

Dossier: Israel-Palestine Conflict

Russia and China in the Gaza Crisis: Trying to Beat Washington at Its Own Game*

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If one thing is true about the international politics of the Middle East region, it is that today's confident assumptions can turn out to be tomorrow's obvious fallacy. So it is with the war in Gaza, ignited by the Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel on 7 October 2023, which led to the biggest and most deadly armed conflict between Israel and its neighbours since 1948. The conflict has taken an immense civilian toll, with no end in sight. In addition to the loss of Palestinian and Israeli lives, and the almost complete devastation of the Gaza Strip, there have been political casualties as well. These include important assumptions that up to now undergirded US policy toward the region.

Washington's hoped-for "pivot to Asia"² was one of the first to topple. This strategy was to have involved a reduction of American political and military investment in the Middle East so the United States could focus more directly on the growing challenges of the Indo-Pacific security environment, particularly China's aggressive rise. Instead, the Gaza war upended this strategy, forcing the United States to become more involved in trying to solve the region's problems than ever before.

Another assumption proved even more damaging: Washington's firm view that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict could be relegated to the sidelines. The Biden administration, just as the Trump and Obama

administrations did earlier, assumed that the Palestinian struggle had lost urgency and importance, and was virtually unsolvable anyway. They concluded that the United States should therefore spend its political capital on efforts likely to be more successful. This meant American-led peacemaking among Israel and key Arab states, primarily the wealthy Gulf powers, to build on the foundation³ of the Trump administration's Abraham Accords, spurring political and economic integration throughout the region and building a coalition to counter Iran. The intractable Palestinian-Israeli conflict could be left to gather dust in a corner, at the top of no one's list of priorities. The success of the strategy rested on the assumption that, despite occasional flare-ups in the West Bank and between Hamas and Israel, the Palestine-Israel conflict would continue, but at a manageable level and without provoking a major international crisis.

The falsity of this assumption – that Palestinian aspirations could be ignored while Arabs made their separate peace with Israel – was likely a key factor in Hamas's decision to launch the 7 October attack that threw the Middle East into chaos.

The Pax Americana, the regional order that has, for better or worse, loomed over the Middle East for more than 70 years, now seems broken. Key players in the region as well as powerful outside actors have begun scrambling to replace it with something more to their liking. The question is: what will it be?

Both Russia and China have seen an opportunity to make renewed bids for influence in the Middle East at America's expense. While the US has been consumed

* This article was written in June 2024 (editor's note).

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² <https://arabcenterdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-Past-and-Future-of-the-American-Pivot-to-Asia.pdf>.

³ <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/us-middle-east-policy-the-trump-biden-doctrine-in-action/>.

by crisis management and reputational damage, both great powers have sought to leverage Gaza to expand ties within the region and pose as an alternative to Washington. But neither has demonstrated the political clout, vision, or capacity to take full advantage, and perhaps even supersede the United States as an external power broker, despite the opportunities this crisis presents to extend the inroads both have made in the last decade. Quite the contrary: Russian and Chinese diplomacy on Gaza has demonstrated their limitations as great powers, at least in the Middle East, and the United States – against its will – has once again been forced into the role of Middle East deal-maker. For now, at least, all roads lead to Washington.

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Still, Moscow and Beijing made serious efforts, especially toward the beginning of the Gaza conflagration, to reinforce their diplomatic credibility and demonstrate their capacity for leadership. Each did so in strikingly different ways.

Russia's Cynical Effort to Take Advantage of Gaza Falls Flat

In the first days following the Hamas terrorist attack, Moscow appeared caught off guard by the magni-

tude of what had happened. But Russia's cynical leadership soon began to see an opportunity to jab at the United States and gain favour with regional Arab powers. It chose to do so by taking the somewhat risky path of aligning itself even more closely with the region's most radical elements, including Hamas, some of which are regarded with suspicion or outright hostility by the very Arab states with which Moscow tried to curry favour.

This should come as no surprise; Russia's growing role as an adjunct member of the Iran-aligned "Axis of Resistance"⁴ has been out in the open since Moscow began "official" military cooperation in Syria⁵ with Hezbollah in 2016, where it provided support to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iranian forces⁶ fighting on Assad's behalf in that country's ruinous civil war. Russia's increasing involvement with radical anti-Western actors⁷ gained momentum after Russia's own invasion of Ukraine, during the course of which Russia has become increasingly dependent⁸ on Iranian weapons systems⁹ to prosecute its illegal aggression against Kyiv.

Thus, shortly after Israel's retaliatory assault on Gaza began in late October 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that the Israeli offensive violated international law;¹⁰ President Putin compared Israel's siege of Gaza with Nazi Germany's siege of Leningrad.¹¹ The official line was echoed by numerous Russian political figures and legislators;¹² none thought to condemn the Hamas attack that led to the confrontation in the first place. (Russia's own tactics in Ukraine – which deliberately target the civilian population¹³ and infrastructure – proved no moral impediment to these verbal attacks on Israel.)

Leaving no doubt whose side it was on, Moscow pointedly hosted a senior delegation¹⁴ from Hamas headed by one of its founding members, Moussa Abu Marzook, just three weeks after the Hamas strike in southern Israel. Although Russia had received del-

⁴ www.nytimes.com/2024/04/04/briefing/iran-israel-war-taiwan.html.

⁵ www.timesofisrael.com/russia-and-hezbollah-officially-working-together-in-syria/.

⁶ www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria.

⁷ www.politico.eu/article/russia-china-struck-deal-yemen-houthi-rebels-ship-safety/.

⁸ www.stimson.org/2024/iran-and-russia-enter-a-new-level-of-military-cooperation/.

⁹ www.reuters.com/world/iran-sends-russia-hundreds-ballistic-missiles-sources-say-2024-02-21/.

¹⁰ www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russia-says-israels-gaza-bombardment-is-against-international-law-2023-10-28/.

¹¹ www.barrons.com/news/putin-compares-unacceptable-gaza-siege-to-nazi-blockade-of-leningrad-c04e9a6a.

¹² <https://time.com/6329850/hamas-gaza-russia-putin-israel/>.

¹³ <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/russia-and-china-on-gaza-sidelined-lurking-or-winning/>.

¹⁴ www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/26/hamas-delegation-travels-to-moscow-for-talks-on-foreign-hostages-in-gaza.

negations from Hamas twice earlier in 2023, the timing of this visit was particularly provocative.

Russian and Chinese diplomacy on Gaza has demonstrated their limitations as great powers, at least in the Middle East, and the United States has once again been forced into the role of Middle East dealmaker

Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov tried to brush off international criticism by claiming¹⁵ Moscow had found it was “necessary to continue our contacts with all parties,” but the remark appeared more cynical than statesmanlike. Marzook and his delegation met with Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov in talks focused on the release of hostages, some of whom held Russian citizenship, and three of the six or so Russian nationals held in Gaza were subsequently released. Beyond these meagre results, however, the talks failed to secure a diplomatic role for Russia in resolving the crisis; instead, they highlighted the paucity of any Russian ideas for constructive diplomacy and Moscow’s inability to separate itself from its associations with internationally condemned terrorist groups. Indeed, during his visit Abu Marzook characterized Moscow as “our closest friend.”¹⁶

Putin Tries Again

Perhaps aware of the damaging optics of his government’s actions, President Putin made an effort to reassert Russia’s relevance in the region and project an image of statesmanship. As the conflict threatened to spread,¹⁷ and tensions rose between

Israel and Hezbollah (increasingly an ally of Moscow),¹⁸ the moment was still ripe. In early December Putin made a quick tour of the Gulf,¹⁹ visiting both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, where he was met with praise by the leadership of both countries. While Gaza was the stepping-off point, Putin focused on reminding his hosts of the larger role Moscow played in the Middle East, celebrating growing trade relations between Russia and his hosts. In Riyadh, Putin also highlighted Russian-Saudi cooperation within OPEC+. These themes – expanding trade and oil price cooperation – helped Putin emphasize Russia’s importance in the politics of the Arab region, reinforcing the Kremlin’s message of its centrality, and demonstrating that Moscow is not isolated²⁰ even among some of Washington’s closest allies.

Ukraine appeared to have been as important to Putin in his Gulf swing as Gaza. The trip afforded an opportunity to remind his interlocutors of the American “double standard” of defending Israel’s assault on Gaza while condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In private, Putin probably expressed appreciation for the Gulf states’ relatively low-key positions on Ukraine, which had been helpful in limiting international pressure on Moscow.

Putin’s diplomatic efforts continued the day after his return from the Gulf. Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi²¹ arrived in Moscow for talks that prominently featured the war in Gaza. Off camera, though, the deepening political-military cooperation between the two countries on Ukraine likely took centre stage, rather than the plight of the Palestinian people.

Despite Russia’s attempt to take advantage of Gaza to damage the United States at an inflection point for US policy in the Middle East, neither the efforts of Putin’s government nor Putin himself managed to carve out a bigger role for Russia in the resolution of the crisis. In fact, following the initial flurry of activity, Russian diplomacy on Gaza has appeared to recede into the background, with Moscow re-focusing much of its attention on the defeat of Ukraine, at a time

¹⁵ www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-bombing-gaza-has-killed-50-hostages-hamas-official-tells-russian-2023-10-27/.

¹⁶ www.reuters.com/world/hamas-is-seeking-eight-gaza-hostages-russias-request-ria-2023-10-28/.

¹⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/26/opinions/israel-hamas-iran-us-middle-east-dunne/index.html>.

¹⁸ www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hizbullah-and-russias-nascent-alliance.

¹⁹ www.wsj.com/world/russia/putin-meets-with-saudi-u-a-e-rulers-in-bid-to-refresh-alliances-df321626.

²⁰ <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-december-11/>.

²¹ www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/7/irans-raisi-says-genocide-under-way-in-gaza-as-he-meets-russias-putin.

when the Western alliance seems to be in disarray. Moscow has largely confined itself to wrangling with the United States²² at the UN Security Council. The United States vetoed²³ three cease-fire resolutions sponsored by Russia and China; in turn, Moscow and Beijing vetoed several resolutions introduced by Washington, much to the ire of US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who decried the vetoes as “cynical” and “petty.”²⁴

Meanwhile, Washington continued to do the diplomatic heavy lifting with the combatant parties and regional allies throughout the spring of 2024. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other senior officials paid numerous visits²⁵ to the Middle East in an attempt to secure the release of hostages still held by Hamas and to negotiate pauses in the fighting to permit humanitarian aid to enter Gaza. A US-sponsored cease-fire resolution finally passed²⁶ in the Security Council on 10 June by a vote of 14-0, with Russia (somewhat passively) abstaining.

For all the international criticism of staunch American support for Israel, the contrast between Russia’s “petty” actions and energetic US diplomacy with regional parties painted a portrait of Russian ineffectiveness. And Moscow may be fine with this:²⁷ the longer this messy and intractable conflict persists, with its damage to the international order and the distractions and criticism it produces for Washington, the more Moscow likes it.

China: Appearing the Statesman, but Playing the Same Game

In contrast to Russian grandstanding and its appeal to radical actors in the region, China has taken a more traditional diplomatic approach. Beijing has issued no invitations to Hamas, for example. Instead, its public statements have relied on safe, standard formulations calling²⁸ for a “just, lasting,

and comprehensive settlement” of the Israel-Palestine conflict. After the Hamas attack, Beijing sent an envoy to the region for discussions on the situation; the diplomat stressed the importance of an immediate ceasefire. Last November, Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted a visiting delegation²⁹ of Arab and Islamic foreign ministers then touring the capitals of the five UN permanent members. Wang emphasized that China is a “good friend and brother of Arab and Muslim countries” that has “always firmly supported the just cause of the Palestinian people to restore their legitimate national rights and interests.”

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The Foreign Minister himself chaired a UN Security Council meeting on Gaza on 29 November during China’s Council presidency, reiterating similar formulations on the necessity of a ceasefire and an eventual two-state solution. In contrast to Russia, which has presented no detailed blueprint for a diplomatic endgame, Wang introduced a five-point Chinese peace plan³⁰ that emphasized the role of the UN and called for the implementation of all relevant United Nations resolutions on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as well as an international conference organized by the UN that would lead to a two-state solution overseen by the Security Council.

The plan was widely seen as too lacking in specifics³¹ to be the basis of a major diplomatic push, but it was successful in making China’s implied point that it was able to play the role expected of a global

²² <https://press.un.org/en/2024/ga12591.doc.htm>.

²³ www.nytimes.com/2024/06/10/world/middleeast/security-council-gaza-ceasefire-blinken.html.

²⁴ www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-security-council-fails-pass-us-resolution-calling-immediate-ceasefire-gaza-2024-03-22/.

²⁵ www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-travel-to-france-egypt-israel-jordan-qatar-and-italy/.

²⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/un-us-security-council-israel-hamas-ceasefire-834734f606a5245cc46a2487a70ae3fa>.

²⁷ <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/12/the-gaza-war-has-convincing-russia-it-was-right-all-along?lang=en>.

²⁸ www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/china-calls-concrete-roadmap-two-state-solution-solve-gaza-conflict-2023-11-30/.

²⁹ www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/beijing-arab-muslim-ministers-urge-end-gaza-war-2023-11-20/.

³⁰ www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202311/t20231129_11189405.html.

³¹ <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-middle-east-united-nations-b66f15460296169e32e38c90286db1df>.

superpower – unlike Russia, (with its aggressive rhetoric and provocative actions), and in pointed contrast³² to “the repeated and persistent obstruction of a permanent member of the Council.” That “permanent member,” the United States, has for its part urged Beijing to use its influence with Iran to prevent a wider regional conflict, a tacit acknowledgment of China’s influence.

The Chinese appear content using their stance on Gaza to build goodwill with regional states that may come in useful in the future regarding more important issues for China

Since then, China’s official statements have largely tended toward diplomatic boilerplate,³³ without any serious attempt to advance either multilateral or bilateral diplomatic plans, including their own. And, like Russia, China may be fine with that; lacking a serious vision or sufficient political clout with key parties, it may be the most Beijing can do for now.³⁴ The Chinese appear content using their stance on Gaza and Palestinian rights to build goodwill with regional states that may come in useful in the future regarding more important issues for China, such as Taiwan.

Not that Beijing is no longer playing the game: in July, China helped broker a joint statement³⁵ on Palestinian national unity and future governance in the Palestinian territories signed by representatives of Fatah and Hamas in the Chinese capital. But the agreement seemed mainly intended to highlight China’s role as a diplomatic mover and shaker and burnish its image in the Middle East, not contribute meaningfully to resolving the Gaza crisis or even Palestinian political infighting. Implementing it would be very difficult, given that it was largely aspirational in nature and vague on how, exactly, it would be brought

into effect, not to mention the fact that it ignores both Israeli and American objections to any governing role for Hamas. And history has been unkind to previous attempts to bring about Palestinian unity: a similar effort hosted by Russia last February collapsed, as did an Arab-led unity agreement in 2017. For now, this latest effort by China should be filed under “nice try”: symbolically interesting but practically impotent.

Moscow, Beijing, and Washington: Differences Stand out

Apart from some highly public efforts to appeal to Arab governments and seize a diplomatic advantage over the United States, neither Moscow nor Beijing has proved capable of playing the type of diplomatic role that might actually end the violence or set a process in motion that would deliver a Palestinian state. In fact, these efforts have served to highlight, once again, the centrality of the United States on the Middle East stage. President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have been publicly and actively engaged with regional governments, while in recent months the leaders of China and Russia seem to have taken a back seat. The United States has had some limited success in engineering a series of humanitarian pauses in the fighting and bringing about the release of hostages³⁶ held by Hamas; the United States, not Russia or China, was finally able to put together a ceasefire solution that could pass the Security Council. And the fact remains that it is only Washington, with its diplomatic heft and significant political-military presence in the region, that is still seen by regional actors (often grudgingly) as the only outside power truly capable of launching a viable peace process to bring about a Palestinian state, if it chooses to do so.

There are a few reasons for this. First, the special relationship between the United States and Israel gives Washington more influence with Jerusalem than any other outside power. Tense as US-Israel re-

³² www.cnn.com/2023/11/20/china/china-arab-countries-beijing-israel-hamas-conflict-intl-hnk/index.html.

³³ www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/china-gaza-hamas-israel-war/.

³⁴ www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/china-gaza-hamas-israel-war/.

³⁵ www.cnn.com/2024/07/23/china/hamas-fatah-palestinian-factions-beijing-intl-hnk/index.html.

³⁶ www.wsj.com/world/europe/cia-director-in-talks-with-israelis-to-restart-hamas-hostage-deal-22ac36b6?mod=hp_lead_pos9.

lations are right now, strained by President Joe Biden's increasing frustration with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the sharp rightward turn of Israel's government, leveraging this relationship remains key to a solution, whether to ending the fighting in Gaza, bring about peace between Israel and Palestine or effect diplomatic recognition between Israel and the Arab states.

Second, both Moscow and Beijing have failed to engage the government of Israel in their regional diplomacy during the present crisis, which has damaged their status as serious arbiters. The perception of bias, even hostility, against Israel has compounded the problem; Moscow's embrace of Hamas in particular did serious harm to relations with the Netanyahu government, and Putin's ever-deeper relationship with Iran has begun to make Moscow's effort to brand itself as a responsible, or at least potent, international actor has helped tarnish its image as well.

China has a similar problem. Like Russia, it is increasingly seen in the region as diplomatically ineffective, if not insincere,³⁷ and its own rhetoric has helped alienate Israel while making little headway with the Palestinians and most Arab states. Indeed, very little of consequence has been heard from either Russia or China on the Gaza war since early last December; they seem to have disappeared from the scene, except for occasional flurries of criticism aimed at Israel.

Gaza Situation Does Moscow and Beijing's Influence Work

This does not mean, however, that US diplomacy to bring about a Gaza ceasefire and a "political horizon" leading to a two-state solution has improved America's image or given it a clear advantage over its great power rivals. Indeed, Washington's unwa-

vering support for Israel's Gaza campaign and its vetoes of Security Council resolutions, in the face of mounting casualties and evidence of shocking Israeli indifference³⁸ to Palestinian deaths, has done serious damage to American standing in the region, which was never very high to begin with. This alone will continue to keep Russia and China relevant in the diplomatic game.

The longer Israel's war drags on and the Palestinian death toll mounts, the potential importance of Beijing and Moscow as a counterweight to Washington is becoming ever more apparent to America's Arab allies

However ineffective Russian and Chinese diplomacy toward Gaza may have been up to this point, events on the ground have underscored the two countries' central point: that by defending Israel at all costs, in the United Nations and with a seemingly unrestrained supply of weapons, ammunition and money, the United States has proven once again its hostility to Palestinian aspirations as well as the views and priorities of Arab and Islamic nations. While Washington strongly rejects any such criticism, the fact remains that the longer Israel's war drags on and the Palestinian death toll mounts – without any indication that Israel is prepared to end the conflict and make a meaningful commitment to a future Palestinian state –, the potential importance of Beijing and Moscow as a counterweight to Washington is becoming ever more apparent to America's Arab allies.

³⁷ www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/china-gaza-hamas-israel-war/.

³⁸ www.972mag.com/mass-assassination-factory-israel-calculated-bombing-gaza/.