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China and the U.S.-Israel-Iran Conflict: Strategic Interests and Diplomacy

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The ongoing confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran has once again highlighted the fragility of the regional security environment in the Middle East and its broader implications for global stability. While the crisis is primarily centered on military escalation and regional security concerns, it also has geopolitical and economic consequences for all powers outside the Gulf. Among these, China occupies a particularly interesting position.

As the world's largest energy importer and a country with growing economic and strategic interests in the Gulf region, China has a clear stake in the trajectory of the conflict. Yet, at present, Beijing appears to be content to observe developments rather than actively intervening. The key question, therefore, is under what circumstances China might consider assuming a more visible diplomatic or strategic role.

China's Energy Stakes in the Conflict

China's immediate interest in the crisis stems primarily from its dependence on Middle Eastern energy supplies. China is the world's largest crude oil importer, bringing in roughly 11 million barrels per day (bpd) to fuel its economy. This heavy reliance on imported energy makes stability in the Gulf region a central component of China's economic security strategy.

Within this broader energy picture, Iran occupies an important position. Despite international sanctions, China has become by far the largest buyer of Iranian crude, purchasing an estimated 1.3-1.4 million barrels per day in 2025, equivalent to roughly 13% of China's total seaborne crude [imports](#). At the same time, China now absorbs more than 80-90% of Iran's total oil exports, effectively providing Tehran with its main economic lifeline under sanctions.

This level of interdependence explains why Beijing has a strong interest in maintaining uninterrupted energy flows from both Iran and the broader Gulf region. While discounted Iranian oil provides China with a strategic advantage, it is ultimately insufficient on its own; the stability and continuity of large-scale energy exports from GCC countries remain far more critical to meeting China's overall energy needs. The strategic significance of the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly 20% of global oil trade passes, further heightens this vulnerability. While China has taken steps to mitigate short-term disruptions, through strategic petroleum reserves, diversified supply sources, and overland



energy routes, it remains far less prepared for a prolonged interruption. Any sustained disruption to shipping in the Strait would therefore have immediate and significant implications for Chinese energy security, given that a large share of its Middle Eastern imports transits this narrow maritime chokepoint. The longer such a disruption persists, the more likely it is that China would be compelled to adopt a more active diplomatic or strategic role.

Strategic Patience and China's Regional Approach

At the same time, China's broader regional strategy has traditionally been characterized by caution and pragmatism. Unlike the United States, Beijing has avoided deep security commitments in the Middle East, largely because the United States has long assumed the primary security role in the region, reducing both the need and the incentive for China to become directly involved. Instead, China has focused on expanding economic partnerships, infrastructure investments, and diplomatic engagement under initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

However, this dynamic is increasingly being questioned. Calls by President Trump for China to help in securing the Strait of Hormuz have introduced new expectations. Washington is effectively calling on China to assume greater security responsibilities, even if this could entail exposing its own assets in a conflict involving a country (Iran) with which it maintains close ties.

Beijing's response so far has been cautious: it continues to emphasize de-escalation and the prevention of regional turmoil from further impacting the global economy, rather than direct security involvement. Yet, as pressures mount and risks to its core interests grow, an open question remains whether China will maintain this restrained approach or gradually move toward a more visible strategic role in the region.

Even when Beijing facilitated the Saudi-Iran rapprochement in March 2023, it did so through diplomacy rather than by assuming any formal security responsibilities. This approach reflects China's preference for minimizing entanglement in complex regional conflicts while benefiting from economic opportunities.

For now, therefore, Beijing has little incentive to insert itself directly into the current confrontation. As long as the conflict remains limited and does not significantly disrupt global energy markets, China can afford to maintain a posture of strategic patience. From Beijing's perspective, the ongoing tensions also highlight the continued security role played by the United States in the region. Despite periodic debates about American retrenchment, the U.S. remains the primary military actor



managing regional crises and protecting maritime routes. This reality allows China to continue benefiting from regional stability without bearing the costs of maintaining a large security presence.

However, several developments could alter this calculation. One of the most significant would be a prolonged interruption to energy supplies from the Gulf. A major disruption in shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, or sustained attacks on energy infrastructure, would directly threaten China's energy security. In such a scenario, Beijing might feel compelled to play a more proactive diplomatic role aimed at de-escalating tensions and stabilizing the region. This could involve mediation efforts, increased engagement with Gulf states, or coordination with other global powers to restore stability in energy markets.

Another potential turning point would be a major transformation within Iran itself. If the current crisis were to lead to significant political change in Tehran, whether through internal upheaval or regime transformation, China would need to reassess its strategic position. Iran has long been an important partner for Beijing, particularly as a supplier of energy and a participant in China's broader connectivity initiatives. A sudden shift in Iran's political orientation could reshape regional dynamics and potentially open space for new diplomatic alignments. In such a situation, China would likely seek to safeguard its economic interests while adapting to the emerging regional balance.

Strategic Lessons and Opportunities for Beijing

The conflict underscores a more sobering reality: despite sustained U.S. and Israeli military action, Iran remains a standing and capable actor. Now entering its third week, the escalation has contributed to the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz, triggering sharp increases in global oil prices and exposing the broader economic and strategic costs of the confrontation.

At the same time, the conflict highlights the complexities of alliance cohesion. While the United States continues to rely on a broad network of regional and international partners, the current crisis has revealed varying degrees of caution among key actors, including China and several European countries, when it comes to direct involvement in escalation dynamics. This suggests that, despite its considerable capabilities, U.S. power projection may face growing political constraints in building cohesive coalitions in high-risk scenarios.



The situation reinforces Beijing's long-standing preference for strategic caution, prioritizing flexibility, avoiding direct involvement, and relying on economic and diplomatic tools rather than hard power. In practice, this allows China to position itself as a stabilizing actor by calling for de-escalation, engaging all sides diplomatically, and leveraging its economic partnerships across the region, while avoiding the costs and risks associated with direct security commitments.

At the same time, China will also be closely monitoring how Gulf states respond to the evolving crisis. Many countries in the region have sought to maintain a careful balance between their longstanding security partnerships with the United States and their expanding economic ties with China. If the current conflict leads to renewed debates about the role of U.S. military bases in the region or the reliability of American security guarantees, Beijing may perceive an opportunity to deepen its engagement with Gulf partners.

This does not necessarily mean that China will attempt to replace the United States as the region's primary security provider. Such a move would carry risks and responsibilities that Beijing has historically been reluctant to assume. However, China could seek to expand its influence in other ways, through economic partnerships, technology cooperation, and diplomatic initiatives that position it as an alternative partner in certain domains. Over time, this could gradually reshape the regional balance of influence.

Ultimately, China's approach to the current conflict reflects its broader global strategy: cautious, pragmatic, and focused on protecting core economic interests. For now, Beijing is likely to remain on the sidelines, monitoring developments and preserving flexibility. Yet the trajectory of the crisis could eventually compel China to take a more active role, particularly if regional instability begins to threaten its energy security or broader strategic interests.

In this sense, the conflict may represent more than a regional confrontation. It may also serve as a test of how emerging global powers such as China navigate crises in regions where their interests are growing but their willingness to assume security responsibilities remains limited.

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