

CHINA AND ISRAEL

Israel "recognized" Communist China in January of 1950, one of the first nations to do so. In return, China later became the first non-Arab nation to establish diplomatic relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

That juxtaposition of events might serve as a wry capsule on modern Jewish history. There is a Yiddish proverb: "If the Jew is right, he is beaten all the more."

But the Chinese government's attitude towards Israel is not based on anti-semitism. Most governments of the world, including America, do not shape their attitudes towards Israel according to whether they like or do not like Jews. That is an irrelevancy. China is a case in point.

China's behavior towards Israel has been part of the wild, fluid pattern in contemporary world politics -- which Vice-President Teng's visit to the United States last week dramatized. Teng's visit was denounced by right-wingers who deplored America's desertion of Taiwan; by left-wingers who deplored Communist China's desertion of Mao; and, of course, by the (Soviet) Communist Party, which doesn't quite know whether it is right-wing or left-wing at this stage of the game.

The pattern of world politics may be wild and fluid on the surface, but there is a constant principle which runs through it: the primacy of national self-interest, and real-life politics. Israel recognized China before the Arab bloc did, at a time when China needed all the support it could get. There was an initial exchange of messages, in which China asked Israel whether it wanted to send a diplomatic mission, and Israel said that it wasn't yet in a financial position to do so. Then everyone became preoccupied with the Korean war.

In 1954, after the war, Chou En-lai publicly expressed China's desire to exchange diplomats with Israel. In January of 1955, there was a three week visit to China by an Israeli Trade and Good Will mission. But the possible rapprochement never developed; it seemed to evaporate.

There is clear evidence that the development of relations between Israel and China was halted by the United States, whose policy at the time was to severely isolate China from the rest of the world. Zvi Kadar, of the Israeli Foreign Ministry described it this way: "The establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel, by means of diplomatic representation, suffered a setback because of the prohibitive attitude of the United States toward the question of diplomatic relations between any country and government in Peking."

Indeed, the United States had threatened to boycott any country which dealt with Peking. Israel could not afford that, nor to generally break its relationship with the United States (not to mention American Jewry). After a while, of course, the United States got around to reviewing its relationship with China -- after a decent post-Korean period, and the full emergence of the mutual Chinese-Soviet hostility.

But by then, Israel had missed that early boat. In April of 1955, at the Bandung Conference, China committed itself to a pro-PLO policy, and thereafter described Israel as "our implacable enemy," in Mao's words. But it was clear that the Chinese really had nothing against Jews -- or even against Israel for that matter. China was just engaged in wrestling the Soviet Union for the Arabs. As Mao said in one speech attacking Israel: "The Soviet revisionist ruling clique is the biggest traitor to the cause of the Arab people." And in 1965, the PLO set up official shop in Peking.

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There is no reason to believe that if Israel had established early relationships with China, despite the U.S., things would have ended up differently. Another member of the Israeli foreign ministry, Yaacov Shimoni, said in 1970: "I have no doubt that if we had established diplomatic relationships with the Chinese, they would have closed our Embassy and expelled us like dogs, during the war in Sinai, or in the sixties or at the latest following the 1967 war. They have placed all their eggs in one Arab basket."

But now China has its eggs scrambled all over the place. There is no innate love lost between fundamentalist Muslim states and Communist China. It is all a matter of real-life politics. If Egypt and Israel could at long last establish a functional relationship, with a nod from Saudi Arabia, then the China card could fall into place as part of an anti-Soviet collective in the Middle East. Otherwise, China might just remain part of an anti-Israel collective. Much depends on the effectiveness, if any, of U.S. foreign policy, if any.

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