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A Quiet Transformation in China's Approach to Israel

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- In recent years, the world has witnessed China's growing involvement in the international arena – whether through its veto in the UN Security Council, its military conducting anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and contributing to peacekeeping missions in Africa and the Middle East, buying U.S. and EU debt, or its declaration that the South China Sea is an integral part of China.
- In the minds of the Chinese, Jews retain a highly respected status as a people who have survived over the millennia against all odds and have attained achievements that belie their miniscule numbers. The Chinese take great pride in Shanghai's status as one of the only cities in the world that accepted Jewish refugees during World War II.
- In the 12th Five-Year Plan, published in 2011, China's leadership announced a national intention to raise the country from being the world's factory to becoming a leading innovator. This new focus led the Chinese to seek the potential contribution of Israel – the "Start-Up Nation."
- Interactions between China and Israel had risen significantly over the years but had remained largely "off the record," due to the Arab nations' strong influence on the PRC leadership's public approach to Israel. In 2011 this began to change. Five formally acknowledged Israel Studies programs were established across China, and in September, China's most powerful political body – the Communist Party – expressed a formal interest in Israel's political echelons in a public fashion by participating in the first-ever China-Israel Strategy and Security Symposium at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya.

- Despite its close ties with the Arab world, China was caught completely off guard by the Arab Spring. They were devastated by the \$20 billion in losses they suffered with the fall of Gaddafi, hammering home their lack of understanding of the Middle East. In their search for accurate and reliable information, leading academics began to seek out Israel, an island of stability whose geographic proximity to the Arab Spring offers unique access.

China's Growing International Involvement

Historically China was inward looking, for over 1200 years seeking no role in the international theater. The world's most populous nation was preoccupied with its own culture, history, and survival.

Driven by the pressing goal to feed and provide basic resources to their people, the Chinese leadership ventured outside their territory beginning in the early 1980s. While this trend grew, the People's Republic of China (PRC) kept its head down and focused on building its economy and pulling itself out of the turmoil and desolation created by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Within 25 years, this Asian nation transformed itself into an economic power and China's wealth has bestowed new responsibilities on the nation's government. In recent years, the world has witnessed China's growing involvement in the international arena – whether through its veto in the UN Security Council,¹ the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy conducting anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden² and contributing to peacekeeping missions in Africa and the Middle East, buying U.S. and EU debt,³ or its declaration that the South China Sea is an integral part of China.⁴

Israel-China Relations

Though the Israeli government extended recognition to China on January 9, 1950, it took until January 1992 for the two nations to establish formal diplomatic relations.⁵ Subsequent to an August 1950 resolution by the Arab League forbidding any Arab country from acknowledging China, the 1955 Bandung Conference was held which excluded Israel and forged a bond between China and the Arab world.⁶ Nevertheless, as China came to recognize Israel's potential to contribute to its economic and military modernization goals, clandestine military exchanges between the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the PLA slowly developed. They began with an initial contact made at the Paris Air Show in 1975. By the early 1980s, Israeli technology in the fields of agriculture, solar energy, information and communications technology, and construction made their way to Asia's largest nation.⁷

Sino-Israel relations took a turn for the worse, however, when Israel adhered to a U.S. mandate to renege on a major sale in 1999 of the Phalcon, a sophisticated reconnaissance aircraft that would allow the Chinese to gather intelligence at a distance,⁸ and again in 2004, when Israel began repairs and upgrades on the Harpy drones, laser-guided unmanned aircraft Israel had sold to China in 1994. Israel eventually succumbed to U.S. pressure, backing out of its earlier agreements with the PRC.⁹

Economic Synergies Form Common Ground

While political relations deteriorated significantly, Israel continued to contribute to agricultural and water technology advancement in China.¹⁰ Over time and with great effort by Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, business interaction was soon revived and growth was nurtured. The value of total bilateral imports and exports reached \$7.65 billion in 2010, nearly 150 times their 1992 value.¹¹ In the minds of the Chinese, Jews retain a highly respected status as a people who have survived over the millennia against all odds and have attained achievements that belie their miniscule numbers. China is a nation with no indigenous anti-Semitism. The Chinese continue to see Jews and themselves as two ancient civilizations, with shared values in, among others, family, education, and hard work. The Chinese continue to take great pride in Shanghai's status as one of the only cities in the world that accepted Jewish refugees during World War II.¹²

Beyond cultural affinities, key occurrences in the past few years have engendered a noticeable warming in China-Israel relations. In the economic arena, the 2008 subprime debacle drew the economies of the West into recession, causing Israeli businesses to look east in a more comprehensive and serious fashion. In 2010, Foxconn,¹³ the leading manufacturer of such products as the iPad, iPhone, Kindle, PlayStation 3, Wii and Xbox 360, with 13 factories across China, suffered suicides by a number of its employees said to be protesting oppressive pressure in the workplace. China's leadership responded by making innovation a priority in the country's 12th Five-Year Plan, published in 2011. The ruling Communist Party announced a national intention to raise the country from being the world's factory to becoming a leading innovator. This new focus led the Chinese to seek the potential contribution of Israel – the "Start-Up Nation."¹⁴

With Wealth Comes Responsibility

Economic factors influenced political ones. During 2010, China was internationally recognized as having the second largest economy in the world, following the U.S.A. This led to growing self-confidence by China's leadership and the nation as a whole. One manifestation of its new self-image was the political echelon's public acknowledgment of a growing interest in relations with Israel. Interactions between the two countries had risen significantly over the previous years but had remained largely "off the record." For example, prior to this transformation in attitude, China's provincial leaders and other officials and diplomats could visit Israel to advance

business, finance, technology, and science exchanges. However, few could formally meet with Israel's political sector or deal with Israel regarding geopolitics. This stemmed in part from the Arab nations' strong influence on the PRC leadership's public approach to Israel.

Signs of change were subtle but convincing. SIGNAL (Sino-Israel Global Network & Academic Leadership) experienced the transformation firsthand through our research in mid-2010 investigating China's interest in high-level academic interchanges with Israel. We learned that there were 10 Jewish Studies centers across China, all established over the past 20 years. However, there was not a single Israel Studies program. This was a symptom of China's official attitude towards Israel – the study of Judaism and Jewish history is non-political and non-offensive to the Arab world. Studying Israel, however, would indicate an official sanctioning of the Jewish nation as an academic focus.

When SIGNAL proposed the idea of establishing Israel Studies programs at Chinese universities in mid-2010, a university in Southwest China responded with great interest. The director of their Jewish Studies Institute wanted to re-name the center "Israel Studies." However, she was advised by more experienced and politically connected scholars that just making such a request could shut down the center. If there was interest in Israel Studies, it should be done quietly, without any formal acknowledgment. In 2011, SIGNAL established five formally acknowledged Israel Studies programs across China. Less than one year into the program, the same university that was advised to avoid the word "Israel" submitted a request to China's Ministry of Education to form an Israel Studies center. It was now possible to obtain official government funding for a program bearing the name "Israel."

Academia Bridging the Gap

Another example of change in China's official approach to Israel was the staging of the first-ever China-Israel Strategic Studies conference. Never before had scholars from China and Israel come together to address geopolitical issues of mutual concern. SIGNAL's due diligence in mid-2010 indicated that high-level and influential Chinese academics and experts would not come to Israel for such an event, nor would they host one in China. The alternative was to hold the event at a leading university in the U.S.A. – capitalizing on China's strong interest in improving U.S.-China relations. However, in late 2010 there was a glimmer of change in China's public recognition of Israel. China's Communist Party invited the Likud "foreign minister" to visit.

Since Israel's political parties do not have foreign ministers, the ruling Likud Party sent MK Yuli Edelstein. Perhaps more significant was the Communist Party's invitation to Edelstein to participate in a "think tank conference" joining the Likud Party think tank with the Communist Party think tank. While China's Communist Party did not realize that Israel's political parties do not have affiliated think tanks, the salient point was that the party publicly invited Israel's ruling party to take part in an Israel-China academic event focusing on issues of political interest. The significance of this development lay in China's most powerful political body expressing formal interest in Israel's political echelons in a public fashion. Due to this transformation in attitude,

in September 2011, SIGNAL held the first-ever China-Israel Strategy and Security Symposium at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel, co-hosted by the Center for Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) and in conjunction with the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at the Lauder School of Government.

2011 proved to be a banner year for warming China-Israel relations. Official visits between the two governments grew in both number and rank, capped with visits by General Chen Bingde and Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud Barak. But for all the governmental and academic exchanges taking place, on close examination it becomes clear that China's leadership continues to lack a basic understanding of Israel and the region. The minimal information they and their academic advisors do have is primarily sourced via their 50-year-old network of affiliations throughout the Arab world and Iran. Israel and China share no such network of trusted associations built over years of studying in each other's universities, touring each other's countrysides, or interacting extensively within shared diplomatic frameworks.

“Arab Spring” Stirs Mid-East Policy

Despite their close ties with the Arab world, China's government and ruling party were caught completely off guard by the Arab Spring. They were in virtual shock to discover that 65,000 of their citizens were working in Libya when the evacuation of foreigners from that country began, and were devastated by the \$20 billion in losses they suffered with the fall of Gaddafi,¹⁵ hammering home their lack of understanding of the Middle East. In response, China's leaders directed their academic advisors to find new avenues for investigation. In their search for accurate and reliable information as well as analysis and interpretation, leading academics from Beijing and Shanghai began to seek out Israel. They learned that Israel is an island of stability, while its geographic proximity to the Arab Spring offers unique access without being drawn into the fray.

Perhaps due in part to the Arab Spring, the ambassadors of the 22 Arab nations have been putting increasing pressure on China to take action in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As is often the case in China, policy advice on such matters is sourced to the nation's leading academic community. The Middle East Research Center at Shanghai Jiaotong University (SJTU) developed a new model for diplomatic involvement in the Middle East and North Africa. In response to the Arab community's complaint that China sits on its proverbial hands, showing indifference to the region, the Center coined the new program, "Constructive Participation." "Constructive Participation," which aims to be the new paradigm for Chinese public diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa, infers China's gradual shift away from its traditional "non-interference" policy towards a strategy in which government, businesses, and NGOs seek to contribute to the development of the region.

The Middle East Center's pilot trip brought a 30-person delegation of business leaders and scholars to Israel and the PA on February 26-29, 2012. The CEOs, presidents, and general managers comprised the largest group of high-level business people ever to come to Israel and

the PA for the sole purpose of investment. The scholars accompanying them aimed to promote economic stability while collecting empirical information on the region in order to carry out "Constructive Participation."

China's economic achievements have created a new reality for the world's most populous nation. Demands and expectations internally and externally will continue to grow and to some extent, China will be seeking out Israel, its scholars, and experts as a trusted source of information and greater understanding in order to meet the responsibilities brought by its economic success.

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Notes

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