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Through Domestic Eyes: Chinese and Indian Responses to the Israel-Hamas Conflict

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SYNOPSIS

Almost three months since the horrendous attacks by Hamas militants on Israel, the moral legitimacy of Israel's response is being questioned worldwide. Comparing China and India's reactions, one sees that domestic concerns shape the manner in which both countries have officially responded to the conflict.

COMMENTARY



As the Israel-Hamas conflict rages on, countries like China and India have taken various political stances on the situation. In considering their respective domestic concerns, China maintains its long-held position of non-interference, while India takes up a nuanced position that supports Israel while condemning Hamas terrorism.

Image from Wikimedia Commons.

China's Middle East Script

Following the 7 October 2023 attacks by Hamas militants on Israel, China's response was largely muted and followed its usual rhetoric, urging both parties to exercise restraint, reiterating the importance of a two-state solution, and expressing Beijing's support for peace negotiations.

While Beijing sent a special envoy, Zhai Jun, to Cairo a few days later, what was notable was the absence of any unequivocal condemnation of Hamas' actions or expression of solidarity towards Israel. In fact, it took almost two weeks before President Xi Jinping made his first public statements on the conflict during a 20 October meeting with Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly in Beijing. As expected, Xi spoke in general terms, including stating the obvious, which was to "stop the fighting as soon as possible, prevent the conflict from spreading or even getting out of control and causing a severe humanitarian crisis."

Unsurprisingly, Beijing's reluctance to be more explicit about its position, including not expressing solidarity with Israel in the early weeks of the conflict, was viewed by the [Israeli political community](#) as a sign of its unwillingness to play a more active role in the region and stand up against [terrorism and violence](#). Beijing's response was in sharp contrast with the responses by the United States and Taiwan, both of which had strongly condemned the Hamas attacks. Only on 24 October (presumably after Xi's statements) did Beijing's official line make mention of Israel's "right to self-defence" against Hamas, although with the caveat that civilians need to be protected.

Why this hesitancy? First and foremost, Beijing's hesitancy squares with its long-standing support for the Palestinian cause, including its identification with Palestinians as historical "[victims](#)" of Western aggression and hegemony. By playing this victim card, China is at once demonstrating solidarity with the weak while claiming moral high ground over the United States, presenting its stance as superior to Washington's binary perspective of the situation in which support for Israel is unconditional.

This position feeds into the popular domestic narrative in which the West (including Israel) is often portrayed as a bully while countries in the developing world (which China identifies with) are perceived as victims. By taking such a position, Beijing is able to rally the Chinese people in support of its exceptionalist worldview, in which China is *good* and the West is *bad*.

Second, China is well aware of the complicated nature of Middle Eastern politics and has little desire to muddy its hands in the region. Unlike the United States, whose support for Israel is in part motivated by strands of [Christian dispensationalist theology](#), China has no such theological baggage and thus adopts a more realpolitik approach to its relations with Israel. Interests, not ideology is the primary factor behind China-Israel relations.

Since the 1990s, Israel has been China's backdoor in gaining access to Western technology, particularly in advanced military and dual-use technology, in exchange for allowing Israeli exports into China. Whether this relationship will continue is open to question in light of American high-tech curbs on China and Israel's unhappiness over

China's muted response. Furthermore, it is the Asia-Pacific region, not the Middle East, which remains the focus of Chinese attention.

Given this reality, it is unlikely that China would want to devote substantial resources to resolve problems in the Middle East. This approach reflects China's long-held position that it would not interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries, thus allowing Beijing to absolve itself of taking further responsibility for what happens in the Middle East.

In contrast, any semblance of America's renewed attention to the Middle East would be welcomed by China as it would mean distracting Washington from Asia, which is where China's interests are centred. While we do not think China's Middle Eastern strategy is expressly intended to trap the United States in the region, the fact that China's rise and dominance within Asia over the past two decades has been in part due to the US strategic focus on the Middle East as it pursued its "war on terror" means that protracted conflict in the Middle East today that consumes America's attention would generally serve Chinese interests better in Asia. As a point of comparison, the somewhat reduced attention paid in Washington to the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the past few months has given Moscow some breathing room. Likewise, Beijing certainly hopes the Israel-Hamas conflict will give China more space in Asia.

India's Middle East Imagination

In contrast to China, India's first official reaction to the developments unfolding in the Gaza Strip was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unequivocal expression of India's support for Israel on the very day of Hamas' attack. As one of the first global leaders to convey a message of support, he stated "We stand in solidarity with Israel in this difficult hour."

The prime minister reiterated the message after speaking to his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, three days following the initial attack and added, "India strongly and unequivocally condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations." However, although firm in its support for Israel, this stance does not [signal](#) a shift away from New Delhi's traditional view on Palestine. It is more reflective of India's own experience with terrorism, which is a core security issue.

Ever since full diplomatic relations were established between India and Israel in 1992, New Delhi has skilfully managed its relations with West Asia. Over the decades, bilateral relations with Israel and the Arab world have simultaneously strengthened across various sectors. India is also a part of the I2U2 partnership along with Israel, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and of the proposed India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) that is intended to run from India to Greece through the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. New Delhi's response to the developments in Gaza echoes India's nuanced position over the unfolding crisis.

Geopolitical realities appear to have driven India's response to Hamas' attack on Israel. Prime Minister Modi's unequivocal support for Israel as the first official position of India could be viewed from two perspectives. First, India's initial response was dictated by humanitarian concern for the thousands killed or injured in Israel. Second, due to the growth of friendly ties under the Modi and Netanyahu governments, India's

relations with Israel are robust and span several sectors. The defence and security cooperation between the two countries, for example, has significantly evolved. India is the [largest](#) buyer of Israeli military equipment and Israel is the third largest exporter of defence equipment to India after Russia and France.

Following the prime minister's tweets, India's external affairs ministry described the Hamas strikes and raids on Israel as a terrorist attack. New Delhi has not designated the group as a terrorist organisation, with the external affairs ministry [stressing](#) that the designation was a "legal matter." At the same time, India's long-standing position on the Palestine issue was reiterated and the government [stated](#) that "India has always advocated the resumption of direct negotiations towards establishing a sovereign, independent, and viable state of Palestine, living within secure and recognised borders side by side at peace with Israel."

India has been active in managing the domestic fallout from the crisis. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar [announced](#) the launch of "Operation Ajay" to facilitate the return of Indian citizens in Israel through specially chartered flights. By 19 October, 1,200 Indians as well as 18 Nepalis had been brought back from Israel. On the humanitarian front, India has [sent](#) 6.5 tonnes of medical aid and equipment and 32 tonnes of disaster relief material for the people of Palestine.

Within India, there have been [debates](#) over the government's position. Several commentaries and [op-eds](#) in leading Indian media sites have [advocated](#) that India should have been more assertive about the rights of the Palestinian people and [criticised](#) the government for being one-sided in its response. [Others](#) have articulated the need for India to pressure and influence Israel. Modi, however, appears to have assuaged such sentiments by [speaking](#) with Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, and expressing his condolences for the loss of innocent lives in the Al Ahli Hospital explosion and reiterating support for Palestinian statehood.

Several protests have taken place [around](#) the [country](#) in support of Palestine and demanding a ceasefire. In November, the chief minister of the state of Kerala inaugurated a rally which was [attended](#) by more than 50,000 people and decried Modi for supporting Israel. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has criticised such rallies and authorities have clamped down on them across the country. In the capital, New Delhi, over 60 people were [detained](#) by police on grounds of failing to obtain prior permission to hold a protest. Similar episodes have taken place in other cities. On the other hand, right-wing groups have also held protests [condemning](#) the Hamas attack and supporting Israel.

Ultimately, India has been able to take a nuanced stance that supports Israel against terrorism and condemns Hamas, while also providing humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza. It has also made an important distinction between Hamas and the people of Palestine. While it might seem that India is leaning towards Israel, its principled stance on a two-state solution remains unchanged. As India gears up for general elections in 2024, the crisis in West Asia is likely to be overshadowed by domestic political issues.

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