China Tip-Toes into Mideast Peace

The pro-Israel lobby has been so effective dominating U.S. policy toward the Middle East that the success, paradoxically, has made Washington increasingly irrelevant to the peace process. That has created a vacuum that China and other nations may try to fill, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

China this week got about as far as it ever has gotten into the Middle East peace process by hosting back-to-back visits by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This was still only, as the New York Times coverage put it, a dipping of China’s toe into that process. The odds are that Beijing will not be wading much farther into that water any time soon.

The new Chinese leadership certainly has plenty on its plate right at home, including uncontrolled corruption, near-catastrophic environmental degradation, and the need to adapt to a slowdown in economic growth. Moreover, continued festering of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not hurt Chinese interests as severely and directly as it hurts the interests of the United States, because of the latter’s association with the Israeli occupation and other controversial Israeli actions.

But if President Xi Jinping and his colleagues nonetheless were to involve themselves more deeply in efforts to resolve this conflict, we should applaud them, for several reasons. The principal reason is that the outside power that has now been looked to for decades as the peace process’s deus ex machina, i.e., the United States, continues to demonstrate that it is too politically crippled to perform that role.

The combination of an Israeli government devoted to continued colonization of conquered and occupied territory and of political forces in the United States devoted to an unquestioning, right-or-wrong backing of that government have had this crippling effect.

President Barack Obama has already dispelled any hope that things would be appreciably different in his second term. His Secretary of State clearly wants to try to make new things happen, but the President seems in effect to have told him, “Good luck, my friend, in seeing what you can do, but don’t expect much help from me with the heavy lifting.”

A second reason to welcome greater involvement by the Chinese is that their own
positions and posture toward the conflict are substantively very sensible, reasonable, and in line with the characteristics that any plausible settlement of the conflict would require.

Prime Minister Li Keqiang was on target when he told Netanyahu that “the Palestinian issue is a core issue affecting the peace and stability of the Middle East.” When Li said, “As a friend of both Israel and the Palestinians, China has always maintained an objective and fair stance,” he was more truthful than if a similar claim were made by the United States, which as Aaron David Miller has accurately put it, has more often functioned as Israel’s lawyer.

Xi presented to Abbas a “plan” that called for establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 boundaries and with East Jerusalem as its capital, with full respect for “Israel’s right to exist and its legitimate security concerns.” About the only editing one might want to do to the Chinese formulation would be to refer explicitly to the possibility of land swaps, as in a recently restated version of the Arab League peace plan.

A further, subsidiary reason greater Chinese involvement with this issue would be good is that it is the type of constructive global engagement that it would be good to see China practicing in general. It would bring China closer to carrying its fair share of the weight of dealing with sticky international issues, and might encourage positive habits that would have spillover effects on otherwise unrelated issues.

Another outside power that one might expect to take up the peace process slack that the United States has proven unable to take up is the European Union. Some of the possibilities were raised by an open letter published last month by the collection of former senior officials known as the European Eminent Persons Group.

The letter is admirably clear and blunt in detailing what needs to be done, and the deficiencies in what has been done so far, including by Europe. But there are limitations to what the Europeans are ever likely to do, some of which are mentioned in Mitchell Plitnick’s look at the eminent persons’ initiative. The letter-writers are only former officials, after all.

The EU has the impediments to action that come from still being a collection of governments and something less than a full federation. The Europeans also have some historical baggage of their own on Arab-Israeli issues that may make it easier for the Israel lobby to reach across the Atlantic and slap them down, as in a derisive dismissal by Elliott Abrams of the eminent persons’ letter as a “useful reminder of European attitudes.” A similar dismissal would be more difficult to direct at China.
In any case, anyone looking for leadership on this issue from a non-U.S. outside power should not place all his hopeful eggs in one basket. An earlier phase of the endless and fruitless Middle East peace process involved a “quartet.” Maybe it’s time to try a European-Chinese duet.

If President Xi needs additional incentive to take some action and some risks on this subject, how about this for a motivation: personal leadership on this subject would be a good way to distinguish himself from all those colleagues of his who dye their hair the same shade of black and wear identical suits. It would give him a historical legacy beyond all the problems back home that he shares with the collective leadership.

Xi ought to aim for a Nobel Peace Prize. Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin won the prize for their work on the subject even though what they did failed to bring lasting peace, and Jimmy Carter also got a Nobel in large part for his work on the same subject. Barack Obama won the prize just for getting elected and not being George W. Bush.

If Xi dove into the subject and made any progress at all, he would have a good chance of making it to Oslo, and deservedly so.

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