**Gaza Ceasefire is the only solution to Middle East**

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January 19, 2024

More than 100 days after the Israel-Hamas war began, there is no longer a question of whether the conflict will widen. It already has. Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Syria have been affected, and the Houthis’ military operations in the Red Sea have illustrated an expanded conflict’s potential to cause disruptions to world trade.

To stop the water in a pot from boiling, a piece of conventional Chinese wisdom is that you need to remove the flaming firewood under the pot. In other words, an effective way to tackle a crisis is to address its root cause. If the current tensions in the Middle East were the boiling water, Israel’s war in Gaza would be the firewood. The Gaza crisis has reignited fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, and it is Houthis’ sympathy for the Palestinians that, to a large extent, prompted the Yemeni group to attack merchant vessels with real or perceived links to Israel.

Unfortunately, despite some deals allowing limited humanitarian aid into Gaza, Israel’s military action is continuing to wreak havoc in the strip. Benjamin Netanyahu has even vowed that “nobody will stop us”, including allegations brought against Israel at the International Court of Justice.

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The Biden administration is reluctant to admit it, but Israel’s behaviour is fueled by the multi-faceted support it receives from the US. Let’s not forget the $14.3 billion earmarked for Israel’s military in the national security package requested by Biden. The money far outweighs the planned humanitarian assistance for Palestinian refugees in the same package, which tells a lot about the real US stance. Unlike aid to Ukraine, there is no partisan disagreement in the US when it comes to supporting Israel.

Apart from monetary and military support, the US had obstructed the UN Security Council from passing a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza until the second half of December. In effect, that sent a clear message to Tel Aviv about Washington’s steadfast readiness to stand with it despite the mounting international pressure. It’s true that US officials including Joe Biden have warned Israel against reckless actions in Gaza. But considering the concrete support that the US is willing to give to Israel, it’s no surprise that those rhetorical, symbolic US warnings have achieved nothing in terms of reining in Israel.

The recent US-led airstrikes on a wide range of sites in Yemen were another bad decision. First of all, the strikes appeared to be in violation of international law, as the UN Security Council has not authorized the use of force against Yemen. It’s one thing to defend merchant ships in the Red Sea, but another when bombing a sovereign country. The bloody armed conflict in Yemen has calmed down following an April 2022 truce, and momentum is reportedly high in the peace talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. No one needs a reminder about the hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of displaced people caused by Yemen’s civil war. The latest airstrikes, out of question, have brought back to Yemeni civilians a memory of bombs and tragedies.

Considering the sophistication of Houthis’ military capability, any claim that the US-led strikes could ensure a safe shipping lane in the Red Sea should be taken with scepticism. An immediate outcome, however, is that the strikes have reinforced a widespread perception in the Middle East that the US is siding with Israel. This could further increase regional tensions if we think about Iran’s recent moves. Because of the sensitivity of the Palestinian cause, major regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt have all stayed out of the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian. The US should have learned from that very fact that its Middle East policy is somewhat out of touch with reality. It didn’t. Instead, it has taken the wrong step by bombing Yemen.

Businesses are sometimes more geopolitically sensitive than politicians. Recently, reports have emerged that many cargo ships are using their signals to indicate they have links to China to avoid Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. Arguably, this is not an isolated case. Rather, it is a reflection of the fact that China is one of the few major powers from the outside that don’t have a foe in the Middle East. In part, it is also pointing to a region-wide recognition of China’s diplomatic efforts after October 7th.

China has carried out a balanced Middle East diplomacy for decades, trying to forge good relations with almost every country in the region. That’s why Beijing managed to broker the landmark Iran-Saudi rapprochement last year. In an Arab Youth Survey conducted last year by Dubai-based public relations firm ASDA’A BCW, 80% of respondents considered China as a friend of their countries, and this ratio has gradually risen over the years.

However, compared to the problems between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Israel-Palestine conflict is facing a different and, perhaps, even more complex situation. Judging from the Gaza crisis’s development over the past few months, no single power alone is capable of resolving this issue. This is why China calls for efforts to reach a broader international consensus based on the two-state solution.

There is no easy way forward, but the top priority for now is a ceasefire. The key to reaching that goal is impartial mediation. Giving one-sided support to one party, like what the US has done to Israel, might torpedo a wider international endeavour. Back to the “boiling water” metaphor, the US needs to work with others to remove the firewood, rather than adding fuel to it.

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