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Israel-Hamas War: Unspoken Interests of India and China

By P. S. Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

As champions of the rights of Palestinians, India and China see their interests entwined in the wave of unprecedented violence between Israel and Palestine's Hamas. At the United Nations, Beijing and Delhi have differed in their voting choices on the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. India is guided mainly by its principle of rejecting terrorism of all kinds while China has seized a strategic opportunity to woo the Palestinians and the Arab-Islamic fraternity, and to alienate them from the United States, perceivably Israel's all-weather patron.

COMMENTARY

Israel's "[fierce attacks](#)" against [Hamas](#) in Gaza test the ability of the United Nations (UN) to end the two-month-old war. A top UN aid official is reported to have described the emerging situation in Gaza as "[apocalyptic](#)" in its impact on the Palestinian civilians. Significantly, China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has already proposed a [new international peace conference](#), albeit under UN auspices, to ensure Palestinian statehood with Israeli concurrence.

Beijing seeks to achieve this elusive geopolitical goal, on the basis of the decades-old two-state formula which is often traced to the UN's ingenuity. Releasing a "position paper" on 30 November 2023, China advocated a "broad-based, authoritative and effective" conference "to formulate a concrete timetable and roadmap for the implementation of the two-state solution". The paper was "[submitted](#)" to the UN Security Council (UNSC) one day earlier.

Without naming the parties relevant to the process, Beijing emphasised that the conference should be "[led and organised by the UN](#)". If this conference should

materialise, both China and India have strong credentials to participate proactively in the initiative.

At stake is a potential agreement between Israel and Palestine to coexist as contiguous nations, an idea kept alive under the [Oslo Accords](#) of the 1990s. This would, inter alia, require Israel to restore the regional boundaries that existed before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

However, this prospect is now even more complicated because of Hamas' 7 October 2023 terrorist blitzkrieg on Israel and the latter's devastating military response, which is still ongoing in the Palestinian territory of Gaza. With Israel's offensive causing massive Palestinian civilian deaths and displacements besides ruining Gaza's infrastructure, international focus on Hamas' action has somewhat dimmed.

China and India continue to advocate Palestinian statehood, despite their respective strong ties with Israel. At this writing, however, the two Asian neighbours have not acted in concert to address the current situation.

Sino-Indian Differences at UNGA

On 27 October, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) approved Jordan's draft resolution that called for a "[humanitarian truce](#) leading to a cessation of hostilities". Hamas was not condemned or even named in the resolution. However, China [voted for](#) this [non-binding UNGA resolution](#) which was overwhelmingly adopted, while India [abstained](#) from voting.

China opted for the moral imperative of safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of the entrapped civilians in Gaza. In doing so, Beijing has taken a calculated risk of displeasing Israel over its concerns about terrorism.

India, while abstaining from voting, was guided by the need to balance the interests of both Israel and the Palestinians. In Delhi's view, the failure to condemn Hamas in the resolution was not conducive to incentivising Israel to accept a Palestinian state in due course.

It should also be noted that India had earlier voted for, while China voted against, Canada's proposed amendment to the Jordanian resolution. Canada's failed amendment, co-sponsored by the United States, would have had the UNGA condemn Hamas.

Beijing's vote appears to have been vindicated by the UNGA's rejection of Canada's proposed amendment. For Delhi, its perspectives were conditioned by its own experience as a major victim of serial terrorism and as an anti-terror pioneer at the UN. As far back as 1996, [India had piloted a draft](#) "Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism" at the UNGA. Unfortunately, owing to the "[necessity to find consensus](#)" on the meaning of "international terrorism" in an increasingly polarised world, India's draft is still being negotiated.

China's Initiative at UNSC, India's Course-Correction

The UNGA resolution on “humanitarian truce” for the Gaza war was adopted following a [deadlock](#) four-times-over in the UNSC. Breaking the deadlock on 15 November 2023, the Security Council called for “[humanitarian pauses and corridors](#)” for “a sufficient number of days” to facilitate the flow of aid to the entrapped civilians in Gaza. Another highlight was the call for the “immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and other groups”.

China voted for the binding “humanitarian pauses” resolution piloted by Malta, while the US and even Russia, China's partner, abstained. While Washington was “horrified” that Hamas was not being condemned, Russia wanted a full-scale ceasefire.

Nevertheless, while Israel and Hamas were implementing the humanitarian pause, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, chaired a UNSC session on 29 November and warned that a resumption of fighting “will most likely [turn into a calamity](#) that [would] encompass the whole [Middle East] region”. With Wang Yi's warning going unheeded, Israel and Hamas resumed the Gaza war on 1 December 2023.

Separately, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had utilised a video-linked gathering of Global South leaders on 17 November to [balance](#) his earlier stand of “[solidarity with Israel](#)” in response to Hamas' terrorist attack. Chairing the Global South meeting, Modi said, “We also strongly condemn the deaths of civilians in the [ongoing] conflict between Israel and Hamas”.

Reflecting a broader perspective, India's former Permanent Representative to the UN, T. S. Tirumurti, who was also the UNSC President in August 2021, intimated this to the author: “The UN Security Council resolution which calls for ‘humanitarian pauses’ does not address the fundamental issue of stopping of indiscriminate killings of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, especially after the unconscionable killing of [thousands of] children”.

Unspoken Realities

Both China and India have not explicitly articulated the rationale for their respective strategies. On the Chinese side, their thinking is influenced by at least two factors.

Firstly, Beijing certainly needs the proactive support of the global Islamic bloc to deal with the terrorist “threat” from the [East Turkestan Islamic Movement](#). China understands that both the political and militant aspects of Hamas resonate in the pan-Islamic world. Therefore, besides the [shuttle diplomacy](#) of Zhai Jun, China's special envoy to the Middle East, to bring about an Israeli-Hamas ceasefire, Beijing began [liaising with a Saudi-led Arab-Islamic delegation](#) on 20 November 2023. Through such diplomacy, the Chinese could hope to gain goodwill in the global Arab-Islamic constituency – potentially at the expense of Washington.

Secondly, China can, arguably, hope to offset any potential Israeli reluctance to supply high-tech products in retaliation for Chinese refusal to condemn Hamas so far. This line of thinking follows US President Joe Biden's apparent [assurance](#) to Chinese President Xi Jinping on 15 November 2023 that America would certainly protect its

national security, but “without unduly limiting [high-tech] trade and investment” vis-à-vis China. Biden’s apparent assurance to Xi reflects a potential thaw, if not also a full-scale detente, in the US-China trade disputes. The importance of the Chinese market for the US high-tech companies seems to have been addressed.

India’s choices, too, can be explained by two factors. Firstly, Israel’s current priority of eradicating terrorism is in sync with India’s resolute campaign against terrorism of all kinds. In recent years, Israel has also become India’s reliable partner in the security and economic sectors.

Secondly, [Modi spoke to Mahmoud Abbas](#), Palestinian Authority’s President, on 19 October, assuring him of India’s continued humanitarian assistance for the traumatised Palestinian civilians. Modi’s call was to offset any negative Palestinian sentiments against India for its stand at the UN.

Conclusion

The geopolitics of the Middle East is still evolving. How the Israel-Hamas war – or indeed, the Israel-Palestinian conflict – ends, may well impact on India’s and China’s respective plans to straddle the Arab-Israeli spectrum as economic and connectivity partners.

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