

Opinion – China's Role in Mediating Middle East Crises

Written by Sophie Wushuang Yi

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SOPHIE WUSHUANG YI, OCT 17 2023

Against the backdrop of the 2023 war in Israel-Palestine, China finds itself in a unique position, owing to its own historical struggles and its growing prominence on the world stage. China's contemporary history, characterised by a "century of humiliation" and its goal of "great rejuvenation" as a civilization, has shaped the nation's approach to global politics. While its sympathetic history offers a distinctive perspective on global power dynamics and crises like the one in the Middle East, China's involvement also places it at the forefront of Sino-US strategic competition.

China's history is one marked by external aggression and humiliation, stemming from the Opium Wars and the colonisation of its territory by foreign powers. This "century of humiliation" has left deep scars on the Chinese psyche and fuelled the nation's determination to reclaim its historical greatness. The "great rejuvenation" envisioned by China's leadership seeks to restore China's status as a global power.

This context provides China with a unique lens through which it views global conflicts. Having endured foreign intervention and occupation, China can empathise with nations struggling to assert their sovereignty. This empathy becomes a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, allowing it to mediate conflicts with a profound understanding of the impact of oppression. Notably, there are debates surrounding China's contemporary foreign policy, with concerns over China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, but the enduring principles encapsulated by China's first Premier Zhou Enlai's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence remain central to China's foreign policy.

In the ongoing crisis between Palestine and Israel, China's historical narrative influences its approach. Foreign Minister Wang Yi's call for a two-state solution and immediate cessation of violence aligns with China's consistent support for the Palestinian cause. China sees the Security Council as a pivotal player in de-escalating the conflict, emphasizing the importance of upholding international law and UN resolutions. China's stance is not merely diplomatic; it carries the weight of a nation that has faced external aggression.

This perspective gives China an edge as a mediator in the Middle East. While many Western nations have strong ties to Israel, China's historical background allows it to engage with both sides with a degree of neutrality that resonates with the international community. However, China's increasing involvement in the Middle East also underscores its rising prominence in global politics. With its expanding economic footprint, the Belt and Road Initiative, and strategic investments in the region, China is far from a passive observer in the Middle East. As it asserts itself, it becomes a more critical player in mediating conflicts and shaping the region's future.

China's engagement in the Middle East is not solely driven by humanitarian concerns but also by strategic interests. Energy security, trade routes, and economic partnerships are factors contributing to China's involvement in the region. The 2023 Israel-Palestine conflict showcases this duality and complexities of the issues that China is confronting – a deep-rooted empathy for the oppressed Palestinians, combined with strategic objectives, while there has been a growing tie between Israel and China for the past few years in trade, investment, education exchanges and tourism.

As China becomes more prominent in the Middle East, its role in global politics gains significance. This prominence is viewed through the lens of the ongoing Sino-US strategic competition. In the case of the Middle East, this competition plays out in various ways. The United States has traditionally been the primary power broker in the

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Middle East, and it has had a profound influence on the region's dynamics. China's growing presence challenges this hegemony and introduces a new dimension to the Sino-US rivalry.

In 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden's administration announced a \$235 million (£171 million) aid package for Palestinians, partially restoring the assistance that had been cut by the former U.S. President Donald Trump. This aid included two-thirds going to the UN's agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, which had been grappling with a financial crisis since losing \$360 million in US funding in 2018. The Biden administration's goal was to "restore credible engagement" by the Palestinians in long-stalled peace talks with Israel, despite their rejection of a peace plan unveiled in 2020, which proposed recognizing Israeli sovereignty over Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and the Jordan Valley, as well as declaring Jerusalem as Israel's "undivided capital."

This move by the US highlights its unwavering support for Israel, a stark contrast to China's more balanced approach. The current presence of American military ships and aircraft near Israel underscores the US commitment to its ally, and the decision to reinstate development aid for Palestinians in 2021 further demonstrates its support for Israel's security. These actions reflect the United States' deep-rooted interests in the region.

China's involvement in the Middle East, especially during the war, illustrates the complexity of contemporary global politics. While its historical perspective enables a unique role in mediating conflicts, its growing influence also positions it in the context of Sino-US competition. China's engagement underscores the need for a multipolar approach to addressing global conflicts. The world is no longer defined by a unipolar order, and China's rise serves as a reminder that a broader spectrum of perspectives and interests must be considered in international diplomacy.

In the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the international community should recognize the importance of multilateral diplomacy and cooperation. The focus should be on de-escalation, a two-state solution, and the principles of international law. China's involvement offers an opportunity to combine historical empathy with contemporary diplomacy to reach a lasting resolution. The Sino-US competition should not eclipse the ultimate goal of peace and stability in the region. It should serve as a reminder that the interests of nations, the rights of individuals, and the principles of international law must always take precedence over political rivalries.

In a world filled with complexity and competing narratives, China's involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict presents both challenges and opportunities. As a nation with a historical consciousness of humiliation and a desire for rejuvenation, China can bring a unique perspective to the table. Its growing prominence in the global security order, however, also demands a nuanced approach to balance its interests in the Middle East with its role as a peacemaker and mediator. The 2023 Israel-Palestine conflict is a test of China's diplomacy and a reminder that the path to peace is paved with empathy, diplomacy, and the willingness to rise above the tumultuous tides of geopolitical rivalry.

About the author:

Sophie Wushuang Yi is a Ph.D. Candidate in Chinese Studies Research (International Relations) at King's College London. She holds a bachelor's degree in international politics and security Studies from the University of Sheffield and has pursued graduate studies in Economics at SOAS and China in Comparative Perspectives (International Relations) at LSE. Her research focuses on China's naval force posture in the South China Sea from a defensive realist perspective, contributing to a deeper understanding of China's role in international relations. From 2021 to 2023, she worked as an Economist Assistant at the UN Resident Coordinator Office in China, and has also worked in think tanks as Research Fellow.