Qafqaz Beynəlxalq Münasibətlər və Strateji Araşdırmalar Mərkəzi
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China’s Evolving Stance in the Middle East: Analyzing Recent Shifts in Diplomacy

On the nights of Saturday, April 13, and Sunday, April 14, a historic event unfolded as Iran launched 320 warheads, striking Israeli territory for the first time. This action has significantly escalated tensions, prompting reactions from various global and regional powers, including China. Known for its balanced foreign policy approach in the region, China has traditionally sought to leverage the United States’ security umbrella in the Middle East while enhancing trade and investment relations with regional countries. This strategy involves maintaining a neutral or balanced stance on conflicts, such as those between Iran and Israel or Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In response to the recent escalation, China initially expressed deep concern and called on all involved parties to exercise calm and restraint to prevent further escalation. However, two significant factors indicate a departure from Beijing’s traditional approach. Firstly, China has exhibited a relative tilt towards Iran in this tension, viewing Iran’s recent attack as an act of self-defense and limited action in response to an alleged Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate compound in Syria. During a phone call between China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Iranian FM Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Wang condemned the alleged Israeli attack, supported Iran’s right to self-defense, and deemed it a violation of international law.

Secondly, China has reframed the tension not solely as a bilateral issue between Iran and Israel but as part of the broader regional tensions, particularly focusing on the Gaza conflict. The Chinese Foreign Ministry’s statement highlights that “The ongoing situation is the latest spillover of the Gaza conflict,” indicating a nuanced understanding of the regional dynamics at play.

China also adopted a similar approach to the war between Israel and Gaza. Despite its neutral stance in the initial phase of the conflict, Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that Israel's actions went "beyond the scope of self-defense" and demanded that it stop imposing "group punishment" on Palestinians, while still refusing to condemn Hamas.

Both the Iran-Israel and Hamas-Israel tensions reveal important shifts in China's approach toward the Middle East. The recent tensions demonstrate the limits of China's "friends with everyone" diplomatic approach. Beijing had previously aimed to avoid taking sides in conflicts it was not directly involved in, preferring to position itself for trade and influence while forgoing the security partnerships favored by the United States and Europe. However, both conflicts have pushed China to tilt toward one side.

Moreover, despite its long-standing stable relations with Israel, Beijing's pro-Iran and Gaza statements indicate another departure from its balanced approach to its traditional Middle East policy. Finally, although China has relatively changed its position toward Israel, it seems that China aims to use tension in the Middle East to gain the support of Global South countries and polarize public opinion not only against Israel but also against the United States. Through this, China may seek to increase its soft power and damage the United States' position in the region and create more discontent toward the United States, at least at the public level.