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Netanyahu's Visit to China: Opportunities beyond Iran

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to make an official visit to China in early May 2013. This would be the first visit by an Israeli prime minister to China in over six years, and given the rarity of the meetings between the two heads of state and China's increased influence internationally, the trip is important. Furthermore, this past March China completed a change of government, and new people are now holding top leadership positions. This will be an opportunity for Israel to meet China's new leaders, some of whom are expected to remain in their positions for the next ten years.

No less important, China has been rethinking its Middle Eastern policy since the start of the Arab Spring. Since China opened up to the world in the late 1970s, its approach to the Middle East has been characterized by a lack of significant involvement in political and diplomatic processes in the region, exclusive focus on promoting its economic interests, and maintenance of a balanced policy toward states and other actors in the region. The Arab Spring, which damaged China's economic interests in the region, coupled with Beijing's declared intention in recent years to acquire a significant status in world politics, led China to presume that its existing policy toward the Middle East has exhausted itself. Instead, it must deepen its ties in the region in order to establish a firm, long term foothold while exploiting the fact that the regional array of forces is undergoing significant change. The highly influential October 2012 article by Wang Jisi, China's leading Chinese scholar of international relations, created a stir by asserting that China needs to adopt a new strategy, "march West," strengthening its influence and position in Central Asia and the Middle East.

This trend entails a significant challenge for Israel. If China assumes that Israel's close relations with the United States will prevent Israel from strengthening its relationship with China, and at the same time, Beijing assesses that its dependence on Arab (and Iranian) oil will grow, the process of its increasing involvement in the Middle East is liable to bypass Israel. In the meantime, as is demonstrated by China's invitation to Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, at the same time Netanyahu will be visiting there (albeit for a slightly shorter visit), China is adhering to its balanced approach to Israel and the Palestinians and is linking bilateral relations with Israel to its regional policy. Clearly, the Sino-Israeli bilateral relationship still does not stand fully on its own.

Finding common interests with China is of great importance for Israel, and a meeting between the heads of state at this time can promote this. In spite of China's traditional support for the Arab line and its energy ties with the Muslim states, it credits Israel with several important assets. One is that Israel holds one of the main keys to stability in the region, an issue in

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which China has much interest; another is that the events of the Arab Spring have demonstrated that Israel is an island of stability in the heart of a volatile region. In addition, Israel is an important source of knowledge about events in a region in which China often feels at a loss. Israel is also seen in China as a source of advanced technologies, and China has an interest in promoting its science and technology ties with Israel, and perhaps even energy ties as Israel's natural gas industry develops. Finally, while China no longer believes, as it once did, that Israel has unlimited influence in Washington, it does feel that strengthening its relationship with Jerusalem would be a sign that it gradually is coming to possess a foothold in the region, while somewhat offsetting, and perhaps even undermining, American political influence there.

Under these circumstances, Netanyahu's visit to China provides a significant opportunity that should not be missed. One way, in fact, to miss the opportunity would be to place too much emphasis on the Iranian issue. The importance of the Iranian threat is clear and certainly Israel must do everything it can to thwart it, including raising the issue with China's new top leaders. However, the issue has been discussed in recent years at every significant meeting between the states, and more than once it has taken up the lion's share of the agenda while pushing aside topics that—from China's point of view—are no less important. Consequently, if Israel makes Iran the main focus of discussion, China's will take this to mean that strengthening bilateral ties is not of primary importance to Israel; rather, from Israel's perspective, China's importance is limited to promoting Israel's security interests.

Therefore, discussions should be balanced between subjects important to Israel (Iran), topics important to China, and to bilateral relations between the states. First and foremost, Israel should demonstrate to China that it is interested in promoting bilateral relations, and that to this end it is prepared to help, with its limited capabilities, to further China's interests in the Middle East. Specific issues that can be raised in this context are promoting Chinese investments in Israel (an interest of both countries) and establishing formal and semi-formal high level dialogues between the two states. As for the China-Israel-United States triangle, Israel can make it clear to China that while its technological ties will remain subject to the framework of understandings between Jerusalem and Washington, it is working to promote its activities with China in a wide variety of non-sensitive areas. Finally, in light of China's desire to play a more visible role in Middle Eastern politics, Israel can suggest that China participate in various international frameworks connected to the Middle East and discuss with it burning regional developments, such as Syria. Mahmoud Abbas' visit to Beijing at the same time as Netanyahu also invites a discussion of China's possible contribution to progress on the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Placing these issues on the table would convey Israel's recognition of China's rising status and its increasing importance in the region, and would make it possible to express Israel's concerns and expectations to China in a more balanced manner.

Finally, more than any other Israeli politician, Benjamin Netanyahu is identified with the close US-Israel relationship. This likely leads China to assume that he would refrain from taking significant steps to promote relations with China so as not to arouse the displeasure of the United States, which, since its decisive action against Sino-Israeli security relations, has been perceived as an impediment to their further development. In addition, Netanyahu has not played a significant role in the development of relations in the past, and on two occasions he canceled planned visits to China. On the other hand, it was during Netanyahu's first term as prime minister that an agreement was signed, later canceled, to provide the Phalcon early warning system to China. Netanyahu was not involved in canceling the deal, nor was he involved in another security crisis between Israel and China in 2004-2005. Thus in spite of his limited role in the development of relations, his "balance sheet" is positive. This has been especially noticeable in recent years given his moves to promote economic and diplomatic ties between the two countries. His intentions to include Chinese companies in large

infrastructure projects in Israel, for example, are known, as is his instruction to ministers in his government during a time of budget cuts to reduce official trips to every country except China. Therefore, despite his commitment to ties with the United States, Netanyahu's contribution to relations with China is largely positive, and the planned visit can help bolster this dynamic.