

# ME crisis tests limits of China’s diplomatic push

REUTERS, Beijing

When China announced a surprise deal restoring ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran this year, it signalled Beijing’s desire to be a diplomatic heavyweight in the Middle East.

The crisis in Israel and Gaza threatens to expose the limits of that ambition.

After the March Saudi-Iran agreement, which China brokered, Chinese media hailed Beijing’s rising profile in a region long dominated by Washington. Wang Yi, China’s top diplomat, said the country would continue to play a constructive role in handling global “hotspot issues”.

But after the killings of more than 900 Israelis in coordinated assaults by the Islamic group Hamas, China’s response was muted.

A foreign ministry spokeswoman repeatedly stopped short of condemning Hamas, instead calling for de-escalation and for Israel and Palestine to pursue a “two-state solution” for an independent Palestine. China’s leader Xi Jinping has been silent on the issue.

“Certainly it does poke a hole in the type of propaganda ... of China being this kind of massive player in the Middle East,” said Bill Figueroa, an assistant professor at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and an expert on China-Middle East relations.

China’s neutrality has drawn criticism from US and Israeli officials, with some saying it undermines Beijing’s claims to be an unbiased peace broker in the region.

That should not come as a surprise, say analysts. Chinese diplomacy has long been risk averse, and the spiralling conflict between Israel and Hamas puts its diplomats in a difficult spot, given China’s historic support for the Palestinians and its rivalry with the United States.

“We have made it clear that China is highly concerned about the continued escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and urges all parties concerned to immediately cease fire and stop fighting. China is willing to maintain communication with all parties and make unremitting efforts for peace and stability in the Middle East,” Wang Wenbin, a foreign ministry spokesperson, said yesterday.

Since the end of China’s nearly three years of Covid lockdowns, Xi has launched a diplomatic push aimed at countering the United States and its allies, who he says seek to contain and suppress his country.

Beijing has deepened alliances with non-Western led multilateral groups such as the BRICS bloc of nations, while hewing more closely to Russia despite its invasion of Ukraine and strengthening ties with countries in the Middle East and the Global South.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Palestinians flee their homes, amid Israeli strikes, in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip yesterday. The United Nations said more than 180,000 Gazans had been made homeless, many huddling on streets or in schools.

## HOSTAGE DEAL WITH HAMAS What are Israel’s options

AGENCIES

Hamas has threatened to execute one hostage every time Israel drops a bomb, without warning, on a Palestinian home in the Gaza Strip, Reuters said yesterday, as the increasingly bloody war between the two sides rolls into a fourth day with no end in sight. The group has 150 hostages - including children and a Holocaust survivor - grabbed from border towns and kibbutzim in attacks that began early Saturday.

Hamas spokesperson Abu Ubaida said, “Every targeting of our people without warning will be met with the execution of one civilian hostage”. AFP reported that four hostages have already died (it is unclear if they were Israelis or other nationals) but also that they were killed during Israeli air strikes.

The hostages present a significant problem for an Israeli government that has vowed to respond to Hamas’ attacks with a “massive” assault and “unprecedented force”; Palestinians are bracing for a vicious response after Tel Aviv called up over three lakh soldiers, including reservists, ahead of a ground assault.

Public opinion has, so far been firmly with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

He has the full support of the opposition too; ex-PM and current Leader of the Opposition, Yair Lapid, told NDTV Monday, “Nobody cares about politics right now... it doesn’t matter.”

However, some experts feel Israelis will not “forgive” their leader if ensuring hostages’ safety, and rescuing them, is not a priority. “The citizens’ attitude would be ‘you have failed to ensure our security, bring us the hostages back’,” Sylvaine Bulle, a French sociologist studying Israel, told AFP.

Bulle also predicted tension between politicians and the military if hostages were killed.

According to Kobi Micheal, a researcher from the Tel-Aviv based Institute for National Security Studies, “Hostages cannot be first priority. With all the sorrow... Israel will (address the) hostage issue only (when it has) the upper hand and when Hamas (is) defeated... not a second before.”

Reuters has also said Qatari mediators are negotiating the hostages’ release in exchange for 36 Palestinian women and children being held in Israeli prisons. Qatar’s Foreign Ministry confirmed to Reuters it is involved and sources told the news agency talks are “moving positively”.

# Total siege of Gaza ‘prohibited’ under int’l law: UN

AFP, Geneva

Israel’s total siege of the Gaza Strip, depriving civilians of goods essential for survival, is banned under international law, the United Nations human rights chief said yesterday. Volker Turk, the UN high commissioner for human rights, said people’s dignity and lives had to be respected as he called for all sides to defuse the “explosive powder-keg situation”. Palestinian group Hamas, which abducted about 150 people in its surprise weekend assault on Israel, threatened to execute the hostages if Israeli air strikes continue “targeting” Gaza residents without warning. The threat came after Israel on Monday imposed a total siege on the Gaza Strip, cutting off food, water and electricity supplies, and sparking fears of an increasingly desperate humanitarian situation. “International humanitarian law is clear: the obligation to take constant care to spare the civilian population and civilian objects remains applicable throughout the attacks,” Turk said in a statement. The siege risk seriously compounding the already dire human rights and humanitarian situation in Gaza.

## Saudi stands by Palestinians Says Crown Prince Salman

AFP, Riyadh



Saudi Arabia’s de facto ruler told Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas he was working to prevent “an expansion” of conflict after the surprise Hamas attack on Israel, Saudi state media said early yesterday.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman also told Abbas the Gulf kingdom continued “to stand by the Palestinian people to achieve their legitimate rights to a decent life, achieve their hopes and aspirations, and achieve just and lasting peace,” the official Saudi Press Agency reported. The spiralling violence kicked off amid speculation that Saudi Arabia, which has never recognised Israel, would agree to normalise ties as part of a deal in which it would obtain security guarantees from the United States as well as assistance developing a civilian nuclear programme.



Afghan residents clear debris of damaged houses after earthquake in Nayeab Rafi village, Zende Jan district of Herat province yesterday. Rescue workers scrambled through rubble for villagers buried in their homes by a series of earthquakes that killed more than 2,000 people in rural western Afghanistan, but hope of finding survivors was fading fast.

PHOTO: AFP

## Russia trying to besiege eastern town Says Ukraine

AFP, Kramatorsk

Russian forces were trying to encircle the eastern Ukrainian town of Avdiivka yesterday, an official said, adding it was being heavily bombed.

Kyiv’s forces have managed to cling on to Avdiivka despite repeated Russian strikes. The town lies just north of the Russian-controlled city of Donetsk, which was captured by separatist forces in 2014.

“For over a year, there has been the danger that (Avdiivka) can be occupied, but now the situation has worsened rapidly,” said Vitaliy Barabash, head of the town’s administration.

Russian troops launched an artillery attack in the morning and were firing incessantly, he said.

## VIOLATION OF OFFICIAL SECRETS ACT Pak HC puts former army chief, spymaster on notice

DAWN ONLINE

Pakistan’s Islamabad High Court (IHC) Chief Justice Aamer Farooq on Monday issued notices to former army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa, ex-spymaster Faiz Hamid and two journalists, in response to a petition seeking legal proceedings for allegedly flouting Official Secrets Act.

In the petition, Atif Ali — a concerned citizen — sought the registration of a case against the journalists and the former generals over news reports regarding the ex-military officers’ role in politics. The director general of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) was also put on notice. Justice Farooq heard the petition on October 4, but the court order was released on Monday.

The petitioner contended that the interview of ex-Gen Bajwa was conducted in a “reckless” manner and the journalists, Javed Chaudhry and Shahid Maitla, did not show any sense of responsibility in publishing them. The petition claimed the revelations made in the interview(s) were a violation of

the Official Secrets Act and tantamount to inciting mutiny and disharmony.

It requested the court to issue directions to the director general of the Federal Investigation Agency to register an FIR against the former COAS, former ISI chief, and the journalists. Besides, it also sought directions for the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority to impose a ban on the two journalists.

Initially, the registrar’s office of the IHC in March this year raised an objection, saying that the High Court was not an appropriate forum and asked the petitioner to approach the relevant authorities. When the petition was heard by the chief justice, he asked the FIA DG to proceed in accordance with the law. However, the petitioner during the hearing informed the court that the investigation agency did not take any action.

Subsequently, Justice Farooq issued notices to all respondents which included Gen Bajwa, ex-ISI DG, journalists Chaudhry and Maitla, and the FIA.

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