China's Approach to the New War in the Middle East

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The escalation between Israel and Hamas changed the geopolitics of the Middle East which has witnessed multiple conflicts in the past decade. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly the recurring flare-ups in the Gaza Strip, has long been a focal point of international attention and concern. With every conflict, there are various stakeholders involved and the same is this one. On the surface, US shuttle bus diplomacy has been on display since the war. The response of the US has disappointed many in the region but one country that is increasingly gaining strategic importance in the region is

China. The stance that China has adopted since the war shows that it values the sentiments of the people on the ground.

China's Stance in the Gaza War

During the initial stages of the war, most of the Western countries visited Israel but the Chinese adopted a completely different stance, rather than sending top officials to the region, the Chinese. Middle East envoy, Zhai Jun toured the region to reduce the tensions. It took President Xi Jinping 17 days to talk about the war and mentioned the long-standing stance of China, urging for a two-state solution and calling for a humanitarian corridor to allow for the aid to flow in.

The Chinese foreign ministry called for calm, to exercise restraint but missed out on condemning Hamas in clear terms. The Chinese approach to the war has much to do with its rivalry with the United States. As a rising global power, China's role in the Gaza conflict is a delicate balancing act between its economic interests, diplomatic principles, and regional stability. China's approach to the latest conflict in the new Middle East war has the element of opposing the United States as a regional hegemony.

Anti-Western Neutrality

China strategically employs an 'Anti-Western neutrality' approach to garner support from densely populated and strategically crucial regions. The sympathetic stance of many Global South nations towards Palestine allows China to mobilize backing for its leadership among developing countries. China is positioning itself as a neutral and peace-seeking partner in the region, in contrast to the United States, which has taken the side of Israel clearly in the early days of the war has provided a golden chance for China and other stakeholders to expand their influence in the Middle East.

Additionally, China actively works to consolidate regional unity by urging the Islamic World to present a unified front on the Palestine issue. This effort builds on China's successful mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, reinforcing the GSI's emphasis on regional countries independently addressing security concerns through solidarity.

Emphasizing its neutral stance and positioning itself as a representative of the Global South, China aims to challenge the moral standing of the US and advocate for the internationalization of the Palestine issue. This involves calling for a global conference to initiate a peace process, challenging the longstanding perception of Washington as the uncontested mediator in the conflict.

Potential Risk for China's Stance

The war also poses a significant challenge to China. Getting directly involved in the war poses a challenge to China's reputation in the region. The people of the region perceive China as a country which has no interest

in interfering in the affairs of any country. The non-interference policy of China is now facing a substantial challenge because if it does not interfere, it risks its reputation in the region.

The Chinese leader has repeatedly condemned violence and the killings of civilians but interestingly it has failed to condemn Hamas. By not condemning Hamas it wants to portray the Western world especially America as the sole reason for the conflict. The policy of just blaming the Western powers can backfire on the Chinese as the powerful countries in the region such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are too against the policies of Hamas.

China's current Gaza policy might be helping its stakeholders to criticise the USA but in the long term, it can lead to self-damage. With China's relative stance in the war, this has the possibility of creating mistrust within the regional partners, especially the Arabs with whom China is extensively working to expand its influence in the region. China's policymakers will now have to calculate the risks and opportunities of taking a side before it's too late.

It is very much clear that the war in Gaza is fuelling conflicts in the wider region, with Houthis blocking a critical trading route and Iran firing off missiles at its neighbours in the context of "fighting Israel". If China is unable to get off its neutral stance, there is a strong possibility of its economic interests getting damaged due to the actions of non-state actors.

As the war wages on, China's role in mitigating the war from becoming a regional conflict will be imperative but it is about time that the Chinese leadership needs to come out of this "neutrality" stance and have a firm stance on the current war for it to be seen as a strategic security partner.

Suhaib Shaukat is currently pursuing a BA in International Politics, Law and Economics at Middlesex University. His interest lies in the affairs of China Middle East Affairs. He is interested in studying the rapid rise of China in the Middle East political spectrum and how will that change the role of the United States in the region. Along with that he is passionate about engaging with youth on political literacy and believes that the young generation must engage with politics. Outside his studies, he is a member of the Youth Panel, Transport for London.

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