Netanyahu to Times of Israel Chinese: I hope Beijing’s ‘Superb’ Relations with Israel will Affect its UN Votes

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Israel’s increasingly strong economic relations with China may yet change the country’s traditionally anti-Israel voting patterns at international organizations such as the United Nations, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in an interview for The Times of Israel’s Chinese site on Wednesday.

Speaking to ToI’s diplomatic correspondent Raphael Ahren and Chinese editor Yifeng Zhou as he wrapped up his visit to Beijing, Netanyahu said he raised the issue during his meeting with China’s President Xi Jinping. “It is my hope that over time we’ll see a greater consonance between China’s superb relations with Israel on the bilateral side and its votes in multinational forums,” Netanyahu said.

Interviewed by The Times of Israel on the 18th floor of Beijing’s St. Regis hotel, the prime minister made no claim to have changed China’s views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian nuclear agreement, which are markedly at odds with Israel’s own. But he did see bilateral relations strengthening, and noted that “President Xi said he believes that strong economic ties help diplomacy.”

Stressing the economic part of the trip, he talked at length about how Israeli technology can dramatically improve the lives of the 1.3 billion Chinese people. Giving just one example, Netanyahu said there are 100 million cars in China, which causes traffic jams, accidents and heavy pollution. “All of that is changing with new technology, a lot which emanates from Israel,” he said, referring to Mobileye, a Jerusalem-based company that computer chip giant Intel bought last week for the staggering amount of $15 billion, and Waze, a crowd-sourced innovation app that was acquired by Google in 2013. ([Netanyahu said at the airport later](http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-significant-progress-in-settlement-talks-with-us/) that 2 billion worth of deals were signed during his China trip.)

Netanyahu’s trip was officially timed to mark 25 years since Israel and China established diplomatic relations, and was replete with ceremonial elements. Arriving on Sunday, Netanyahu was welcomed at Beijing airport by an honor guard. Before his meeting with Prime Minister Li Keqiang in the Great Hall of the People, the national anthems were played. Israeli flags fluttered on lampposts at Tiananmen Square throughout the three-day visit. On Tuesday, Netanyahu and his wife Sara laid a wreath at the Monument to the People’s Heroes, making him the first Israeli leader to be granted such an honor.

But the ceremonial aspects were not the focus of the visit. Rather, Netanyahu and his delegation — which included four ministers and dozens of businesspeople — signed more than a dozen bilateral agreements, agreeing to cooperate chiefly in the fields of technology and innovation.

“Israel is renowned, precisely as President Xi said, as a leader in technology,” Netanyahu told The Times of Israel. “In many of these areas, we can have a very fruitful cooperation between Israeli technology and Chinese marketing and industrial power.”

On Tuesday, Beijing announced the creation of a China-Israel “innovative strategic partnership.”

“As President Xi himself said, this particular designation applies only to Israel, and to Israel only,” Netanyahu enthused. “And it shows the primacy of Israel’s position in innovation. We’re a small country (of 8.6 million people). We could fit twice, or maybe even more, into Beijing (21.5 million) or Shanghai (24.5 million), in terms of population. But we have a predominance in many areas of technology that are changing the lives of people.”

Here is a full transcript of our interview:

**The Times of Israel: President Xi Jinping said you told him Israel is hoping for China to take a more active role in Middle East affairs. What exactly do you have in mind?**

Prime Minister Netanyahu: Well, actually I was talking about the economic side and the logistical possibility. China wants to increase the access of Asia — China specifically — to the world. There are two ways of doing it: One is the mutual exchange of Israeli technology with Chinese business. I think we’re well en route to doing that. A third of the investment in Israeli high technology is Chinese. We welcome more. And we would like to advance the free trade association, which would enable a two-way movement to proceed. We agreed that we’d accelerate it.

Secondly, there is a transportation route that we’re planning now, which is [a rail connection between Asia and between the Red Sea and Mediterranean ports](https://besacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Chaziza-Mordechai-Red-Med-Canal-China-BRI-PP-385-11-Dec-2016.pdf) (such as Eilat and Ashdod). We think it could be of interest to China. So we’ve been discussing that as well.

**But you envision no role for China in the Middle East peace process?**
Well, we’re going to a pursue our attempt to achieve both a broad peace with the Arab states and Palestinian-Israeli peace. And China is always seen as a valued supporting party.

**The Chinese president** [**said**](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/21/c_136146441.htm) **he “appreciates Israel’s adoption of the two-state solution.” In recent weeks you have refrained from using this terminology. Was that a point of contention?**

First of all, I’d say that the overwhelming part of our conversation talked about economy and technology and the various possibilities of Israeli-Chinese cooperation. To the extent that we discussed this, I reiterated my position that the Palestinians would have to recognize a Jewish state and that Israel would have overriding security control over the territory west of the Jordan. These are not new positions. I have said that for many years; that hasn’t changed. But the thrust of our conversation overwhelmingly was on economic and technological cooperation.

**When can we expect the excellent scientific and technological relations to be translated into diplomatic support at international forums such as the United Nations?**

I raised my hope that extraordinary bilateral relations would also be reflected in multinational forums. President Xi said that he believes that strong economic ties help diplomacy. It is my hope that over time we’ll see a greater consonance between China’s superb relations with Israel on the bilateral side and its votes in multinational forums.

**You said at the UN last year that in 10 years, the UN will cheer Israel. You’ve since said it could happen even sooner. How long will it take until China switches its traditional voting patterns in the UN [which consistently support Arab-sponsored anti-Israeli initiatives]?**

I wasn’t speaking specifically of China. But I was speaking of a great number of countries that we see dramatically broadening and deepening relations their relations with Israel. And I expect, there, to see a change fairly quickly. I was specifically talking about the large mass of African countries.

We discussed, quite apart from that, the possibility that Israel and China will have trilateral cooperation in third countries. We specifically spoke about Africa. China is in Africa, it has a big presence in Africa. And Israel’s coming back to Africa with great dynamism. In fact, I intend to take a second trip to Africa in a few months, this time to West Africa. We’re already cooperating with other countries, like Germany and Italy. There’s no reason why Israel and China shouldn’t cooperate, bringing our mutual expertise to the help of African countries. We agreed that our respective foreign ministries would begin discussions to that effect.

**Let’s speak about Iran, which is a strong ally of China. After your meeting with Prime Minister Li, a senior Chinese Foreign Ministry official** [**told reporters**](http://www.timesofisrael.com/backing-un-moves-and-iran-deal-china-says-its-not-only-about-the-money/) **that Beijing still believes the 2015 nuclear agreement “will be very conducive for regional and international peace.” Clearly you disagree with this characterization.**

Yes, that’s no secret. I made my views known in every forum possible, from the United Nations to the US Congress. And I obviously have not changed my view. And Iran’s actions since the signing of the agreement have not lessened this concern. Not to me or to many of the countries of the region, who view Iran as a source of a great deal of aggression.

**To what extent were you able to convince the Chinese of your assessment? They plainly don’t see Iran as destabilizing factor but rather as a stabilizing factor.**

Time will tell. But I have not changed my mind.

**What benefits do you see Israel reaping from the innovative strategic partnership with China that was announced on Tuesday?**

It’s a remarkable announcement. It gives Israel a unique position. As President Xi himself said, this particular designation applies only to Israel, and to Israel only. And it shows the primacy of Israel’s position in innovation. We’re a small country. We could fit twice, or maybe even more, into Beijing or Shanghai, in terms of population. But we have a predominance in many areas of technology that are changing the lives of people.

We have [expertise in] such areas as water, digital health, cybersecurity, agriculture. Israel is renowned, precisely as President Xi said, as a leader in technology. In many of these areas, we can have a very fruitful cooperation between Israeli technology and Chinese marketing and industrial power.

In fact, I would say, and I recognize now a clear understanding of this in the leadership of China, that once you’ve established basic infrastructure — roads, utilities, factories — the way that you can sustain growth is only by consistently adding value to your products and services. The only way to do that, beyond a certain point, is with the addition of technology.

Every part of life, every area of human affairs, is now being technologized. This is what Israel specializes in.

We had a lengthy discussion over a very fruitful dinner about the changes that are happening for example in the car industry. China has a 100 million cars. There’s a problem of congestion. Road accidents. Air pollution. The new automotive technology — autonomous vehicles — and the computer networking makes driving a lot more efficient. All of that is changing with new technology, a lot of which emanates from Israel.

Intel just bought an Israeli company [MobilEye] for $15 billion that deals with driverless car technology. But there are hundreds of other such companies in Israel. So it’s become a world leader in this effort.

China is a classic, perhaps the preeminent country, that could apply this technology for the benefit of its people. Fewer road accidents. Less pollution. And you get more quickly to your destination, without the need to spend exorbitant amounts of money on a clumsy car that costs a bundle and is 95 percent of the time idle. These changes are all the products of technology. So it’s one of the areas that we spoke about.

We also spoke at great length about digital health, which means for example that the medical records of all Chinese citizens could be computerized so that every time you go to a different hospital you don’t have to go through the whole battery of tests to establish your medical record.

We in Israel have a computerized card, so that’s not necessary. You can go to any doctor, anywhere, and he knows instantly your medical record; what medicines you need, what medicines you should avoid. This is a tremendous saving and a tremendous improvement in health.