

# Chinese-Israeli Relations: Between Opportunities and Constraints

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**Abstract:** This article examines Chinese-Israeli relations, and argues that since the 1990s, China and Israel successfully improved their bilateral ties by focusing on their commonalities defined by mutual economic interests instead of their differences. Yet, besides opportunities, there are also constraints affecting the bilateral relations: first, the U.S.-Chinese competition for global leadership, and the U.S. as a close ally of Israel opposing the improvement in Chinese-Israeli relations; second, China's close military relations with Iran; and third, Beijing's pro-Palestinian policies. The article argues that of the three constraints, the U.S. disapproval of close Chinese-Israeli relations influenced the bilateral ties the most. Although China's military relations with Iran raised Israeli security concerns, both states managed to focus on their mutual economic gains. Regarding the Palestinian issue, China's cautious policies did not adversely affect the bilateral ties.

**Keywords:** *Chinese-Israeli Relations, U.S.-Israeli Relations, Chinese-Iranian Relations, China's Pro-Palestinian Policies*

## Fırsatlar ve Kısıtlamalar Arasındaki Çin-İsrail İlişkileri

**Öz:** Bu makale Çin-İsrail ilişkilerini incelemektedir ve 1990'lardan beri Çin ve İsrail'in başarılı olarak ikili ilişkilerini farklılıklarından ziyade ortak ekonomik çıkarlarıyla tanımlanmış ortak noktalarına odaklandıklarını öne sürmektedir. Fakat fırsatların yanı sıra ikili ilişkileri etkileyen kısıtlamalar da mevcuttur bunlar: bir, ABD-Çin arasındaki küresel liderlik rekabeti ve ABD'nin İsrail'in yakın müttefiki olarak gelişen Çin-İsrail ilişkilerine karşı çıkması; iki, Çin'in İran ile yakın ilişkileri ve üç, Pekin'in Filistin yanlısı politikaları. Makale bu üç kısıtlayıcı etken arasında en çok ABD'nin yakın Çin-İsrail ilişkilerine karşı olmasının ikili ilişkileri etkilendiği görüşünü dile getirmektedir. Her ne kadar Çin'in İran ile askeri ilişkileri İsrail'in güvenlik endişelerine sebep olmuşsa da, her iki ülke ortak ekonomik kazançlarına odaklanabilmişlerdir. Filistin

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konusunda Çin'in izlediği temkinli politikalar ikili ilişkilerin zarar görmesini engellemiştir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Çin-İsrail İlişkileri, ABD-İsrail İlişkileri, Çin-İran İlişkileri, Çin'in Filistin Yanlısı Politikaları.*

## **Introduction**

There are vast differences between China and Israel in terms of their hard power, foreign policy orientation, and regime type. Regarding its military power, China is the world's third most powerful state; whereas Israel ranks the twentieth (Koronka, 2021). China is the world's second largest economy with a nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at \$14,722 trillion, whereas Israel ranks twenty-ninth with a nominal GDP at \$407 billion (World Bank, 2020). Israel is a close U.S. ally and pursues a pro-Western foreign policy orientation; whereas China competes with the U.S. for global domination, and usually follows a pro-Russian stance in international affairs. In contrast to the increasingly repressive authoritarian regime in China (Freedom House 1/2022), Israel is the best democracy in the Middle East region (Freedom House 2/2022). Despite all these differences, however, China and Israel defined their relations based on pragmatism by focusing on expanding their trade and investment opportunities.

This article examines Chinese-Israeli relations, and argues that since the 1990s, China and Israel successfully improved their bilateral ties by focusing on their commonalities defined by mutual economic interests instead of their differences. Yet, besides opportunities, there are also constraints affecting the bilateral relations: first, the U.S.-Chinese competition for global leadership, and the U.S. as a close ally of Israel opposing the improvement in Chinese-Israeli relations; second, China's close military relations with Iran; and third, Beijing's pro-Palestinian policies (e.g., diplomatic support for the Palestinian quest and not regarding Hamas as a terrorist organization). The article argues that of the three constraints, the U.S. disapproval of the close Chinese-Israeli relations influenced the bilateral ties the most. Although China's military relations with Iran raises Israeli security concerns, both countries could manage to focus on their mutual economic gains. Regarding the Palestinian issue, China's cautious policies did not adversely affect the bilateral ties.

## **A Brief Historical Account of the Bilateral Relations**

Israel was the first country in the Middle East region to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) in January 1950. Yet, the bilateral diplomatic relations could only be formed in January 1992, when Beijing finally recognized Israel. The Cold War superpower competition, the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, and China's pro-Arab stance acted as obstacles for the establishment of diplomatic relations.

Despite the fact that the Cold War impeded the formation of Chinese-Israeli diplomatic relations, until early 1955, China positively regarded Israel as a liberated state from British imperialism with a modernizing society pursuing some socialist tendencies (Shichor, 1994: 188-190). Indeed, China prior to becoming communist in 1949 was one of the countries allowing the flow of Jewish refugees to its territory and communist China maintained this pro-Jewish policy. The first large wave of Russian Jewish immigrants escaping from the Bolshevik Revolution arrived in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s. Then, this was followed by European Jews fleeing from Nazi rule in Germany and taking refuge in Shanghai (Griffiths, 2013). During World War II, China not only admitted about 20,000 European Jewish refugees (Smithsonian Magazine, 2021), but also acted as one of the transit countries through which the refugees arrived in Israel in the aftermath of the war. For example, in November 1950, 5,200 Jewish hard core (ill and aged) refugees left China for Israel by an International Refugee Organization ship (FO 371/87424-0013/WR1415/31/48, 1950, November 3).

The end of the Korean War in 1953, by relatively easing the international tension, raised the possibility for China and Israel to form diplomatic relations. In the mid-1950s, Israel, while being on the Western bloc, tried to overcome its regional isolation by reaching out to China, in particular (SD 684A.93/4-655, 1955, April 6), and Asia, in general. Within this framework, in January 1955, an Israeli trade delegation visited China (SD 320.2, 1955, February 1: 5). Following the arrival in Israel of a Chinese trade mission in June 1955, Israeli government informed its counterpart that it was prepared to discuss the exchange of diplomatic representatives with Beijing. Yet, the Israeli initiative failed as a result of China's rejection and its pro-Arab stance (SD 684A.93/6-1055, 1955, June 10). Indeed, at the Bandung Conference in April 1955, China adversely changed its position toward

Israel by prioritizing the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issue (Shichor, 1994: 190). During the Suez War in 1956, China supported Egypt and broke off all of its contacts with Israel. This resulted in a frozen period in the bilateral relations until the late 1970s (Goldstein, 2004: 239).

Israel, facing Arab states' hostility, emphasized maintaining its strong relations with the U.S.-led bloc in order to ensure its survival and security. Whereas, until 1978, China's foremost goal was, by supporting the Palestinian liberation quest vis-à-vis the Israeli occupation, to increase its influence in the Middle East region and form an anti-imperialist Third World bloc under its leadership as an alternative to the U.S. and Soviet blocs. In January 1965, China was the first non-Arab country recognizing the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and in March of that year it invited the PLO to open up a semi-diplomatic mission in Beijing. In addition to its diplomatic support, China also provided military training and weapons to various Palestinian factions, adversely affecting the Chinese-Israeli relations (Shichor, 1994: 191-192).

Meanwhile, China's pro-PLO and pro-Arab stance defined by communism was only a partial success. Only a handful of Arab states (e.g., Egypt, Syria, and Yemen in 1956 and Iraq in 1958) formed diplomatic relations with China. Most Middle Eastern states maintained their political ties with the Republic of China (ROC) or Taiwan until the 1970s (Goldstein, 2004: 239). Indeed, the real breakthrough resulting in Beijing to expand its relations with countries of the Middle East could only occur in 1971, when China was admitted to the United Nations (UN), while also assuming the UN Security Council (UNSC) permanent membership at the expense of Taiwan. By the late 1960s, China regarded the Soviet Union as an immediate threat to its security. This resulted in a reconciliation between the U.S. and China, while Beijing distancing itself from pro-Soviet radical Arab states (e.g., Syria, South Yemen, and Libya) and national liberation movements (e.g., FATAH and the PLO). On account of this change, Turkey, Israel, Iran, Kuwait, and Lebanon promptly recognized the PRC's UNSC membership in 1971. This was followed by Jordan in 1977 and Libya and Oman in 1978 (Shichor, 1994: 192-194; Zhang, 1999: 150-151; Shichor, 2015: 102; Inbar, 2020: 254; Scobell and Nader, 2016: 4; Kumaraswamy, 2013: 146).

By the mid-1970s, China toned down its criticism of Israel. Beijing, on the one hand, avoided from forming diplomatic relations with Israel by conditioning it on the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet, on the other hand, China implicitly recognized Israel's right to exist and emphasized not to be identified with radical anti-Israeli Arab-Palestinian policies (Shichor, 1994: 192-194; Zang, 1999: 150-151; Shichor, 2015: 102; Inbar, 2020: 254; Scobell and Nader, 2016: 4; Kumaraswamy, 2013: 146). Meanwhile, Israel consistently pursued One China policy; thus, it never recognized Taiwan. Israel, as an endeavor to improve its relations with China, opened up an honorary council in Hong Kong in 1961, and in 1972, it upgraded this to a consulate general. Yet, in 1975, there was a return to an honorary council for budgetary reasons (Xiao, 2018: 3; Efron et al., 2019: 13).

The bilateral relations improved in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping assumed China's leadership after Mao Zedong's death in 1976. Under Xiaoping, China deemphasized its policy of self-reliance, and instead focused on reaching out to the world by promoting its relations in fields of agriculture, industry, science, and technology for its modernization and economic development. Indeed, Xiaoping's post-Mao pro-market reforms solidified support for the regime, while making China a model for the world (Brands and Gaddis, 2021: 13).

Meanwhile, Israel's relations with Egypt were undergoing a significant change following Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem in 1977. This allowed China to redefine its communist foreign policy toward Israel and the Middle East region by pragmatism. China began to portray itself as a disinterested and honest broker of peace in the region. Thus, the late 1970s marked a fresh start for the formation of informal Chinese-Israeli relations. In 1979, Israeli businessman Shaul Eisenberg fostered the clandestine bilateral ties in the form of a military technology transfer from Israel to China, while the latter also benefiting from the former's technology in agriculture (Chen, 2012: 5; Yu, 2021: 278).

In the 1980s, China's economic policy aimed at achieving rapid industrial development by adopting Western methods and technology from available countries. Within this framework, China benefited from Israel's advanced technological capabilities in agriculture, solar energy, construction, and military modernization. For this purpose, Beijing hosted some Israeli scientists; yet, it was only after 1982 that

the country eased its restrictions on Israeli passport holders (Shichor, 2015: 102; Inbar, 2020: 254; Kumaraswamy, 2013: 147-148).

Both states maintained their military cooperation; for example, in 1988, Israel signed a secret deal with China supplying it an advanced missile technology. It is estimated that over the two decades since 1979, the two countries concluded more than 60 arms transactions, and Israeli arms sales to China totaled to between \$1 billion and \$2 billion. In the 1980s, China's political statements on Israel were less hostile; yet, it maintained a pro-Arab stance and sold weapons to Arab states, including missiles threatening Israel. Moreover, in 1990, China signed with Iran, Israel's existential threat since 1979, a nuclear cooperation agreement (Evron, 2017: 830; Inbar, 2020: 255).

Yet, China also continued to improve its relations with the pro-U.S. Arab states. Within this framework, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1984, Qatar in 1988, Bahrain in 1989, and Saudi Arabia in 1990 normalized their relations with China (Kumaraswamy, 2013: 150; *The New York Times*, 1988; Scobell and Nader, 2016: 4; Inbar, 2020: 255). In 1990, Chinese-Israeli relations further improved when China opened up a branch office of the China International Travel Service in Tel Aviv, and Israel reciprocated by opening up a liaison office of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Beijing (Evron, 2017: 830; Inbar, 2020: 255).

Until the 1990s, the U.S. largely remained indifferent toward the improvement of the Chinese-Israeli relations on account that following the Sino-American rapprochement of 1971, this fit the U.S. containment strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, in August 1985, Israel reopened its consulate general in Hong Kong as a means to reach out to China. Following a meeting in September 1987 of Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and his Chinese counterpart Wu Xueqian as well as a Politburo member, representing both the government and the Chinese Communist Party, both states agreed on taking the necessary steps for a full normalization of the bilateral relations. China abandoned its previous conditions (i.e., complete Israel withdrawal from all occupied territories, a full restoration of Palestinian rights, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state) in order to form diplomatic relations with Israel. Instead, Beijing emphasized holding an international conference in order to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict (*The New York Times*, 1987).

In January 1992, the Chinese and Israeli endeavors finally culminated to the formation of diplomatic relations. Israel opened up an embassy in Beijing in 1992 and a consulate general in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu in 1994, 2009, and 2014, respectively. Following the formation of diplomatic relations, the bilateral trade ties improved. Indeed, by 2018, China became Israel's largest trading partner in Asia and the third largest partner in the world following the European Union and the U.S. Since 1992, the trade volume between Israel and China increased over 400 times from \$50 million in 1992 to \$22.8 billion in 2022 (Kumaraswamy, 2013: 150-151; Inbar, 2020: 255; Ella, 2021).

### **Chinese-Israeli Relations Since the 1990s**

Since the end of the Cold War, China defined its interests toward the Middle East region as follows: having a continued access to energy resources; expanding its geostrategic influence beyond the Asia-Pacific region; maintaining domestic stability via external relations; and enhancing its status as a great power. Among these interests, China's foremost concern is having a continued access to energy resources. Since the late 1970s, Beijing's sustained economic growth rates raised its demand for oil, and since the 1990s, the country imports oil mainly from the Middle East region. Indeed, in 2015, Beijing became the world's largest importer of crude oil, with the Middle East accounting for more than 40 percent of its oil imports. Thus, China's interest toward the region has visibly grown in order to realize its economic, political, and strategic interests. The post-Cold War period was an opportunity for China to improve its relations with countries in the region. Within this framework, China supported the U.S.-led Middle East peace process, and participated in multilateral talks on regional security, water, and refugees (Scobell and Nader, 2016: 7-21; Inbar, 2020: 256).

Along with its increased level of interest toward the Middle East since the 1990s, China sought to improve its relations with Israel. Beijing, while defining Israel as a center for advanced technology in its quest for military and economic modernization, regards the country as a valuable asset against its perceived threat of radical Islam among Uyghurs in the western Xinjiang region. For China, in its global power competition with the U.S., Israel as a close American ally is a valuable asset. China also values the American Jewish lobby in order to

improve its image in the U.S. by limiting criticism of China's human rights violations both at the U.S. Congress and among American public. The Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 aiming at resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict enabled China to form formal relations with Israel without antagonizing Arab states (Inbar, 2020: 256).

For Israel, developing relations with China has been in tandem with its long-time goal of engagement with Asia. Israel, as a center for advanced technology, seeks to diversify its export markets and sources of investments beyond the U.S. and Europe. Thus, for Israel expanding its political and economic ties with the world's second largest economy is beneficial (Evron, 2017: 829; Inbar, 2020: 255-256; Efron et al., 2019: 1-2, 123).

Although both China and Israel sought to improve their relations, the U.S.-Chinese competition in the post-Cold War period acted as an obstacle to this goal. Since the 1990s, the U.S. has been uneasy about the rise of China in world politics; thus, it staunchly disapproved the Chinese-Israeli military cooperation, in particular. The U.S. has been concerned that China has been seeking to use Israel indirectly to obtain military technology that the U.S. and other Western countries have refused to sell it; thus, achieving parity with the U.S. military. In the 1990s, the U.S. accused Israel of unauthorized selling of American weapons and sensitive technology to China. For example, in October 1993, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director James Woolsey asserted that Israel sold billions of dollars-worth of advanced military technology to China for more than a decade on programs for jet-fighters, air-to-air missiles, and tanks. Both Israel and China denied the CIA's allegations (Gordon, 1993; UPI Archive, 1993).

In 1999, the U.S. opposed Israel's Phalcon deal (an Israeli-developed sophisticated reconnaissance aircraft) with China on account that it would create a security threat to the U.S. presence and security interests in the Asia-Pacific region, in the Taiwan sector, in particular. A year later, Israel cancelled the deal as a result of the U.S. pressure. Likewise, in 2004, the U.S. opposed the Israeli agreement on the upgrade of the Harpy laser-guided unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that it exported to China in 1994 on account that it would make the Chinese military technologically superior to the U.S. position. During the Harpy incident, as a means of pressure over Israel, the U.S. ceased its cooperation with the country on the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program. Moreover, the U.S. demanded the resignation of senior



Ministry of Defense officials and required that all Israeli defense transfers and dual-use exports to China be subject to the U.S. approval. As a result of the U.S. pressure, in 2005, Israel cancelled the Harpy deal with China (Kumaraswamy, 2013: 151-155; UPI NewsTrack, 2004; Efron, 2019: 19). Thus, the Chinese-Israeli defense ties experienced two major setbacks in 2000 and 2005. Israel's failure to realize its commitments, however, did not result in a diplomatic crisis in the bilateral relations on account that China has been cognizant of the U.S. pressure over Israel. Yet, the bilateral relations cooled off until 2011.

For Israel, the U.S. has been an indispensable ally ensuring its security. Since the early 1960s, Israel has been receiving the latest military technology and the largest share of U.S. aid and assistance, while ensuring the U.S. diplomatic support in international politics. In return, the U.S. expects Israel to comply with its strategic interests (Kumaraswamy, 2013: 145). Despite the U.S. uneasiness, however, China and Israel maintained their military cooperation. Indeed, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission reported that in 2010 Israel ranked second following Russia as a weapons system provider to China and as a conduit for sophisticated military technology followed by France and Germany (Samet, 2021: 80).

China's interest in Israel and the Middle East increased further in the mid-2000s along with its quest for being a global power. Thus, the region has become a growing destination for China's labor, construction companies, export goods, and investments. For example, between 2004 and 2014 China's trade with the Middle East grew from \$40 billion to over \$300 billion. And between 2005 and 2016 Beijing's investment in the region amounted to \$143 billion, making the country the region's largest source of foreign investment. China concluded partnership agreements with fifteen Middle Eastern and North African countries between 2010 and 2018 (Evron, 2019: 199; Lons et al., 2019: 12; Sun, 2020).

It is important to note that Chinese foreign policy toward the Middle East has been defined by the principle of noninterference or limited level of political involvement in regions beyond its traditional sphere of influence. Thus, China neither interferes in the internal political affairs of states in the region nor gets involved in regional tensions. Beijing acts as an external power maintaining relations with all states in the region. This strategy has been successful given that China has simultaneously managed to maintain its economic and

security ties with competing states such as, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran (Scobell and Nader, 2016: 5-6; Evron, 2019: 196).

In 2011, China and Israel revived their relations. High-level military visits resumed in that year when Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak visited Beijing. This was followed in August 2011 by the People's Liberation Army General Staff Department's visit to Israel. Yet, the military cooperation has been limited to areas that would not be raising the U.S. concerns such as, Israel providing counterterrorism training to Chinese troops. China's continued need for advanced technologies; its geopolitical competition with the U.S.; Beijing's need for Israeli cooperation on counterterrorism against its perceived threat of radical Islam; and Israel's continued need to diversify its export markets and foreign investments from its traditional partners (i.e., the U.S. and Europe) played a significant role in this revival (Efron et al., 2019: 23; Evron, 2019: 203; Evron, 2017: 829).

For Israel, the European market has been both stagnating and presenting a contentious diplomatic front for the country with a substantial pressure coming from the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Although the BDS movement in the U.S. did not pose a diplomatic challenge for Israel, the boost in Chinese-Israeli relations in 2013 and 2014, in particular, marked the souring of the U.S.-Israeli relations under the U.S. Barack Obama administration and Israeli Benjamin Netanyahu government (Evron, 2017: 829; Inbar, 2020: 255-256; Efron et al., 2019: 1-2).

In 2013, China launched its international cooperation and economic strategy in the form of an extensive developmental project called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aimed at politically and economically connecting 146 countries. This will enable China to reach out to markets in Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Within this framework, Beijing engaged in construction contracts and investments (e.g., roads, railroads, and sea ports) with the BRI countries amounting to \$850 billion between 2013 and 2021. Thus, for the Middle East region, the BRI changed the role of China from primarily an oil and gas consumer to a major economic player by constructing a vast transportation and trade network. In 2015, for example, China's investment in infrastructure in the Middle East and Africa was around \$5.7 billion, which increased to \$21.5 billion in 2016. Likewise, China became the region's largest foreign investor with an investment amounting to \$155 billion between 2013

and 2020 representing over 40 percent of the total foreign direct investment. During the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party in October 2017, Beijing defined the one-trillion-dollar BRI as a crucial means serving for its economic development and strengthening its international cooperation. The BRI further boosted the Chinese-Israeli relations since 2013 on account of Israel's valuable location. The initiative is financed in part by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and despite the U.S. objections, Israel became one of the founding members of it in 2015 (Chaziza and Karsh, 2021: 1; Evron, 2019: 196; Vilnai, Orion, and Lavi, 2017).

In the post-2011 period, China and Israel, cognizant of the U.S. pressures on Israel, focused more on improving their economic relations than their military ties. During Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to Beijing in May 2013, both states agreed on improving their economic relations by going beyond trade; thus, increasing the level of Chinese investments in Israel and the bilateral business and governmental scientific-technological collaboration (Evron, 2019: 204). Within this framework, both states formed five task forces in the fields of high technology, environmental protection, energy, agriculture, and financing (Efron et al., 2019: 26). Netanyahu during his second visit to Beijing in March 2017 defined the bilateral ties as a "comprehensive innovative partnership" (Vilnai, Orion, and Lavi, 2017). The two states signed a number of bilateral and business agreements with a total value of \$25 billion. China invested in infrastructure projects in Israel such as, the Carmel tunnels in Haifa, the light rail in Tel Aviv, and the Ashdod and Haifa seaports (Efron et al., 2019: 3; Vilnai, Orion, and Lavi, 2017).

Meanwhile, two key Chinese government documents – the 2015 "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" and the 2016 "Arab Policy Paper" – reveal that the country first, focuses on energy; second, infrastructure construction, trade, and investment; and third, nuclear energy, satellites, and new energy sources in the Middle East. Thus, security-related issues are still not in the primary agenda of China. Beijing has been cautious to maintain a balanced foreign policy based on the principle of non-interference, while strengthening its economic presence by pursuing developmental projects without fully engaging itself in the region politically and militarily. Although China aims at being an influential power in the Middle East, Beijing's UNSC vetoes

follow those of Russia, while its symbolic peace proposals are not seriously followed up by regional powers (Lons et al., 2019: 3, 10-11; Evron, 2019: 201).

China, while improving its relations with Israel, has been cautious to ensure the ongoing flow of energy from the region and to maintain receiving economic benefits from numerous Arab states and Iran. Within this framework, Beijing emphasizes portraying itself as a champion of the Palestinians as a means to increase its regional influence. The 2016 Arab Policy Paper, for example, stated that China supported the Middle East peace process and establishment of an independent Palestinian state with full sovereignty based on the pre-1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital (Efron et al., 2019: 33). Yet, Chinese cautious support for the Palestinians did not adversely affect the Chinese-Israeli relations.

China has recently accelerated its transition from a center of low-cost manufacturing economy to a high-tech one with an industrial base. Beijing also seeks for innovative solutions for its large and aging population, which makes Israel a valuable state for its technological development in healthcare, cleantech (e.g., water purification, desalination, and waste management), software, and technology related to automobile manufacturing. Thus, China has been investing in Israel's high technology, agriculture, food, water, and medical and bio technology industries. Indeed, in 2017, China and Hong Kong accounted for around one-third of investments in Israeli high technology (Vilnai, Orion, and Lavi, 2017; Chaziza, 2018; Kuo, 2018). Yet, this raises some concerns about Chinese venture capital companies investing in Israeli high-tech companies with a specialization in sensitive or dual-use technology (e.g., cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, or robotics) (Efron et al., 2019: 117).

In 2014, both states formed the China-Israel Joint Committee on Innovation Cooperation (JCIC) as a comprehensive bilateral framework involving ministries and government agencies as well as leading universities and research institutions. The committee has been meeting annually since 2015. In October 2018, Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan visited Israel as the co-chair of the JCIC, and this was the highest-level visit to Israel since the Chinese then-President Jiang Zemin's visit in 2000. Qishan praised Israel's capabilities in high-technology as a country having a population less than the size of one mid-size Chinese city (Chaziza, 2018; Kuo, 2018).

Israel has been an important center for advanced technology and innovation. Indeed, the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Competitiveness Report ranked Israel seventh in the world in terms of its citizens' digital skills (Yellinek, 2021: 1, 3). In October 2021, Israel's 70 technology companies, which were valued at around \$1 billion, accounted for about 10 percent of the global total (Rachman, 2021). Between 2002 and 2020, Chinese state-owned enterprises and technology companies either acquired or invested in some 463 Israeli companies mostly in technology. Every major Israeli university like their counterparts in the U.S. and Europe has partnerships with Chinese universities and laboratories. Chinese companies either built or have been operating around \$4 billion of Israeli infrastructure (Feith, 2021). Chinese investments in Israel nearly doubled from \$6 billion between 2005 and 2013 to \$10 billion between 2013 and 2019. Meanwhile, in 2018 the Chinese-Israeli trade totaled to around \$15 billion (Chaziza and Karsh, 2021: 1; Samet, 2021: 79).

For China, pro-West Israel is a valuable state in its geopolitical competition with the U.S. Beijing tries to increase its influence over Israel, as in elsewhere, via investment deals and bids for major Israeli infrastructure projects. Chinese companies sought to run ports in Israel, in some cases successfully. For example, in 2015 China's state-owned Shanghai International Port Group won a tender to operate a port terminal in Haifa for twenty-five years beginning in 2021. Given that the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet routinely docks in the Haifa port, this raised the U.S. concerns on account that China could potentially collect intelligence (Samet, 2021: 80; Ben-David, 2021). Chinese construction and operation of major infrastructure projects raise concerns given that they involve the installation of and access to cameras, radio, fiber optics, and cellular networks (Efron et al., 2019: 7). Indeed, in January 2019, National Security Adviser to the Trump administration John Bolton and Deputy Secretary of Energy Dan Brouillette expressed the U.S. uneasiness over the Chinese presence at the Haifa port. However, some Israeli officials discounted them by calling a joke (Nir, 2019).

In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that China has entered a new era that it should take center stage in the world. It seems that China in its global leadership competition with the U.S. primarily emphasizes being an economic and technological power instead of acting as a traditional military power. Within this framework, the BRI across Eurasia and Africa will put China at the center of a network of

trade and economic relations across multiple continents. Along with the BRI, the Digital Silk Road aims at making China a cyber-superpower. Thus, it seems that China has been exerting its economic and technological power as a means to increase its geopolitical influence globally (Brands and Sullivan, 2020: 47, 49).

The U.S. has been concerned about China's growing economic influence over Israel. For example, in May 2020, following that the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed his uneasiness about the growth of Israeli-Chinese economic relations, a desalination plant bid in Israel was granted to another firm instead of a Hong Kong-based company, which was one of the final bidders (Yellinek, 2021: 4). This shows the continuing U.S. pressure over Israel, while the latter conducting its foreign policy toward China.

It is important to note that some Israeli officials share the U.S. concerns about the improvement in Chinese-Israeli relations possibly increasing Chinese influence over Israel, alas, weakening the country's security. In May 2014, Efraim Halevy, former chair of Mossad, for example, by emphasizing the Chinese construction of the Eilat-Ashdod railway connecting the Red Sea to the Mediterranean coast and in 2014, China's Bright Food Group's purchase of Tnuva (a major Israeli food corporation) argued that the Chinese government conglomerates should be regarded as an arm of the Chinese regime. Thus, he maintained that control by Chinese companies of such strategic assets was liable to serve China as a political-strategic leverage against Israel that the latter should evade (Hasson, 2014; Evron, 2017: 839-840).

Likewise, in January 2019, Shin Bet Security Service Chief Nadav Argaman expressed his concerns over Chinese investments in Israel could be putting the state security at risk (Haaretz, 2019). Facing the increased level of U.S. pressure over growing Chinese investments in Israeli companies, in October 2019, the Israeli government formed an advisory committee to monitor foreign investments in the country. Yet, regulators would approach the committee on a voluntary basis, while the panel would be acting in an advisory capacity (Scheer, 2019).

The U.S. under the Joe Biden administration since 2021 continues to be uneasy about Chinese companies constructing major infrastructure and transportation projects in Israel (e.g., Haifa port, tunnel and railway constructions, desalination plants, and 5G network

infrastructure) and China's investments in Israeli technology firms (e.g., medical and food technology, robotics, and artificial intelligence). The U.S. has been concerned over the possibility that China might have an access to sensitive military-related technology on account that various technologies used within the framework of Chinese-Israeli cooperation have both civilian and military applications (Times of Israel, 2021; Magid, 2021). Moreover, the U.S. continues to regard China as its rival in world politics. For example, in June 2021, the U.S. President Biden urged leaders of G7 states to offer hundreds of billions in loans to developing states as a means to counterbalance China's BRI. Indeed, the BRI, China's overseas lending and investment push across Africa, Latin America, and Europe, surpasses the Marshall Plan (Sanger and Landler, 2021).

If the U.S. constrains the further improvement of the Chinese-Israeli relations, two more issues create a divergence of interests in the bilateral ties: first, the Palestinian issue; and even more importantly, second, China's relations with Iran. China was among the first countries recognizing the Palestinian state at the UN, and it does not consider Hamas as a terrorist organization. In December 2017, China denounced the U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and voted in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution rejecting the U.S. announcement (Efron et al., 2019: 34-35). Meanwhile, in December 2017, China also held a symposium on Palestinian-Israeli Peace with participation of delegates from Palestine, Israel, and China (Gao, 2017). In October 2021, the first "China and the Palestinian Question" international conference was held in Istanbul in order to discuss relations between China and the Palestinians and Beijing's possible role and impact on the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Ul Khaliq, 2021). Although China pursues a pro-Palestinian stance, this does not exceed diplomatic support and symbolic gestures aiming at projecting its image as a great power in the Middle East (Efron et al., 2019: 35). Thus, it seems that so long as China pursues a cautious policy on the Palestinian issue, it does not have a potential to weaken the Chinese-Israeli relations.

However, China's relations with Iran have a potential to undermine the bilateral ties. China's strengthening military capabilities of Iran by cooperating over the latter's missile and nuclear programs raises Israel's security concerns. China and Iran maintain strong military ties since the 1980s. China sold Iran tactical ballistic

and anti-ship cruise missiles (e.g., HY-2 Silkworm), advanced anti-ship mines, anti-aircraft missiles, and Houdong fast-attack boats. Beijing also provided technical expertise to Tehran by assisting to develop the indigenous Nasr anti-ship cruise missile. Thus, Chinese design and technology can be seen in many Iranian missiles (e.g., short-range Oghab and Nazeat and long-range Shabab 3 missiles) (Efron et al., 2019: 54). Moreover, in 1990, China signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with Iran, an action inimical to Israel's national security.

China follows Russia in armament sales to Iran. Although Chinese military exports to Iran slowed down between 2013 and 2015 as a result of the international sanctions on Tehran, the bilateral defense ties deepened. In 2014, an Iranian Navy chief visited China for the first time in order to discuss cooperation on anti-piracy and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Chinese and Iranian navies also held a joint naval drill for the first time in the Persian Gulf in 2014. In October 2015, the deputy chief of the Chinese Navy met with Iranian defense minister to discuss strengthening opportunities for bilateral military cooperation (Efron et al., 2019: 35-36, 54). In January 2016, China signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with Iran four days after concluding a CSP agreement with Saudi Arabia (Greer and Batmanghelidj, 2020: 1). This was followed by Iran and China signing an agreement in November 2016 boosting their long-term defense-military ties (Majidyar, 2016). In June 2017, China and Iran conducted a naval drill in the Gulf, (Reuters, 2017) and in January 2022, China, Iran, and Russia held their third joint naval drill in the north of Indian Ocean (Reuters, 2022).

Israel has also been concerned about China indirectly providing weapons (e.g., artillery rockets) to armed nonstate actors of Hezbollah and Hamas. Beijing does not consider them as terrorist organizations (Efron et al., 2019: 35-36, 55). Indeed, during the Second Lebanon War in 2006, the Hezbollah struck an Israeli navy ship by a Chinese-made C-802 anti-ship missile, which Iran provided, resulting in the death of four Israeli sailors and severe damage to the corvette (Kumaraswamy, 2013: 157). Despite all these, however, Israel focused on the economic advantages of improving its ties with China, while expecting to limit the Chinese-Iranian relations by exerting its influence over Beijing (Evron, 2017: 829; Inbar, 2020: 255-256).



Meanwhile, Beijing utilizes cultural and educational activities and person-to-person contacts as a means to cultivate its relations with Israeli society. Chinese tourists visit Israel and students enroll in Israeli universities. China emphasizes communicating with Israeli society via local Hebrew-language newspapers, Chinese outlets (e.g., CRI), and pro-Chinese public figures. It seems that China has achieved some success in boosting its popularity among Israeli society.

For example, the Pew polling firm's 2019 Pew Global Attitudes Survey revealed that 66 percent of Israeli respondents stated that they viewed China favorably, while 25 percent expressed a negative view. Indeed, this made Israel one of the most pro-China countries in the world. By comparison, 60 percent of U.S. respondents to the poll regarded China in unfavorable terms, while only 26 percent expressed a positive view on China (Yellinek, 2021: 10-11; Samet, 2021: 86; China Today, 2019). Yet, a 2017 poll conducted by the BBC showed that only 34 percent of the Chinese public expressed a positive view of Israel, while 57 percent held negative views. Moreover, a 2014 poll conducted by the Anti-Defamation League showed that 20 percent of adults in China held anti-Semitic views (Efron et al., 2019: 41, 44). Thus, the Chinese public does not seem to share the positive official view of Israel.

## **Conclusion**

This article examined the Chinese-Israeli relations, and argued that since the 1990s, China and Israel successfully improved their bilateral ties by focusing on their commonalities defined by mutual economic interests instead of their differences. Yet, besides opportunities, there are also constraints affecting the bilateral relations: first, the U.S.-Chinese competition for global leadership, and the U.S. as a close ally of Israel opposing the improvement in Chinese-Israeli relations; second, China's close military relations with Iran; and third, Beijing's pro-Palestinian policies. The article argued that of the three constraints, the U.S. disapproval of close Chinese-Israeli relations influenced the bilateral ties the most. Although China's military relations with Iran raised Israeli security concerns, both states managed to focus on their mutual economic gains. Regarding the Palestinian issue, China's cautious policies did not adversely affect the bilateral ties.

The U.S. continues to regard China as a significant challenger to its global power status. Indeed, in August 2021, the CIA Director Bill Burns expressed the U.S. concerns about Chinese investments in Israel, particularly in the technology sector, and involvement in major infrastructure projects like the new port in Haifa, having a potential to undermine the U.S.-Israeli strategic relations (Middle East Eye, 2021). Moreover, in November 2021, Chair of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley defined China as the number-one state militarily challenging the U.S. power (Cooper, 2021). Despite the U.S. reservations, however, China and Israel have been seeking to deepen their relations in areas such as, science, technology, agriculture, and healthcare (China Daily, 2021). In January 2022, for example, the China-Israel JCIC met for the fifth time since 2018 (Berman, 2022).

It remains to be seen if China will become politically more involved in the Middle East region as a result of the BRI initiative, which has a potential to overstretch Beijing's resources. China since the mid-2000s became politically and militarily more involved in the region's issues, while still pursuing the principle of noninterference. For example, it has been contributing to UN peacekeepers in Lebanon since 2006; participated in the international anti-piracy and maritime security missions in the Gulf of Aden; conducted joint military exercises in the region; and established a military-logistic base in Djibouti as its first overseas facility. Beijing did not, however, join the international coalition against the Islamic State showing its limits of engagement (Evron, 2019: 201).

The highly demanding economic and political nature of the BRI may eventually result in a change in China's traditional policy of low level of political involvement in regions beyond its traditional sphere of influence. Thus, Beijing may become more involved in the Middle East region by promoting collaboration between rival states, while building and exercising influence in those states' political and business circles (Evron, 2019: 197). Yet, more political involvement in the region's issues may also show China the limits of its pragmatic economic interest-oriented policy of simultaneously conducting friendly relations with countries pursuing competing interests. Thus, it seems that besides the U.S. reservations on the improvement in Chinese-Israeli relations, how China will define its policy toward Iran is highly likely to determine the future the bilateral ties.

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