China and Conflict Resolution in the Middle East

The recent escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken center stage in the global arena and politicians from various countries are vociferously calling for its immediate resolution.

During a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting on May 16, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergei Vershinin urged the opposing sides to cease all hostilities and talked about the need to create appropriate conditions for launching a “peaceful Palestinian-Israeli dialogue.” He also said that the Middle East Quartet had to convene a meeting and drew attention to a proposal by Moscow to “hold a ministerial meeting with leading regional states.”

Senior officials from Jordan, Egypt and France expressed willingness, on behalf of their nations, “to broker conditions necessary for a relaunch of peace negotiations” meaning the cessation of the Israeli aggression in the occupied Palestine territories. Following their meeting in the form of a videoconference, French and Egyptian Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, and King of Jordan Abdullah II “agreed to reach a ceasefire agreement through the UN Security Council.”

German tabloid newspaper Bild published an article criticizing EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen for not making any statements about the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict until May 14, 2021. The report also quoted EU foreign affairs expert Elmar Brok who found it “shameful that the EU Commission and EU Council” had
During an emergency virtual meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu criticized once again, in the strongest terms, Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud agreed with the aforementioned position at the OIC meeting by “condemning Israel's flagrant violations of Palestinian rights” and calling on “the international community to act urgently to put an end to military operations” and “to revive peace negotiations based on a two-state solution.” The proposal “envisions an independent State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel, west of the Jordan River”, for the Arab population of the contested region.

A resolution was adopted at the meeting, with the UAE joining calls for a ceasefire and expressing its opposition to Turkey under an obvious pressure from Israel and the US. The UAE condemned Hamas for the escalation of the conflict and declared its intention to stop investing in the region in case Hamas does not cease rocket attacks.

Meanwhile, the United States “blocked a joint statement from the UN Security Council calling for an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas” for the third time in a week. A recent New York Times article has shed some light on the bluntly pro-Israeli stance taken by President Joe Biden by publishing certain details about a telephone conversation between the US leader and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. At the same time, “a number of congressional Democrats are ramping up pressure on the Biden administration to more forcefully engage on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” which could prevent Biden from defending Netanyahu any longer. For instance, “Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a Democrat from New York” said he wished “to see a ceasefire reached quickly” and most Congressmen are inviting the White House to act accordingly.

In the current climate, Minister for Foreign Affairs of China Wang Yi expressed “support for peace talks and the Middle East peace process”, declared China’s readiness to replace the US as peace mediator and invited Israeli and Palestinian sides to the PRC “to resume direct negotiations.” He also criticized the United States for preventing the Security Council from “speaking in one voice”, sabotaging ceasefire efforts and being biased in favor of Israel.

Wang Yi especially reminded that China has been consistently pragmatic advocating the respect of the international law and endeavoring to help both parties reach a realistic compromise; unlike some other countries, China has not backed one party to the detriment of the other. “Regrettably, the obstruction of one country prevents the [Security] Council from speaking in one voice,” Wang Yi said during a virtual UN Security Council meeting on May 16. He also called on “the United States to shoulder its due responsibilities, adopt a fair stand, and support the UNSC in playing its due role in easing the situation, rebuilding trust, and advancing a political settlement.”

In addition, China’s Foreign Minister said the two-state solution was the way forward and reminded the meeting participants that the issue had been “on the United Nations agenda for more than 70 years” but was yet to be resolved, so the root of the crisis resides in repeated violations of Palestine’s right to create an independent state which is not a faire solution of the problem preventing Palestine and Israel from reaching genuine peace. US officials, on the other hand, are not prepared to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in earnest, which is why they have prevented the UN Security Council from releasing a joint statement on the issue.

In the current climate, according to The Times of Israel, China has been playing a more active role in global affairs. Although the PRC is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it has rarely exercised its right of veto, and unlike the United States, it is not a member of the Quartet on the Middle East “involved in mediating the Israeli–Palestinian peace process.”

China’s recent efforts aimed at resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict lend further proof to the theory that the PRC is striving to transform into a leader in the global political arena. The country’s attempts to become a mediator in future talks are indicative of China’s growing ambitions to show its mettle to the international community and score brownie points. It is not surprising that Chinese officials have expressed their support for a two-state solution, as the PRC does not wish to quarrel with Arab nations. In fact, in 2016, the PRC “became the largest source of foreign investment in the Middle East.”

During a telephone conversation between China’s Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi and his Pakistani counterpart, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, on May 15, the former expounded on PRC’s “position on the current Palestine-Israel conflict” affirming China’s willingness to lend support to the Palestinians and contribute to the settlement of disputes with Israel. “China will continue to firmly support the just cause of the Palestinian people to strive for the restoration of their legitimate national rights and support a just solution to the current issue through political
dialogue,” said the head of PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the conversation.

Russian politicians are well aware that attempts to resolve the conflict are not welcome in Israel. In recent years, Moscow has, on more than one occasion, expressed willingness to mediate between the Palestinian and Israeli leadership either in Russia or elsewhere. However, so far, these proposals have been politely but firmly rejected by Israel.

There are no UN peacekeeping troops in Palestine territories because Israel has repeatedly rejected their deployment whoever was its initiator. However, borders between Israel, and Lebanon and Syria are still being patrolled by UNFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) and UNDOF (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force) respectively. But the conflict in Palestine is different since Israel considers it mainly as an internal affair from the point of view of the territory, and has not, and will not, allow UN peacekeeping forces to be deployed in the country.

Clearly, it will be very challenging to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hence, it is not surprising that quite a few external players would like to see China, a new mediator, succeed where others have failed.

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