative of the dialogue?

Gedaliah Afterman:

So I think most people were disappointed rather than surprised. Right? I think people were expecting, at least on the human level, a warmer reaction. I mean, many Jewish people that visit China have always had a positive, warm experience. And because this is seen as a 9/11 experience for Israel, a real, a real, you know, tragedy, a real catastrophe, I think people were hoping or expecting China to behave a little bit differently rather than just have this very cold, very cynical calculation when it comes to the tragedy. Were people surprised? I don't think they should have been surprised,

following the trends in recent years. I think, as I said earlier, I think China behaved as you would expect it to behave. I don't think anyone in Israel was hoping or expecting China to come and save Israel, right, to do a United States. But I think it is part of the reason that China responded so negatively in Israel in contrast to the way the US responded. So on the one hand, we have president Biden sending in, you know, two aircraft carriers within days to the region, coming to the region himself, sending the, you know, the head of the administration to the region, and being very involved and very active in supporting Israel. And on the other hand, we have China, not even doing the minimum, in terms of even statements, let alone anything else, to show sympathy to Israel. So I think that's why we've seen this kind of higher than usual level of disappointment, in Israel. And I think this will have an impact on the atmosphere and the relationship between Israel and China. I think it's likely that trade will continue. And as I said, trade between Israel and China is quite high. But I think if people were thinking about some kind of political partnership, if people were thinking that China might be, you know, helpful in regional integration for Israel, I think the lack of trust that is stopped now makes it quite unlikely.

Jonathan Fulton:

But you don't see it having any impact on the economic side? Imagine trade will continue as is?

Gedaliah Afterman:

Pretty much. I mean, one thing that was on the table is an FTA between China and Israel, and it's been on the table for the last few years, and probably not signed because of not wanting to piss off Washington. But I think that probably won't be signed because Israel now will be feeling that it's not in their interest to push something like that, especially given the relationship with the US. But generally speaking, I think the relationship will continue as is, perhaps less on technology and more on other less sensitive areas.

Jonathan Fulton:

Well so, you know, with the big trade numbers and there is a lot of contracting in Israel, what is it that China's doing on the economic side? If it's not tech, is it mostly just infrastructure stuff? Or, you know, what are you seeing us doing here?

Gedaliah Afterman:

I think the most important element in Chinese investment in Israel is infrastructure. And there was a feeling in Israel that Israel needs those Chinese capabilities and money in order to carry out this infrastructure project. Right? We're talking about ports. We're talking about highways. We're talking about train rails. So I think there was a feeling that Israel needs that in order to meet its goals, in order to make its economy more efficient. And that might continue to an extent. I don't know if we have a different alternative. Although, it'd be interesting to see whether we see more efforts on the Israeli side to find new actors in this field.

Jonathan Fulton:

Right. Yeah. So that's interesting because, you know, when you're describing the contrast between, you know, what Israel got from China, what Israel got from the US. I mean, of course, we shouldn't be surprised because the relationship with the US is very, very, you know, central. But we do keep hearing these narratives about China as this emerging Middle East power. And then you see its response to a serious crisis has been, you know, quite underwhelming the way you're describing it. You know, does this tell us something, you know, from your perspective about what we can expect from China in the region?

Gedaliah Afterman:

Absolutely. So, you know, we talked about the the agreement between the Saudis and the Iranians and the the narrative that China has been pushing since then, that it can be a mediator, that it can push, you know, the escalation in the region in a different way that it can counter, the American presence. And I think what we've seen here might be going the other way. I mean, if you're sitting in Saudi Arabia and you're thinking whether or not a security agreement or security guarantee with the Americans is worth it. When you see the Americans come in within 2 or 3 days with 2 aircraft carriers, I think that's something that resonates. And on the other hand, you might agree with China's rhetoric about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but I'm sure that people also know that China isn't doing much to ease the tension. So I think when we're looking, when we look forward, on the in the regional sense, I think people will continue the economic relationships, the economic trends will deepen cooperation. Technology and infrastructure again, will play a big role in the region, but the political narrative might be seen as less realistic, in that sense. It also, of course, depends on how things develop with the war. Right? Because one of the things I think China is looking to do now is to capitalize on criticism of the US in the region. But if the US manages to wind up the war relatively quickly and to push some kind of political process with the Palestinians, some kind of regional process with Saudi Arabia, you know, initiatives like the India Middle

East economic corridor, put them back on the table. I think that China could suffer some credit, on the political front, as well.

Jonathan Fulton:

So you mentioned the Saudi-Iran mediation efforts. And you and I have talked about this in the past. So we both have, I think, kind of similar ideas about how, you know, China was involved in that. I mean, I think it's been kind of overblown in a lot of the media accounts of it. But at the same time, you know, China did get to pass the finish line, and it was seen as a pretty useful actor. What do you think from an Israeli perspective now having seen the Chinese government's response and kind of the lackluster underwhelming, you know, response to this conflict and not a lot of support for Israel. Does China really have much role to play in this mediation effort anymore? Can China be seen as a reliable actor by the Israelis?

Gedaliah Afterman:

So first of all, I agree about the China Saudi Arabia agreement. I think China, was basically getting a lot of credit for being there for the last 50 meters of a marathon. But nevertheless, it is telling that both Saudi Arabia and Iran have made a big effort to give credit to China. So I think that's something to keep in mind. Listen, from Israel's perspective, the first thing that Israel needs to understand, and I think is getting to understand, is that China won't do anything for Israel's sake. Israel's ability to influence Chinese policy bilaterally or regionally is close to zero, including, regarding this conflict. So the way to look at it is when we're trying to think what kind of role China could play, I think there are two roles. One, and this will be for two reasons, either regional or geopolitical there are two roles that it can play. The first one is that it can pressure, or convince Iran not to come in and not to escalate the situation further with other actors like Hezbollah, like the Houthis in Yemen and other places. And that might be happening, to some degree at least, but I think that's quite an important role that China can play. And I think the second could be to play a role on the humanitarian front because that's something that China can do without taking much risk but with getting a lot of credit and a lot of publicity. I mean, I think - if you think about it, can China mediate peace between Israel and the Palestinians? No. Of course, not. That would be completely unrealistic. But can China play a role in pressuring Qatar and Egypt into, you know, securing the release of the Israeli and international hostages held by Hamas? I think it can. Can China help bringing aid or facilitating, you know, aid to Palestinians in Gaza? I think it can. Can China play a role, in the future, in the day after in reconstructing Gaza? I think it can as well. So I think there's some potential roles that China can play in the conflict, but it needs to decide to do so. And so far, we haven't

seen any real sign that China really wants to do any of these things. But I think that if China is to do them, now this week or the next few weeks are the time to do them for several reasons. The first is that we have a meeting between Xi Jinping and president Biden coming up in the next day or so. And that's something that's an opportunity for China to show that it's a positive actor that we cooperate with the U.S. The second is the fact that China is currently chair of the UN Security Council. The third is regional, and that's the sense that many of its partners in the region, we're not talking about Israel. We're talking about Saudi Arabia. We're talking about the UAE. We're talking about Qatar. They're very worried about a spillover. And the fourth is the fact that there's an actual active negotiation now about the release of the hostages in return for a ceasefire. So this is something focused, something specific that, theoretically, at least, China could play a role in.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. Excuse me. I should mention that when we're recording this it's November 14th, so there is actually some momentum right now. We're hearing stories about this, this hostage negotiation happening through Qatar. Right? So, you know, it feels like we might be making some positive momentum right now. But I think you made some really important points because, I mean, when I'm maybe being a little hard on China here, maybe not hard, but I'm, you know, pointing out some of the deficiencies and how people talk about China as a regional actor. But they do have interest in the Middle East, and they do have influence. There is space for China to be pretty useful in this. It does have significant interest, and I think I keep saying, they have primarily economic interest. So when people expect China to be a security or a political actor, I think they're kind of expecting the wrong thing. But given its deep economic presence here, you know, it doesn't wanna see the region you know, they don't wanna see this conflict expand into a region wide conflict. So I think your point about China's regional influence and how it can act with other actors in the gulf or in Iran, it's a point well taken. There's something we could expect that could be useful, and it does align with a lot of other extra regional powers that have similar concerns and similar interests.

Gedaliah Afterman:

We've seen, for example, the escalation, you know, process or trend in the region seems to be continuing. I mean, putting aside the conflict, but we've seen, you know, the Iranians and the Saudis sitting together and the Syrians, showing up at the Arab League meeting. And this is a momentum that I think suits, serves Chinese interests, and this is something that they would like to maintain. So I think when we're talking about a Chinese role, we need to be pragmatic and realistic about it. Again, we don't

need to say they're not gonna say even change the Middle East, but they can definitely have influence on specific issues that are quite critical. If you want to reach a ceasefire, in this current war, the key is releasing the hostages, the kidnapped, and civilians in Gaza. If you manage to do that, you're in a different position. If you manage to have some kind of political horizon, some kind of economic and political horizon for the future of Gaza, for future of Gaza in the West Bank, even a Palestinian state, that's something that at least theoretically, China could play a role, especially on the infrastructure issue, the economic issues, etcetera, and especially if it's done by countries in the region. So if we can imagine a scenario, for example, where the GCC, you know, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, for example, need a process of reconstruction in Gaza, you could imagine China wanting to play a role in that as well. So, again, as long as we focus and are specific and realistic in our approach, I think China could have a role to play. But from a Chinese perspective, it all depends on how beneficial it is, does it think it might be for its interest, in the region and also how it portrays it vis a vis the US. Does it help the US? Does it help China vis a vis the US? So I think this is all part of the thinking very much geopolitical, very much regional.

Jonathan Fulton:

That's a really great way to wrap it up. I I think you gave us a lot to consider. I appreciate it because, I mean, obviously, I appreciate taking time when things are very unpleasant at home, but also just that you've given us a lot to consider. You know, we keep hearing about, I think, these outsized, expectations. And I think you're really helping us right size how we should be thinking about China over here and especially in the current context. Gedaliah, thanks so much. I really appreciate it, man.

Gedaliah Afterman:

Thanks so much.

Jonathan Fulton:

And, to our listeners, as always, thanks for joining us. We'll, we'll be with you again in a couple weeks with a new episode. And, you know, like, listen, subscribe, and all the other good podcast stuff that we do. Thank you very much.

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