



Amid Israel-Hamas war, India becomes wild card in an emerging China-Russia-Iran order across Eurasia

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Abstract

In midst of the Israel-Hamas war, observers noticed China deleted Israel from its online maps while Hamas leader called on China and Russia to end U.S. monopoly in the Middle East. As a coalition of China, Russia and Iran is emerging as a new order across the Middle East and Eurasia to challenge the western order, India is a wild card that presents a challenge to the new order.

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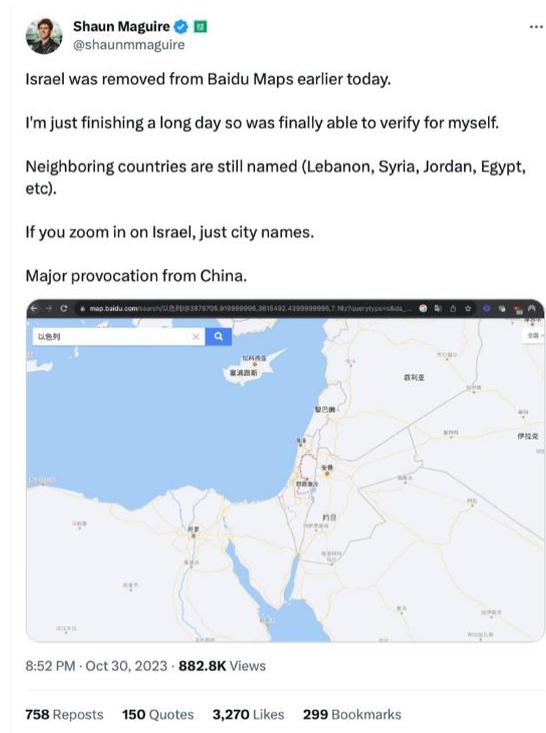
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Analysis

In midst of the war between Israel and Iran-backed Hamas, on November 1 *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Israel is suddenly erased from China's online maps.¹ Iran has traditionally threatened to wipe Israel off the map, but this time China beat them to it digitally.² Why?



Given the Chinese Communist Party's sensitivity to national borders, Alibaba and Baidu's online maps sans Israel likely received a wink and a nod from the leadership. One example of Beijing's obsession with borders is its alleged insistence that the film *Barbie* include its 'nine-dash line' in the South China Sea, reinforcing its territorial claims which are not internationally recognized.³ China has also used this standard to levy fines on hotel websites and other companies in the past.⁴

¹ Fatima Al Kassab, "What is the 'axis of resistance' of Iran-backed groups in the Middle East", *NPR*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/26/1208456496/iran-hamas-axis-of-resistance-hezbollah-israel>; James T. Areddy and Liyan Qi, "Israel goes unnamed on China online maps", *The Wall Street Journal*, November 1, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/israel-hamas-gaza-war-latest/card/israel-goes-unnamed-on-china-online-maps-aY5VjRWllsnSMuASZNF2>

² TOI Staff, "Iran general says Tehran aims to wipe Israel off the 'global political map'", *Times of Israel*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-general-says-tehran-aims-to-wipe-israel-off-the-political-map-report/>

³ Tim Brinkof, "How Hollywood appeases China, explained by the Barbie movie", *Vox*, July 13, 2023, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2023/7/13/23791805/barbie-map-nine-dash-line-vietnam-china>; "Barbie movie gets Vietnam ban over South China Sea map", *BBC*, July 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66083761>

⁴ James Spiro, "Provocation or Diplomacy? China removes Israel from its digital maps", *CTech*, October 31, 2023, <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctechnews/article/hy4q14rma>



Two Chinese researchers pointed out in the Chinese newsletter *Pekingology* that archived webpages of articles showed Israel was missing in Baidu and Alibaba maps since May 2021, well before the October 7 massacre.⁵ Nonetheless, that was during a time of heightened U.S. tension over Sino-Israel high-tech cooperation, and the Chinese UN Security Council (UNSC) presidency in May 2021 coincided with renewed Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which Beijing voted against Israel.⁶

In this light, some ponder whether erasing Israel from Chinese maps is a move of provocation or diplomacy?

Opportunity for China-Russia-Iran order in Eurasia?

With China's traditional posture of non-interference internationally, perhaps this was and is a diplomatic trial balloon. During its 2021 UNSC presidency, China faced international backlash for its abuses in Xinjiang, and sought ways to improve its international image with the Muslim and Arab world on which it heavily relies for energy imports. Siding with the Palestinians was an opportunity to discredit the U.S. and win moral support from Arab countries in the Middle East.

Similarly, China's support of Palestinians after the October attack has won accolades from Hamas, and Hamas' ex-political Chief Khaled Meshaal in an interview to TRT Arabic urged China and Russia to get involved in the ongoing Israel-Palestine war in Gaza and "abolish U.S.' monopoly" in the Middle East.⁷



This would be in line with China's long-term posture across Eurasia, as evidenced by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO) and the Belt and Road Initiative, in which a China-Russia-Iran led order displaces the current western order across the heartland.⁸ On July 4 this year, America's Independence Day no less, Iran was admitted

⁵ Aadil Brar, "China denies erasing Israel from its maps", *Newsweek*, November 1, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-map-israel-gaza-conflict-denial-1839849>

⁶ Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, "China's Security Council Presidency—May 2021", <http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zt/202104302/>; Junhua Zhang, "China-Israel Relations at a Crossroads", *GIS Reports*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/israel-partnership-china/>

⁷ "Gaza an opportunity": Hamas Big Offer to China, Russia to End 'U.S. Monopoly' in Middle East", *Hindustan Times*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/videos/gaza-an-opportunity-hamas-big-offer-to-china-russia-to-end-u-s-monopoly-in-middle-east-101699068183338.html>

⁸ Ahmad Hashemi, "Iran just joined a pact with Moscow and Beijing—here's what it means for the US", *The Hill*, July 13, 2023, <https://thehill.com/opinion/4094000-iran-just-joined-a-pact-with-moscow-and-beijing-heres-what-it-means-for-the-us/>; Mercy Kuo, "The China-Russia-Iran Triangle: Alternative World Order? Insights from Benjamin Tsai", *The Diplomat*, July 7, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/4094000-iran-just-joined-a-pact-with-moscow-and-beijing-heres-what-it-means-for-the-us/>



as a full member of the SCO, fulfilling Zbigniew Brzezinski's warning in *The Grand Chessboard* (1997) that America's security depended upon the geopolitical pluralism of Eurasia and its most dangerous threat consisted of "a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran."⁹



Source: World Atlas

However, this Eurasia coalition may have a wild card in another member of the SCO—India.

India – a wild card in Eurasia

In the aftermath of Hamas October 7 massacre, India came out strong in support of Israel, a break from its traditional stance of supporting Palestinians.¹⁰ Since Prime Minister Modi took power in 2014, New Delhi has been

⁹ Iran becomes new permanent member of SCO", NDTV, July 5, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/iran-becomes-new-permanent-member-of-sco-4178521>; Francis Sempa, "In the 21st century, China is our main adversary and Japan is our ally", *Real Clear Defense*, January 11, 2023, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2023/01/11/in_the_21st_century_china_is_our_main_adversary_and_japan_is_our_most_important_ally_874995.html;

Zhang Tengjun, "US ignores Brzezinski's warning, faces dilemma", *Global Times*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1220323.shtml>

¹⁰ Sudha Ramachandran, "India's Modi Voices Solidarity With Israel After Hamas Attack", *The Diplomat*, October 12, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/indias-modi-voices-solidarity-with-israel-after-hamas-attack/>; Jannatul Naym Pieal, "India was once a strong ally of Palestine. What changed?" *The Diplomat*, November 6, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/india-once-was-a-strong-ally-of-palestine-what-changed/#:~:text=India%20was%20the%20first%20non,State%20of%20Palestine%20in%201988.>



upgrading ties with Jerusalem especially in counter-terrorism with the rise of ISIS back then.¹¹ As Michel Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center observed, “India views the current conflict through the lens of counterterrorism, and it views the Israeli assault on Gaza as a counterterrorism operation. And counterterrorism operations don’t pause for humanitarian truces.”¹²

As such former Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal called on China and Russia but omitted India, despite its SCO membership, to end U.S. monopoly in the region. India also eyes fellow members China and Pakistan warily due to ongoing territorial disputes over Aksai Chin, Arunachal Pradesh and Kashmir.¹³ According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), a research institute focused on conflict and armaments, between the years 2018 to 2022 India was the largest importer of Israeli weapons totaling US\$1.2 billion, or one-third of Israel’s arms exports during that period.¹⁴ Given this, India is maintaining its freedom of action on the international stage as a price-maker instead of a price-taker, and remains a wild card in Eurasia as former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo once described.¹⁵

But India does have clarity on the true nature of Israel’s current war as a war against Islamic terrorism. As Mosab Hassan Yousef, son of Hamas leader known as the Green Prince rightly argued regarding Hamas’ manifesto, he underscored that Hamas is not fighting a national war over borders but a religious war, to eventually establish an Islamic state on the rubbles of the state of Israel.¹⁶ On this point, the Green Prince, Khaled Meshaal, Modi and Netanyahu find themselves in agreement even while the rest of the world disagrees and erupts in protests, strange bedfellows in even stranger times.

Comment: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

¹¹ Raffaello Pantucci, “Indians and Central Asians are the new face of the Islamic State”, *Foreign Policy*, October 8, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/08/isis-indian-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-uzbekistan-central-asians-are-the-new-face-of-islamic-state/>

¹² Pieal *Ibid*.

¹³ Shaikh Azizur Rahman, “India protests Chinese map claiming disputed territories”, *Voice of America*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-protests-chinese-map-claiming-disputed-territories/7246891.html>

¹⁴ AJLabs, “How big is Israel’s military and how much funding does it get from the US”, *Al Jazeera*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/11/how-big-is-israels-military-and-how-much-funding-does-it-get-from-the-us>

¹⁵ C. Uday Bhaskar, “India remains the wild card in US-China security tussle in Asia”, *South China Morning Post*, June 18, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/asia/article/3181800/india-remains-wild-card-us-china-security-tussle-asia>; “Pompeo: India ‘wild card’ in Quad, forced in by Chinese aggression”, *Times of India*, January 27, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pompeo-india-wild-card-in-quad-forced-in-by-chinese-aggression/articleshow/97360087.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁶ Hindustan Times Youtube, “Hamas Founder’s Son Turned Israeli Spy Dresses Down Militants | Meet ‘Green Prince’ Mosab” October 25, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MG74T9T1mcM>