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## **Eurasian Powers Are Benefiting from the War in Gaza**

Emil Avdaliani  
December 2023



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The war between Israel and Hamas risks evolving into a larger regional conflict, potentially involving Iran and Hezbollah. More importantly, the ongoing hostilities could have much broader repercussions influencing China and Russia's position in the Middle East and especially their ties with Israel.

The Gaza conflict represents a strategic moment for China and Russia. It gives these two Eurasian powers a chance to anticipate distraction of Western attention. Russia in particular, sees it as a shift in US focus from Ukraine, where Moscow has been engaged in a full-scale war it initiated in February 2022. As Western hopes of Ukraine's quick victory fade, Russia's calculus is clear--wait out Western resolve in helping Kyiv financially and militarily. Conflicts elsewhere would help Russia divide the West and weaken its resolve.

China views the conflict as part of a broader pattern where Western attention is being constantly diverted from a more long-term confrontation with China. Beijing perceives the Gaza war, alongside the Ukraine conflict, as one of continuous instability, which helps to shift America's gaze away from the Indo-Pacific, providing Beijing with more strategic freedom in foreign policy and allowing it to make necessary military preparations for a potential future military conflict.

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza, coupled with the US' limited success in winning over the Arab countries, provide China with a much-desired respite akin to the early 2000s, when Washington was preoccupied with global terrorism, diverting its attention from other serious geopolitical challenges such as competition with Beijing or standing up to Moscow's increasingly ambitious foreign policy.

China and Russia also benefit from the war in Gaza because it effectively freezes the implementation of the ambitious IMEC trade corridor which runs from India to Europe via the Middle East. Moscow and Beijing had concerns that IMEC could overshadow their respective economic initiatives--the sprawling Belt and Road Initiative and the International North-South Transport Corridor which runs from Russian ports to Iran's major ports with an ambition to further link to India.

While longer term advantages for China and Russia are clear, they nevertheless face potential downsides of more immediate character. Both have had close economic and political ties with Israel, but as the Israeli military operation in Gaza unfolds, Beijing and Moscow have begun distancing themselves from Tel-Aviv.

While Russia is not expected to directly engage in the Gaza conflict, it benefits to a certain extent from the instability. Moscow would not, however, favor an all-out war in the region, as it could drag Russia into the Middle East quagmire amid its own protracted war effort in Ukraine.

Since February 2022 there has been a certain status quo in Israeli-Russian relations. Tel-Aviv so far has taken a measured stance towards Russia's war in Ukraine, not joining Western sanctions or supplying weapons to Kyiv. Russia on the other hand, maintained a balanced approach toward



Hamas, Israel, and Iran. Yet with the ongoing war in Gaza, maintaining this balance has become increasingly challenging for Moscow. The Kremlin portrays the ongoing war as evidence of faltering Western diplomacy and an opportunity for Moscow to ramp up its links with the Arab world. The recent visits by the Russian president Vladimir Putin to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) underlined the shifting Russian calculus: Moscow now prefers siding with the Arab world where greater trade and investment opportunities for Russian businesses allow the country to successfully re-orient its trade away from the West. The Arab world is also an important piece within the Global South, which Russian diplomacy has actively relied upon since its invasion of Ukraine.

This, however, does not mean that Russia favors a radical break with Israel, a stance that could backfire if Tel-Aviv shifts its balanced approach towards Ukraine. Yet Moscow seems increasingly less fearful of this scenario. After all, Israel has its own war and even if the conflict in Gaza ends in the foreseeable future, Tel-Aviv would still need to remain highly militarized for some time in order to maintain stability during the post-war period. This would obviously lessen the chances of any high-tech Israeli weapons being shipped to Ukraine.

Similarly, China could be witnessing a shifting dynamic in its relations with Israel. Prior to the Gaza war, Israel appeared to be moving closer to China, with plans for Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu to visit Beijing for talks on economic and military cooperation. This was a major concern for the US, especially given the fact that China was trying to gain influence in Israeli-Palestinian peace talks by advancing its own peace version and hosting the head of the Palestinian Authority in Beijing.

China indeed has always been highly supportive of the Palestinian cause, but the war has altered the dynamics pushing Israel to potentially re-think its close ties with China and rebuild links with the US. This shift was evident when Israel, along with over 50 other countries, condemned China's alleged human rights abuses of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang during a UN session in October 2023, signaling a potential realignment towards the collective which has been openly supportive of Israel.

Overall, the conflict in Gaza further increases the Global South's disenchantment with the West, who has struggled to woo this critical region following the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, it has managed to score some diplomatic successes: the major actors within the Global South have, at least not openly sided with Russia, and Saudi Arabia--a critical player in the region, even hosted the Ukraine peace talks in August 2023. But the war in Gaza further complicates the West's position in the Middle East as Arab countries become increasingly open to Russia and China.

The war in Gaza thus highlights the changing US role in the Middle East where the instability reflects the lack of a new American strategy in the region. Moscow and Beijing are cleverly taking advantage of it by eyeing potential opportunities stemming from widening divisions in the West which increasingly struggles to deal with the double conflict of Ukraine and Gaza.

*Emil Avdaliani is a professor of international relations at European University in Tbilisi, Georgia, and a scholar of silk roads.*

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