

Facing Off—China and Taiwan in the Contexts of the Swords of Iron War

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The conduct of China and Taiwan since the October 7 massacre in the context of the Swords of Iron war reflects differences in their interests, objectives, and strategic positions with respect to Israel, the Middle East, and the international arena. While China is opposed to Israel and sympathetic to Hamas, Taiwan shows sympathy and support for Israel. In spite of the emerging clarity, Israel should not at this stage change its fundamental policy on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

China and the Palestinians—Background

China has traditionally expressed political support for the Palestinians, promoted the two-states solution, recognized the Palestinian state, and consistently criticized Israeli actions that it has described as provocative. The source of China's ongoing support for the Palestinians lies in its historical perception of itself as the leader of the developing world and a supporter of national liberation movements against what it describes as Western imperialism. China's support is largely expressed rhetorically with statements backing Palestinian rights, including self determination, while China's economic aid to the Palestinians remains limited. In the [ranking of UNRWA donors](#) by donation size, over the past decade China has never been ranked above 30th place, with donations ranging from \$200,000 to three million dollars. In 2023 China was in 41st place with a donation of only two million dollars, while countries such as Indonesia, India, and Japan donated higher sums (\$2.6 million, \$5 million, and \$48.5 million respectively). For comparison purposes, the United States is ranked as the largest donor with about \$422 million. At the same time, China's relations with Israel have developed into a "comprehensive partnership in innovation," including considerable activity in the fields of economy, trade, infrastructure, and more. In [recent years](#), China's position on the Palestinian issue has become more prominent and vociferous, made clear by its contributions to discussions in the UN Security Council, the UN Human Rights Council, and its public statements on the issue. During the Swords of Iron war, China's conduct has become more hostile toward Israel.

What Has China Done Since October 7?

China's immediate response to the October 7 massacre was weak, calling on both sides to remain "calm" and resolve the dispute through "implementing a two-state solution and establishing an independent Palestinian state"—without mentioning the hostages held by Hamas or condemning its barbaric crimes. Since then, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has expressed growing support for the Palestinians, along with condemning Israel, calling to investigate Israel's "crimes," supporting ceasefire proposals with unfavorable terms for Israel, and using its veto power against American proposals for a ceasefire—all this in debates in the UN Security Council. Chinese rhetoric has become harsher as the war continues. In October, the Chinese ambassador to the UN [claimed](#) that Israel was occupying Palestine, whereas in the past its references to "occupation" focused mainly on the building of settlements. In February, the legal counsel of the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared in the International Court of Justice in The Hague that the Palestinians had the "right" to armed struggle against Israel, as part of their right to self-determination. Since the outbreak of the war, the Chinese Foreign Ministry and President Xi Jinping have frequently mentioned the ["right of return"](#) as one of the basic rights of the Palestinians.

Not only have President Xi and other official spokespersons [defined](#) Israeli policy as "collective punishment," but China has not even officially condemned the murder and wounding of Chinese citizens by Hamas terrorists. Instead, China maintains direct contacts with Hamas, which it does not see as a terrorist organization. In March the head of the Hamas political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, and Chinese envoy Wang Kejian [met in Qatar](#), and before that, Ismail Haniyeh met the Chinese Ambassador in Doha. According to a Hamas announcement after the meeting, Wang said that unlike Western countries, China recognizes Hamas as part of the Palestinian national fabric. In [a vote at](#) the UN Security Council, China expressed full support for granting the Palestinian state membership in the UN. China continued to issue harsh statements regarding the direct escalation between Israel and Iran and condemned the Israeli attack on senior Al Quds personnel in Damascus and the damage caused to the sovereignty of Syria and Iran. However, China did not condemn Iran's launch of over 300 rockets and drones against Israel, and the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, [even told](#) his Iranian counterpart that "the action taken was limited and was an act of self-defense," without reference to Iran's infringement on the sovereignty of Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia whose airspace was violated by Iranian weaponry, let alone a reference to Israel's sovereignty. The strong rhetoric against Israel did not end with official announcements from the government, as [a wave of antisemitism](#) swept over its social media, which is, of course, subject to strict government censorship that could have prevented this if it desired.

At the end of October, Israel's then foreign minister Eli Cohen spoke with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, expressing his concerns about the spread of antisemitism on Chinese social media and asking him to raise the demand for the return of the hostages in international forums. Israel also lodged an official [protest](#) with China for not clearly condemning the massacre, and there was even a [discussion](#) between the Deputy Director General for Asia and the Pacific in the Foreign Ministry and the Chinese Middle Eastern envoy in which the former "expressed Israel's deep disappointment

with Chinese announcements and statements about the recent events in the south, where there was no clear and unequivocal condemnation of the terrible massacre committed by the terrorist organization Hamas against innocent civilians and the abduction of dozens of them to Gaza.”

But since October 7, China’s embassy in Israel has been silent. The Chinese ambassador, Cai Run, only spoke for the first time in February, [in an article](#) in *Israel Today* marking the Chinese Year of the Dragon, with no mention of the massacre and the war. The article focused on China’s prosperity and contribution to strengthening the global economy and innovation and ended by describing the relations between Israel and China as important and fruitful. At the same time, the ambassador did not ignore matters affecting China and Taiwan, and after the swearing-in of the Taiwanese president on May 20, the Chinese ambassador to Israel held [talks](#) with Israelis “from all walks of life” in which he stressed the importance of the “One China” principle.

Against the backdrop of Beijing’s statements against Israel, its support for Hamas and Iran, and the silence of the embassy in Tel Aviv, the Chinese government has refused to send additional workers from China to Israel. However, Chinese workers who are already in Israel continue to work on building the light railway system in Tel Aviv and other construction sites. Chinese companies operating in Israel also continue, and some have even initiated activities in support of soldiers, the Gaza border communities, and the hostages. For example, the Haifa Bay Port, which is operated by SIPG Israel and owned by a company from Shanghai, temporarily [hosted](#) a Home Front Command company, purchased agricultural produce from farms along the Gaza border, and even [donated](#) protective containers to the IDF.

China’s foreign policy, as expressed in a [joint statement](#) by the presidents of China and France on May 7, referring to the dispute between Israel and Hamas, reflects China’s diplomatic maneuvers. In the declaration, President Xi condemned Israel, expressed opposition to the operation in Rafah, and avoided mentioning Hamas or Iranian involvement. However, the statement also demonstrated a more balanced and comprehensive approach to the dispute. For the first time, President Xi called the events of October 7 an “attack,” criticized “violent terror,” and called for the immediate release of the hostages—using the term “hostages” instead of “detained civilians,” as Chinese officials had previously referred to them, echoing Hamas rhetoric. It is possible that this more balanced approach to Israel was influenced by France’s diplomatic efforts and by China’s desire to lead a broad international consensus and be perceived as moderate by its Western partners.

On May 16–18, President Xi hosted Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and [at their meeting](#), they discussed the situation in the Middle East. Contrary to the public messages heard in Paris, the only information published was that the leaders had agreed that UN decisions must be complied with and that the Palestinian issue must be resolved through the two-state solution.

Meanwhile, in Taiwan

In contrast to China's blatant avoidance of addressing Hamas's terrorist atrocities and its victims in Israel, Taiwan has clearly and openly supported Israel since the start of the war, by expressing solidarity and by offering concrete assistance. Even on the day of the massacre, the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry was among the first in the world to [condemn](#) Hamas. The support continued with symbolic gestures, including illuminating the Taipei 101 Tower—the highest in Taiwan—with the colors of the Israeli flag, days after the slaughter, and holding a [concert](#) organized by the Taiwan-Israel Friends Alliance in mid-May, more than seven months after the war started. A [survey](#) held in Taiwan just a few days after October 7 showed that the Taiwanese public identified more with Israel (35%) than with the Palestinians (15%)—similar to the public in most Western countries at that time. However, there have also been limited [demonstrations](#) on the island in support of the Palestinians.

Unlike China, Taiwan condemned the Iranian attack on Israel, and the Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu [said](#) that the island joins “other democratic countries in condemning Iran's attack on Israel,” and illustrated the link that Taipei sees between identifying with and supporting Israel and its association with the global west. In response, Knesset Member Boaz Toporovsky and chairperson of the Israel–Taiwan Friendship Group, who at the time of the Iranian attack was leading a delegation of four Knesset members to Taiwan, [thanked](#) the outgoing president and the foreign minister for their support of Israel. He also linked the attack to Israel's association with the west, said that it was “an attack against the democratic world” and compared Taiwan to Israel by saying that both were small democracies situated in a difficult environment. During the [meeting](#) with the outgoing president, Tsai Ing-Wen, Toporovsky called Taiwan “a true friend” and said that Israel “noted and would always remember Taiwan's support for Israel after the October 7 attack.”

Taiwan's representative office in Israel, headed by Ya-Ping (Abby) Lee, has been very active since the tragedy. Its employees visited Gaza border communities and medical facilities, volunteered in agricultural businesses in the south, and organized events and activities for evacuated families. The mission worked hard to provide donations and aid to evacuated Israelis and the Israeli hinterland. It “adopted” Kibbutz Kfar Aza and promised to help with its rehabilitation by constructing a resilience center and temporary housing for its residents. It donated \$70,000 to the Pitchon Lev Association for families from the Gaza border communities and wounded Israeli soldiers and about half a million dollars to the Federation of Local Authorities [to set up](#) a satellite communication system for security and protection needs in local authorities. These activities, which were mostly publicized in the media and on social media, are intended to express Taiwan's commitment and solidarity with Israel and its citizens, its unambiguous stance against terror, and, of course, to improve Taiwan's public image in Israel. As part of the Israeli Knesset delegation's visit to Taiwan, its members heard from their Taiwanese colleagues that they were happy about the aid they had granted Israel, but they had also been subjected to domestic criticism as a result and were forced to clarify that the donations were granted to civilian rather than military organizations. It should be noted that at the beginning of May, Taiwan donated [half a](#)

[million dollars](#) for humanitarian aid in Gaza through the Mercy Corps organization to provide food, water, clothing, and tents.

Taiwan's involvement in unofficial civilian social initiatives in Israel has occasionally led to criticism and anger from the Chinese Embassy in Israel. Last year, the Yad Ezer leChaver Association signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) for humanitarian cooperation with the Taiwanese mission in Israel. The mission donated to the association's motorcycle unit and also [provided](#) assistance during the Swords of Iron war. Representatives of the Chinese Embassy were invited to the association's Holocaust Day [Ceremony](#) in Haifa, but when they understood that Taiwan's envoy Abby Lee had also been invited and was planning to speak at the event, they told the chairperson of the association that "there is no such country as Taiwan" and asked that "she should go." When the chairperson said that he "did not want to engage in politics" and did not ask the envoy to leave, the Chinese representatives left the event in protest and envoy Lee addressed the audience as planned.

China and Taiwan in the Middle East

Chinese foreign policy in the Middle East focuses on economic and diplomatic activity, as well as symbolic military presence. In economic terms, China sees the Middle East as an important source of energy, capital, and a significant market for its goods, infrastructure, and investments. China claims that it maintains a principle of non-intervention, by avoiding direct involvement in the region's conflicts and presenting itself as a neutral broker. For example, China hosted symbolic meetings between Palestinians and Israelis, and last year, it hosted the signing of the treaty between Iran and Saudi Arabia, positioning itself as the source of regional reconciliation and calm.

Since the outbreak of the war in Gaza, China's diplomatic activity has included conferences of international organizations at the UN; visits to the region by senior officials, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Special Envoy Zhai Jun, to key countries in the Middle East, including a visit to the Gaza Strip by China's Ambassador to the UN Zhang Jun. Foreign Minister Wang Yi has held numerous telephone discussions with his Middle Eastern counterparts, including [Minister Eli Cohen](#) in October. China has also published [joint statements](#), such as the one made by China and the Arab League on the future of the Israeli–Palestinian dispute. At the end of April, China hosted "reconciliation" meetings between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas—as part of its perception that Palestinian unity is a condition for stability—and called for a "united Palestinian front" and invited them to another reconciliation meeting in June.

The United States has called on China to use its influence to prevent escalation by Iran and Yemen, but it is hard to determine whether China has taken action on this matter. However, in terms of results, the aggression from Tehran and Sana'a continues to escalate. Beijing's inability to restrain the axis of resistance, which threatens the interests of China and its regional partners, particularly in regards to freedom of shipping, energy security, activity in the Suez Canal, as well as the attacks on Gulf States and Israel, underlines the limits of its influence and also perhaps its unwillingness to become involved by exerting actual influence on security matters in the region.

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Like Israel, all countries in the Middle East recognize the “One China” policy, and Taiwan operates in those countries through Economic and Cultural Offices, below the threshold of official diplomatic relations. Taiwan’s policy in the region is characterized by non-involvement in political matters, with the focus on economic collaborations, particularly in the [energy](#) sector, with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, and Oman, which supply over half of Taiwan’s [oil imports](#). Although Taiwan imported oil from Iran (about 4% of its imports) until 2021, Taiwan rejected Tehran’s proposal to establish a commercial office in Taiwan due to extensive pressure, including from Israel, and it severed economic relations with Iran following American pressure. Taiwan’s focus on economic cooperation with “moderate” countries in the Gulf and on civil initiatives in other countries of the region enables it to deal with any potential tensions with Arab countries that could arise from its broad collaboration with Israel, since these countries are themselves cooperating with Israel.

China Versus Taiwan: Why the Differences in Approach?

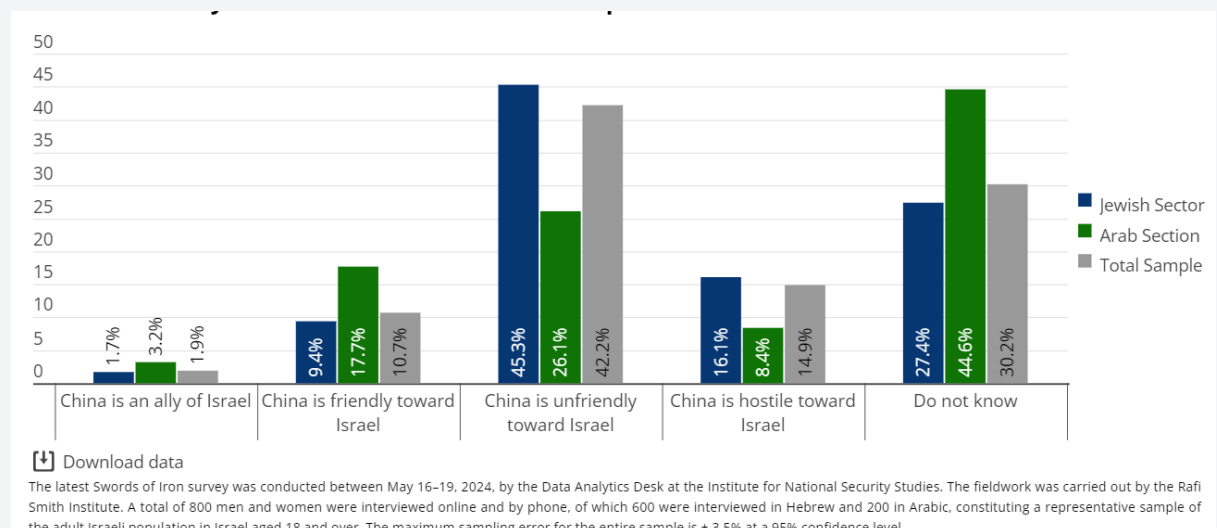
The difference between China’s and Taiwan’s approaches to the war in Gaza stems from a broader context that goes beyond the war itself or the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. China’s opposition to Israel and support for Iran, the Palestinians, and even Hamas expresses a strategic choice that reflects its view of the current war as another episode in the ongoing struggle between the powers, regionally and globally, in which China sees another opportunity to position itself against the United States and the West. In the UN Security Council, for example, China uses its veto, together with Russia, to block US resolutions favorable to Israel; it demonstrates commitment to the Palestinian issue and presents itself as the leader of the global south, thus challenging the American influence. Beijing also presents an alternative vision for resolving conflicts, signaling its ambitions to reshape the geopolitical order. In the Middle East, China’s position toward Israel echoes reservations that are common among large swathes of the public in the region and the declared positions of their regimes, thus “going with the (popular) flow.” China’s policy aims to continue maneuvering through the Middle Eastern maze while preserving its many interests in the region—trade and collaboration with Arab countries, significant trade with Israel, in addition to strengthening its image as the leader of the developing world, while undermining the status of the United States both regionally and globally.

However, China’s position since the outbreak of the war, a position that purports to be neutral but in fact stands alongside Iran and Hamas, is not without cost. While the United States has concretely illustrated its commitment to the defense of its ally, Israel, and demonstrated operational, technological, and strategic capabilities to recruit Western and Arab partners—a message that resounds throughout the Middle East, Europe, and Asia—China has been revealed as an irrelevant power for the security needs of countries in the region, and even put itself alongside those that are most threatening to them, Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, as for the Houthi attacks on shipping and communication cables in the Red Sea, whose security is also an obvious interest for China, it is hard to distinguish a relevant response from Beijing, whose ships in the area even ignored distress calls from civilian vessels. This is in spite of the damage caused by the Houthis to China’s strategic partners such as Egypt and the cost to Chinese trade, as Chinese shipping companies have also diverted their

shipping to the longer route round Africa. In its [statements](#), China has frequently called on “relevant countries” to use their influence to calm the situation, but this choice of words actually reveals its own lack of relevance.

Meanwhile here in Israel, trade relations continue, although at a considerably slower pace—[trade](#) between Israel and China fell by 16% in 2023, and the number of Chinese citizens entering Israel has been continuously low since the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, according to a [survey](#) conducted by the Data Analytics Desk at INSS (see Figure 1), China’s image in Israel continues to decline, at least among the Jewish population: 35% of those surveyed said their attitude toward China had changed for the worse since the outbreak of the war, approximately 42% see it as a country that is unfriendly to Israel, and 15% see it as a hostile country. It is hard to imagine that these sentiments will not be reflected in the willingness to establish partnerships with China or relations with it at various levels—from people-to-people connections to relationships between towns and academic institutions, and even to decisions on matters of regulation, projects, infrastructure, and technology.

Figure 1. How would you describe Israel’s relationship with China?



Source: Roy Ben Tzur, “What Does the Israeli Public Think about Israel–China Relations?” (May 2024), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-china-relations-public/>

In contrast to China, which in effect has stood alongside Iran, Taiwan identifies with Israel, as it is facing an existential threat and is backed by the United States. Taiwan’s determined stance is in keeping with its wider strategic interests and with its democratic values, and it strives to reinforce alliances with like-minded countries—liberal democracies. Although Israel recognizes the “One China” policy (like most countries worldwide), Taiwan continues to support Israel and strengthen cooperation with it. By openly backing Israel and explicitly condemning terrorism, Taiwan aims to position itself as a player in the international arena, identifying with Western countries and thus seeking broad recognition and support for its [ambitions](#) to participate more actively in international organizations and in the global discourse. In the absence of official diplomatic relations, Taiwan actively promotes people-to-people ties, not only to

intensify bilateral relations, but also in order to leverage the potential for collaboration in various fields, including culture, technology, innovation, health, and education. In this way, Taiwan deepens its ties with Israel, reinforces its diplomatic presence, and improves its international status.

The responses of China and Taiwan to the Swords of Iron war provide a glimpse into the complex dynamics of the trilateral Israel–China–Taiwan relationship. While China’s realpolitik approach gives precedence to economic interests and regional influence, Taiwan’s support for Israel, despite promoting its own interests, also stresses its commitment to democratic principles and to strategic partnerships. Nonetheless, there are also clear differences in their courses of action since the outbreak of the war—in both words and deeds. While China is mainly engaged in declarations and traditional diplomacy, Taiwan is very active on the ground, providing active and direct help to Israelis in distress following the massacre, while leveraging these efforts on social media, to amplify its influence. In spite of these efforts, the findings of the [survey](#) conducted by INSS show that Israeli familiarity with Taiwan is limited: 56% of respondents were unable to assess relations between Israel and Taiwan. Apart from strategic explanations, the comparison also reflects gaps in style and ability between the representative offices of China and Taiwan in Israel, as well as the degree of initiative, activity, and connection to the local reality, which stem from differences in the national and organizational culture and from the character of their officials in the field.

Significance for Israel

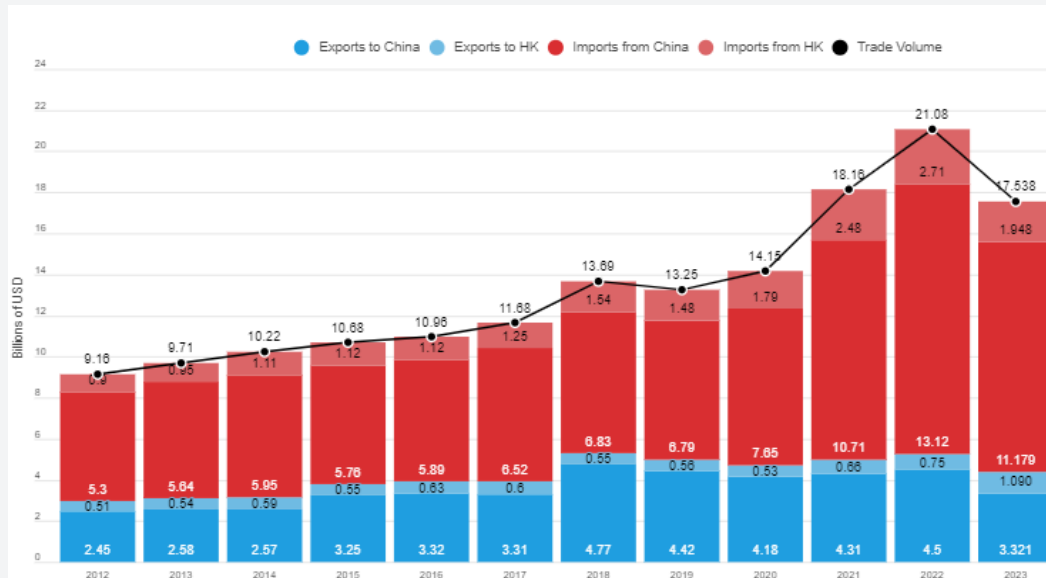
The mirror image of Chinese and Taiwanese policies since the outbreak of the war is characterized by a high degree of clarity and contrast. On one side is China, calling—with apparent balance—for all sides to show restraint and end the fighting, while actually standing with Hamas and Iran and adopting anti-Israeli positions on several aspects and on international platforms. On the other side is Taiwan, which has clearly stood with Israel and against Iranian aggression and Hamas terrorism, both in words and deeds. It is clear that Israeli policy strives for fruitful relations with China, subject to national security considerations, as well as for productive, although unofficial, relations with Taiwan. Should Israel now change its policy toward China and Taiwan as a result of the situation? It should definitely not move from one extreme to another.

China regards Taiwan as part of China, and its unification as a core national interest of the first rank. In spite of China’s conduct toward Israel and its core interests—national security and international status—Israel must not turn China into an enemy, damaging its own core interests.

China is Israel’s third-largest trading partner (after the European Union and the United States), and trade with it (including Hong Kong) in [2023](#) amounted to [17.5 billion dollars](#) (see Figure 2), while trade with Taiwan amounted to [1.989 billion dollars](#). In terms of quality, economic relations with Taiwan—[the global capital of chip manufacture](#)—have important potential benefits for Israel’s economy, which has relative advantages in the field of chip programming and design. In the current situation of diplomatic relations

with China and unofficial relations with Taiwan, Israel benefits from fruitful trade relations with both of them, and maintaining this situation is obviously in its interests.

Figure 2. Israel–China (including Hong Kong) trade in commodities (excluding diamonds), 2012–2023



Source: INSS, The Glazer Israel-China Policy Center.

China’s conduct over the last eight months has clearly demonstrated that it is not a good friend of Israel as its spokespersons repeatedly claim. However, it is also not an enemy of Israel, as some of its critics claim, and it is essential for Israel to avoid turning it into one. It is clear that China takes positions that make Israel uncomfortable whenever it serves its purposes in competition with the United States or for its global and regional positioning; Jerusalem’s growing dependence on Washington due to the war only intensifies this situation. Therefore, in its relations with China, Israel must continue to balance its economic interests with its national security considerations; it should give increasing weight to the latter in view of emerging trends, just as China itself does on a range of issues.

At the same time, Taiwan offers Israel an additional potential space for developing unofficial cooperation within the framework of existing policy, which could include matters of civilian resilience and civil defense in emergency situations and natural disasters such as earthquakes, as well as in the fields of economy, academia, science and technology, cybersecurity, environmental quality, water resources, and food security. Israel and Taiwan share a common ally, the United States, which represents additional potential for cooperation beyond the bilateral level.

It is often claimed that Israeli policy tends toward *realpolitik* at the expense of expressing ethical positions, and rightly so. Israel has faced a lot of criticism for its “weak” stance on the war between Russia and Ukraine, while Russia is giving support to and strengthening ties with Iran. But wars sharpen the lines between friends and enemies and reduce the room for smaller players to maneuver between the major powers. The Swords of Iron war has provided a foundation for China to emphasize its

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oppositional stance toward Israel, for its own reasons and considerations, but it also has shed light on those that support Israel—the United States, the Western powers, and democracies, including Taiwan. In the current state of affairs, Israel can maintain the main aspects of its policy with certain adjustments, but if the war in the Middle East escalates, and certainly if war breaks out around Taiwan, Israel's room to maneuver between the powers will be severely restricted, and then it will be forced to align with its friends.