

China's Strategic Gains in the current Israel-Hamas Conflict

The current Israel-Hamas conflict in West Asia has various strategic implications for many nations concerned. It's an important region of the world due to its geography known for its oil producing capabilities as well as the various conflicts among the nations. Those conflicts have given rise to various contemporary issues to the world, one being the issue of terrorism. The entire world's major energy needs, especially for the South and South East Asian nations are met through this region. Therefore, this conflict will have certain bearings on those nations which have various strategic interests in the region, like the USA, EU, Russia, India and China etc.

While this conflict adds to the increasing instability to the global order, which is already bearing the brunt of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, some nations will see a silver lining in this war, especially China, which is always on the lookout for such conflicts to either defame the western world and its policies towards the Global South, or to extract strategic gains. We already know since the reduction and withdrawal of US troops from the West Asia in Iraq and in Afghanistan respectively, China has been looking to fill the vacuum to exploit the vulnerabilities and to forge new allies. It will be interesting to know what strategic gains can this conflict add to the Chinese interests in the whole region, and expanding into the wider Indo-Pacific, which will have a bearing on India's interests.

US and NATO attention can shift from Indo-Pacific

We are aware of the fact that the US and its allies are finding it difficult to sustain Ukraine in its fight against Russia to recover its territory. The US government is already finding it difficult to keep supporting Ukraine financially. The Republicans have blocked a proposal to fund the war in Ukraine, which amounts to around 50 billion USD, being dead against expanding more security assistance to Ukraine.^[1] Moreover, with the upcoming Presidential elections due in the US, a Republican candidate like Donald Trump with his popular Make America Great Again policy will further dash hopes for the Ukrainians.

Therefore, this renewed Israel-Hamas war will again shift the focus away from the Indo-Pacific in the coming days which is what China basically wants.^[2] If it's being extremely difficult for the US to support both Ukraine and Israel in their respective wars, then it will inspire China to increase its coercive behaviour in the Indo-Pacific. Perhaps one of the reasons why President Biden met Xi Jinping in California was to begin a steady relationship without causing further tensions which many suspect was a win for China after a long tense relationship.^[3] We have already seen how China has begun intimidating Taiwan and Philippines aggressively in the recent days, in both, the waters and the air in the South China Sea (SCS). The more the US and EU resources are stretched in the Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Hamas wars, the more China will have an opportunity to expand its aggressive behaviour in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) or the Pacific.

Damage to Abraham Accords and India's interests

One of the key objectives for China in this war will be to spoil the Abraham Accords process and the ultimate normalisation of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia which the US and India were looking forward to. This is because China along with Iran, Russia and North Korea have formed a formidable axis which the US and its allies find extremely difficult to contain. At present, these 4 nations pose dangerous security challenges to US and its allies via their advancement in the development of potent weapons in form of ballistic missiles which the US is concerned about. The US tried to form the Abraham Accords to settle down Israel and Saudi Arabia, thereby uniting these two to challenge the activities of Iran and its proxies in the region. Also, the other important aim was to check the growing influence of Chinese activities in the UAE.[\[4\]](#)

The second aspect is the recently proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) in the G-20 summit in New Delhi, which many analysts have said to be a counter to the Chinese BRI in the region. If completed, the corridor will provide a cost-effective and reliable cross-border railway network, which will be supported by available road transport and maritime routes, facilitating the movement of goods and services between India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Greece, and Italy, France, and Germany and if possible, this corridor can extend to the US in future.[\[5\]](#) Now if we observe this project, the countries which are benefitting are the US, India, European countries, Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and UAE, and Israel.[\[6\]](#) And the countries which are clearly losing out are China and Iran in particular.

China is will try to undermine this project mainly because it doesn't want India to provide an alternative to its BRI, especially now that we have seen how European countries are rejecting the Chinese BRI, fearful of the debt trap policy being followed by the Chinese aggressively. Recently, Italy has communicated to China that it is leaving the BRI, where Italian PM Meloni has expressed fears that Chinese companies are exerting an increased sway over their Italian counterparts, cementing the warnings that the US had sounded that BRI might let China take control of sensitive technologies and vital infrastructure. She says that the BRI had brought no significant gains to Italy.[\[7\]](#) Therefore, the Israel-Hamas conflict gives significant gains to the Chinese to atleast delay the IMEC implementation so it can use its diplomatic tools to negotiate with the Europeans.

Houthi attacks can lead to Increased Chinese Presence in IOR

In the current Israel-Hamas conflict, there is an increased aggression being displayed by the Iranian proxies, like the Houthis of Yemen in the gulf maritime trade routes. Two events have increased the threat to maritime commerce in this region. On 20th November, Yemen's Houthi Rebels seized an Israeli-linked cargo ship, named Galaxy Leader on a crucial Red Sea shipping route on Sunday and took its 25 crew members hostage, officials said, raising fears that regional tensions heightened in the war were playing out on a new maritime front.[\[8\]](#)

The second incident deals with the firing of Ballistic missiles by the Houthis on 3 commercial vessels which found themselves in the crosshairs in this Israel-Hamas war. The US Military Central Command stated, “These attacks represent a direct threat to international commerce and maritime security. They have jeopardized the lives of international crews representing multiple countries around the world”.^[9] Therefore, these attacks will enable China to increase their naval presence in the International Shipping lanes near to the Red Sea as they have done in the past with regards to the threat of Somalian piracy attacks. Subsequently, the US too will have friction with the presence of Chinese ships. Already due to this war, China has deployed 6 warships including a Type 052D guided missile destroyer, the frigate Jingzhou, and the integrated supply ship Qiandaohu, as part of Chinese Navy’s 44th and 45th naval task force.

Conclusion

The Israel-Hamas conflict presents a wider opportunity for the Chinese to undermine both the American and Indian influence in the West Asia. The icing on the cake for the Chinese will be the increased opportunity to deploy its warships in the IOR, in the name of providing protection to its commercial vessels near the Houthi controlled zone.

Endnotes

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[3] Michael Martina, Trevor Hunnicutt, Greg Torode, “What China’s Xi Gained From His Biden Meeting”, *Reuters*, 17 November 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-chinas-xi-gained-his-biden-meeting-2023-11-17/>

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[5] Dr. Arshad, “India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor: Aspects and Prospects”, *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 16 October 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10061&lid=6413v

[6] Dr. Arshad, Ibid.

[7] Reuters, “Italy Tells China it is leaving Belt and Road Initiative”, *Nikkei Asia*, 6 December 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Italy-tells-China-it-is-leaving-Belt-and-Road-Initiative>

[1] Isabel Debre & Jon Gambrell, “Yemen’s Houthi rebels hijack an Israeli-linked ship in the Red Sea and take 25 crew members hostage”, *Associated Press*, 20 November 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-houthi-rebels-hijacked-ship-red-sea-dc9b6448690bcf5c70a0baf7c7c34b09>

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Uploaded on : 14-12-2023

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