

CHINA AND ISRAEL

50 YEARS OF BILATERAL RELATIONS, 1948-98 *by* PAN GUANG

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PAN GUANG

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AT THE END OF THE 1940S, TWO new states emerged from the ashes of the Second World War at opposite ends of Asia—the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the State of Israel. Although they differed tremendously in population and area, they represented the oldest civilizations in Asia and perhaps in the world. Not until 1992, however, did these two states establish diplomatic relations. The history of their relationship can be divided into four stages: (1) from 1949 to 1956, tentative friendship; (2) from 1957 to 1977, cold avoidance; (3) from 1978 to 1991, restoration of friendship; (4) and starting from 1992, a new era of diplomatic relations.

Opportunities Missed, 1949-56

In May 1948 when the State of Israel was established, the Chinese media, including the press run by the Chinese Communist Party, applauded. On May 27, a famous Communist newspaper in northern China, *Jizhong Herald*, commented: “A new Jewish nation called the State of Israel announced its establishment on the 14th. To the Jewish people, who have suffered insult and slaughter wandering without a homeland over the past 2000 years, their dream to build up

their own nation has finally come true.”¹ On June 6, a news release by the Xinhua News Agency denounced Britain for “provoking the reactionary rulers” of the Arab countries to start “an anti-Jewish war,” claiming that there were Nazis and fascists in the Arab military forces and showing full support to “the determined and just resistance” of the Israelis.²

In October 1949 the establishment of the PRC was welcomed by Israel. On January 9, 1950, the Israeli government officially recognized the PRC, the first nation in the Middle East to do so. On January 17, 1950, the *People's Daily* reported the news on its front page under the headline: “Israel, Afghanistan and Finland to tie diplomatically with China, Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai welcomes in reply.”³

In 1950, it seemed the two countries were heading toward normal diplomatic relations. Since Israel, unlike most countries in the world, had had no relations with the old Chinese regime, there were no obstacles to such a relationship. In June 1950, representatives of the two countries met in Moscow to discuss the issue. In September, the Israeli representative at the United Nations voted for the PRC to replace the Kuomintang regime in all UN organizations. Meanwhile, the media of New China continued to praise Israeli achievements in every field. With the help of the Chinese government, thousands of Jews left Shang-

hai, Harbin, and Tianjin to settle in Israel.

But rapprochement slowed by the end of 1950, and in 1951 came to a halt because of the worsening situation in the Far East, particularly China's involvement in the Korean War. After the Moscow talks, the Israeli Foreign Ministry told its representative in the Soviet Union to take no further steps to establish diplomatic ties with China until the situation in the Far East became clear.⁴ In February 1951, after the UN passed a resolution condemning China, the Israeli government, obviously under pressure from the United States, ended contacts with China. So the two countries missed their first opportunity to set up diplomatic relations.

After the Korean War, China improved its relations with the West. In 1954, China established diplomatic relations with Great Britain. Soon afterward, talks started between the ambassadors of China and the United States in Warsaw. It was under such circumstances that the second chance for better relationships between China and Israel emerged. In 1953 and 1954, officials from both sides held talks in Moscow, Rangoon, Helsinki, and London, with Rangoon being the main locus of Chinese-Israeli contacts. In January 1954, the Chinese ambassador to Burma, Yao Zhongming, met in Rangoon his Israeli counterpart, David Hacohen, and discussion of establishing formal ties started again. In June the same year

when China's premier Zhou Enlai visited Burma, he met Hacoheh at a reception and invited an Israeli delegation to China.⁵ In September, Zhou mentioned in his report to the National People's Congress that efforts were being made to establish relations with Israel.⁶ However, some influential Israeli politicians, such as its ambassador to the United States, Abba Eban, were not enthusiastic, fearing that such a development might interfere with U.S.-Israeli relations. To them, pressure from America, particularly from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, could not be ignored.

Meanwhile, in preparing for the Bandung Conference, China pursued contacts with Arab countries when it became certain that Israel would not be included in the conference.⁷ In January 1955, David Hacoheh led a trade delegation to China, its members including the director of the Asian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The delegation talked with China's vice minister of foreign affairs, Zhang Hanfu, and the director of the Asian and African Department, Huang Hua, on the matter of establishing ties. It was said that the discussions even touched on such issues as the location of the Israeli embassy in Beijing and nationalization of Jewish properties in Shanghai. But because of its instructions from its government, the Israeli delegation was free to deal only with trade issues and had no authority over diplomatic matters.⁸

The delegation therefore invited the Chinese side to send a delegation to Israel and there to continue to negotiate diplomatic relations.

With the Bandung Conference in sight, China was unwilling to speed up Chinese-Israeli talks and therefore did not give a definite response to the invitation. In April 1955, the Bandung Conference issued a final communiqué supporting “the rights of Palestine Arabs,” thereby isolating Israel in the Asian and African worlds. At that moment, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent an urgent message to the Chinese side on April 29, saying that Israel “desires to establish full diplomatic relations with the government of the People’s Republic of China at the earliest convenient moment.”⁹ But it was too late. In July, the Israeli ambassador to the Soviet Union visited China privately, hoping to make further efforts on the issue, but his hosts carefully avoided the topic.

In fact, the Bandung Conference and the rapid development of Chinese-Arab relations pushed the Chinese government to change its policies in the Middle East—to pursue relations with the Arab states and ignore relations with Israel.¹⁰ Between May and September 1956, China established diplomatic ties with Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. Yet until then, China did not give up developing relations with Israel. Premier Zhou Enlai said that it was unacceptable to

set up friendly ties with one party and dismiss the other. But the Suez Crisis in October 1956 changed China's stance completely. It now saw Israel as "the tool of imperialist policy in the Near East." Relations between the two countries entered a period of cold avoidance. The second opportunity for diplomatic ties was lost because of the relationship of both countries with third parties—in the Israeli case, with the United States, in the Chinese case, with the Arab countries.

The Long Freeze, 1957-77

During the twenty-year period when the West—including the United States—was restoring and developing relations with China, and Israel was adopting a foreign policy more independent of American influence, relations between Arab countries and Israel worsened. China was enjoying closer ties with the Arab world in political, economic, and military fields. While Israel found fewer obstacles to developing relations with China, China's relations with Arab countries caused it to rebuff repeated approaches from Israel.

Even during this period, there were no direct obstacles to proper bilateral relations. Israel adhered to two principles: (1) acknowledge the sole legitimacy of the government of the PRC, (2) form no official ties with Taiwan. On the other hand, although

China denounced Israeli policies in the Middle East, it never complained about Israeli policy affecting their bilateral relations.

China's coldness to Israel by no means implied hostility toward the Jewish people. Unlike the former Soviet Union and East European countries, the PRC has never known anti-Semitism. In the 1950s, a number of Jews still lived happily in Shanghai, Tianjin, and Harbin. In fact, many Jewish celebrities were well respected in China, such as Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Armand Hammer, and even Henry Kissinger. Books and films about the Holocaust such as Herman Wouk's *Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* were well received in China. At the end of the 1960s, both countries fought with the Soviet Union, Chinese soldiers on the Sino-Soviet border, Israeli pilots in the skies over Egypt. When U.S. Senator Henry Jackson visited China in 1974, Premier Zhou Enlai told him that China supported Israel in its efforts against Soviet expansion in the Middle East.¹¹

Restoration of Friendship, 1978-92

After the Cultural Revolution, China embarked on far-reaching domestic reforms. Important changes were also made in foreign policy. China improved its relations with most of the countries in the world including the West, and bilateral relations with Israel began to thaw.

This development was very slow. A Chinese deputy foreign minister was quoted as saying that China's policy in Sino-Israeli relations was "slow move."¹² His words vividly described the Chinese principle in treating during that period: step forward with extreme caution, then observe the Arab reaction before taking the next step. This policy was also nicknamed "a minuet policy." The problem was the continued hostility between Israel and the Arab world despite the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel.

The Arab connection constrained China's policy for three reasons: (1) China's exports to Middle East countries (the majority to Arab countries) reached \$1.5 billion in 1990 and more than 50,000 Chinese workers were employed in the region.¹³ Armaments sales were especially profitable. (2) The Arab world had twenty seats in international organizations such as the UN. A friendly bloc of this size could not be ignored. (3) Some Arab countries threatened to establish ties with Taiwan if China strengthened its ties with Israel. It must be remembered that during the long years after Israel acknowledged New China, conservative Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan remained firm friends of Taiwan and refused to acknowledge the PRC.

Nevertheless, China altered its policy toward Israel in 1978-92 in three significant ways. First, Chinese media became more

favorable toward Israel. When Egyptian president Sadat visited Israel in October 1977, the Chinese press hailed his initiative without hesitation and anticipated political solutions to Middle East issues. In 1978, when most Arab countries condemned Egypt, China chose to support peace talks between Israel and Egypt, the first since 1956.¹⁴ The next year, a Chinese leader, General Geng Biao, said for the first time that “Israel should withdraw from the majority of land occupied after 1967”—a change from past demands that Israel withdraw from “all” occupied land. In July 1980, Chinese deputy minister of foreign affairs He Ying enumerated three principles governing China’s attitude toward the Palestine issue. The third was apparently new: “Every country in the Middle East should enjoy the right to exist and be independent.”¹⁵ In December 1982, when China’s ex-premier Zhao Ziyang visited Egypt, he reiterated China’s support of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the right of every Middle East country to exist. Meanwhile, expressions condemning Zionism disappeared from the Chinese press. Instead, the press denounced “the expansion policies of the Israeli ruling circle.” In September 1988, Chinese foreign minister Qian Qicheng proposed a five-point package to solve the Middle East problem: (1) peace talks hosted by the UN and attended by the five permanent members of the Security Council and other coun-

tries concerned; (2) dialogue among all parties involved; (3) Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab land and Israeli security guaranteed; (4) reciprocal recognition by Palestinians and Israelis of each other's states; and (5) the Arab and Jewish peoples to coexist peacefully.¹⁶

Second, there was rapid growth in unofficial exchanges between Israel and China, especially in trade and technology. Sino-Israeli trade was managed through a third party such as the well-known middleman Shaul Eisenberg, based in Hong Kong. Although both countries hoped to expand trade, trade volume was only US \$20-30 million a year. But cooperation and exchanges in science and technology were outstanding, specifically in agriculture, irrigation, chemicals, medicine, aeronautics, and other high-tech fields. Media of other countries often mentioned trade and cooperation in military armaments and technology, but these allegations were never confirmed by either China or Israel. Exchanges in social sciences and culture also started. In 1985, China agreed to admit Israeli scholars to attend international conferences held in China. After that, a number of Israeli social scientists visited China.

Meanwhile, some Chinese scholars visited Israel through a third country. Direct exchanges of Chinese and Israeli scholars did not start until 1991. Direct dialing between the two countries began in 1986. In 1989,

China allowed entry of tourists holding Israeli passports. Exchanges between political parties and societies have increased too. In June 1987, a delegation of the Communist Party of Israel visited China.

In March 1988, a delegation of the United Labor Party of Israel visited China, as did members of the Israel International Center for Peace in the Middle East and the Israel Labor Party. From China, a delegation of the Chinese Association for International Understanding visited Israel. The Israeli Press Association and the New China News Agency established relations, and delegations from each visited one another.

Third, frequent unofficial exchanges finally led to official contacts. Between March 1986 and January 1987, officials from both countries had several contacts in Paris, where they discussed the possibility of further developing bilateral relations. In March 1987, these official contacts were elevated to a higher level. The Chinese representative at the UN, Li Luye, met in New York with Abraham Tamir, director of the office of the Israeli minister of foreign affairs. In September the same year, the two met again in New York. On September 30, Chinese state counsel and minister of foreign affairs Wu Xueqian met Israeli vice premier and minister of foreign affairs Shimon Peres in New York. This was the first formal meeting of such high officials. In January 1989, Chinese minister of foreign affairs

Qian Qicheng met his Israeli counterpart, Moshe Arens, in Paris and both agreed to maintain regular contacts through their representatives at the UN. Thus official contacts were fixed in form. In 1990, the office of the China International Travel Service in Tel Aviv and the liaison office of the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Beijing were set up, marking a significant breakthrough toward normalizing bilateral relations. After that, progress was conspicuous. Both sides started exchanging students, and academic exchanges in social sciences and humanities also began. In July 1990, Israeli students attended the International Mathematics Olympics held in Beijing, where the national flag of Israel was raised for the first time. Meanwhile, Chinese tennis players attended a Davis Cup Tournament held in Israel. In 1991, staffers of the above-mentioned offices changed their business passports to diplomatic passports and both offices started to issue visas.

This in fact indicated a bilateral relation at the consular level even though both countries denied the fact. The first direct visit by Chinese social scientists was made in October 1991, when five scholars visited Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. That month the Yugoslav News Agency released the news that China and Israel would set up diplomatic ties in three months. The report turned out to be accurate. Three months later, on January 25, 1992, China and Israel

finally established ambassadorial ties.

The last step was made at such a rapid pace mainly because of the following: (1) After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States also established diplomatic ties with Israel, one after another. As a result, the Arab countries could hardly retaliate against every state that opened diplomatic ties with Israel. This provided favorable conditions for normalizing Chinese-Israeli relations. (2) The Gulf War damaged the hard-liners in the Arab world while improving the image of Israel. After the war, the moderate forces such as Egypt and the Gulf states played the dominating role in the Arab world. And their attitude toward Israel was tolerant. Therefore, when the news broke about the establishment of Sino-Israeli diplomatic ties, the Arab world gave its tacit consent despite complaints from a few countries. (3) The Middle East Peace Conference held in Madrid marked the start of direct negotiations between the Arab countries and Israel. So the Arab world found it could not object to other countries getting close to Israel. At the same time, China was one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The Arab countries had always voted for China's role in the peace process in the Middle East while Israel had voted against it. China's relationship with Israel, therefore, would allow China to enter the Middle East peace process, where

its participation would be of benefit to the Arab world.

Hopeful Prospects

The communiqué between China and Israel on January 25, 1992 opened a new page in the relationship between the two countries, peoples, and civilizations.

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties, Sino-Israeli relations have developed rapidly and smoothly. Many Israeli leaders have visited Beijing, and their Chinese counterparts have, in turn, traveled to Israel. From US \$50 million in 1992, bilateral trade reached US \$500 million in 1997,¹⁷ mainly involving chemicals, textiles, agricultural products, light machinery, diamonds, and high-technology products. More and more Sino-Israeli joint ventures in agriculture, telecommunications, computers, medicine, diamonds, shipping, and aeronautics have been set up. Cultural exchanges and cooperation between the two countries have also flourished since 1992. The Israeli Philharmonic's visit to China in 1994 created a sensation in Beijing and Shanghai. Several hundred Chinese students are now studying at Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, Bar-Ilan University, and the Weizmann Institute. Sister city ties have been established between more than twenty Chinese and Israeli cities including Beijing-Tel Aviv and Shanghai-Haifa. Tens of thou-

sands of Israeli tourists have traveled “border to border” throughout China.

The development of bilateral relations still faces some problems. The two states continue to differ on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Especially after Likud came to power in 1996, China has been concerned with the stalemate of the Middle East peace process. But hopeful prospects have been raised by the following four considerations:

1. Chinese and Jewish cultures share much in common, which helps facilitate close emotional ties between the two peoples. Many Jews have lived in China from ancient times until today and have never been bothered by anti-Semitism. The Jewish people are particularly grateful to the Chinese for their help to Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe during World War II. The Chinese also remember the support of many Jews during China’s period of revolution and reconstruction. These historical, cultural, and emotional ties promote the development of bilateral relations.

2. Both countries now pursue independent foreign policies, not needing the permission of any third party. At the moment, the development of bilateral relations is limited by some factors, but this does not mean that any other nation or coalition can manipulate the situation. Gone are the days in the 1950s when both countries had to discuss their plans to develop bilateral relations with either the Soviet Union or the United

States.

3. Bilateral relations have encountered no big problems due to Israel's adherence to its "one China" policy. There are no differences between Israeli political parties on developing relations with China, while the Chinese are unanimous in wanting to improve Sino-Israeli relations. All this will benefit the further development of the bilateral relationship.

4. The international situation is moving toward peace and development. The Gulf War and Bosnia War have not halted this trend. Parties involved in many bilateral and multilateral conflicts have sat down at the negotiating table to seek peaceful solutions. The Middle East issue is also moving toward a political solution. Such general global trends will reduce differences between China and Israel over certain issues, and help clear away the obstacles to further development of bilateral relations.

An old Chinese saying best sums up the development of Chinese-Israeli relations: "A road with zigzags promises a bright future."

Notes

1. *Jizhong Herald (Jizhong Daobao)*, May 27, 1948.

2. Xin Hua News Agency, June 6, 1948.

3. *People's Daily*, Jan. 17, 1950.

4. M. Namir, *Shlihut BeMoskva* (Mission in Moscow) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1971), pp.147-149.

5. See David Hacoheh, *Burma Diary* (Tel

Aviv, 1963).

6. Zhou Enlai, *Report on the work of the Government, made at the first session of the First National People's Congress of the PRC, Sept. 23, 1954* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1954), p. 43.

7. Michael Curtis and Susan A. Gitelson, eds., *Israel in the Third World* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1976), pp. 225, 226-27, 229.

8. Hacoheh, *Burma Diary*.

9. Curtis and Gitelson, *Israel in the Third World*.

10. Li Qiao, "Zhongguo Yu Yiseliu Jian-jiaomiwen" (Inside Story on Sino-Israeli Diplomatic Ties), in Fu Hao and Li Tongcheng, eds., *Waijiao Fengyun* (Chinese Diplomats' Memoirs) (Beijing: The Overseas Chinese Publishing House, 1995), p. 256.

11. *Le Monde*, July 30, 1971.

12. Interview with Yang Fuchang, deputy foreign minister of the PRC, Beijing, June 10, 1990.

13. *Zhongguo Duiwai Jingmao Nianjian* (1991 Year Book of China's Foreign Economic Trade) (Beijing: Chinese Financial & Economic Publishing House, 1991).

14. *International Herald Tribune*, Feb. 6, 1978.

15. *Xinhua Yuebao* (Beijing), August 1980.

16. *Beijing Review*, Oct. 16-22, 1989.

17. Department of Policy Research, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, *China's Foreign Relations in 1997* (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 1998).



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