

# China-India Brief

*A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation*



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*Guest Column*

## Chinese and Indian Responses to the Gaza War

By Daniel Markey

The war in Gaza, especially its disruption of maritime shipping through the Red Sea and potential to escalate into a wider regional conflict, threatens important Chinese and Indian material interests. Those threats have naturally conditioned aspects of the wartime policy responses from Beijing and New Delhi.

However, because neither China nor India perceives the war as a vital threat, and because neither wields great influence over its conduct or outcome, their policy responses have tended to reflect a range of other

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The *China-India Brief* is a monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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parochial aims. Above all, China has opportunistically turned the war into an exercise in diplomatic point-scoring against the United States (US). India, for its part, has clung stubbornly to a pre-war vision for the “new Middle East.” For now, China’s approach appears to be paying greater dividends, but India’s policies already serve important domestic political purposes and might still pay off over the long run.

### **Common Material Interests Condition Some Policies**

Despite its terrible human costs, neither China nor India is directly threatened by the violence in Israel, Gaza, or the West Bank. Indirectly, however, the escalation of the conflict by Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping has already proven costly. Increased security risks and longer transit times associated with the diversion of container traffic to the Cape of Good Hope harm global producers and consumers alike. **Rates** to ship cargo from Shanghai to Northern Europe went from a pre-war \$581 per 20-foot equivalent unit to over \$3000 in January 2024. For India, because roughly half of its exports and 30 percent of imports would **normally** run through the Suez Canal, the war is estimated to cost India **\$30 billion** in exports this fiscal year.

In some ways, India and China have responded similarly to this threat. Neither has opted to join the US-led “Operation Prosperity Guardian” coalition or to actively target the Iran-backed Houthi militias, leaving those risky missions to others.

The Chinese navy is, however, **reportedly** escorting a small number of Chinese cargo ships through the Red Sea. And India’s navy has **expanded** its counter-piracy and rescue missions in a bid to complement other maritime security efforts.

On the diplomatic front, Beijing and New Delhi each enjoy a modest degree of influence with Iran, but neither has found an effective means to force Tehran to squeeze the Houthis. For China, this may be especially galling, given that it is now the **top buyer** of Iranian crude. It is likely that both **Chinese** and **Indian** diplomats are trying to place greater pressure on Tehran, but as yet there is no sign of a breakthrough.

A further escalation of the regional conflict would threaten other Chinese and Indian interests, including the safety of their many workers based in and around the Gulf and the **(possibly growing)** number of Indian workers in Israel. Still, if the present circumstance is any guide, Beijing and New Delhi would not commit to military missions that pose significant risks for any purpose other than to evacuate their citizens.

### **Diplomatic Divergence**

On the global diplomatic stage, China and India have pursued very different approaches to the Gaza war. The drama has mainly played out at the United Nations and in a handful of other forums where Chinese and Indian leaders have addressed leaders of the global South.



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Overall, their starkly different approaches reflect other aspirations and preoccupations that have relatively little to do with the Gaza war *per se*.

From immediately after Hamas' October 7 terrorist attack to the present, China **cast itself** as a staunch defender of the Palestinian cause in a bid to appeal to the many states that routinely oppose Israel. In its public statements and state-backed propaganda, Beijing **skipped** any real condemnation of Hamas and has routinely mimicked popular, even clearly **antisemitic**, narratives. China has reliably voted in favor of cease-fire resolutions in the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly and has **championed** the Palestinian cause at the International Court of Justice.

Yet, throughout this entire episode, Beijing's principal target has really been the US. China has **not taken significant material steps** to assist Palestinian civilians, but it cynically appreciates that Washington's unpopular stance in support of Israel exposes the US to charges of hypocrisy in its selective application of liberal principles. Long a critic (and target) of American moralising and eager to cast doubt on US motives as a means to undermine the legitimacy of a world order backed by American power, Beijing has seized this chance with gusto.

Like China, India has sought to cultivate a leadership role in the global South. But quite unlike Beijing, New Delhi **initially focused** its public diplomacy on Hamas' horrific terrorist attack against Israel and has only gradually recalibrated its stance to **support** a December UN General Assembly vote for a humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza.

For Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government, the threat posed by Islamist terror groups has remained the most politically pertinent feature of the conflict. This marked a significant shift from earlier generations of Indian leaders who were less inclined to see India's terror threat as akin to Israel's, leaned in favour of the Palestinian cause, and tended to be far more critical of the US' role in the Middle East.

### Decisive Shifts on Israel

Indeed, the starkest difference in Chinese and Indian responses to the Gaza war is found in how they have managed their relations with Israel. Whereas both Beijing and New Delhi have retained important ties to the Arab Gulf states and, as noted above, Iran, China's policies have cast its relationship with Israel into serious doubt while India has doubled down on its partnership with Jerusalem.

Nothing about Chinese actions has been welcomed by Israel. In October 2023, Beijing played **host** to Arab League leaders aligned in condemnation of Israel's early military operations in Gaza. The following month in November, Beijing released a policy **statement** that made no mention of terrorism or Hamas but focused on the question of Palestinian statehood. In January 2024, the Israel Defence Forces **claimed** to have found a stockpile of Chinese arms used by Hamas (although China **denied** providing the weapons).

By contrast, immediately after the October 7 attacks, Modi **tweeted**, "We stand in solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour." The message **built upon decades** of increasingly friendly bilateral diplomacy that burst onto the public stage during **Modi's much-photographed 2017 visit** to Israel. In addition to longstanding security ties, defence and technology trade, and a shared worldview that cast the two states as victims of Islamist extremism, Modi and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have united in their aim to build a new vision for the Middle East.

A seminal piece of that new vision, the "India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC)," was **unveiled** in New Delhi just weeks before the October Hamas attacks. IMEC came on the heels of several other innovative diplomatic initiatives, including the "**I2U2**" (an informal grouping of India, Israel, the UAE and US), and sprang from the foundational logic of the 2020 Abraham Accords. All of these efforts were aligned in the assumption that the Palestinian issue could be pushed to the side while the Middle East—including Israel but not Iran—mobilized collective resources to promote economic development and connectivity with partners in Europe and Asia.

Since October, India has held fast to the promise of IMEC, and its leaders continue to hail its potential as a long-term strategy. Rather than perceiving the Gaza war as a fatal blow, India has continued to push the agenda with European **leaders** and to stress its underlying **geoeconomic rationale**.

India has also continued to deepen its direct relations with **Gulf partners**, especially the UAE, where Modi made his seventh trip as prime minister in February. Obviously, India can't bring the IMEC to life unless Israel finds its way back to the table with Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia. But New Delhi shows every sign of working to keep that option open and remains committed to partnership with Israel.

### **Lessons for the Future**

All told, neither India nor China has assumed a central role in the Gaza war, either when it comes to providing collective security or leading core diplomatic initiatives. Chinese and Indian security policies are marked mainly by self-interest and risk aversion, contrary to the often overheated and overhyped expectations placed on these rising Asian giants.

That said, there are fascinating and important differences in how China and India have conducted their diplomacy since the start of the Gaza war. These differences reflect divergent strategic aims, both at the global and regional levels. They highlight significant policy shifts; ten years ago, Beijing and New Delhi would almost certainly have responded otherwise.

At present, China's approach looks to be the cleverer of the two. Beijing has undeniably profited from Washington's difficult strategic bind. Not only can China cheaply associate itself with a popular Palestinian

cause, but it can—for now at least—sit back as the US is once again pulled into the vortex of conflict in the Middle East (not to mention in Europe). Shipping costs included, Beijing may still come out ahead.

Meanwhile, India now pays a diplomatic price in the Global South and much of the rest of the world for its close ties to Israel (and even its tilt toward the US). Yet, it would be wise not to overestimate that cost. Overseas, India's long history of vocal anti-imperialism inoculates it from many critiques. At home, Modi's political dominance and his ascendant ideology of Hindu nationalism insulate him from serious criticism and even render his support to Netanyahu's hardline Israeli government popular with his primary constituents. Looking to the future, if the Gaza war winds down without first becoming an even more devastating regional conflagration, India's persistent cultivation of relationships across the region could reopen the door to IMEC or a similarly beneficial collection of trans-regional initiatives.

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