

The Chinese Potential: Close Ties with Tehran, Dialing Down Israel-Palestine Tensions

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Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi held a telephone call with his Israeli counterpart Eli Cohen on October 23, 2023. Said Wang Yi: "Every country has the right to self-defense but should abide by international humanitarian law and protect civilians". He also asked his counterpart to protect Chinese interests in Israel.

So far, Beijing has been very cautious in its response, refraining from criticising Hamas - the Palestinian militant group which governs Gaza - and supporting the Palestinian cause. China issued a statement criticising the killing of 'ordinary civilians' only after the US policymakers expressed "disappointment" with the former for not criticising the multi-pronged attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023 which has led to the current Israel-Palestine conflagration. The death toll as of October 25, 2023 was well over 7,000 - this included 5,791 people in Gaza, 1,400 people in Israel and 100 Palestinians in West Bank

China-US ties.

It would be pertinent to point out that the Chinese President, Xi Jinping is likely to visit the US for Asia Pacific Economic Summit (APEC) Summit in



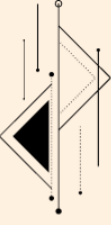
Beijing has been very cautious in its response, refraining from criticising Hamas while supporting the Palestinian cause. The US on its part has issued repeated warnings to Iran to refrain from supporting Hamas or Hezbollah from attacking US forces. Iran on its part has upped the ante and said that continued offensives against Gaza will face strong retaliation. Given its close ties vis-à-vis Tehran and its overall clout in the Middle East, Beijing can potentially play a role in reducing tensions.

November and Wang Yi is visiting the US from October 26-28, 2023 and will be meeting with the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken. The meeting between Wang Yi and Blinken is likely to pave the way for a possible meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden. In a letter delivered to the New York-headquartered National Committee on United States-China Relations, the Chinese President called for stable ties based on "mutual respect".

China's possible role in preventing the escalation of tensions in the Middle East

One of the issues which will be high on the agenda during the meeting between Wang Yi and Blinken is preventing the current conflict in the Middle East from further exacerbating.

US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, while addressing the UN Security Council, on October 24, 2023, said: "We do not want this war to widen. But if Iran or its proxies attack US



personnel anywhere, make no mistake: We will defend our people, we will defend our security, swiftly and decisively."

In a message specifically directed at Russia and China, Blinken said: *"If you, like the United States, want to prevent this conflict from spreading, tell Iran, tell its proxies - in public, in private, through every means - do not open another front against Israel in this conflict. Do not attack Israel's partners."*

The US has found no evidence with regard to Iran's involvement in the October 7, 2023 attacks by Hamas which led to the current Israel-Palestine conflagration - though Iran had supported the actions by Hamas.

Iran's increasing aggression

In the aftermath of an attack on al-Ahri Arab hospital in Gaza, on October 17, 2023 which killed hundreds of people, Iran during an emergency meeting of Organisation of Islamic cooperation (OIC) had asked other members to impose an oil embargo on Israel and to expel Israeli diplomats.

While the Palestinians blamed Israel for this attack Israelis blamed a misdirected rocket fired by the militant Palestinian group, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), for the hospital's destruction. US President Joe Biden also backed the Israeli claim during his visit to the Middle East

US warnings to Iran

As mentioned earlier, the US on its part has issued repeated warnings to Iran to refrain from supporting Hamas or Hezbollah from attacking US forces. While commenting on the attacks on US and coalition forces in

Iraq and Syria, Pentagon spokesman Patrick Ryder said:

"We know that these groups conducting these attacks are supported by the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) and Iranian regime"

Iran on its part has upped the ante and said that continued offensives against Gaza will face strong retaliation. During a conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron, on October 15, 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi had underscored this point.

The current conflict provides the US and China an opportunity to find some common ground. Further instability in the Middle East will benefit neither side. World Bank President, Ajaypal Singh Banga while addressing the Future Investment Initiative (FII) Summit (Riyadh) said: *"There is so much going on in the world and geopolitics in the wars that you're seeing and what just happened recently in Israel and Gaza. At the end of the day, when you put all this together, I think the impact on economic development is even more serious,"*

Given its close ties vis-à-vis Tehran and its overall clout in the Middle East, Beijing can potentially play a role - to some extent -- in reducing tensions. However, controlling the current conflict will require more than just an intervention by China.

The current situation in the Middle East, while providing a window for the US and China to work together - as mentioned earlier - if not checked from expanding could pose a serious challenge not just to the Middle East, but the global economy as well.

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