

## Pompeo Defies Covid-19 and Visits Jerusalem with 'Mission China' Agenda

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*Less than three years ago, China and Israel marked 25 years of their bilateral diplomatic relations. While Beijing celebrated the occasion also to show to the world China's ability to implement a more balanced and pragmatic Middle East foreign policy; Jerusalem was exuberant in its successfully walking a fine line between reaping American patronage and benefitting from Chinese economic influence and prestige. Last month, US secretary of state Mike Pompeo suddenly flew into Jerusalem to warn PM Netanyahu: Enough is enough!*

China and Israel have a chequered diplomatic past. Beijing describes Israel as “extraordinary other” nation, neither reflecting cultural and socio-political similarity to “East or West,” nor anywhere close to “North or South” in terms of its economic development.<sup>1</sup> Since 1992, when Beijing and Jerusalem finally placed envoys in their two capitals, there has been steady growth in their bilateral trade, political and defence ties. All thanks to the absence of “cold war” – heated or cold – between the US and China during past three decades or so, Jerusalem has been successfully manoeuvring the hawks in the US administration in maintaining a robust relationship with Beijing. The Israeli strategy of playing both sides did seem to have paid dividends. However, according to the US mainstream media (MSM), a combination of three “unanticipated” factors: namely, the ascent of Trump in the White House, the

sudden outburst and escalation of US trade war with China, and the coronavirus global pandemic - all have made sure Israel's honeymoon with China is on the verge of nearing a horrific end. If we were to believe the MSM, soon enough, Jerusalem might find itself having to make a stark choice between Washington and Beijing. On the other hand, specialists in Beijing are confident in telling us, the (Israeli) tail won't wag the dog (the US).

The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo landed in Tel Aviv amid “countrywide lockdown” - the first Trump administration official to travel abroad during the Pandemic

### **Pompeo in Jerusalem to Warn Netanyahu: Xiaoxin Zhongguo<sup>2</sup>**

Wednesday, May 13, was no ordinary day in Israel. On the eve of 72<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Israel's “Independence Day,” when the US secretary of state Mike Pompeo landed in Tel Aviv amid “countrywide lockdown” and six-hours later flew back to Washington, he became the highest-ranking, and also the first,

Trump administration official to travel abroad during the pandemic.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's new cabinet, scheduled to be sworn-in the following day, flouted its own 14-day quarantine rule for all foreign visitors, for the extraordinary guest on an extraordinary mission. Although Pompeo did emerge from the aircraft at the Ben Gurion International Airport flaunting his stars and stripes patterned face mask, both the mask as well as "diplomatic" niceties behind it had vanished by the time he entered the Chagall State Hall in the Knesset building. According to media reports in Israel, though hard to believe, the 70-year old veteran and Israel's longest-serving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has dominated Israel-US relations for over a decade, himself was clueless of the urgency of why Pompeo had to rush to Jerusalem a mere four days after his father having passed away. Sophie Shulman of *Calcalist*, Israel's leading *Financial Daily* claimed, the former CIA director who is known for his unyielding loyalty to President Trump and who has enjoyed unparalleled longevity in the current Trump administration so far, was on a special mission: to demand all the US close allies, including Israel, choose the US side in its new "cold war" with communist China. "The US secretary of state's irregular visit to Israel was meant to signal that the trade war with China is escalating in the wake of Covid-19," she wrote.<sup>3</sup>

Without mincing words, Pompeo bluntly let it be known to Israeli officials and public alike, that Beijing gaining access to Israeli infrastructure will not only put the country's citizens to risk, it will also endanger the US capacity to work alongside Israel on key projects.

Pompeo's visit is being viewed as the first concrete step amid an intense US campaign to rally Five Eye Alliance countries against the Chinese government. Risking Covid-19, the

secretary of state barely spent six hours in Jerusalem, one-fourth of the round-trip flying hours between the two capitals. On the face of it, his [Pompeo's] top agenda was to 'order' Netanyahu to review the participation of a Hong Kong-based company Hutchison Water in a government tender for the construction of a \$1.5 billion Sorek 2 desalination plant, south of Tel Aviv. However, the urgency and a greater mission of the visit were revealed in an interview with public television aired hours after Pompeo met with Netanyahu. Without mincing words, Pompeo bluntly let it be known to Israeli officials and public alike, that Beijing gaining access to Israeli infrastructure will not only put the country's citizens to risk, it will also endanger the US capacity to work alongside Israel on key projects. Pompeo's public remarks must be viewed in the context of US concerns over the possibility of the Chinese government-backed company winning the tender, especially with the project-site near an Israeli military base which is also used by the US frequently.

### **Israel Willing to Walk Tightrope to Woo Beijing**

As expected, in less than two weeks after Pompeo flew back to Washington, Israel announced IDE Technologies, a local company, as winner of the bid to construct the country's biggest and most ambitious water project. This was the third time – the previous two cancelled deals were both in the arena of sensitive defence technology – in two decades, Israel cancelled a major project with a Chinese company under the US pressure. Interestingly, on two of the three occasions, the deals had been initiated and signed under Netanyahu himself. The first deal, the Israeli Phalcon early warning system (AWACS) was signed by Netanyahu during his visit to Beijing in 1998,<sup>4</sup> and the other, the 2005 Harpy anti-radar missile agreement was scrapped when the Likud party was in power. It is understandable what draws Israel towards the largest military equipment and defence technology customer in the world.

What is more intriguing is why would Jerusalem risk, especially in the backdrop of its largely pro-America "nationalist" population,

jeopardizing relations with a country that not only provides it with \$3 billion annual aid and unconditional, blind support, but is also the Jewish state's chief protector? Possibly for two reasons: one symbolic, the other more real. Pompeo's "flying" visit coincided with the second anniversary of the US embassy being moved to Jerusalem. This was a move which Beijing had not only condemned but also called "unlawful."

On the political and economic front, just like the US unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as the capital in December 2017, the rejecting of Hutcheson Water bid for the desalination plant is viewed by Beijing as a big setback, as reported in the US press. For Beijing considers Israel as a tech powerhouse and big stop in the Middle East on its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially since Xi Jinping and visiting Netanyahu signed a "comprehensive innovation partnership" agreement in the Chinese capital on the occasion of silver jubilee celebrations of their diplomatic relations. According to Yoram Evron, a senior lecturer with the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Haifa, as US-China tensions rose, more cooperation between Israel and China would come under pressure because it was deemed "sensitive" by Washington. "Israel has a clear interest in having a relationship with China in many areas, both politically and economically, considering China's rising profile in the world and presence in the Middle East," Evron recently told *South China Morning Post*.<sup>5</sup>

China will continue to push forward its relations with Israel undeterred by the US annoyance and unhappiness with the latter – *Editor, Palestine Chronicles*

### **Undeterred by Pompeo Visit, Beijing Determined to Continue to Strengthen Ties with Jerusalem**

For China, Israel is important for reasons different from why Jerusalem is keen in

wooing Beijing. But how have the Chinese viewed Pompeo's visit to Jerusalem and its major fallout in terms of the desalination project not going the China way?

A Chinese-language 3-minute video news clip released by *Global Times* sponsored *ifeng TV* a couple of days after Pompeo's visit, declared the visit "unsuccessful." Dismissive of the US ability to influence Israel to sever ties with China, *ifeng TV* commentary claimed "despite not awarding Hong Kong's C K Hutchinson the tender to build \$1.5 billion water desalination plant under the US pressure, Israel is pressing ahead with other trade deals with China – highlighting a substantial gap in the positions of two countries – Israel and the US – on whether commerce with China poses a security threat."<sup>6</sup> Substantiating the above claim, a popular WhatsApp news portal *Toutiao* carried a story on the current state of China's relations with Israel. *Toutiao* cited from a recent statement made by Michael Bornstein Oren, Israel's former envoy to Washington: "Israel sees China as an opportunity. For the United States, China is a threat – a three-pronged threat that's strategic, commercial, and technological."<sup>7</sup>

Ramzy Baroud, the editor of *Palestine Chronicles*, also reckons China will continue to push forward its relations with Israel undeterred by the US annoyance and unhappiness with the latter. "The visit by vice president Wang Qishan to Israel in 2018 was part of this Chinese strategy," Baroud noted.<sup>8</sup> Following China-Israel new comprehensive innovative partnership agreement in 2017 and Wang's visit, the bilateral trade has been growing exponentially and reached over \$14 billion, the second largest and next only to the US-Israel bilateral trade, Baroud said. Last month, Shu Meng, a researcher and specialist on Middle Eastern Studies at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS), told *Nikki Asian Review* in an interview "[Especially] in terms of technical and military cooperation, the United States has stood in the way of the development of China-Israel relations. Nevertheless, the continuous development of the bilateral relations will remain a major trend."<sup>9</sup>

## Growing Trade and Commercial Ties

The Chinese embassy in Jerusalem released a strongly-worded statement in response to Pompeo's warning to Israel against Chinese participation in infrastructure projects citing "security concerns." The embassy press release said, "Over the past few years, Pompeo has been labelling Chinese products, investments and personnel as 'security risks' without producing any concrete evidence."<sup>10</sup> Last week, the official Chinese news agency Xinhua reported Israeli exports to China rose 9.8 percent year on year during the first five months of 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Citing Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, Xinhua report stated "the figures also show a 7.9-percent increase in Israeli imports from China, from 682 million dollars in May 2019 to 736 million dollars in May this year."<sup>10</sup> A few days earlier, a report in *Global Times* (GT) claimed "The close business ties between China and Israel, particularly in the high-tech sector, won't be dented by the US."<sup>11</sup>

Besides trade, a major attraction for the Chinese businesses in Israel is the country's image of a world-renowned nation with more than 6,000 hi-tech start-ups and over 350 R&D centres funded by multinational companies.

Unaffected by external factors – natural or political – China-Israel bilateral trade and investment activities this year have been on the increase. The bilateral trade rose 18 percent year-on-year in the first four months of 2020, hitting \$4.87 billion. Double-digit growth against the backdrop of COVID-19 and a global trade tumble showcases the high complementarity of the two countries' economies, the Xinhua News reported in May. Besides trade, a major attraction for the Chinese businesses in Israel is the country's image of a world-renowned nation with more than 6,000 hi-tech start-ups and over 350 R&D centres funded by multinational companies. This has been a major incentive for the Chinese investments into Israel. According to the Tel Aviv-based IVC Research Centre, there has

been exponential growth in the Chinese investment in the country, especially in the tech companies. From 2016 to May 2020, Chinese investors provided \$1.43 billion in financing for Israeli tech companies. In 2018, Chinese investors made direct investments in 12 percent of local funding rounds, compared to 7.5 percent to 9 percent for the three years prior. "Big Chinese firms including Ping An, Alibaba, Baidu and Lenovo Group have significantly invested in many Israeli companies and venture capital funds," the IVC Research Centre told the GT recently.<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Peng, founder and CEO of the Israel Plan Organization (IPO), a non-profit organization focused on promoting and supporting Israel in China, told the *Global Times* a fortnight ago that "cooperation with Israeli high-tech firms would be a good substitute for Western companies as China is faces deliberate blocks on several Western fronts."<sup>14</sup>

## Establishment of Diplomatic Ties has benefitted both China and Israel

Zhejiang Foreign Language University Professor Ma Xiaolin, eminent Arabic scholar and internationally well-known Middle Eastern Studies expert, described Pompeo visit as aimed at killing not just two but "four birds" with one stone.<sup>15</sup> The four birds are, to reassert enduring US-Israeli alliance; to demonstrate US responsibility to safeguard Israel; to coordinate and push forward "the deal of the century" Trump Peace Plan; and to tear apart Israel-China bilateral relations. In an article for the widely read *Beijing Youth Daily* and later picked up by the authoritative CPC mouthpiece *People's Daily*, Professor Ma cited a *Jerusalem Post* report to highlight "anti-China" smear campaign as one of the chief purposes of the Pompeo visit. *Jerusalem Post* report had devoted far more newsprint space on what Pompeo deliberated on China than other issues on the agenda of his flash visit, Ma said. Calling Pompeo visit "unsuccessful", Professor Ma noted, "Sino-Israel relations have weathered several storms in the past. No top leader including Netanyahu has reacted to Pompeo's anti-China comments, which shows the secretary of state was only talking to himself."<sup>16</sup> "Establishment of diplomatic

relations has hugely benefitted both China and Israel, and has enhanced their respective diplomatic standing internationally. For China, leveraging good bilateral ties with Israel and therefore implement a more balanced, pragmatic Middle East policy will enhance its capability as responsible international player,” is how Professor Yu Jianhua described the current equation between Beijing and Jerusalem. Yu, the vice president of China Middle East Studies Association, is also a researcher and deputy director of the Institute of International Studies under the Shanghai Social Sciences Academy. Exuding confidence in Israel’s commitment to uphold growing Sino-Israeli political, economic and military relationship, Professor Yu spoke of how China has enabled Israel to end its “international isolation in general and in Asia in particular” since the establishment of their diplomatic relations. “Following China, several big and small countries in Asia went on a setting up diplomatic relations spree with Israel, notable names are India, Vietnam and Mongolia etc,” he claimed.<sup>17</sup>

If China has been more exuberant in its reactions to the mounting pressure Israel is being subjected to by the US, the Israelis have adopted a more quiet and cautious approach.

Interestingly, by strengthening economic and commercial ties with Jerusalem, Beijing is also aiming at establishing itself as “friends” of both Israel and Palestine. In early April, President Xi Jinping sent a greetings message to the State of Palestine leader Mahmoud Abbas saying, “Beijing attaches great importance to developing Sino-Palestine ties, and hopes China and Palestine will together carry forward their cooperative and overall bilateral relationship.”<sup>18</sup> A month ago, in a letter sent to the Palestine foreign minister Riyad Maliki, China’s state councillor and foreign minister Wang Yi made a firm commitment to the Palestine cause and assured Maliki of China’s concerns regarding Israel’s

recent encroachment on Palestine territory.<sup>19</sup> According to a commentary in the *Jerusalem Post*, in the backdrop of daily escalating tensions between China and the US, “Palestine is striving hard to consolidate its relations with China. The ultimate aim of which is to put pressure on the Trump administration to stop Israel from exercising administrative control in parts of Jordan-West Bank areas.”<sup>20</sup> Citing the remarks of a high Palestine official, the newspaper wrote: “We [Palestine] wish to see China playing a far greater role in the region. We see the Trump administration having no qualification to play a role in the Palestine-Israeli Peace Process because it is openly siding with Israel. Instead, China has all along stood with the Palestinian people.” There are no reports whatsoever of Jerusalem’s displeasure or objections to Xi’s and Wang Yi’s letters written to the Palestinian counterparts respectively.<sup>21</sup>

### US no Substitute for Chinese Investments in Israeli

In a more forthcoming and candid op-ed piece, entitled “Pompeo’s 5-point ‘dirty’ mission to backstab China in Israel,” the *Huashanwanjian* blogger Liang Shiwen, who is a widely popular and influential independent current affairs commentator, the following five “harms” have been done by Pompeo to China: snatched away the Sorek 2 water desalination project; eclipsed prospects of Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG) new container terminal at the Port of Haifa; forcing Israel to cut off all technical cooperation with Hua Wei; demanding Israel completely blockade all high-tech deals with China; and the fifth is a “flying knife” flew out of the White House after Pompeo returned home i.e. no Israel-China cooperation in sensitive arena. Attributing the “five knife” backstab-People’s Republic of China-action plan to the US initiated anti-China Five Eyes (FVEY) plot, however, Liang Wenshi emphatically denied “China or Israel closing door on each other.”<sup>22</sup> Zhou Rong, a senior research fellow at the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at the Renmin University of China, believes Israel holds a critical position for the US to the extent that the US is reluctant to harm Israel’s interests, which include the

latter's cooperation with China. In a recent interview to GT, exuding full confidence in Israeli commercial commitments to China, Zhou Rong said, "It is the US which is wooing Israel rather than the other way around, therefore the Israeli side won't care too much about the US' concerns."<sup>23</sup>

Further, if China has been more exuberant in its reactions to the mounting pressure Israel is being subjected to by the US, the Israelis have adopted a more quiet and cautious approach. Praising Chinese efficiency and welcoming billions of dollars in investments China is bringing into Israel, Professor Shaul Chorev, director of Israel's Maritime Strategy and Research Centre, University of Haifa sounded optimistic when he said: There is no turning back (for Israel). "There were no public objections from the US until 2018, when the Trump administration started its trade war with China," Chorev recalled.<sup>24</sup> We have to maintain our economic connections with China, without jeopardizing the unique relationship Israel shares with the US, he typically observed.

Finally, only a post-Covid-19 world would determine whether Israel will succumb to the Trump administration and once again let history repeat itself in terms of plunging its diplomatic relations with China into a phase of uncertainty. Expressing faith in China, Shira Efron, a fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, recently told *Foreign Policy*: "China has never been in Israeli threat assessments like Iran is. China is not in the neighbourhood, and Israel isn't an Asia-specific power." Echoing similar sentiments, Zhou Rong told GT in the interview: "Israel doesn't have the China experts that are embedded in the system the way they are in the U.S." Meanwhile, the Chinese are as pragmatic and confident as ever of the US failure in winning over its closest ally to give up on Beijing. Or else, why do you think Professor Ma Xiaolin loves quoting the age-old Chinese saying: Ten birds on a tree are not as good as one bird in hand!

## Endnotes

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