

Action Through Inaction? The Chinese Strategy in the US-Iran War

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The war between the United States and Iran presented China with a complex strategic challenge: maintaining its relations with Iran, the Gulf states, and the United States all at once, while safeguarding its economic and energy interests in the region. Despite possessing the economic tools to exert significant influence, Beijing chose to limit its response primarily to the diplomatic arena and refrained from using the leverage at its disposal. This article argues that Beijing's conduct should not be viewed as passivity, but rather as a calculated strategy designed to preserve China's strategic flexibility by avoiding having to choose between competing interests.

The war between the United States and Iran presented China with one of the most complex tests for its foreign policy in the Middle East. For the first time, nearly all of Beijing's core interests in the region came under pressure simultaneously: ensuring Chinese energy security, sustaining relations with the Gulf states, preserving the stability of the Iranian regime, and avoiding direct confrontation with the United States. Any significant step by China in favor of one interest risked undermining the others. In practice, Beijing chose not to decide between these competing interests. Instead, it adopted a pattern of action aimed at both avoiding having to choose and preserving its room for maneuver in the region. It is important to examine how it managed to do so, and why it chose this specific strategy.

Although China's actions during the conflict appeared to consist largely of general, noncommittal messaging, commentators repeatedly [raised China's name](#) in connection with mediation, pointing to its potential role in [Iran's reconstruction and in shaping the post-war regional order](#). This raises an interesting question: How did Beijing manage to preserve its status as a relevant actor in the region, despite failing to provide any of the major players with the support each had hoped to receive from China during the conflict?

Components of the Chinese Strategy

At first glance, one might have expected a different course of action. China and Iran maintain a comprehensive strategic partnership; China purchases most of Iran's oil exports, and both countries oppose the US-led international order and collaborate within the frameworks of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Against this backdrop, [some estimated](#) that Beijing would provide more substantial support to Iran. Conversely, others anticipated that Beijing would leverage its influence to direct Tehran in accordance with Chinese interests—an expectation echoed in [public calls](#) by senior US officials urging China to use its influence over Iran.

In practice, the reality differed from expectations. Chinese actions combined critical messaging toward Iran while refraining from deploying actual leverage. For instance, as in previous crises, China called for

a ceasefire, dialogue, and a diplomatic solution, and even offered to mediate between the parties. At the same time, it refrained from offering security guarantees and avoided exerting significant pressure on Iran, even when the closure of the Strait of Hormuz threatened Chinese energy security. Simultaneously, following the Iranian strikes on the Gulf states, Beijing [made clear](#) that it would not go along with the attacks against the Gulf states, while stopping short of explicitly condemning Iran.

This conduct is not merely a series of ad hoc responses. Rather, it reflects a coherent strategy in which three complementary components can be identified.

The first is **generating diplomatic visibility**. China sought to be perceived as highly active, even if it did not aim to directly influence the course of the war. Foreign Minister Wang Yi held more than twenty conversations with regional leaders, and China presented various political initiatives, acted within the UN Security Council, and dispatched a special envoy to the Middle East. When Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning was asked what contribution Beijing had made to ending the war, she responded by highlighting the scope of China's diplomatic activity: "[Foreign Minister Wang Yi made 26 phone calls... The Special Envoy... traveled to the region in a mediation effort... China and Pakistan issued the five-point initiative...](#)" From China's perspective, diplomatic visibility itself constitutes part of the strategic achievement, even when it does not alter the course of events.

The second component is **tailoring messaging to varying target audiences**. Beijing spoke differently to each audience: with Iran, principles of sovereignty and condemnation of attacks were emphasized; toward the United States, the tone was relatively moderate—partly out of a desire to prevent further deterioration in relations during a politically sensitive period and against the backdrop of US President Donald Trump's visit to Beijing on May 13, 2026; in the UN arena, international law, dialogue, and the need for a ceasefire were highlighted; toward the nations of the Global South, China presented itself as a responsible power preferring diplomatic solutions over the use of military force. These messages were not contradictory; rather, they were carefully calibrated for different audiences, allowing China to preserve its relations simultaneously with all of the principal actors.

The third, and perhaps most important, component is **ambiguity regarding the nature of involvement**. This does not mean China abstained from all security cooperation with regional states. In fact, even during the war, China continued to maintain security ties with the Gulf states while simultaneously preserving its ties with Iran. In doing so, it avoided unequivocal identification with either side and sustained its relations with both camps. At the same time, reports were published regarding the supply of dual-use components, shipments of sodium perchlorate (a precursor material for missile engines), and other materials originating from Chinese companies to Iran, including reports of intelligence assistance. Even if some of these reports are accurate, they point to a pattern of security assistance maintained below the threshold of public military involvement. Beijing was careful not to accept official responsibility for such actions, thereby avoiding the diplomatic and strategic costs associated with becoming an overt party to the war.

Although [interpretations](#) emerged during the war suggesting that Beijing exerted pressure on Tehran, available evidence provides little basis for such an interpretation. Chinese calls to avoid escalation, reopen the Strait of Hormuz, and return to negotiations were largely consistent with Beijing's routine rhetoric during regional crises, and were not accompanied by the use of actual leverage. Even after the ceasefire, when [reports](#) began to circulate regarding China's involvement in shaping the settlement, and

even the possibility of serving as its guarantor, Beijing maintained the same strategic ambiguity and refrained from assuming any official responsibility.

Together, these three components—diplomatic visibility, tailored messaging, and ambiguity regarding the nature of involvement—enabled Beijing to preserve both its strategic flexibility and its freedom of maneuver after the fighting ended. In doing so, China managed, at least in the short term, to avoid choosing between Iran and the Gulf states without substantially damaging its relations with either side, while leaving the main burden of involvement and strategic costs to the United States.

This pattern of action is not merely a collection of practical measures. It reflects a broader conception of power projection that can be interpreted through the Daoist concept of *Wu Wei* (無為), meaning "non-action" or, more precisely, "action without unnecessary intervention," even if there is no intention to claim that the Communist Party adopted Daoist philosophy as part of its foreign policy. This does not imply absolute passivity, but rather the avoidance of actions that could cause more harm than good. In this context, China did not refrain from diplomatic activity; on the contrary, it was highly active, but refrained from moves that could have made it a direct party to the war and damaged the relationships it has cultivated in the region over the years. In other words, China did the minimum necessary to maximize its strategic room for maneuver.

In retrospect, this pattern of action appears to have largely achieved its goal. Iran continues to regard China as its principal strategic partner, despite some criticism voiced within Iran regarding the extent of Chinese support. The Gulf states continue to view Beijing as an important economic and political partner, while the United States continues to bear the region's security burden. Relations with Washington have not deteriorated as a result of the war, and a limited channel of cooperation on crisis management has remained intact.

Furthermore, Beijing even earned praise from the US president, who commended his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, for his assistance during the war. What form did that assistance take? According to Trump: ["They could have sent in an oil ship with six destroyers alongside it... They didn't do that."](#) In other words, China's greatest assistance lay in its non-action.

That said, it is too early to conclude that this policy came without cost. In the short term, China managed to preserve its relations with all sides, but over the long term, its caution may raise doubts regarding its willingness to translate its economic and diplomatic influence into effective leverage during times of crisis. In Iran, questions may emerge concerning the scope of support to be expected from Beijing in extreme circumstances, while in the Gulf states, the perception may take hold that Beijing does not deploy its leverage to restrain Tehran, even when Chinese interests in the region are threatened. Therefore, Chinese "non-action" preserved its strategic flexibility and its relationships with all actors, but did not necessarily strengthen confidence in its willingness to incur costs on their behalf during a crisis. The war therefore illustrated both the advantages of Chinese restraint and its limits.

Even after the ceasefire collapsed and hostilities resumed, and despite the possibility that this pattern would further expose the limits of China's influence in the region, Beijing immediately reverted to its familiar mode of operation—calling on all parties to exercise restraint, end the violence, return to the negotiating table, respect international law, and avoid further escalation. Yet, even after the fighting resumed, China did not transition from statements of principle to the use of actual leverage. Its refusal

to choose a side allows Beijing to maintain its status as a party acceptable to all actors, without being required to bear any security responsibilities.

Implications for Israel

The war in Iran illustrates that analyzing Chinese policy cannot rely solely on Beijing's public statements. The messages China conveys vary depending on the target audience and circumstances; therefore, they must be examined alongside its actions, and particularly alongside the actions China chooses *not* to take. Understanding the gap between rhetoric and conduct is essential for developing a more accurate assessment of Beijing's policy and its objectives in the Middle East. In this respect, the war in Iran is not an exception, but rather brings into sharp focus a pattern of action that has already appeared in previous Middle Eastern crises.

The war also highlights the limitations of efforts to rely on China's use of leverage against Iran. Over the years, proposals have been raised in Israel to build a coalition of countries with close ties to Beijing, led by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, to encourage China to exert pressure on Tehran. However, China's conduct during the war demonstrates that, even when it possesses significant leverage, and even when its close partners in the Gulf have come under attack, Beijing refrains from deploying it. Consequently, the challenge for Israel is not merely assessing the extent of China's leverage over Iran, but understanding the conditions under which Beijing would regard the use of that leverage as serving its own interests.

Finally, identifying the boundaries of Chinese involvement can assist Israel in evaluating Beijing's conduct in future crises more accurately. Rather than asking what China *might* do, it is more effective to assess in advance which steps it is *unlikely* to take—whether regarding the deployment of economic pressure, binding political intervention, or incurring strategic costs. Such an approach can reduce unrealistic expectations and enable Israel to base its policy toward China on a more clear-eyed assessment of the limits of its involvement.

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