



Israel Is Finally Starting To See China And Russia Clearly

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Wars have a way of clarifying a great many things, and of reshuffling existing partnerships in profound ways. This is what's happening with Israel's views of China and Russia, which are now undergoing a redefinition because of its current conflict with terrorist organization Hamas.

Take Israel's approach to China, which for a long while was dominated by a desire to make the People's Republic of China (PRC) a major economic stakeholder in the "start up nation." That open-door policy, initiated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu more than a decade ago, has caused no shortage of friction with Washington, with successive administrations urging Jerusalem to take a more sober stance toward the political and national security risks associated with Chinese money.

These entreaties have had some effect. In response to U.S. concerns, Israel has done things like set up a governmental financial screening body and step up scrutiny of foreign investment from the PRC. For its part, China has noticed, and drawn down its economic stake in the Jewish state significantly. As a result, in the words of one Israeli expert, the Israeli-Chinese "honeymoon is over."

Even so, Israel has remained acutely interested in Chinese engagement, and eager to curry favor with Beijing. This is so for practical reasons. As one observer explained to me in Tel Aviv earlier this year, Israel needs to play its cards right with China, or it could find its high-tech sector, the engine of its economy, crippled as a result of a Chinese move against Taiwan—something he believed was a matter of "when, not if."

But all that was before the Hamas atrocities of Oct. 7 and the ensuing Israeli incursion into Gaza. China's response to the crisis has been decidedly unfriendly to the Jewish state, with policymakers in Beijing refusing to condemn Hamas' terror rampage and actively seeking to curtail Israel's military response. Meanwhile, TikTok, China's wildly-popular social media platform, has been awash with pro-Palestinian content, so much so that it has been accused of helping spread "pro-Hamas propaganda." All of which has led to a growing recognition among Israelis that China, far from being an impartial party in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has decisively taken sides in it—and is actively stoking antisemitism in the process.

The same seismic shift is visible in Israeli views of Russia. Prior to this fall, Israel had taken a hands-off approach to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, offering only muted support for Kyiv's fight against the Kremlin's aggression. This tepid stance was justified several ways. Israel, policymakers in Jerusalem said, needed to be cautious about provoking the Kremlin because of the prominent role Russia plays on its northern border, where it continues to backstop the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Relevant, too, was the roughly 15 percent of the Israeli population that is of Russian extraction—a significant percentage of whom still have connections to the "old country." And more than a few made note of the fact that President Vladimir Putin, though not overtly pro-Israeli, was nonetheless the least antisemitic Russian leader in living memory.

The aggregate result was a Ukraine policy that was limited in scope. While Jerusalem did provide Kyiv with extensive intelligence and humanitarian assistance, it stopped short of offering military aid or materiel. Even the entry of Iran, Israel's regional nemesis, into the conflict on Russia's side didn't do much to alter the Israeli strategic calculus.

Russia's post-Oct. 7 policies, however, have changed things. Moscow has stayed largely mum, refusing to condemn Hamas' campaign of terror. It has also formally received representatives of the terror group in an effort to demonstrate its continued clout in the Middle East. Meanwhile, it has done little to back Israel's government, despite the ostensibly close personal ties between Putin and Netanyahu—all of which has left an indelible impression that Russia, much like the Soviet Union before it, remains an enemy of the Jews.

That understanding is beginning to percolate in Israeli society. On social media and in private conversations, more and more Israelis are beginning to admit that Israel may have mishandled its Ukraine policy, and that a more full-throated defense of Kyiv is warranted. At the core of this realization is a profound truth—that freedom is a common fight, and its rollback in one place makes aggression in others more likely.

All of which is to say that, for Israel, the horrors of Oct. 7 were a watershed moment, and one that will inevitably prompt a major reconfiguration of foreign policy. What that might look like has yet to be determined, but all of the signs suggest that Jerusalem's ties to both Beijing and Moscow are poised to change significantly.

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