

Abbas Goes to China

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The United States might not be interested in the Middle East, but China is. In the latest of a series of diplomatic maneuvers in the region, Chinese President Xi Jinping welcomed Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, to Beijing, announced a “strategic partnership” between the two sides, and declared his willingness to help negotiate a two-state peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians.

This is part of an accelerating Chinese efforts to compete with the United States across all elements of national power and erode and displace America’s international primacy, following the recent China-brokered rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to resume diplomatic ties in March. This particular outreach to the Palestinians has the further subtext of signaling to Israel—which has been taking steps to reduce Chinese involvement in its economy—the potential dangers of refusing to do business with Beijing. Without renewed U.S. leadership and engagement in the region, China will likely continue finding diplomatic victories, however symbolic, in the Middle East, peeling away U.S. partners, and weakening Washington’s ability to compete against Beijing.

What Happened?

- On June 14, Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority (PA), [arrived in Beijing](#) for a four-day visit. He was welcomed by Chinese President Xi Jinping with full military honors.
- The two leaders announced a “strategic partnership,” likely including economic assistance for the PA, although details of what that entails remain scant. Xi also [put forward a plan](#) for arriving at a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue.
 - » “China is willing to strengthen coordination and cooperation with the Palestinian side to promote a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the Palestinian issue as soon as possible,” Xi said.

Why Is It Important?

- Beijing’s welcoming of Abbas is of a piece with China’s own sense of its growing global role and clout. China now sees itself as a major player on the geopolitical stage. It is increasingly willing to leverage its rising economic and military power to undergird significant diplomatic initiatives aimed at shaping a new, post-Pax Americana global order—especially in critical regional theaters like the Middle East where U.S. retrenchment has created vacuums that China is ready to exploit.

- » Beijing's peace plan for Ukraine, its brokering of the Iran-Saudi détente, and putting itself forward as the champion of a negotiated two-state solution are all part of this accelerating trend and very much part of China's efforts to compete with the U.S. across all elements of national power and erode and displace America's international primacy.
- » As Xi [told](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin when he visited him in Moscow earlier this year: "Right now there are changes – the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years – and we are the ones driving these changes together."
- Regardless of whatever agreements Xi and Abbas might have signed, it is unlikely that China will expend significant political or economic capital to assist the Palestinians in any meaningful way.
 - » China's global track record of [shoddy infrastructure projects](#) and [foreign investments that turn into debt traps](#) has clearly demonstrated that Beijing acts internationally only when it sees an opportunity to benefit its own interests.
 - » Beijing derives much more benefit from the symbolic act of siding with the Palestinians than from actually doing anything to help them.
- Beyond the global political victory of showing itself to be a leading diplomatic actor, China's outreach to the Palestinians likely also has some specific regional objectives, such as:
 - » Putting pressure on Israel to continue doing business with China.
 - After significant [American encouragement](#), Israel has quietly [begun limiting Chinese involvement](#) in its critical infrastructure and investment in vital economic sectors, such as telecommunications.
 - These changes have been noticed in Beijing, which would prefer to continue to have access to the cutting-edge technologies being developed in the [Start-Up nation](#).
 - Xi's overtures to support Palestinian political demands can be used as leverage to demand greater Israeli economic cooperation, demonstrating to Israel the dangers of not doing business with China.
 - » Further appealing to Arab and Muslim states by casting itself as a champion of the Palestinians.
 - In a recent [poll commissioned by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#), for the first time since the poll began in 2014, China clearly passed the United States in Saudi popular preferences. Similarly, in a poll conducted by Princeton University's [Arab Barometer in 2022](#), China was found to be more popular with publics in 7 of 9 Arab countries surveyed.
 - As evidenced by its brokering of the restoration of Iranian-Saudi ties, China is interested in deepening its relations with the Muslim world, through whose waterways most of its large oil imports either originate or transit, and its Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure projects pass—from Central Asia to Pakistan and Turkey.
 - Even though, through the Abraham Accords, Arab states have now demonstrated that resolving the Palestinian issue is not a prerequisite for normalization with Israel, Beijing may believe that taking up the Palestinian cause will endear it to the Muslim world.

- This engagement also serves to distract attention away from China’s genocide against its Muslim Uyghur minority in Xinjiang.
- Similarly, while Beijing’s diplomatic overtures serve to highlight American absence on the world stage and undermine its claims to global leadership, the outreach to Abbas and the PA could have some specific negative repercussions for U.S. interests, including:
 - » Peeling away U.S. partners.
 - In recent weeks, U.S. partnerships in the Middle East have suffered two blows. First, the Chinese-brokered Iran-Saudi deal, even if the White House refused to recognize it as such, was a direct rebuke of Washington by Riyadh. Second, the United Arab Emirates’ [withdrawal](#) from the U.S.-led Combined Maritime Forces, which focuses in part on deterring and combating Iranian provocations at sea.
 - Although Chinese-PA cooperation is unlikely to have a similar immediate effect, it could increase pressure on Israel to temper its cooperation with U.S. efforts to compete with China and constrain its rising power and influence.
 - » Destabilizing the West Bank.
 - The Palestinian Authority is already suffering a legitimacy crisis, with Abbas in the 18th year of a 4-year term, no new elections in sight, massive corruption and economic mismanagement. Abbas may believe that China can help solve or distract from these problems, but it is likely to only make matters worse.
 - Any economic assistance to the PA is likely to support, if not exacerbate, terrorism. The PA continues to engage in “pay-for-slay,” giving payouts to families of terrorists who attack Israel. Because all money is fungible, any economic assistance that China provides frees up funds that the PA can devote to “pay-for-slay” continuing to incentivize terrorism. Amid the largest wave of terrorist attacks in years, this promises to only heighten Israeli-Palestinian tensions and detract from efforts to bring stability and prosperity to the West Bank.
 - Should the PA seek Chinese assistance to stay in power by, for example, using authoritarian security technology such as surveillance cameras and facial recognition technology, it might only further exacerbate political discontent in the West Bank. With Hamas already seeking to exploit the PA’s failings, any further erosion of PA legitimacy could strengthen Hamas’ hand and set the stage for a potential conflict between the two groups.