

India's Gulf Strategy Is Chasing Chinese Phantoms

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The Chinese statement of December 2 at the United Nations General Assembly in New York on the 'Question of Palestine and the Situation in the Middle East' should trigger introspection in New Delhi. Without doubt, this must be one of the most forceful endorsements of the Palestinian cause in recent times by a great power.

It comes at a time when the narrative in India, scripted by the pro-US, pro-Israeli lobbyists in the media, has crystallised that Palestine cause is dead and India must 'move on'. The government, of course, indulges in dissimulation, paying lip service to the Palestinian problem but it cannot deceive onlookers.

Beijing, taking a diametrically opposite stance, places the Palestine cause "at the heart of Middle East situation," impacting regional peace. The Chinese statement hails **President Xi Jinping's** [congratulatory message](#) on the occasion of the International Day of solidarity with Palestinian people on December 1 reiterating that "China firmly supports the just cause of the Palestinian people to restore their legitimate national rights, as well as all the efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of the Palestinian issue."

Has **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** greeted the Palestinian people? Doubtful. Certainly, it was no less important to do so than telephoning Boris Johnson, the prime minister of Britain, our erstwhile colonial master, to personally invite him as the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations in January 2022.

Contrary to the Indian narrative, in the Chinese understanding, Palestine-Israel relations are "becoming increasingly tense and the peace process is dragging on in difficulty, and the risk of regional conflict is on the rise." There is a fundamental divergence here between the Indian and Chinese reading of the Middle Eastern tea leaves.

The Modi government identifies the Abraham Accords as a defining moment. The External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar went out of the way to hail the Abraham Accords and to follow up with a tour of Manama and Abu Dhabi last week. He literally followed the US Secretary Mike Pompeo's footfalls.

However, China insists that the "two-state solution is a bottom line of international justice, there's no going against the tide of history... The relevant UN resolutions, the land for peace principle, and the two-state solution... are important parameters in the Middle East peace process... (and) are the basis for solving the Palestinian question, and should be duly observed and implemented."

The Chinese statement calls on both sides to "seek an early solution to the issue of the

occupied Palestinian territory pursuant to the relevant UN resolutions, delineate the final Palestine-Israel border through peace talks, and refrain from any action that might fuel the tensions.”

China has welcomed the proposal of President Abbas to convene an international peace conference early next year. Indirectly referring to the killing of the Iranian scientist recently, the Chinese statement concludes,

“The tension has flared up back again in the Gulf, causing grave worries and concern. China is against any act that aggravates the regional tension and undermines regional peace and stability. China urges the parties concerned to make joint efforts to ease tension and maintain peace and stability in the region.”

The contrast couldn't be sharper. There is deafening silence in Delhi apropos of the state-sponsored terrorism by Israel in Iran, notwithstanding the chorus of condemnation by India's extended neighbourhood of the killing of the Iranian scientist — Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey, etc.

This stunning silence grates against breast-beating by the Modi government over recent killings in France. On December 7, Modi [telephoned](#) French president **Emmanuel Macron** to convey his condolences for the “terror attacks” in France and to reiterate India's “full support” to that country in its “fight against terrorism, extremism and radicalism.”

Make no mistake, China is positioning itself on the right side of history even as a US retrenchment is commencing in the Middle East. What the one-dimensional policymakers in Delhi fail to grasp is that China is crafting a ‘win-win’ approach.

It is no secret that China is discussing the draft of a 25-year strategic cooperation deal with Iran envisaging cooperation to the tune of \$400 billion over a twenty-five year period. Essentially, China has a significant economic incentive and is quietly preparing itself to play a larger role in the Middle East diplomacy that explicitly rejects US unilateralism abroad.

Given the serious doubts over the capacity of the Joe Biden presidency to push through a game changing accord with Iran, China hopes to get space to get more directly involved in Tehran's diplomatic affairs. This is one thing.

Again, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister **Wang Yi** recently unveiled an initiative to help resolve security issues facing the Gulf region and the Middle East through political and diplomatic means while also safeguarding the Iran nuclear deal. Wang did this after meeting with the visiting Iranian counterpart Javed Zarif at Tengchong, Yunnan province, on October 10.

This proposal devolving upon a [regional multilateral dialogue platform](#) is intended as a key template of a series of rapid Chinese policy shifts towards diplomatic intervention in the Middle East in the recent period, which, while implicitly competing with the US' recent moves, such as the Abraham Accords, outflanks them. Interestingly, Wang underscored that nations taking part in the new Middle East forum would be required to sign onto the Iran nuclear deal.

Now, all this must be seen in the backdrop of the Middle Eastern leaderships increasingly

pivoting towards China as a strategic partner, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE. China's achievement of diversified regional partnerships is astounding — in terms of planned investments to support ambitious infrastructure and technology initiatives in the region.

Reports have appeared that in October, Saudi Arabia's National Centre for Artificial Intelligence signed agreements with Chinese companies Huawei Technologies Co. and Alibaba Cloud as part of its new AI strategy. At the other extreme, China is widely perceived as the leading candidate to rebuild Syria's drastically damaged infrastructure after the long years of war. Estimates of the [cost of rebuilding Syria](#) range from a modest \$200 billion to more pessimistic forecasts in the region of \$1 trillion.

Indeed, China continues to deepen its reliance on the Middle East's energy supply, which is an anchor sheet of its regional diplomacy. Meanwhile, the [China-Arab States Political Parties Dialogue](#) is a relatively new platform that includes 60 leaders from political parties across the Arab states, including Assad and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, which meshes with a [larger matrix](#) that China hopes to lead.

Fundamentally, China's diplomatic exchanges in the Middle East are motivated by its long-term economic rise. Put differently, China's economic ambitions remain the backbone – rather than an accessory – to its foreign policy decision-making.

Quintessentially, this is the difference between the Indian and Chinese approaches to the Gulf. The China-Middle East forum projects a diplomatic agenda rather than advancing a geopolitical agenda.

Jaishankar's exciting trip to Manama, Abu Dhabi and Victoria, on the other hand, was directed against China's perceived interventionist agenda in the Arabian Gulf and western Indian Ocean, where none really exists, which essentially views the region as a proxy for US-China tensions. It is deeply flawed and is fated to be wasteful, unproductive and ultimately unsustainable — and cannot be any different in its outcome from the predicament that the US is encountering vis-a-vis the ASEAN.

The text of the Chinese statement at the UNGA is [here](#).

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