During Israel’s second decennial, Israel’s alliance with the United States and the West was cemented. Consequently, Israel’s relationship with China was largely subject to goodwill between Beijing and Western nations though Israel notably was the first country in the Middle East to recognize the People’s Republic of China. The pro-Western policies of subsequent Israeli governments contributed to the Jewish nation being the last country in the Middle East to establish bilateral diplomatic ties with Beijing, despite its early recognition of the PRC. China positioned itself in favor of the Arab bloc largely due to economic interests. Indicative of this affiliation was the PRC’s establishment of an embassy in the Palestinian Authority four years before it established one in Israel.

In January 1992, when Israel and China finally established official ties, the bilateral relationship focused on limited areas of cooperation. Business and trade emphasized Israel’s contributions in the areas of agricultural and water solutions, technologies of vital importance to China.

The evolution of the relationship between Israel and China has been characterized by general improvement with brief periods of frustration and misunderstanding. Relations between these two ancient peoples were historically dominated by geopolitical considerations and the influence of allied countries. The State of Israel was the first country in the Middle East and the seventh member of the United Nations to recognize the People’s Republic of China. Despite this, schisms developed between the leaders of the two nations. Israel tends to approach international relations through a Western lens. Meanwhile, China understood the early support of the former Soviet Union and Israel’s powerful socialist movement to be indicative of an Israeli departure from western political ideology.

The China-Israel Center for Training in Agriculture began bilateral collaboration in 1993. Within a brief period of time, Israeli technology and knowhow contributed to a significant increase in the milk production of dairy cows in China. Successful collaboration between the two countries laid a sturdy framework for future cooperation. Moreover, the ongoing introduction of Israeli technology in the fields of agriculture and water built Israel’s reputation in China as a nation of highly skilled innovators. China is now utilizing Israeli technology to build the world’s largest desalinization plant in Tianjin.

Trade between the People’s Republic of China and the State of Israel grew steadily until the mid-2000’s. In 2000 relations and trade suffered a serious setback when Washington interfered and compelled Israel to cancel the sale of four Phalcon Advanced Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) to China. The political situation further deteriorated in 2004 when China sent the Harpy Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), which...
Utilizing Israeli Government backed loans, Jasmine International facilitated the building of two hospitals in western China, a region designated for development by the Chinese government. Jasmine International is also managing projects in wastewater treatment and education. In spite of great progress, “there still is a culture gap between China and Israel that mitigates progress” explained Ms. Tzur. “Israelis tend to be impatient seeking quick results. The Chinese have a long term approach that also applies to their style in closing a business deal. With more exposure to each other’s business practices the culture gap will narrow,” she continued.

Barry Swersky, Head of the Israel China Culture Exchange explained that cultural interchange over the past year significantly contributed to building bridges between these divergent peoples. Chinese artistic groups such as the Beijing Dance/LDTX and Shaolin Martial Arts Group performed across Israel. The PRC’s ambassador to Israel hosted a reception for the International Symposium for Women’s Architecture featuring Chinese Architects. Cultural interchange culminated in 2011 with the arrival of PRC Minister of Culture Cai Wu to Israel. Building on the 2011 successes of his organization, Mr. Swersky is already initiating new projects for 2012, celebrating the China-Israel 20th jubilee. Amongst his numerous plans is the development of an internet based telecast bringing Israeli culture to the computer screens of Chinese ‘netizens’.

Awareness of Israel among Chinese citizens is also rising. “The tripling of Chinese tourism to Israel in past year indicates that the growing interest is mutual,” it purchased from Israel in the mid 1990’s, for routine maintenance repair in Israel. For the second time in four years, Israel bowed to strong US pressure and impounded the drones. However, over time and with great effort by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, valuable Israeli technology and businesses were introduced to China, re-opening the door for improved relations.

In light of this increased exposure to the Middle Kingdom, Israel and Israelis are beginning to appreciate the elaborate tapestry that is China. Chinese language courses were recently introduced in the academic curriculum in select Israeli elementary and high schools. Moreover, Chinese companies have been invited for projects in Israel and are in negotiations to build a high speed rail system from Tel Aviv to Eilat, and on the cultural side, the Shaolin Martial Arts Group is performing in Israel.

Despite a monolithic façade, China’s policy is influenced by a host of agents, from heads of state owned enterprises and national and local politicians, to scholars and other government advisors. Recently these multifarious leaders have shown increased interest in Israel from boardrooms to classrooms, indicating a window of opportunity opening that could prove valuable to both nations.

Solid returns are already being seen in the area of business cooperation. While the earliest foundations of the China-Israel relationship focused on business, in October 2011 cooperation reached new heights with the purchase of Makhteshim Agan by China National Agrochemical Corporation, a subsidiary of China National Chemical Corporation (ChemChina). ChemChina paid US$2.4 billion for 60% of the Israeli company. This marked the single largest corporate sale in Israel’s history. Einat Tzur, former Director and one of the founders of the Israel China Chamber of Commerce in Beijing and current Jasmine International Head of Business Development China related that the “Made In Israel” brand is a powerful tool.
by Carice Witte & Jake Morrel

Feature

says Eyal Benner, Executive Director of Tao, a tour company for Chinese visitors to Israel. The increase in mutual interest between China and Israel is also reflected in the volume of official visits between the two countries.

Despite the impressive developments in mutual relations, Israel is still catching up with much of the rest of the world when it comes to engaging China. “Now is a crucial time to push forward the China-Israel bilateral relationship”, says Dr. Gedaliah Afterman, fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute, a Jerusalem based research center. “Israel is lagging a few years behind the rest of the world in developing a relationship with China”.

The breadth of interactions between Israel and China throughout 2011 is promising. A key cause of the leap forward in bilateral relations, especially in academia, is official sanction from both governments. Both nations acknowledge that academia is an integral catalyst for enhancing China bilateral relations. Guy Kivetz of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained that because of Israel’s small size it will never be a strategic competitor with China. This disparity actually gives the diminutive Jewish nation certain advantages over larger countries. “The needs and capabilities of the two countries are very compatible,” Kivetz said. “Stronger China-Israel ties will result in a win-win situation.”

A central reason for China’s increased interest in Israel in 2011 is the ‘Arab Spring’. As China adjusts to its evolving role in international geopolitics, it is responding to the perplexing instability in the Middle East by affirming the Middle Kingdom’s commitment to understand the region. China is looking towards Israeli scholars to assimilate a varied narrative into its decision making process as it relates to one of the globe’s most complicated and volatile regions.

In the view of SIGNAL (Sino-Israel Global Network & Academic Leadership) the dearth of high level scholarly interchange in the field of international relations greatly limited the potential to reach mutually valuable solutions. SIGNAL, established in 2011 to advance China-Israel relations through academia, conducted research showing that after 20 years of official relations, Chinese misconceptions about Israel and the Jewish people abound. SIGNAL further discovered that Chinese and Israeli academics were actively interested in advancing high-level scholarly interchange. To redress widespread misunderstandings, SIGNAL established the first website providing introductory to advanced essays and articles about Israel and its people in Chinese. Additionally, SIGNAL held the first China-Israel academic event focusing on geopolitics.

In September 2011, SIGNAL and its co-host the Lauder School of Government’s Center for Global Strategic International Research held its first annual China-Israel Strategy & Security Symposium. The event was carried out in affiliation with the International Center for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya. Perhaps the most promising outcome of the symposium was the agreement by scholars on both sides to continue the dialogue to gain greater shared understanding.

The impact of the personal bonds forged in the symposium were immediately felt when SIGNAL traveled to China to inaugurate the first Israel Studies Program (ISP) ever established at a Chinese university. During SIGNAL’s China trip, five additional ISPs advanced to varying stages of development. In Shanghai SIGNAL concluded an agreement with Shanghai International Studies University to launch the ISP in Jan. 2012. SIGNAL held meetings with the VP of Shanghai Jiaotong University (SJTU) and the Dean of the International Relations School to advance the recent establishment of the SIGNAL-SJTU Sino-Israel Research Center - the first in the world. The Center for Contemporary Sino-Israel Studies focuses on comparative politics and strategic analysis between the two nations.

The SIGNAL-Henan University ISP began in the Fall semester of 2011 when one of the Jewish Studies scholars received a SIGNAL scholarship to attend the SIGNAL-Bar Ilan University ISP training program. Also participating in this customized academic study program were two lecturers from Sichuan International Studies University (SISU) where the ISP was launched in the Spring semester of 2011.

In January 2012 SISU students working on major research projects concerning Israel traveled to the Jewish State to carry out in depth research. In February the SISU lecturers now studying at the Bar Ilan-SIGNAL ISP training program returned, well equipped to teach Israel studies.

The success of this historic academic cooperation in 2011 has roused the interest of scholars for further interchange. In all fields the bilateral relationship is expected to grow through a natural evolution and officially channeled resources. As the Israel China Culture Exchange founder, Barry Swersky, explained, there is massive potential for Israel-China associations outside of Beijing and Shanghai.

2011 saw significant expansion and deepening of interpersonal relationships in all sectors of society. The 20th anniversary of official bilateral relations, the growing network of connections in business, science, technology, culture, diplomacy and academia will surely strengthen the foundations of the China-Israel bond, creating a robust framework for 20 more years of flourishing relations. 🇨🇳

Carice Witte is the Founder/Exec. Director, SIGNAL and Jake Morrel is the Head of Communications & Strategic Development, SIGNAL