Commentary
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How China's Diplomatic Moves Challenge American Dominance: From Palestine to Ukraine

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Summary

Recent discussions among Palestinian political movements, facilitated in Beijing, have generated significant international attention. Questions remain about the feasibility of fully implementing this agreement, but its primary geopolitical significance lies in China's gradual encroachment into traditional American spheres of influence. This shift alters many regional dynamics and offers local actors opportunities to diversify their foreign policies. China's engagement in Palestinian affairs is just one example of these changes.

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On 21-23 July, representatives from major Palestinian political movements convened in Beijing, where, with the mediation of Chinese diplomats, they **held** talks to strengthen Palestinian unity. As a result, leaders of the two main competing factions, Hamas and Fatah, signed an agreement to end their long-standing division. This agreement **aims** to maintain Palestinian governance in the Gaza Strip following the conclusion of recent hostilities. Apart from that, these leaders, along with members of twelve other Palestinian movements, met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Beijing declaration

The agreements reached involve the formation of a provisional unity government to oversee the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Additionally, under the political unity declaration, free elections for the National Council are to be organized. Chinese

media have hailed the Beijing Declaration as a major breakthrough. **According to** China's Foreign Minister, it represents a "historic moment for the cause of Palestine's liberation".

Many analysts caution that it's premature to consider Beijing's mediation efforts a definitive success. Declarations and agreements, even when signed, do not guarantee their effective implementation. Since 2007, when Hamas effectively ousted Fatah from Gaza, several attempts have been made to restore Palestinian political unity without success.

Additionally, Israel not only rejects the Beijing Declaration but is also opposed to some of its provisions. Israel is generally disinclined to see the US's influence in the Middle East diminish and will resist both the substance of the declaration and the increasing Chinese influence. Consequently, despite the high-profile nature of the declaration, tangible results on the ground may not materialize. It's possible that these agreements may not be fully realized or could even collapse under the weight of harsh realities.

While it might be tempting to view the recent developments solely through the lens of internal Palestinian politics, it's crucial to consider the broader international context. For decades, Western diplomacy has achieved only sporadic success in addressing the complex issues of the Middle East. Specifically, it has struggled to find solutions for Palestinian internal political dynamics and to foster genuine normalization between Palestine and Israel.

> Despite these challenges, the US has long been the dominant external actor, with all parties in the region looking to it for hope and guidance. Its influence and authority were widely recognized because there were no viable alternatives.

Currently, these power and influence are being diluted, with nascent Chinese alternatives emerging—a key **focus** of Beijing's efforts. However, in the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that China aims to significantly surpass US influence in the Middle East, as such a goal is simply unrealistic. Instead, China probably seeks to at least balance American political power in the region. In the future, this could enable China to participate on equal terms with Washington in managing Middle Eastern affairs. Essentially, this aligns with Beijing's broader strategy of implementing a multipolar world order in this strategically crucial region.

Palestine is not alone

In this context, Beijing is also active in various other regional cases. For example, in March 2023, Chinese diplomats **achieved** a notable breakthrough in the Middle East by facilitating the restoration of diplomatic relations between long-time adversaries Iran and Saudi Arabia, which had been severed in 2016. Additionally, the two countries resumed economic agreements made two decades ago. While this development did not drastically alter the regional dynamics, it did introduce new elements to the situation. Notably, it demonstrated that complex negotiations between key regional rivals can successfully proceed without Washington's involvement. The US had little choice but to reluctantly acknowledge that Chinese initiatives contributing to stability in the Middle East are playing a positive role.

A similar dynamic, though with different intricacies and stylistic elements, can be observed in Eastern Europe. It has become a common observation that halting the conflict in Ukraine and achieving sustainable de-escalation between Moscow and Kyiv might be impossible without active Chinese involvement.

> This observation may be incorrect, but the fact that it is being made is significant. China's diplomacy will leverage this perception to further expand its influence far beyond its own borders.

Beijing will employ a full range of tools—diplomatic, economic, infrastructural, and even social. Additionally, China is interested in increasing its institutional presence in Eastern Europe, as demonstrated by Belarus's **accession** to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Recent joint **exercises** near the Polish border involving Belarusian and Chinese special forces also indicate China's willingness to cautiously employ elements of military cooperation to enhance its global significance.

Over the past decade, China has gradually but systematically implemented a similar strategy in Africa. Today, China's influence has become dominant in many parts of the African continent. Both local players and major foreign powers must now reckon with this significant presence.

Balance of power and perceptions

Observing current events, it's easy to see how China's capabilities and ambitions are growing. Take, for example, the situation in Ukraine, where a widespread conclusion is emerging that without China's involvement, the conflict in Eastern Europe cannot be resolved or shifted towards peace. Alongside recent news of Chinese mediation in the

Middle East, many are beginning to feel that Washington's role in addressing complex international issues is insufficient and that China's influence is becoming decisive in an increasing number of conflict scenarios. However, this perception may not fully reflect the actual balance of power.

For instance, in the Middle Eastern theatre, China currently lacks the political and military capabilities that the US possesses. Yet, in international relations (and politics more broadly), it is often impossible to measure the real balance of power accurately. This is particularly true until a conflict reaches significant intensity and takes on the form of a hard political or military confrontation. Until then, the material reality is often "filtered" through the perceptions of various actors. It is these perceptions that become the central factor determining the strategies and decisions of states. This is where we can observe rapid geopolitical shifts in favour of China.

The recent **visit** by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba to Guangzhou on 23-25 July is particularly indicative. This was the first high-level visit from the Ukrainian government to China since February 2022. The visit underscored the ongoing sentiment that without Beijing, a long-term resolution to the conflict may be elusive.

Interestingly, the initial push for active dialogue with Beijing from Kyiv began in early 2023. At that time, China released a position paper with 12 points for a political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis and **appointed** a special envoy to engage with all relevant parties. However, according to confidential sources close to President Zelenskyy's office, Washington had clearly signalled its disapproval of intensive Kyiv-Beijing dialogue at that time.

Now, the situation on the battlefield and in global diplomacy has evolved to a point where the Americans no longer obstruct Ukraine's efforts to engage meaningfully with China.

> It is clear that China cannot provide a miracle that will suddenly lead to a quick resolution of conflicts. However, Beijing is becoming a significant geopolitical and geostrategic force that is viewed as a last hope in deadlocked conflicts. This, in turn, naturally enhances both China's capabilities and ambitions.

Moreover, the rising expectations of China are based not only on its perceived economic and military-political potential but also on a substantial normative foundation. China effectively positions itself to many non-Western audiences as a more understanding and

equitable superpower, capable of uniting people around mutually beneficial proposals rather than imposing unilateral solutions. This contrasts sharply with the perception of the United States and the Western world in some regions.

However, this does not imply a universal rise in such "soft power" of China compared to the US. Many countries, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, view China as a primary strategic threat to their security and therefore do not see any aspirations for justice and understanding in its foreign policy. Nonetheless, this does not negate the points mentioned earlier. In the context of specific conflict cases, it is important to keep those points in mind.

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