



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Standing aside regarding Israel will cost China global influence



China's remaining neutral regarding the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel is a harsh encounter with reality, where Beijing cannot prove that it is truly up to the role of a global leader.

China has been persistently seeking that role for a decade under the leadership of Xi Jinping. He has gained the status of a worshipped leader in his country - the most influential in modern history - because of his ambition to profile China as a global leader in changes that match its own standards.

However, China has failed to participate in any of the significant crises that tested whether a country was capable of such a role.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine was one such opportunity. Beijing missed it with its more or less covert support for Moscow and with only declarative "interference" as a factor that could bring peace.

China's 12-point initiative for peace in Ukraine announced on the anniversary of the start of Russian aggression, has not been successful. It took Beijing an entire year to demonstrate that it was not indifferent towards this war far from its borders.

But it did not cause any effect on the ground, nor did it attract the attention of anyone who could effectively influence the outcome of the Ukrainian crisis.

A step back

Beijing was also unprepared for the terrorist attacks by Hamas on Israel. In search of an attitude, it reached for the old manuals from the pre-Xi era, and came up with a balanced policy, even disinterest in the nature and outcome of the crisis, without condemning terrorism.

China's Foreign Ministry called on "relevant parties to remain calm, exercise restraint, and immediately end the hostilities". UN Ambassador Zhan Jun said that "further escalation and civilian casualties" should be

prevented.

The leader of the democratic majority in the US Senate, Chuck Schumer, was in Beijing during the outbreak of the war in Israel and met with President Xi. He expressed his disappointment that China did not condemn terrorism against Israel.

"I'm disappointed by the foreign ministry's statement showing no sympathy or support for the Israeli people during these tragic times", said Senator Schumer.

Hamas's attack on Israel made China return to the pre-Xi period of restraint and even disinterest in major international events, particularly crises.

This is a significant setback for China's ambitions for global leadership, which Xi has long supported and has made plain in recent years through adopting strategic initiatives on international development, security, and civilisation.

This return to a comfortable, but at the same time, fruitless policy of not participating in significant international shifts is also a blow to practical diplomatic action, which China wanted to use and show that it has abandoned global passivity.

If, by mediating the historic agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it stepped deeply into relations in the Middle East as a factor that could decide their future, China has now voluntarily relinquished such a role in the case of Israel.

The limited reach of Chinese diplomacy

Its "neutrality" towards Hamas terrorism is primarily the result of the internal contradictions of Chinese policy.

While it feels obligated to Palestine, whose cause it has supported for decades, China is constrained by its relations with its Muslim

minority, the Uyghurs, whom it has long declared terrorists, and created a strong narrative on the subject to its domestic public.

At the same time, China has been trying not to jeopardise its highly developed and growing (economic and technological) ties with Israel, but, on the other hand, it wants to maintain the lucrative oil interests it has with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Also, China's ambitions to expand its global influence are fading because some of its biggest competitors in the Indo-Pacific, region, particularly India and Japan, have clearly condemned Hamas terrorism and supported Israel.

Thus, China remained in the company of states without a position on the Israeli crisis, and in the company of states that would not influence its resolution.

Many of them are forced to stay on the side-lines and refer to principles (refrain from violence, protection of civilians...) because they have neither the ambition nor the strength to influence the outcome of global crises. But China has been trying to break out of that circle and assert its leadership role for a long time.

An unreliable partner

It gives the impression of being insufficiently strong and having unreliable global support among those willing to accept its concept of restructuring international relations, because it emphatically refrains from condemning terrorism.

China's decision to step aside and refuse to condemn terrorism comes at a rather critical moment for Beijing as negotiations with its principal trading partners and global competitors - the EU and the US - are about to begin.

With all the differences and problems burdening relations between China and the West, Beijing's reluctance to condemn Hamas

terrorism will make its position difficult in the upcoming meetings - the summit with EU leaders and perhaps with US President Joe Biden in San Francisco in November within the framework of APEC.

"There is not much that China can do and their remarks show the limits. I don't think Beijing wants to do something. I think they are quite happy to sit and watch", said Raffaello Pantucci from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.