



PERSPECTIVES

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Lessons of the UNESCO Vote

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israelis who cultivate the pipe dream of substituting Israel's long-term bond with the US for an alliance with China and Russia should take a long, hard look at the votes of Moscow and Beijing at UNESCO, where they joined in denial of Jewish links to Jerusalem. Russian and Chinese policies lack the ethical basis that is so prevalent in US policy, and the chances of forging a similar long-term bond with either are slim.

The recent resolution by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) denying the Jewish link to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall in Jerusalem is so absurd and detached from reality that it is hard to believe it was passed by what is supposed to be one of the world's most respected international bodies.

It does, however, clarify certain realities: that the Arab claims are devoid of logic, and that the international community readily capitulates to Palestinian whims because of its own cowardice.

The Arab-Muslim bloc was prominent among the states that voted in favor of the resolution, unfortunately proving, yet again, the "no partner" assertion by Israelis who are wary of negotiations with the Palestinians. After all, if this is what the Palestinians and Arabs believe, what point is there in talking?

If Israel and the Jewish people have no historic or religious link to the Temple Mount and Jerusalem, the Palestinians could move to debunk Israel's claim to any of its historic homeland. This would make any negotiations into which they subsequently entered an act of deceit meant to eliminate the Jewish state. Of course, if the Palestinians can secure international achievements such as UNESCO resolutions, they have no need for peace talks in the first place.

Of the nations that voted in favor of the resolution, China's and Russia's voting patterns stand out. Beijing is a rising global economic power that is trying to rival the US, while Moscow is trying to extricate itself from the international corner it finds itself in following the collapse of the Soviet Union's communist empire.

They are each pursuing a dynamic foreign policy that is putting pressure on the US. China is pushing the US in the South China Sea, and Russia is pushing the US in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

In the case of the UNESCO resolution, however, the Chinese and Russian votes, in opposition to that of the US, were a sign of weakness, not strength.

Many Israelis view the UNESCO vote in terms of anti-Semitism, but this does not seem to be the case here.

While Russia has a longstanding tradition of anti-Semitism, one cannot unequivocally level such an accusation at President Vladimir Putin. Nor would it be correct to attribute China's vote to categorical anti-Semitism.

While conversing recently with Chinese experts on the Middle East, I asked them to explain the gap between Beijing's desire for improved relations with Israel and the realpolitik it continues to pursue. Judging by China's votes in the international arena, where it still automatically sides with the Arabs, one would think nothing has changed in Jerusalem-Beijing relations in the past 40 years.

In the case of the UNESCO vote in particular, China was shooting itself in the foot. Its claims to the South China Sea are based on a map of questionable historical accuracy that many refuse to accept as authentic. China's vote on the Jerusalem issue, which is rooted far deeper in history and tradition, potentially opened the door to similar UN resolutions in the future that could undercut its historic claims to the South China Sea and perhaps even Tibet.

My interlocutors reeled at the comparison between the Palestinians and Tibet, claiming it was "not the same thing." They offered two possible explanations for the UNESCO vote, one political and one sociological.

From a political standpoint, they explained, China is a weak country. It is trying to climb to the top of the global ladder despite fierce opposition, and it needs all the support it can get on the international stage. The Islamic bloc, comprising 57 of the UN's 193 members, is therefore crucial. China cannot afford to lose it, even if the Chinese believe Israel is in the right on specific issues.

China has nothing against Israel and would like to improve relations in all areas, but cannot ignore the power the Muslim bloc wields at the UN. This is

why it cannot change its voting patterns. It has nothing to do with anti-Semitism or the actual diplomatic ties between Israel and China.

From a sociological standpoint, there is a gap between the sympathy young Chinese feel for Israel and the views of the older generation, which is still entangled in outdated perceptions and irrelevant historical obligations. I was told that once China's leadership passes into the hands of the younger generation, Israel's position in terms of Chinese policy will likely improve.

The political explanation coincides with the decision-making process in Russia. There, too, all that matters is the numbers: the Muslim bloc is larger than the bloc of countries that back Israel, so that is the bloc that receives consistent support.

China and Russia share concerns over Islamic extremists, and it is therefore important that they avoid straining their relationships with Muslim countries.

Neither seems able to rise above tradition, outdated though it might be. This is not a sign of strength but of weakness. Like Beijing's claim to the South China Sea, Moscow's claim to Crimea is not as historically solid as Israel's claim to the Temple Mount. For this reason, Russia is also taking a chance by supporting the Palestinian move at UNESCO.

Israelis who cultivate the pipe dream of substituting Israel's long-term bond with the US for an alliance with China and Russia should take a long, hard look at UNESCO's resolutions. Moscow's and Beijing's policies lack the ethical basis that is so prevalent in US policy, and the chances of forging a similar long-term bond with either are slim.

Israel will always be small and will lack sister-states in the international arena. It is much more naturally inclined to foster deep and binding ties with the US than with countries like Russia and China, which are still held captive by dated traditions, at least with regard to their conduct on the global stage.

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