

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## China and the Iran Crisis

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### **S***ummary*

In the Iran crisis, a major strategic objective for Beijing was to frame itself as a 'stabilising' power, in contrast to Washington's disruptive interventions.

Since the breakout of the US–Israel–Iran war on 28 February 2026, China’s role in the crisis has been in focus. Observers noted that China was likely to remain on the sidelines of the crisis, as Beijing did not see Iran as an indispensable ally and viewed China’s calls for restraint and diplomatic negotiation as rhetorical.<sup>1</sup> Also, the energy crisis was unlikely to have a severe impact on China due to its large oil reserves and diversified energy mix. Such arguments are rooted primarily in the analysis of short-term strategic interests and do not account for other factors, such as international status considerations, elite perceptions, and political culture, which also influence foreign policy decision-making. The declaration of a two-week ceasefire on 7 April and the White House’s confirmation of China’s role in bringing Iran to the negotiating table have renewed attention to China’s standing in the crisis.<sup>2</sup>

In the last few years, China has directed its diplomacy to advance the narrative of being a responsible major power. Through its mediation attempts (Pakistan–Afghanistan, Thailand–Cambodia, Saudi Arabia–Iran), the establishment of alternative institutions (International Organisation for Mediation), and the advancement of normative frameworks such as the Global Governance Initiative, Beijing has sought to showcase its capability to provide public goods, especially as the US appears to withdraw from critical international spaces. These strategic initiatives are aimed not only at countering the China threat discourse but also at demonstrating to the international community the dividends of China’s rise.

Accordingly, in the latest crisis, a major strategic objective for Beijing was to frame itself as a stabilising power, in contrast to Washington’s disruptive interventions. China, in a bid to set itself apart from the US, projected a diplomatic commitment, with Chinese Special Envoy Zhai Jun visiting Middle Eastern countries to prevent escalation and broker negotiations.<sup>3</sup> According to state media narratives, China did not remain on the sidelines of the crisis, but rather has been instrumental in preventing the situation from spiralling out of control. Contrasting China’s policy approach with that of the US, the state media has hailed that at a time when the US and Israel launched military strikes against Iran, Beijing was quick to “inject

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<sup>1</sup> There have been reports that Chinese companies provided Tehran with detailed satellite imageries regarding US and their allies military assets and strategic infrastructure. [“Never Added Fuel to Fire: China Rejects Claims of Military Support to Iran during US-Israeli Conflict”](#), *The Times of India*, 9 April 2026.

<sup>2</sup> [“US and Iran Agree to a Two-Week Ceasefire”](#), *AP News*, 8 April 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Cen Ziyuan, [“US and Israel Attack Iran: China’s Special Envoy on Middle East Affairs Briefs Media on Regional Trip”](#), *CGTN*, 24 March 2026.

stabilising force” through “intensive diplomatic mediation”, “clear expression of positions” and “special envoy visits”.<sup>4</sup>

However, the question remains: why did China restrict its posturing to that of a stabilising power rather than a responsible ally? Observers have attributed this behaviour to first, China's preference for flexible partnerships without binding military or security commitments; second, an active intervention strategy would impact China’s more lucrative opportunities in other Gulf countries; and, finally, China’s broader goal of energy security, which could be best secured through strategic ambiguity. Alternatively, against this backdrop, another key dimension has been overlooked: China’s ultimate goal of regime security.

China’s restraint amidst a series of US interventions, including decapitation strikes against pro-China governments in Venezuela and Iran, indicates that, for now at least, Beijing is unwilling to engage in an active geopolitical struggle against Washington. Chinese analysts had indicated that China would avoid getting entangled in “other people’s wars”.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, China largely remained silent on Trump’s calls for sending warships to force open the Strait of Hormuz. Avoidance of a military or security contest with the US was justified by the argument that a protracted war in the Middle East would shift US attention away from the Indo-Pacific theatre, weaken the US, and accelerate its decline.

However, China’s long game appears to be shaped by lessons from major-power rivalry during the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> Chinese strategists and observers consider that, among other factors, the collapse of the Soviet Union was also engineered by Moscow being drawn into a vicious cycle of challenges and wars with the US over international leadership and status, leading to severe misallocation of resources.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in response to US containment, the Soviet Union was drawn into a quagmire of a zero-sum game, unable to extricate itself.<sup>8</sup>

It is suggested in Chinese policy circles that Cold War logic is embedded in American perceptions of major-power competition and that, under the Trump

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<sup>4</sup> [\*\*“Why is China the Only Stabilizer in the Chaos in the Middle East? The Key Move Behind Wisdom”\*\*](#), *China.com*, 6 March 2026.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Lo, [\*\*“China Always Ends Up Winning When the United States Goes to War \(with others\)”\*\*](#), *SCMP*, 1 March 2026.

<sup>6</sup> Yen Mo, [\*\*“Why Is China Keeping a Low Profile on the Iran War?”\*\*](#), Project Finance and Law, 22 March 2026; Lai Jiaqi, [\*\*“China Knows Very Well: Never Interrupt Your Opponent When He Makes a Mistake”\*\*](#), *Guancha.cn*, 5 April 2026.

<sup>7</sup> [\*\*“Cold War Apocalypse”\*\*](#), Scientific Research Achievements, Department of History, East China Normal University, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Shen Zhihua, [\*\*“Looking at Reality from History: Rethinking the Origins of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union”\*\*](#), *21<sup>st</sup> Century Issue*, Vol. 181, No. 10, 2020, pp. 56–62.

presidency, the US has inaugurated a new phase of the Cold War. Accordingly, Washington has been pursuing all means short of war to impede China’s rise. In light of this, Chinese observers suggest that Beijing should not be complacent and should pursue its own strategic objectives. Xi Jinping’s “new type of major power relations” is propagated as a response to the United States’ containment strategy.<sup>9</sup>

In the Chinese assessment, the military action in Iran not only aims to undercut Chinese influence and restrict access to critical resources but also serves the broader containment logic of drawing China into a regional hotspot and distracting it from the task of national rejuvenation. Thus, over the course of the crisis, Beijing appeared not to take the bait.<sup>10</sup>

It is apparent, in the context of how China decided on its strategic objectives, that the overall foreign policy framework is geared towards cultivating China’s rise as a stabilising force with minimum cost or risk to the core interest of regime security. This strategy is noteworthy, especially against the backdrop of China’s rapid military modernisation and expanding power-projection capabilities. More importantly, despite considerable development of its military hard power, China will continue to leverage normative state practices to legitimise its position as a major power globally.

Further, even as Sino-US competition intensifies across geo-economic and technological domains, China will refrain from expending military resources to counter the US in a dynamic geopolitical contest. For the time being, until China realises its national rejuvenation by 2049 and transforms the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) into a world-class military force by 2050, Beijing will resort to moral posturing and institutional balancing to contrast with perceived US military adventurism. Second, while PLA remains assertive at the regional level with Taiwan and the South China Sea, Beijing is unlikely to stretch itself militarily. Finally, in its engagement with the Global South and beyond, China will prioritise economic and technological cooperation for contesting US leadership.

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<sup>9</sup> Luo Xingjian, [\*\*“From Great Containment to Strategic Competition: How the Cold War Experience of the United States and the Soviet Union Affected the Sino-US Pattern”\*\*](#), The Institute for International Affairs, Qianhai, 23 October 2025.

<sup>10</sup> [\*\*“Why Doesn't China Intervene to Support Iran?”\*\*](#), *Sina.com*, 14 March 2026; [\*\*“Why Doesn't China End Up Supporting Iran? The Truth Behind It”\*\*](#), *Guancha.cn*, 6 March 2026.

## About the Author



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