



INSS Insight No. 275, August 17, 2011

The Chinese Chief of Staff Visits Israel: Renewing Military Relations?

Yoram Evron

On August 14, 2011 General Chen Bingde, the Chinese Chief of Staff, arrived on a state visit to Israel. Although the visit it not expected to generate a profound change in the bilateral military ties, it has aroused a great deal of attention. First of all, the visit is being portrayed as part of a growing military relationship between the countries. This occasion, the first time a Chinese chief of staff has visited Israel, comes on the heels of a visit to Israel in May 2011 by the commander of the Chinese navy, while the following month Israel's Defense Minister visited China – the first such visit in a decade.

Second, the serious crises in Israeli-Chinese relations of the early 2000s made the military the most sensitive area in these relations. Israel, which until then had provided China with military technologies, was forced under American pressure to abrogate unilaterally an agreement to supply China with the Phalcon airborne early warning system; a few years later, again under American pressure, it was forced to reject a Chinese request to provide maintenance work on UAVs (the Harpy) it had supplied previously. Israel subsequently arrived at an understanding with the United States that prevented further military exports to China. These circumstances brought Israeli-Chinese relations to a nadir, and although political relations have since been restored, the limitations on security exports to China still in place would presumably make it difficult to renew military relations.

Under these circumstances, the reciprocal visits indeed give rise to speculation about closer military cooperation between China and Israel. Possible explanations should first be sought on the Chinese side. First, as the party previously injured by the severing of military relations and especially because of the enormous gap in size between the two nations, the renewal of relations depends on China's desire to do so. Second, as long as

Dr. Yoram Evron is a research associate at INSS and a lecturer in the Asian Studies Department at the University of Haifa.

there has been no change in Israel's military exports policy – and there is no evidence of such a change – Israel has nothing new to offer China. Nonetheless, it seems that even under present circumstances, strengthening military relations may benefit China. Militarily, China is interested not only in original technologies but also in broader knowledge, and Israel, with its vast operational experience, is viewed by China as an authoritative source. China is clearly aware that the transmission of military knowledge is likely to be quite limited, but given the lack of practical experience (China has not conducted a military campaign since 1979), any information China receives may be of value. As for the transmission of military technologies, China with its political experience and patience may assume that current export limitations could one day be lifted, and may therefore continue to raise the issue on different occasions.

Information sharing is relevant not only in the military sphere, but also in broader strategic contexts. Over the last decade and in the latter half in particular, China's involvement in the Middle East has deepened. Despite its desire to limit its activities in the region to the economic sphere, China's growing dependence on Middle Eastern oil has impelled it to promote political ties to the region including, to a certain extent, military ties. It has promoted these ties by nurturing extensive diplomatic connections, increasing investments, demonstrating interest in regional political processes, selling arms, and recently by cautiously increasing its military presence. In addition to participating in regional peacekeeping forces, it sent a small naval force to the Gulf of Aden as part of the international struggle against piracy (December 2008), held joint maneuvers with Turkey (fall of 2010), and sent naval vessels and airplanes to evacuate its citizens from Libya (February 2011).

In a situation in which China's interests in the region are becoming more complex and its desire for continued stability is growing, the association with Israel has clear benefits. Not only can Israel provide China with a current perspective on what is happening in the region – for example, the developments of the “Jasmine Revolution” and trends in terrorism – but by maintaining strategic channels of information with Israel, China can avoid surprises on the part of Israel. Moreover, this type of relationship may even afford China some measure of influence over Israel's moves. In a broader dimension, strengthening military ties with Israel may be part of a Chinese effort to establish gradually a strategic presence in the Middle East, a subject that has recently been discussed in China. The fact that Israel is the clear ally of the United States only strengthens the profitability of such a move, because in the growing competition between the two powers, the seeming strengthening of military relations with an American ally earns points for China.

As for Israel, the new situation presents it with a dilemma. On the one hand, given China's rising global status, Israel has an interest in strengthening bilateral ties, especially because

since the Phalcon affair Israel has sought to repair the damage and recover from lost opportunities. In addition, strengthening ties with China may offer Israel an additional means to promote its campaign against the Iranian nuclear program and limit the transfer of Chinese weapons and ammunition (apparently indirectly and unintentionally) to Hamas and Hizbollah. In addition, in light of China's strengthening ties with the Arab world and Iran because of its growing dependence on imported oil, there is a real concern that Beijing will show increased support for them on the international diplomatic arena. China's vote in the UN in favor of the Goldstone Report – against its own foreign policy principles – is an example of this diplomacy. Therefore, it is up to Israel to find joint areas of interest to balance this tendency, if only in part.

On the other hand, having previously suffered due to its military relations with China, Israel is not interested in creating the impression that cooperation is growing, thereby yet again arousing American suspicions. These limitations are clear to China, and if it is sincerely interested in a long term strengthening of military relations with Israel, China will likely not force Israel to choose between China and the US – a choice whose outcome is not in question – and will rather take advantage of every possible channel to strengthen cooperation. For its part, Israel will find it difficult to forego the opportunity to strengthen its military relations with China, but unlike the past, when it ignored the tension between the US and China or alternately chose one side only, it will now have to find a way to maneuver between the two.

