

OVERSEAS AID

China airlifts medical supplies to Lebanon following urgent request

On 21 October China delivered 57 metric tons of emergency medical aid to Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport, following an urgent request from the Lebanese government amid escalating hostilities between Hezbollah and the Israel Defense Forces.^{1,2,3} The shipment included essential items such as anaesthetics, disposable endotracheal tubes, and surgical gowns, and is aimed at alleviating the strain on Lebanon's healthcare system.⁴

The aid was presented at a handover ceremony attended by Chinese Ambassador Qian Minjian and Lebanese Health Minister Firas Abiad.^{5,6} In his speech, Ambassador Qian stated that the conflict has caused significant suffering in Lebanon, resulting in numerous casualties and millions displaced.⁷ He reaffirmed China's support for Lebanon's sovereignty and security, while emphasising opposition to indiscriminate attacks on civilians, and expressed hope that the medical supplies would help ease the situation.^{8,9} Minister Abiad expressed gratitude for China's continued assistance and highlighted the importance of this aid in supporting Lebanon's healthcare system as well as referencing prior help from China during crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 Beirut port explosion.¹⁰

As of 31 October, according to figures from the Lebanese Health Ministry, 2,820 people have been killed by Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon since October 2023 with a further 12,937 people injured.¹¹

Adarga Analysis: Lebanon's healthcare system is under severe strain, exacerbated by years of economic challenges, political instability, and most recently, the escalation of armed conflict. Minister Abiad's expressed gratitude and emphasis on the significance of China's support underscores the critical role that external assistance presently plays in sustaining Lebanon's fragile healthcare infrastructure.

The read-out from the Chinese side is illustrative of Beijing's strategic positioning in the context of the intensifying conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. In his speech at the aid handover ceremony, Ambassador Qian Minjian emphasised Chinese support for Lebanon's sovereignty and opposition to indiscriminate attacks on civilians. In so doing, the Ambassador is subtly criticising the Israel Defense Force's military actions without explicitly alienating Israel, thus allowing Beijing to maintain a balanced stance. This is consistent with the Chinese approach to ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, including in Gaza and between Israel and Iran. It is likely that China's strategy for navigating the complexities of present conflicts in the region is one of cautious diplomacy wherein it seeks to avoid jeopardising its relationship with either side.

The medical aid can also be interpreted as advancing China's broader foreign policy goals. By providing critical medical supplies during a period of acute need, China reinforces its image as a benevolent global actor willing to respond to crises. In this sense, the delivery from China is not only vital for immediate relief but also likely intended as a signal of Beijing's commitment to Lebanon's stability. As mentioned in Minister Abiad's public comments, this is the latest of several instances of Chinese direct support to Lebanon. By maintaining a consistent pattern of providing support, China can nurture long-term bilateral relationships with countries that consequently have the potential to be translated into strategic influence. Humanitarian assistance is a cornerstone of this type of soft power projection for global powers, and it is likely Beijing will continue to cultivate goodwill and strengthen diplomatic ties with Lebanon in the short and medium term.

Finally, by positioning itself as a supportive and stabilising force in Lebanon, China can reinforce its regional influence and showcase its ability to act as a key player in Middle Eastern geopolitics. Lebanon has historically been influenced by Western powers, especially France and the US. While the US remains a dominant force in the region, its unwavering support for Israel often limits Washington's ability to act as an impartial mediator in conflicts involving Israel, such as in Lebanon. Therefore, China likely has a strategic opportunity to partially reshape traditional power dynamics in the region. Its involvement through humanitarian aid and economic investments, combined with more balanced or neutral positions, entails a realistic possibility that Beijing may gradually be perceived as a reliable alternative partner to the US for countries such as Lebanon, and a more credible mediator, with the consequence of enhancing its diplomatic stature in the region and beyond.

ECONOMICS

Brazil declines invite to join Belt and Road Initiative

On 28 October it was announced that Brazil has opted not to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), making it the second BRICS member, after India, to decline participation.^{12,13,14} The decision was delivered by President Lula da Silva's special adviser, Celso Amorim, who indicated Brazil's goal is to foster "synergy" between Brazil's infrastructure projects and the Chinese investment funds linked to the initiative without formal commitments to the BRI framework, so as to enhance its relationship with China while safeguarding national interests and retaining autonomy in economic decisions.^{15,16}

Historically, China has courted Brazilian officials on the subject of the country becoming a signatory of the initiative; during Lula's trip to Beijing in April 2023, China repeated its request for Brazil to join.¹⁷ The decision came following a series of rumours that China expected to announce that Brazil would join the BRI during an upcoming visit from President Xi Jinping to the country for the G20 summit on 18-19 November.^{18,19} Furthermore, until the announcement, although his scepticism around the magnitude of BRI benefits had been mentioned in coverage of a recent visit to Beijing, reports had suggested that Special Presidential Adviser Amorim previously supported the idea of Brazil joining the BRI.²⁰

Adarga Analysis: The BRI has been a cornerstone of China's global outreach since 2013, and serves as an important framework for advancing its model of infrastructure development, in addition to enhancing its bilateral relationships with partner countries and thereby potentially extending its international influence.

Although over 150 countries and organisations have signed up to the initiative since its inception – including 22 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean – Brazil's absence has been somewhat conspicuous. Brazil is currently China's largest trading partner in Latin America, and China has held this status for Brazil for 14 consecutive years. Both countries are significant players in the Global South and have engaged in various areas, including agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and technology as well as through multilateral forums, including the BRICS bloc.

Brazil's public rejection represents a setback for Beijing's efforts to cement Latin America as a pivotal node in the BRI network and disrupts China's vision of a fully integrated BRI across developing economies. Due to Brazil's status, both within BRICS and as a significant emerging economy, there is also a realistic possibility that it will raise questions about the initiative's long-term viability and appeal, especially among major economies.

The significance of this rejection is further amplified through its impact on the perception of BRI as a unifying force among BRICS members. As discussed in previous issues of *Briefly*, the bloc plays a critical role in promoting a shared vision of a multipolar global order. With two of the five members now openly distancing themselves from the BRI, the decision also undermines China's strategy for increasing BRICS solidarity under its economic leadership.

Brazil's decision reflects a nuanced approach to managing its relationship with China and a clear desire to engage on its own terms. Amorim's comments to Brazilian newspaper *O Globo* highlighted that the decision has been taken to "enhance infrastructure cooperation" with Chinese investment entities without binding itself to the formal framework necessitated within the BRI. Consequently, this can be interpreted as a deliberate strategy of economic pragmatism which prioritises strategic autonomy and sovereign decision-making; while Brazil recognises the benefits of Chinese capital to enhance infrastructure development, by seeking 'synergy' rather than formal alignment, it will likely be able to retain greater economic autonomy to ensure signed projects align with its own national priorities.

Overall, this decision suggests that the dynamic between the two countries is such that Brazil increasingly views its relationship with China as one between peers rather than as a hierarchical dependency. Brazil's self-perception as a regional powerhouse and its status as a major player within BRICS likely contribute to a sense of equality in its dealings with China. Correspondingly, the country's economic size and regional geopolitical significance afford it leverage and the confidence to interact with China as a partner rather than a passive recipient of aid or investment. Consequently, although Brazil's insistence on structuring its engagement with China to suit its own developmental and strategic goals can be seen as a setback to China, the way that it has been communicated also demonstrates mutual respect and acknowledgment of influence between the two countries.

ABOUT

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