

CHINA-MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS AFTER THE TWELVE-DAY WAR



An Analysis of Chinese, Israeli, Iranian and Arab Expert Debates



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An Analysis of Chinese, Israeli, Iranian and Arab Expert Debates

Edited by

ENRICO FARDELLA & LEONARDO BRUNI

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2025 Israel–Iran War has profoundly reshaped the Middle East’s security landscape, with relevant implications for Sino–Middle Eastern relations. By analyzing scholarly and media discussions in China and across the region, alongside Chinese official statements, this report assesses how the war has influenced perceptions of China’s role and future in the Middle East.

Much of the media debate focused on how, despite their partnership, China refrained from providing direct material support to Iran during the war. Beijing’s official response, centered on calls for de-escalation and respect for sovereignty, was widely interpreted as “balanced” and “neutral,” sparking debate over China’s commitment to its regional relationships. Chinese experts largely echoed official rhetoric, condemning U.S. and Israeli actions while also analyzing the deeper causes of the conflict. Given the limited reactions to the U.S. intervention in Israel’s favor, many Chinese commentators also questioned whether regional actors are truly capable of advancing a multipolar order, exposing contradictions in the prevailing Chinese narrative of Western decline. Additionally, the lack of analysis on China’s potential role revealed uncertainty among Chinese scholars about Beijing’s ability to contribute meaningfully to regional stabilization, underscoring its seemingly limited leverage.

Nevertheless, across the Middle East, Beijing is not regarded as an irrelevant actor. Scholars and commentators from the region continue to view China as an indispensable partner their governments should continue to engage with. In Israel, public discourse remained wary of China’s ties with Iran, yet several experts and diplomats interpreted Beijing’s “balanced stance” as an opportunity to reset bilateral relations, driven by trade and Israeli fears of diplomatic isolation. In Iran, while disappointment over China’s muted response was widespread, many commentators directed criticism toward their own government for failing to deepen strategic cooperation with Beijing, particularly in the domains of defense and infrastructure. Across the Arab world, and in Gulf state-aligned media especially, China’s “positive neutrality” was generally welcomed. Overall, Middle Eastern analysts acknowledged and even justified Beijing’s pragmatism and restraint, viewing its posture as consistent with its broader strategic priorities.

This report concludes by exploring some recent developments noting that while China’s role in the Middle East remains constrained by its caution and limited capacity, regional observers regard and will likely continue to perceive Beijing as an indispensable economic, strategic, and diplomatic

partner. The war has prompted reassessments of China’s reliability, but not a desire for disengagement; instead, many experts in the region appear to be advocating for recalibrated partnerships grounded in mutual interests rather than idealized expectations. As the regional context continues to evolve, Sino–Middle Eastern relations remain as relevant, and debated, as ever.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINAMED PROJECT



The wider Mediterranean is a vast region that stretches from the Iranian Plateau to the Strait of Gibraltar, from the Alps to the Horn of Africa. It is an area characterized by long-term trends, but it is also the epicenter of centrifugal forces that connect Europe, Africa and Asia. Our research team at the ChinaMed Project analyses how the dynamics of this region intersect with one of the most consequential macro-trends of this century: the transition of China, with its 1.4 billion people, from the periphery to the center of the international system. Our research platform's mission is to track and investigate how China's presence in the region is changing the balance of power on the ground in a nuanced, yet incremental fashion. We achieve this by collecting data and creating indicators that analyze China's growing economic, commercial, and security ties with the countries of the wider Mediterranean, which we make publicly available at ChinaMed Data.

Moreover, we publish the ChinaMed Observer – sharp and focused analyses of the media discourses in China and the

countries of the wider Mediterranean region on the most recent events and the most pressing trends in Sino-Mediterranean relations.

We also actively engage with and participate in the expanding connections between China and the wider Mediterranean through a range of academic initiatives including: the China Management and Business Program, scientific publications, and academic events. The ChinaMed Project, a part of the TOChina Hub developed by the University of Turin and promoted by the Torino World Affairs Institute, carries out these initiatives and its research through various partnerships, including those with the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme at Durham University, the China Global South Project, and the Asian Studies Unit of the Research Department of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. ChinaMed also enjoys the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Fondazione CRT, one of Italy's largest charitable foundations.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 13, 2025, Israel launched a series of air strikes against Iran, targeting nuclear facilities, military installations, air defense systems, as well as prominent military leaders, politicians and nuclear scientists.¹ Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** justified the operation as a "preemptive strike," claiming it necessary to prevent Iran's purportedly imminent development of a nuclear weapon. In response, Iran carried out drone and missile strikes against Israel, with both sides hitting military and civilian targets.

On June 21, the United States intervened in support of Israel, launching air strikes against three Iranian nuclear sites. According to U.S. President **Donald Trump**, the stated objective was to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities and bring the war to an end. On June 23, Iran retaliated by launching missiles at a U.S. military base in Qatar; no casualties were reported. The following day, Iranian state television announced a ceasefire with Israel, just hours after Trump declared that an agreement had been reached.

Christened the "Twelve-Day War" by President Trump, this brief, intense conflict marked the culmination of a prolonged, multidimensional, and steadily escalating confrontation between Tel Aviv and Tehran. While tensions over Iran's nuclear program have long simmered, open hostilities erupted following the outbreak of the Gaza War. In the months since October 7, 2023, Israel escalated its military operations in the region far beyond Hamas, engaging in sustained clashes with the other members of the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance," including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. Alongside precipitating catastrophic humanitarian crises, these operations have brought Israel into increasingly direct conflict with Iran, particularly after the Israeli airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024, and, later that year, the assassinations of Hamas political leader **Ismail Haniyeh** and Hezbollah leader **Hassan Nasrallah**.

The June 2025 war represented the most dramatic escalation in this ongoing struggle, resulting in the deaths of approximately thirty Israelis and over one thousand Iranians, including hundreds of women and children, with thousands more wounded on both sides. Whether this conflict constitutes a lasting geostrategic turning point remains uncertain; nonetheless, it exposed Israel's regional military predominance (albeit not its invulnerability), revealed critical weaknesses in Iran's air defense and intelligence capabilities, as well as unsettled Arab states, fearful of the disruption that a wider escalation across the Middle East would entail.

Beyond its immediate implications, the Twelve-Day War also cast a light on China's role and influence (or lack thereof) in the Middle East. In recent years, Beijing has been increasingly discussed as a relevant actor in the region, not solely in economic but also in diplomatic terms, exemplified by its contribution to the Iran-Saudi rapprochement in March 2023. However, since the onset of the Gaza War, China has appeared either unwilling or unable to meaningfully engage with the region's rapidly evolving security landscape.

Beijing's muted response to Israel's strikes against Iran, ostensibly its most important regional partner, has reignited debate over the depth of China's commitment to the Middle East. Despite the Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement, Beijing facilitating Tehran's normalization of ties with Gulf states, and Iran's admission into China-backed multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS, the People's Republic refrained from any substantive diplomatic or strategic reaction to Israel's attack. This inaction has raised doubts about the solidity and limits of the China-Iran partnership, often framed by Western analysts as a key part of a broader revisionist coalition – alongside Russia and, at times, North Korea – challenging the existing international order.²

Some commentators have also interpreted China's restrained response, in light of Israel's proven military superiority and the United States' adamant support for Israeli security, as damaging Beijing's credibility in the eyes of Middle Eastern actors.³ However, as this report shows, this perception is not widely shared among the region's scholars and commentators. To better understand these differing perceptions and broader regional trends, the ChinaMed Research Team examined expert and media debates in China, Israel, Iran, and the Arab world concerning Sino-Middle Eastern relations in the immediate aftermath of the Israel-Iran War.

While less explicit than their Western counterparts, Chinese commentators appeared, through omission, to express uncertainty about how Beijing could meaningfully contribute to conflict resolution or regional stabilization. Official statements and expert analyses offered few concrete policy proposals, with the commentary emerging from China mostly focused on analyzing regional states' motivation and whether they are genuinely capable of, or committed to, advancing a new multipolar order in partnership with China, rather than articulating a China-led framework, revealing the tensions within China's prevailing narrative of a declining West.

¹ For a detailed timeline of events leading up to and during the Israel-Iran war, see Kevin Huggard & Mallika Yadwad, "The road to the Israel-Iran war", Brookings, July 23, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-road-to-the-israel-iran-war/>.

² Jean-Loup Samaan, "Is the cautious China-Iran military cooperation at a turning point?," Atlantic Council, August 29, 2025, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/is-the-cautious-china-iran-military-cooperation-at-a-turning-point/](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/is-the-cautious-china-iran-military-cooperation-at-a-turning-point;); Simone McCarthy, "China was on the sidelines of the Iran-Israel war. That's just where it wanted to be," CNN, July 18, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/18/china/china-iran-sco-israel-axis-intl-hnk/>.

³ John Calabrese, "The 12-day Israel-Iran war: China's response and its implications," Middle East Institute, July 10, 2025, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/12-day-israel-iran-war-chinas-response-and-its-implications>; Anna Borshchevskaya & Grant Rumley, "Exploiting Fault Lines in Iran's Relations with Russia and China After the Israel War," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 1, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exploiting-fault-lines-irans-relations-russia-and-china-after-israel-war>; Jesse Marks, "Iran's bid for Beijing's backing meets its limits," East Asia Forum, August 22, 2025, <https://easiaforum.org/2025/08/22/irans-bid-for-beijings-backing-meets-its-limits>.

By contrast, analysts across Israel, Iran, and the Arab world did not hesitate to recognize China's long-term importance for the region's future. Although many expressed concerns over Beijing's approach, they largely view China as an indispensable actor for their countries' trade relations, economic development and foreign policies, often welcoming, to varying degrees, its "neutrality." Quite a few experts not only explained, but also defended China's restrained response, urging their governments to preserve or even strengthen relations with Beijing.

In Israel, while public discourse emphasized purported Chinese support for Tehran, reflecting enduring mistrust; several Israeli experts interpreted China's "balanced" stance as a potential olive branch, with them encouraging Tel Aviv to seize the opportunity to repair ties. While in Iran, disappointment over China's muted reaction was overshadowed by the domestic criticism levied against Tehran for its failure to deepen cooperation with China, perceived as the only major power capable of and potentially willing to assist the Islamic Republic. Across the Arab world, particularly in Gulf-aligned media, China's calls for de-escalation, its posture of "positive neutrality," and its perceived "betrayal" of Tehran were broadly welcomed.

We hope readers will appreciate this effort to provide an informed overview of Chinese and regional perspectives on Sino-Middle Eastern relations with the aim of enriching ongoing discussions among scholars, analysts, and policymakers concerning China's role in the region amid the rapidly evolving international order.

A PASSIVE REGION, AN ABSENT CHINA: CHINESE OFFICIAL STATEMENTS AND EXPERT DEBATE AFTER THE TWELVE-DAY WAR

by Miriam Verzellino and Andrea Ghiselli

The Chinese official response to the Israel-Iran War followed a familiar script: criticism of Israel and the United States, calls for an immediate ceasefire, and appeals for a return to diplomacy. However, despite Chinese diplomats' sharp words, China's overall stance appeared cautious, with Beijing providing no direct support to Iran. This seemingly ambivalent stance, alongside the Chinese leadership's apparent hesitance to directly condemn Israel and the U.S., led to significant speculation among Middle Eastern analysts about the future of China's relations with Tehran and Tel Aviv (a topic explored in the following chapters of this report).

Chinese commentators mostly adhered to, or expanded upon, Beijing's official line. Their analyses largely blamed the outbreak of war on Washington's erratic policy and Israel's *carte blanche* to act unilaterally. Yet, many struggled to square this conflict within the usual narrative of a declining U.S. and an ascendant China-led order. They noted that regional actors, such as Arab states, Russia and Europe, had proved neither willing nor able to halt the hostilities. As for China itself, commentary was sparse and guarded, betraying a shared frustration: Tehran matters, but Beijing has limited leverage.

China's Official Position

On June 13, **Lin Jian**, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, stated that China was deeply concerned about Israel's attack on Iran and its consequences, clarifying Beijing's opposition to any violation of Iran's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity. He also urged all parties to promote regional peace, avoid further escalation, and emphasized China's readiness to play a constructive role in de-escalating the crisis.⁴

On the same day, the remarks by China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, **Fu Cong**, on the situation in the Middle East were published, stating that China urges

Israel to "immediately cease all military adventurism," and called on all relevant parties to abide by the UN Charter and international law, resolving disputes through political and diplomatic means.⁵

The following day, Chinese Foreign Minister **Wang Yi** held a telephone conversation with his Iranian counterpart, **Abbas Araghchi**. According to the official Chinese readout, Wang "unequivocally condemned Israel's violation of Iran's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity," adding that Israel's actions constitute a "serious breach of the purposes and principles of the UN Charter." He underscored the gravity of the attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities, warning that such actions set a dangerous precedent with potentially catastrophic consequences.⁶

On June 17, more than four days into Israel's military campaign, Chinese President **Xi Jinping** addressed the conflict during the second China-Central Asia Summit in Astana. Expressing deep concern over the rising tensions in the Middle East caused by Israel's military actions against Iran, Xi reaffirmed Beijing's opposition to any infringement of the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of other countries, and reiterated China's readiness to work with all parties to play a constructive role for peace in the Middle East. What particularly caught the attention of commentators across Israel, Iran, and the Arab world was his appeal to "all parties" to work to rapidly de-escalate the conflict and avoid further escalation, a seemingly "balanced" formulation that called not only upon Tel Aviv, but also Tehran.⁷

During the emergency meeting of the UN Security Council held on June 22, the day after the U.S. launched strikes against three nuclear sites in Iran, **Fu Cong** stated that China strongly condemns the U.S. attacks on Iran and the bombing of nuclear facilities, putting forth four appeals calling for an immediate ceasefire, the effective protection of civilians, a commitment to dialogue and negotiation, and swift action by the Security Council.⁸

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Èr líng èr wǔ nián liù yuè shí sān rì wài jiāo bù fā yán rén Lín Jiàn zhǔ chí lì xíng jì zhě huì" 2025年6月13日外交部发言人林剑主持例行记者会 [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian held a regular press conference on June 13, 2025], June 13, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250613_11648029.shtml.

⁵ Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN, "Remarks on the Situation in the Middle East by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council Briefing," June 13, 2025, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyfy/202506/t20250614_11648590.htm.

⁶ Lu Yuansheng, "Wáng Yì fēnbié tóng yīlǎng wàizhǎng、yǐsèliè wàizhǎng tōnghuà" 王毅分别同伊朗外长、以色列外长通话 [Wang Yi had phone calls with the Iranian and Israeli counterparts respectively], Guancha, June 14, 2025, https://m.guancha.cn/international/2025_06_14_779390.shtml.

⁷ Yan Jun, "Xí Jīnpíng : gēfāng yīnggāi tuīdòng zhōngdōng jùshì jǐnkuài jiàngwēn" 习近平：各方应该推动中东局势尽快降温 [Xi Jinping: all parties should promote a de-escalation in the Middle East as soon as possible], CCTV, June 17, 2025, https://content-static.cctvnews.cctv.com/snow-book/index.html?item_id=4495386130084596908.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Remarks on Iran by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council Emergency Meeting," June 22, 2025, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyfy/202506/t20250623_11654794.htm.

On June 23, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson **Guo Jiakun** reported that China, along with Russia and Pakistan, had circulated a draft resolution at the Security Council, referring to the four appeals proposed by Fu Cong.⁹ This marked the first instance in which China seemed to go beyond rhetorical condemnation, although no vote on the draft resolution took place.

On June 24, Israel and Iran reached a ceasefire agreement. At subsequent press conferences, **Guo Jiakun** stated that China had repeatedly emphasized that the correct path to achieving a ceasefire is through dialogue rather than military means. He also emphasized that China and Iran are traditional friends, and that Beijing is willing to continue its partnership with Tehran and work to safeguard peace in the Middle East.¹⁰

Israel's Motivations According to Chinese Experts

During the initial stage of the Israel-Iran War, Chinese experts debated Israel's reasons for launching military strikes against Iran, generally identifying three main drivers. In sum, their perspectives do not substantially differ from those of their foreign counterparts.

The first reason was to prevent Iran from developing nuclear capabilities. According to **Li Shaoxian**, President of the China-Arab Research Institute at Ningxia University, Tel Aviv had been restrained by the Biden administration from launching a "lethal strike" on Iranian nuclear facilities, but Trump's return to office shifted the regional context, intensifying U.S. pressure on Tehran.¹¹ **Tian Wenlin**, Director of the Institute of Middle East Studies at Renmin University's Regional National Research Institute, invoked the Chinese idiom "choose the lesser of two evils" (liǎng hài xiāng quán qǔ qí qīng 两害相权取其轻), arguing that Israel acted to neutralize a future Iranian nuclear threat despite the heavy costs. While Israel's strikes represented the most "unprecedented existential challenge" faced by Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Tian concluded

that they might ultimately backfire by reinforcing Tehran's resolve to expand its nuclear program.¹²

The second was to obstruct a potential new Iran nuclear deal. **Li Shaoxian** emphasized Israeli concern over U.S.-Iran negotiations (including a sixth round scheduled for June 15), which Israel firmly opposed if the resulting deal would allow continued uranium enrichment by the Islamic Republic.¹³ **Liu Zhongmin**, Professor at the Middle East Studies Institute at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), added that "Trump 2.0" exacerbated this situation by failing to restrain Tel Aviv during these talks, while simultaneously aggravating instability in other regional flashpoints, including Israel-Palestine, the Red Sea and Syria.¹⁴

The third was to foment chaos in Iran. **Ding Long**, also a professor at SISU's Middle East Studies Institute, contended that the strikes, targeting Iranian political and military leaders, aimed to provoke domestic political upheaval, potentially threatening regime stability.¹⁵

Involved or Not? Regional Actors, the United States, China, Russia and Europe

For **Niu Xinchun**, Executive Director of the China-Arab Research Institute at Ningxia University, the Israel-Iran war was the most dangerous moment for the Middle East since October 7, 2023. Unlike previous crises, this was a direct clash between two sovereign states, both major military powers, a situation made even more perilous by U.S. involvement.¹⁶ **Ding Long** echoed this view, describing Israel's strike on Iran as a full-scale declaration of war.¹⁷

Assessing the likelihood of broader regional escalation, **Liu Qiang**, Senior Research Fellow and Chairman of the Academic Committee of the Shanghai Centre for RimPac Strategic and International Studies, observed that on June 16, 2025, twenty-one Arab and Muslim countries issued a joint statement condemning Israel's attack. While the declaration called for

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2025 nián 6 yuè 23 rì wàijiāobù fāyánrén Guō Jiākūn zhǔchí lìxíng jìzhěhuì, 2025年6月23日外交部发言人郭嘉昆主持例行记者会, [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun held a regular press conference on June 23, 2025], June 23, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250623_11655121.shtml.

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "2025 Nián 6 yuè 24 rì wàijiāo bù fāyán rén Guō Jiākūn zhǔchí lìxíng jìzhě huì" 2025年6月24日外交部发言人郭嘉昆主持例行记者会 [On June 24, 2025, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun hosted a regular press conference], June 24, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250624_11657850.shtml; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "2025 Nián 6 yuè 25 rì wàijiāo bù fāyán rén Guō Jiākūn zhǔchí lìxíng jìzhě huì" 2025年6月25日外交部发言人郭嘉昆主持例行记者会 [On June 25, 2025, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun hosted a regular press conference], June 25, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250625_11658600.shtml.

¹¹ Zhang Wenjun, "Yísèliè wèishénme xuǎnzài cǐshí kōngxí yǐlǎng" zhuānjiǎ fēnxī 以色列为什么选在此时空袭伊朗? 专家分析 [Why does Israel attack Iran? Expert analysis], CCTV, June 13, 2025, https://ysxw.cctv.cn/article.html?toc_style_id=feeds_default&item_id=1672631973013911086&channelId=1119.

¹² Feng Qikun, "Zhōngdōng jùshì zǒuxiàng shǐkòng? Zhuānjiǎ" jiědú cǐ cì yǐ yī chōngtū bèihòu yuányīn yǔ yǐngxiǎng 中东局势走向失控? 专家解读此次以伊冲突背后原因与影响 [Is the situation in the Middle East getting out of control? Experts interpret the causes and impacts behind the Israel-Iran conflict], CRI online, June 13, 2025, <https://news.cri.cn/20250613/8c21ac01-e2ed-8cc8-2fcf-652e5e1b5341.html>.

¹³ See note 11, Zhang Wenjun, CCTV, June 13, 2025.

¹⁴ Liu Zhongmin, "Zhōngdōng ruì píng | tàlǎngpǔ de "sānwú" zhèngcè shì yísèliè yǐlǎng chōngtū de zhōngyào gēnyuán" 中东睿评 | 特朗普的 "三无" 政策是以色列伊朗冲突的重要根源 [Trump's "three nos" policy is an important source of the Israel-Iran conflict], The Paper, June 17, 2025, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30991499.

¹⁵ The Paper, "Zāo wú lún kōngxí hòu Yǐlǎng liào hēnhuà: Jiāng wú zhǐjìng bàofù! Duōfāng jǐnjí fāshēng! Yísèliè wèihé cǐshí dòngshǒu? Zhuānjiǎ fēnxī zhǔyào yǒu 3 dà mùdì!" 遭五轮空袭后伊朗撂狠话: 将无止境报复! 多方紧急发声! 以色列为何此时动手? 专家分析主要有3大目的 [After five rounds of air strikes, Iran said cruelly: there will be endless retaliation! Multi-party emergency voice! Why is Israel doing it at this time? There are three main purposes of expert analysis], June 13, 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30979310.

¹⁶ Su Xiaojing, "Yǐlǎng duì yísèliè bàofù yǐ zhǎnkāi zhōngdōng chǔyú "zuì wéixiǎn" shíkè zhuānjiǎ fēnxī" 伊朗对以色列报复已展开 中东处于 "最危险" 时刻 专家分析 [Iran has already responded to Israel. The experts analysis: the Middle East is in the most dangerous moment], CNR, June 14, 2025, https://news.cnr.cn/sq/20250614/t20250614_527210408.shtml.

¹⁷ Zhao Yifan & Han Jiaojiao, "Quánmiàn xuānzhàn!" Zhuānjiǎ jiědú yísèliè xījī yǐlǎng gēnběn yuányīn "全面宣战"! 专家解读以色列袭击伊朗根本原因 [Declaration of total war! Experts explain the root cause of Israel's attack on Iran], Sina Finance, June 13, 2025, <https://finance.sina.com.cn/jjxw/2025-06-13/doc-inezxpez7122647.shtml>.

respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, Liu argued that this appeal for peace was “in reality, a clear-cut show of choosing sides” by Middle Eastern states, including major regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, siding in favor of Iran.¹⁸

Nevertheless, **Tian Wenlin** and other Chinese experts contended that Arab states lack both the strength and the motivation to challenge Israel, noting that they have taken no substantive actions against Tel Aviv over the Gaza War. Given their longstanding disagreements with Iran, Tian and the others concluded that Arab states would likely “stand by and watch.”¹⁹

Regarding the U.S., **Liu Zhongmin** characterized the second Trump administration’s Middle East policy as “the three noes”: immoral, chaotic, and inconsistent (wúdào, wúxù, wúcháng; 无道、无序、无常):

“[American foreign policy is] Immoral because the United States has abandoned the so-called ‘universal values’ of the past, such as saving the Middle East and democratic transformation; [...] chaotic because there is a lack of systematic and coordinated strategic planning in the Middle East policy of the United States; [...] Inconsistent because there is a lack of durability and sustainability, which has led to the continuous decline of the credibility of U.S. Middle East policy.”²⁰

Similarly, **Sun Degang** argued that the Trump administration operates on a transactional basis, and that **Steve Witkoff**, the U.S. special envoy for Middle East affairs, lacks a clear strategy and an understanding of the complexity of regional dynamics. As a result of Washington’s inability “to consider the consequences of its actions” and its capacity to “only take one step at a time,” the Israel–Iran situation spiraled out into an “uncontrolled, chaotic conflict.”²¹

Liu Zhongmin concurs, adding that the Middle East has shifted from U.S. hegemony toward greater multipolarity, though the implications of this shift for China remain unclear. Regarding China’s role in the region, **Liu Qiang** argued that Iran’s security is a matter of national security for Beijing. He explained:

“For China, how to ensure that Iran, the most fragile link in the international security chain, does not break due to this military conflict with Israel, or even a possible joint strangulation by the U.S. and Israel, requires taking proactive and positive actions to ensure that the impact on China’s national interests is minimized.”²²

Liu Zhongmin wrote that the constructive role of emerging powers, represented by China, has become more prominent through the promotion of practical cooperation around the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Development Initiative.²³ Nevertheless, neither **Liu Qiang** nor **Liu Zhongmin** offered concrete examples of what China could do. This lack of concrete proposals has unsurprisingly not prevented some Chinese media outlets from highlighting statements from Iranian officials thanking China for “providing support in the most difficult moment”²⁴ and for “understanding Iran’s position.”²⁵

As to Russia, **Sun Degang** observed that although Moscow has expressed a willingness to mediate the Israel–Iran conflict, it remains mired in its own war with Ukraine. He also noted how Israel is unlikely to trust Russia, given Tel Aviv’s alignment with Kyiv. Similarly, **Liu Zhongmin** emphasized Russia’s focus on Ukraine, noting how its earlier withdrawal from Syria had undermined Iranian security by dooming the Assad regime.²⁶

Regarding Europe, **Dong Yifan**, Associate Research Fellow at the Belt and Road Academy of Beijing Language and Culture University, describes Europe as trapped in an awkward “two-hard” dilemma: eager to promote a ceasefire, yet unable to adopt a position independent from the U.S. and Israel.²⁷ According to Dong, Europe struggles to reconcile its geopolitical ambitions with its actual capacity to influence events, revealing the contradictions between its moral responsibilities and practical interests.

Cui Hongjian, a senior research fellow and director of the Department for European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), added that Iran’s negotiations with European countries are largely symbolic, as European governments are unlikely to pursue an independent diplomatic track with Tehran for fear of jeopardizing relations with Washington and Tel Aviv.²⁸

¹⁸ Liu Qiang, “Liú Qiáng : yǐsèliè yǔ yīlǎng jūnshìhìchōngtū de kě yùjiàn hé bùkěyùjiàn de wēixiǎnxìng” 刘强：以色列与伊朗军事冲突的可预见和不可预见的危险性 [Liu Qiang: The foreseeable and unforeseen dangers of military conflict between Israel and Iran], Aisixiang, June 20, 2025, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/164046.html>.

¹⁹ See note 12, Feng Qikun, CRI online, June 13, 2025.

²⁰ See note 14, Liu Zhongmin, *The Paper*, June 17, 2025.

²¹ Zhu Runyu, “Yīlǎng hái xǐxiǎng jìxù hé měiguó tánpàn? zhuānjiā : “dǎtòng” yǐsèliè cái yǒu tánpàn dǐqì” 伊朗还想继续和美国谈判？专家：“打痛”以色列才有谈判底气 [Does Iran still want to continue negotiations with the United States? Expert: Only by “striking” Israel can it have the confidence to negotiate], *The Paper*, June 17, 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30995725

²² See note 18, Liu Qiang, Aisixiang, June 20, 2025.

²³ See note 14, Liu Zhongmin, *The Paper*, June 17, 2025.

²⁴ Sina, “Gǎnxiè Zhōngguó zhèngfǔ hé rénmin zài Yīlǎng zuì jiǎnnán shíkè jǐyǔ de zhīchí” 感谢中国政府和人民在伊朗最艰难时刻给予的支持 [“We thank the Chinese government and people for the support given during Iran’s most difficult time”], June 29, 2025, <https://cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/1887344341/707e96d502001myf8>.

²⁵ Sohu, “Yīlǎng fángzhǎng liányè gǎndào Zhōngguó, dǎngmiàn gǎnxiè Zhōngfāng zhīchí, Shànghé shí guó fángzhǎng quánbù dàoqì” 伊朗防长连夜赶到中国，当面感谢中方支持，上合十国防长全部到齐 [The Iranian Defense Minister rushed to China overnight to personally thank the Chinese side for its support. All ten defense ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization were present], June 26, 2025, https://www.sohu.com/a/908051021_121462186.

²⁶ Chen Qinhan, “Yuánzhuō | cǐ lún yǐ yī chōngtū huìdǎozhì yīlǎng zhèngquán gēngdié ma?” 圆桌 | 此轮以伊冲突会导致伊朗政权更迭吗？ [Will this Israel–Iran conflict lead to regime change in Iran?], *The Paper*, June 17, 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30992652.

²⁷ Dong Yifan, “Dǒng Yīfán: Yǐ yī chōngtū, ōuzhōu lìchǎng wèihé níng bǎ?” 董一凡：以伊冲突，欧洲立场为何拧巴？ [Dong Yifan: Why is Europe’s position so awkward in the Israel–Iraq conflict?], Aisixiang, June 24, 2025, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/164215.html>.

²⁸ CCTV, “Ōuzhōu jiēshǒu yī hé huītán yǒu nǎxiē kǎoliáng? Zhuānjiā fēnxī” 欧洲接手伊核会谈有哪些考量？专家分析 [What considerations does Europe have in taking over the Iran nuclear talks? Expert analysis], June 19, 2025, <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20250619A08FLO00>.

Looking at the Future

Chinese experts also explored how Iran might pursue peace. **Liu Zhongmin** argued that even if Iran chooses a peaceful course, its options are constrained by regional and international factors, including the erosion of U.S. global leadership and the weakening of international institutions such as the UN Security Council.²⁹

Jin Liangxiang, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for West Asian and African Studies and Associate Professor at the Institute for International Strategic Studies, noted that while the Trump administration expressed interest in negotiating with Iran, it faced several challenges. In particular, Washington would likely continue to be unable to restrain Israel, given the strong influence of pro-Israel lobby groups and “Jewish capital” within U.S. politics.³⁰

After Trump’s announcement of a ceasefire between Israel and Iran, the Chinese expert debate shifted toward evaluating this truce’s durability. **Li Zixin**, Associate Researcher at CIIS, suggested that the Trump administration seems to have a “stop there” approach, attempting to avoid long-term entanglement in the Middle East as it does not align with Trump’s domestic political interests.³¹ According to Li, the ceasefire was possible as all three parties could claim victory to their domestic audiences: the U.S. “destroyed” Iran’s nuclear facilities, Iran retaliated against the largest U.S. military base in the region, and Israel sabotaged the U.S.-Iran talks and interrupted Tehran’s nuclear program.³²

Liu Zhongmin offered a similar assessment but cautioned that Iran is unlikely to abandon its nuclear ambitions, warning that hostility with Israel will likely persist.³³ **Wang Lixin**, Assistant Research Fellow at the Institute of International Relations at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, stressed the uncertainty of the post-U.S. intervention environment: on one hand, Trump appears motivated to rapidly secure regional stability; on the other, he has the chance to strengthen the pressure on Iran, raising the risk of a new round of escalation.³⁴

acknowledging Israel’s rationale and U.S. claims of having “destroyed” Iran’s nuclear capabilities.

It is also clear from their words that Chinese analysts struggled to reconcile this crisis with the well-established narrative of U.S. decline in the Middle East and the parallel rise of China and other non-Western powers as they viewed regional actors, Russia, and Europe as lacking the will or capacity to resolve such a crisis.

As to China’s role, there appears to be an underlying frustration, likely shared by Chinese officials and experts: Iran is an important partner but there is little that China can seriously do to help or assist Tehran. The few references to China in the sources reviewed are largely generic, suggesting that there is no interest to discuss a situation in which Beijing cannot, or does not wish to, commit to a substantive role.

Conclusion

China’s official position was critical toward Israel and the U.S., a stance consistent with its responses to previous crises in the region. Many Chinese experts echoed their government’s line, expressing serious concerns over the escalation, blaming Washington’s policy for enabling Tel Aviv, while also

²⁹ Sun Degang, “Péngpài xīnwén : Sūn Dégāng: yuánzhuō | yǐsèliè cǐ lún néng dǎozhì yǐlǎng zhèngquán gēngdié ma? “澎湃新闻：孙德刚：圆桌 | 以色列此轮能导致伊朗政权更迭吗？ [The Paper: Sun Degang: Round Table: Can Israel’s round lead to regime change in Iran?] Institute of International Studies Fudan University, June 17, 2025, <https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/43/66/c6893a738150/page.htm>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Shi Xunfeng, “Túshuō gǔn yǐsèliè yǔ yǐlǎng tíng huǒ, zhōngdōng júshì zǒuxiàng rúhé” 图说 | 以色列与伊朗停火，中东局势走向如何 [Illustration | A ceasefire between Israel and Iran, what is the direction of the situation in the Middle East?], *The Paper*, June 24, 2025, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_31032902.

³² CNR, “Yǐ yī 12 tiān zhànzhēng jiéshù tíng huǒ kě chíxù ma? Zhuānjiā fēnxī” 以伊12天战争结束 停火可持续吗？专家分析 [Is the ceasefire sustainable after 12 days of war in Iraq? Expert analysis], June 25, 2025, https://news.cnr.cn/sq/20250625/t20250625_527228959.shtml.

³³ *The Paper*, “Liú Zhōngmín jiàoshòu jiù yǐsèliè yǔ yǐlǎng tíng huǒ jiēshòu xīnhuá shè cǎifǎng” 刘中民教授就以色列与伊朗停火接受新华社采访 [Professor Liu Zhongmin was interviewed by Xinhua News Agency on the ceasefire between Israel and Iran], Shanghai International Studies University, June 24, 2025, <https://mideast.shisu.edu.cn/07/02/c3991a198402/page.htm>.

³⁴ Sina, “Yǐ Yī tíng huǒ néng fǒu chíxù? Zhuānjiā: quē fá zhàn lüè hù xìn, chōng tū huò cháng qī huà” 以伊停火能否持续？专家：缺乏战略互信，冲突或长期化 [Will the Israel-Iran ceasefire last? Experts: there is lack of strategic mutual trust, the conflict may be protracted], June 25, 2025, <https://news.sina.com.cn/w/2025-06-25/doc-infchyza7831346.shtml>.

Yair Amar, political correspondent for the right-wing outlet *Srugim*, reported that Nasirzadeh's visit was likely to be a part of a procurement campaign to acquire new air defense systems and even the Chinese J-10 fighter jet, believed to be based on the cancelled Israeli Lavi aircraft (which Egypt allegedly is also interested in acquiring).⁴² Analysts emphasized that the J-10, which demonstrated notable effectiveness during Pakistani aerial engagements against India in early May, could significantly challenge Israel's air superiority in the Middle East should it be acquired by regional states.⁴³ *Middle East Eye*, citing anonymous Arab officials, reported that both the U.S. and its Arab allies were aware of Iranian re-armament efforts, further alleging that Tehran pays for missiles with oil shipments.⁴⁴

Experts' Reaction: There is Still Room for Cooperation

Amid overwhelming suspicion in the Israeli media landscape regarding Chinese military support for Iran, Israeli experts and diplomats offered different and more nuanced views. While some interpreted the reports as enduring proof of Sino-Israeli estrangement, most adopted a more cautious tone, urging for a reassessment of Israel's China policy. These experts noted that ultimately, despite the media coverage, Beijing's diplomacy during the war did not directly harm Israel and might even turn to Tel Aviv's advantage if managed well.

One of the most critical views of China was expressed by Israel's Ambassador to Washington, **Yechiel Leiter**, who strongly criticized alleged Sino-Iranian military cooperation. In an interview for *The Voice of America*, later republished by *Ynet*, the ambassador warned that Israel should prioritize preventing China from helping Iran rebuild its missile program, noting that despite its interest in "maintaining good relations with

the Chinese people," Israel cannot agree to China "working hand in hand with a country that openly threatens to destroy us."⁴⁵

Nadav Eyal, columnist for *Yediot Ahronot*,⁴⁶ echoed these concerns, opining that "the issue [of Chinese military cooperation with Iran] is very troubling and may have strategic implications," despite official sources claiming that Beijing "did not confirm the allegation."⁴⁷ For his part, **Yoram Evrom**, an Associate Professor of Political Science and Chinese Studies at the University of Haifa, observed that even if China was taking the risk to help Iran, it would probably supply equipment classified as "dual-use" to go under the radar, because fundamentally, Beijing does "not risk its interests for others."⁴⁸

Unlike her U.S.-based counterpart, Israel's Consul General to Shanghai, **Ravit Baer**, conveyed a more pragmatic message in an interview with *Bloomberg TV* that later appeared on *Maariv*. She directly appealed to Beijing to restrain Iran's rearmament, stating that "China is the only one capable of influencing Iran," but that as long as China continues to buy oil from Iran, it will be difficult to curb Tehran's aggressive policy.⁴⁹ At the same time, she warned that an Iranian air force strengthened by Chinese J-10 aircraft would not only represent a threat to Israel, but also to other Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia, a country vital to Beijing's regional interests and ambitions.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, while acknowledging the political divergence between Tel Aviv and Beijing, she underscored the robust bilateral trade figures as a proof that:

"Even if we disagree politically, that doesn't mean we can't cooperate. There is still a positive dialogue."⁵¹

Several analysts echoed Baer's perspective, emphasizing how Beijing had pressured Tehran not to close the Strait of Hormuz, despite the Iranian parliament unanimously endorsing the measure on June 22, shortly after the U.S. strikes on Iranian

⁴² Yair Amar, "Mitkonenim LaMilchama HaBa'a? Sar HaHagana HaIrani Higia LeMasa Rechesh BeSin" רכש למסע רכש? שר ההגנה האיראני הגיע למסע רכש, *Srugim News*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.srugim.co.il/1143285-מיתכוננים-למלחמה-הבאה-שר-ההגנה-האיראני-הגיע-למסע-רכש>.

Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, "Israeli Media Examines Trade and Tech Relations with China," *ChinaMed Observer*, February 25, 2025, <https://www.chinamed.it/observer/israeli-media-examines-trade-and-tech-relations-with-china>.

⁴³ Neta Bar, "Yecholot Muchachot VeMekorot Israelim: Ze Matos HaKrav Shelran Meunienet Liknot MeSin" זה מטוס הקרב שלראן מעוניינת לקנות מסין [Proven capabilities and Israeli sources: This is the fighter jet that Iran is interested in buying from China], *Israel Hayom*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/middle-east/article/18292340>.

⁴⁴ *Maariv*, "Chashavtem SheLeIran Nigmeru HaTilim? Chaval - HaMa'atzma SheMemalet Et HaMachsanim BeTehran" חשבתם שלאיראן נגמרו הטיילים? חבל - חמא'אצמה שמהמלת את המחסנים בטהרן [Did you think Iran ran out of missiles? Too bad - the superpower that is filling the warehouses in Tehran], July 8, 2025, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1212691>.

⁴⁵ Sean Mathews, "Iran receives Chinese surface-to-air missile batteries after Israel ceasefire deal," *Middle East Eye*, July 7, 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-receives-chinese-surface-air-missile-batteries-after-israel-ceasefire-say-sources>.

Itamar Eichner, "Shagrir Israel BeArtzot HaBrit Neged Sin: 'Mesaya'at LeIran Lehachayot Et Tochnit HaTilim Shela" מגריר ישראל בארה"ב נגד סין: "מסייעת" ליראן להחיות את תוכנית הטיילים שלה [Israeli Ambassador to the US Against China: "Helping Iran Revive Its Missile Program"], *Ynet*, July 26, 2025, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/slhfxfvfwgl>.

⁴⁶ *Yediot Ahronot* (Ynet's paper version) and *Israel Hayom* are Israel's most widely read news platforms.

⁴⁷ Nadav Eyal, "Iran Rotza Leshakem Et Ma'arach HaTilim - BeEzrat Sin; Israel 'Mutredet Meod'" ישראל רוצה לשקם את מערך הטיילים - בעזרת סין; ישראל "מוטרדת" מטרדת, *Ynet*, August 15, 2025, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hkc5q2odgg>.

⁴⁸ Dudi Kogan, "HaMilchama Yim Iran Hochicha: HaOlam Adain Shayach LeWashington" [The war with Iran proved: The world still belongs to Washington], *Israel Hayom*, June 24, 2025, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/usa/article/18273678>.

⁴⁹ *Maariv*, "Hitya'ashu MeTrump? HaDrisha HaChariga Shel Israel MeSin Neged Iran" התייאשו מטרמפ? הדרשה החריגה של ישראל מסין נגד איראן [Have they given up on Trump? Israel's unusual demand from China against Iran], July 7, 2025, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/article-1212395>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Maariv*, "Bimkom Lehitasek Yim Iran Yeshirot - Israel Pona LeTzinor HaChamtzan Shela" במקום להתעסק עם איראן ישירות - ישראל פונה לצינור החמצן שלה [Instead of dealing with Iran directly, Israel turns to its oxygen pipeline], July 2, 2025, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1210887>.

nuclear sites.⁵² On June 23, Israeli media underscored Beijing's involvement, reporting that Chinese Foreign Minister **Wang Yi** (王毅) had called his Iranian counterpart **Abbas Araghchi** "to prevent even more severe economic damage to global trade."⁵³ **Amatzia Baram**, a professor emeritus of Middle East history at the University of Haifa, explained that China, in particular, had a strong interest in preventing the war from escalating as it "very much needs Iranian oil" and would be "the first to suffer" from a disruption in supply.⁵⁴

While some analysts attributed China's pressure on Iran primarily to economic considerations, others contended that this episode revealed "cracks in the anti-Western axis," given that neither Moscow nor Beijing offered Tehran substantial support during the war. Notably, China refrained from attempting to isolate Israel at the United Nations as some had expected.⁵⁵ **Galia Lavi**, Director of the Israel-China Policy Center at the INSS, argued that Beijing's measured rhetoric since Israel's "pre-emptive strike" on June 13 reflected both China's caution to avoid entanglement in the conflict and its consistent opposition to Iran developing nuclear weapons, which Beijing sees as a scenario detrimental to its own strategic interests in the region. She added that "this balancing policy shows that Beijing does not see itself as part of the Iranian axis," but rather, that it strives to delicately balance its relationships with Iran, Israel, and the Arab states.⁵⁶

A Turning Point for Bilateral Relations?

In contrast to the harsh statements issued in the aftermath of Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023, Chinese state media refrained from directly criticizing Israel during its war with Iran, limiting itself to condemning the violation of Iran's

sovereignty, while urging restraint and de-escalation. Beijing's softer rhetoric toward Tel Aviv is a continuation of a trend that started last year, marked by the arrival of the new Chinese ambassador to Israel, **Xiao Junzheng** (肖军正).⁵⁷ In early July, Xiao gave an interview to *Israel Hayom* in which he strongly denied allegations that China had provided military support to Iran, including the transfer of missiles and J-10 fighter jets. He dismissed such claims as misinformation, declaring that "a lie repeated 1000 times remains a lie."⁵⁸ *Israel Hayom* reporters agreed that, to some extent, the interview embodied "the change in Chinese tone toward Israel during the war."⁵⁹

Doron Cucos, a researcher of international relations and East Asia and guest contributor at the Mitvim Institute, characterized China's rhetorical shift and Israel's military success against Iran as a "watershed moment" for reshaping Tel Aviv's bilateral relations with Beijing.⁶⁰ Cucos argued that Tel Aviv should seek alignment with Beijing on issues where their interests converge, "particularly on containing Iran's nuclear ambitions and curbing regional instability."⁶¹

Geopolitics analyst **Dr. Anat Hochberg-Marom** also considered the war a turning point for China's regional strategy: while Israeli and U.S. military strikes challenged and weakened Iran, they simultaneously heightened China's dependence on Arab Middle Eastern oil exporters. As such, she encouraged Tel Aviv to seize the opportunity to "adopt a new, pragmatic foreign policy" toward China and strengthen relations with Beijing.⁶² Hochberg-Marom went as far as to argue that "amid mounting global criticism of Israel, the renewal of nuclear talks with Iran, and the unpredictable foreign policy of the President of the United States," recognition from China could rehabilitate Israel's image in the Global South, whereas Beijing for its part would enhance its image as a credible conflict mediator.⁶³

While closer Sino-Israeli cooperation was generally viewed as feasible and even desirable, most experts remained less

⁵² Yair Amar, "Srugim News, Sin Shigra Azhara Charifa LeIran: 'Tza'ad SheLo Mekubal Aleinu'" [China issued a stern warning to Iran: "A step that is unacceptable to us"], June 23, 2025, <https://www.srugim.co.il/1141999-מ-שלא-צעד-לא-יראן-צד-המסר-המשפיל-של-רוסיה-וסין-לא-יראן>; *Maariv*, "Bachru BaKesef Al Cheshbon Asakim: HaMasar HaMashpil Shel Rusia VeSin LeIran" [Choose money over business: Russia and China's humiliating message to Iran], June 30, 2025, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/article-1210333>;

Srugim News, "Shavua Akharei Hafsakat HaEsh: Maka Kasha Nosefet LeIran" [A week after the ceasefire: Another hard blow to Iran], June 30, 2025, <https://www.srugim.co.il/1145171-נוספת-קשה-מכה-לא-יראן>; Dean Shmuel Elmas, "Rega Acharei Hafsakat HaEsh, Iran Yotzet Lelskat Anak. Al HaPerek: Metosei Krav Chadashim" [A week after the ceasefire, Iran enters into huge deal. On the agenda: new fighter jets], *Globes*, July 3, 2025, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001514359>.

⁵³ *Maariv*, "Iran Notra Levada: BeTehran Zoamim Al HaRusim, Gam Sin Medashdeshet" [Iran is left alone: Tehran is furious with the Russians, China is also floundering], June 23, 2025, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/article-1208232>.

⁵⁴ Maya Cohen, "Lo Osim Cheshbon: Vladimir Putin VeSin Tzfuyim Lintosh Et Iran" [No calculations: Vladimir Putin and China are expected to abandon Iran], *Maariv*, June 19, 2025, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/article-1206484>.

⁵⁵ *Maariv*, "HaShagrir Halrani Leshe'avar Boche: Eich HaRusim Mochrim Otanu Kol Pa'am MeChadash" [Former Iranian ambassador cries: How the Russians sell us out over and over again], July 7, 2025, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1212380>.

⁵⁶ Galia Lavi, "Sin, Iran Velsrael: Diplomatia Zehira BeZira Boeret" [China, Iran and Israel: Cautious Diplomacy in a Burning Arena], INSS, June 13, 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/he/social_media/בזירה-זהירה-בזירה-בזירה.

⁵⁷ See note 35, Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, *ChinaMed Observer*, February 11, 2025.

⁵⁸ Yair Amar, "Shagrirut Sin Belsrael Machchisha: Lo He'evarnu Ma'archot Tilim LeIran" [Chinese Embassy in Israel Denies: We Did Not Transfer Missile Systems to Iran], *Srugim News*, July 9, 2025, <https://www.srugim.co.il/1149149-מס-העברנו-לא-העברנו-מע-משגריר-סין-בישראל-מכחישה-לא-העברנו-מע>.

⁵⁹ Dudi Kogan & Erez Linn, "Shagrir Sin Al HaHashamot Belsrael: 'Ha'avarat Neshek LeIran? Sheker'" [Chinese Ambassador on Israel's Accusations: "Transferring Weapons to Iran? A Lie"], *Israel Hayom*, July 10, 2025, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/other/article/18390553>.

⁶⁰ Doron Cucos, "China's strategic shift: Navigating relations with Israel, Iran in a changing Middle East - opinion," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 22, 2025, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-861723>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Anat Hochberg-Marom, "Itut MeBeijing: Yitachen SheSin Hevina Shelsrael Hi Neches - VeYesh Lechach Siba | Dr. Anat Hochberg-Marom" [Signal from Beijing: China may have realized that Israel is an asset - and there's a reason for that | Dr. Anat Hochberg-Marom], *Maariv*, August 1, 2025, <https://www.maariv.co.il/journalists/opinions/article-1219979>.

⁶³ Ibid.

optimistic about China's potential role as a mediator. **Dudi Kogan**, writing for *Israel Hayom*, contended that the war and the American intervention underscored Washington's enduring primacy as security provider in the Middle East.⁶⁴

Galia Lavi and **Ori Sela** from the Israel-China Policy Center at the INSS shared the same perspective, arguing that, against the backdrop of the conflict, "the region's countries never expected more than rhetoric from China in the first place" as they "distinguish between China's importance in economic and infrastructure matters from political-military issues, where they clearly rely on the United States."⁶⁵ Similarly, **Roy Ben Tzur**, a Research Assistant hailing from the same institution, added that, in light of China's perceived diplomatic alignment with Israel's adversaries, Beijing's credibility as mediator will remain compromised unless it "chooses to balance its positions and recognize the complexity" of the security threats facing Tel Aviv.⁶⁶

conclusion

The Israeli media debate on China during and after the war with Iran revealed a notable shift of tone compared to the previous year, as documented in our report.⁶⁷ Although the extensive media coverage of Beijing's alleged military support for Tehran reflected lingering estrangement toward China within Israeli public opinion, several China and security experts interpreted the conflict as an opportunity to reassess bilateral ties.

Among those publicly advocating for a rapprochement with China was **Ravit Baer**, Israel's consul to Shanghai, who emphasized the importance of preserving bilateral trade relations, which "did not deteriorate significantly despite the conflicts since 2023,"⁶⁸ and whose continuity may assist in sustaining Israel's economy during wartime. The reemergence of a more pragmatic outlook toward China among some Israeli experts, however, was shaped not only by economic considerations but also by diplomatic factors, in particular, the efforts of China's new ambassador to Israel and Beijing's subsequent softening of its rhetoric toward Tel Aviv.

Nevertheless, despite the resilience of trade and the growing diplomatic outreach, these trends have not significantly reshaped Israeli perceptions of China. National security concerns remain paramount, and while an increasing number of analysts support expanding cooperation with China, few extend that optimism to Beijing's oft-stated aspirations to serve as a mediator in the Middle East.

⁶⁴ See note 48, Dudi Kogan, *Israel Hayom*, June 24, 2025.

⁶⁵ Galia Lavi & Ori Sela, "Committed to Itself: China and the Israel-Iran War," INSS Insight No. 2003, July 14, 2025, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-iran-israel/>.

⁶⁶ Roy Ben Tzur, "Biased Neutrality: China's Rhetoric Amid Escalating Tensions in the Middle East," INSS Insight No. 2004, August 14, 2025, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-middle-east-2025/>.

⁶⁷ Enrico Fardella, Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, "China in the Shadow of October 7: Israeli Media Coverage of China in 2024," ChinaMed Project, March 21, 2025, <https://www.twai.it/journal/chinamed-report-2024/>.

⁶⁸ See note 51, *Maariv*, July 2, 2025.

LOOKING INWARD BEFORE LOOKING EAST: IRANIAN PERSPECTIVES ON CHINA AFTER THE TWELVE-DAY WAR

by Theo Nencini and Veronica Turrini

Many Iranians expected a stronger Chinese response to Israeli strikes. Instead, Beijing's reaction was limited to a delayed condemnation and, as far as we know, no tangible assistance. In the aftermath, senior Iranian officials, including Defense Minister **Aziz Nasirzadeh** and Foreign Minister **Abbas Araghchi**, travelled to Beijing and publicly thanked China for its "valuable support."⁶⁹

Yet, the evident Chinese circumspection during the Twelve-Day War had a significant impact on the domestic Iranian debate on the relationship with China, with pronounced reactions that ranged from criticizing China for not doing enough to blaming the Iranian government for failing to convince Beijing of Tehran's importance and value as a partner.

Below Expectations, at Least for Some

China's initial hesitancy to promptly and unequivocally condemn the initial Israeli strikes has unsettled many Iranian experts from institutional circles, academia and the media.

"China hasn't condemned the attack before Iran's reciprocation, but only asked for self-restraint," stressed **Mehdi Kharratiyan**, the director of the Institute for Policy Revival.⁷⁰ His interpretation is that, from a Chinese vantage, the Islamic Republic might conceivably have been on the brink of collapse after Israel's first blow. That is no trivial matter, given that many Iranian commentators regard closer ties with China as a form of "life-insurance" enabling their sanctions-constricted state to endure. As the academic and policy analyst **Rahman Qahremanpour**⁷¹ observes, "This may

have consequences on China's credibility,"⁷² an assessment shared by others.

Qahremanpour attributes Beijing's restraint to the absence of any coherent Chinese security strategy for the region: in his words, China "has no security plan for the Middle East."⁷³ He invokes former Iranian ambassador to China **Mohammad Hossein Malaek** (1997-2001), who maintained that "China has no major plan beyond Pakistan."⁷⁴ From this standpoint, Chinese interests in the region are largely confined to securing oil supplies from the Persian Gulf and advancing infrastructure investments linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Hence, Qahremanpour contends that Iran cannot reasonably entrust its security to China: "What kind of power are you if, in a time of crisis, you say 'I do not enter into this; solve your problems yourselves'?"

Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, Director of the China-MENA Project at the Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran (CSRMESS), amplifies this verdict by asserting that "Iran and China cannot have a strategic relationship."⁷⁵ She argues that because China pursues a non-aligned foreign policy and therefore maintains no formal allies, only "hierarchized" partners, "Iran cannot expect the same level of protection that the U.S. grants to its allies. [...] A partnership with China implies an absence of obligations and no military support, and in the event that the Europeans adopt the snapback mechanism, China will not sell arms to Iran."⁷⁶

For other commentators, the issue lies in China failing to understand Iran's strategic importance. **Mehdi Khorsand**, Head of Tehran Municipality's Economic Diplomacy Department and a specialist in Eurasian affairs, articulates

⁶⁹ Bloomberg News, "Iran's Defense Minister Visits China in First Trip Since War," June 25, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-06-25/iran-s-defense-minister-visits-china-in-his-first-trip-since-war>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Wang Yi Meets with Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi," July 16, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202507/t20250717_11672131.html.

⁷⁰ The Institute for Policy Revival (انديشكده احياي سياست) is a small Iran-focused think-tank that produces live streamed video-based analyses in Persian but publishes little formal academic research and lacks clearly documented institutional affiliations.

⁷¹ Qahremanpour is a specialist in disarmament and international affairs, formerly director of the Disarmament Research Group at Iran's Center for Strategic Research, and editor-in-chief of *Hamshahri Diplomatic*, known for his extensive media commentary on Iran's nuclear diplomacy and for having been detained between 2011 and 2014 following criticism of nuclear policy.

⁷² He presents his analysis in an interview for the YouTube channel "Azad", a podcast and video platform linked to the Sharif University of Technology: Azad, *پیدا و پنهان جنگ ۱۲ روزه گفتگوی رحمان قهرمانپور و مهدی خراتیان* [The visible and hidden aspects of the 12-day war. Conversation with Rahman Qahremanpour and Mehdi Kharratiyan], July 15, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vp1EzPREjCO&t=102s>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Although this exact wording could not be traced, Qahremanpour's reformulation may reasonably be regarded as plausible, given Malaek's established manner of analyzing China's foreign policy and strategic priorities.

⁷⁵ Azad, *گفتگو در مورد چرایی و چگونگی جنگ ۱۲ روزه گفتگوی مهدی خراتیان و مهدی خراتیان* [China's Absence in the 12-Day War? A Conversation Between Hamed Vafaei and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas], July 30, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

this bluntly: “only Iran can be China’s strategic partner in the region as an ‘independent’ and ‘anti-Western’ actor.”⁷⁷

There are, however, also Iranian voices that are somewhat less critical of Beijing, appearing to have accepted that expecting much from China reflects a misunderstanding of its foreign policy. For example, **Hossein Qaheri**, President of the Iran-China Institute for Strategic Studies and a prominent figure in the informal channels between the two states,⁷⁸ contends that “China hasn’t kept a passive approach during the war.”⁷⁹ He notes that “China maintained its purchases of Iranian oil and provided Iran with essential items [...] and had a clear stance on Iran.”⁸⁰

Qaheri attributes China’s distance to recurring frictions in the bilateral relationship, notably the uneven implementation of numerous agreements and contracts across sectors – energy, industry, transport and ICT. Since the first major oil and gas contracts were signed in 2004, several projects, including many major ones, have been cancelled or deferred.⁸¹ The same pattern has been evident in civil-engineering projects.⁸² These setbacks, he stresses, cannot be ascribed solely to U.S. sanctions: in many instances contracts were terminated owing to technically inadequate Chinese implementation, while in others delays stemmed from the administrative burdens and rigidities that characterize the Iranian state apparatus.⁸³ It is on this basis that Qaheri delivers the trenchant, if bitter, assessment that “the Chinese don’t have ‘strategic trust’ in Iran anymore.”⁸⁴ From his perspective, the signing of the Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement in March 2021 was essentially symbolic.

Hamed Vafaei, Director of the Asia Research Center and co-director of the University of Tehran’s Confucius Institute,⁸⁵ situates Chinese reserve toward Iran within the fundamental principles of China’s foreign policy. According to him, Beijing’s approach to the Iran-Israel conflict unfolded in three phases:

hesitation (“wait to see if the Iranian government was still stable and able to answer back”⁸⁶), decision (condemnation of the attack) and consolidation (offer for mediation).⁸⁷

In an interview with *Asr-e Iran*,⁸⁸ Vafaei elaborates on his perspective, citing reports that the Chinese themselves describe their position as “Sitting on a mountain and watching the tigers fight.” He thus cautions that “Iran should not expect direct and full support from China,” insofar as “its support must be analyzed within the framework of China’s own rationality and national interests.”⁸⁹ Vafaei stresses that China does not seek commitments, and that the very basis of its foreign policy should be understood as distinct from that of the United States.

He emphasizes the particularity of the Chinese viewpoint in which Iran, “which has little more to offer than oil,”⁹⁰ has seen its strategic weight decline significantly in Beijing’s energy security calculations. In this respect, Vafaei highlights that China has markedly diversified its oil imports, and that Iran’s share, although still significant (10-13%), is likely to recede over the medium- to long-term and, above all, “is not sufficient for China to become seriously involved in Iranian affairs.”⁹¹

In an article published in the economic newspaper *Donya-e Eqtesad*, **Ehsan Citsaz**, Deputy Minister of Communications, and **Behzad Ahmadi**, Advisor for International Affairs to the Minister of Communications, both holding research positions at the University of Tehran, further develop this argument:

“China has a balanced approach to protect its multifaceted interests in the region, and it is unrealistic for Iran to expect it to jeopardize its relations with Israel and the United States. Therefore, it seems that our romantic view of China is the product of years of myth-making and strategic wishful thinking, rather than an accurate understanding of the behavior of a pragmatic power.”⁹²

⁷⁷ Fatemeh Sadat Mortazavi, «مذازا باوخرادیب؟ [Will the dragon wake up?], *Farikhtegan Daily*, July 15, 2025, <https://farikhhtegandaily.com/page/269806/>.

⁷⁸ Hossein Qaheri’s professional endeavors center on strengthening Iran-China bilateral relations, emphasizing economic, commercial, and scientific cooperation. As CEO of several companies – Iran-China Cooperation Development Group, Nikan Industrial Group, and Naipco Investment Company – he spearheads partnerships with Chinese conglomerates in energy, trade, and industrial sectors. Additionally, he holds board positions at Alabusiness Bank and the Bashir Saleh Institute, fostering financial and technological synergies with Chinese entities, and presides over the Cryptocurrency Exchange Association, focusing on blockchain collaborations with Chinese digital platforms. More information can be found on his website: <https://hosseinghaeri.com/>.

⁷⁹ Fatemeh Sadat Mortazavi, «چین واقعا در جنگ ۱۲ روزه منفعل بود؟ [Was China really passive in the 12-day war?], *Farikhtegan Daily*, July 15, 2025, <https://farikhhtegandaily.com/news/210606/چین-واقعا-در-جنگ-۱۲-روزه-منفعل-بود؟>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ News Agencies, “Iran says Chinese state oil firm has withdrawn from \$5bn deal,” *Al Jazeera*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/10/7/iran-says-chinese-state-oil-firm-has-withdrawn-from-5bn-deal>; Reuters, “Iran says China’s Sinopec might not develop Yadavaran oilfield,” May 2, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/currencies/iran-says-chinas-sinopec-might-not-develop-yadavaran-oilfield-idUSKCN1S8191/>.

⁸² Reuters, “Iran cancels \$2 billion dam deal with China: report,” May 31, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/iran-cancels-2-billion-dam-deal-with-china-report-idUSBRE84U085/>.

⁸³ Reuters, “Iran cancels oilfield deal with China’s CNPC,” April 30, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/commodities/iran-cancels-oilfield-deal-with-chinas-cnpc-idUSL6N0NM2D3/>; Mahdi Rahmati, Mahdi Rojhani & Mohammad Amin Raoof, “Causes of Delays in Iranian Building Construction Projects,” *AUT J. Civil Eng.*, 5(4), February 19, 2022, <http://doi.org/10.22060/ajce.2022.19293.5725>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Confucius Institutes are usually run jointly by the host (local) university and a Chinese partner, and most institutes have co-leadership arrangements that include a local (host-side) director and a Chinese (partner-side) director or co-director.

⁸⁶ See note 75, Azad, July 30, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ>.

⁸⁷ He reiterates his analysis at the 3rd International Conference on “The Decline of the United States: The New Era of the World” (August 19, 2025): China’s Approach to the Twelve-Day War in Three Phases: Hesitation, Decision, and Consolidation.

⁸⁸ *Asr-e Iran*, «چرا چین در جنگ ۱۲ روزه طرف ایران را نگرفت؟ [Why didn’t China side with Iran in the 12-day war?], July 19, 2025, <https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/1077981/چرا-چین-در-جنگ-۱۲-روزه-طرف-ایران-را-نگرفت؟>.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ See note 75, Azad, July 30, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ehsan Citsaz & Behzad Ahmadi, «رابطه اقتصادی ایران و چین [Iran-China Economic Relations], *Donya-e Eqtesad*, July 13, 2025, <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/چین-ایران-اقتصادی-رابطه-64/4204443-دبلماسی-خبر-بخش>.

A Failed Strategy

While many Iranian commentators have seemingly come to accept the limits of Chinese assistance, and even to sympathize with the reasons behind Beijing's caution, their criticism of the Iranian leadership's own China policy is considerably sharper.

As noted above, **Hamed Vafaei** posits that a long-standing assumption has shaped the Iranian debate on China: namely, that Iran plays a critical role in China's regional calculus. As he writes:

*"The Islamic Republic is the western wall of defense of China. If it falls, China is going to be affected and injured. This was in the head of our politicians in these years: if we cut the oil, China is going to face problems; if there is no Iran, China is going to be affected by challenges. If we don't keep America occupied in this region, America will go after China."*⁹³

However, the sources we consulted, including sustained monitoring of X (formerly Twitter),⁹⁴ converge on a clear criticism of how successive Iranian governments have mishandled the relations with China. Experts are explicit about where responsibility lies. Whether their critique is directed at the "ruling elite" or specific administrations (notably the Rohani years, 2013–2021, and the Pezeshkian government since 2024⁹⁵), their assessments echo **Mehdi Khorsand's** observation that "the Chinese have repeatedly made major offers of economic and infrastructure [cooperation] to Iran [...] but there was no effective response from the Iranian authorities."⁹⁶

Employing terms often associated with China's own Middle East policy, **Hossein Qaheri** told *Eghtesad 120* that "Iran's China policy is essentially opportunistic. Iran only turned to China when it needed it, i.e. when the West turned its back on Iran."⁹⁷ He argues that the Iran-China partnership is scarcely "strategic" so long as Iranian leaders have not clarified the deeper meaning of these concepts, and, more importantly, so long as they have not reached agreement with their Chinese counterparts on how to integrate their bilateral relationship into their respective foreign policy frameworks. It is in this

sense that Qaheri states unambiguously that "Iran should change its approach toward China."⁹⁸

Hamed Vafaei advances a similar line:

*"Iran must enter into a real strategic dialogue with China. Relations should not be limited to official visits, statements or slogans such as the Silk Road. The two countries should discuss what can concretely be Iran's role in the realization of China's initiatives. [...] China's initial uncertainty – during the Twelve-Day War – proves we severely lack a system of strategic bilateral relations."*⁹⁹

He develops this argument further by comparing the Iranian case with Sino-Saudi and Sino-Emirati relations:

*"Iran has not established its position in Beijing's strategic mindset. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have, by contrast, become part of China's value chain. [...] If Iran cannot consolidate its share in China's value chain, it should not expect China to defend it in the security sphere. Iran has to demonstrate to China that Israel's attack on one of its partners is equivalent to an attack on Chinese interests."*¹⁰⁰

These debates ultimately converge on the core issue animating Iranian discussions on China policy, both within and outside the country: arms procurement. Israeli strikes have starkly laid bare the serious technical and operational shortcomings of Iran's defense apparatus. Iranians now have fully recognized the technological backwardness of their armed forces, despite the rhetoric and shows of strength advanced by entities such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.¹⁰¹ The imperative to acquire advanced Chinese weaponry – especially anti-aircraft systems, which have demonstrated their efficacy in the recent Indo-Pakistani clash – pervades the deliberations and observations of Iranian analysts.

The most lucid and well-contextualized perspective comes from **Mohammad Keshavarzadeh**, Iran's former ambassador to China (2018–2023).¹⁰² In an interview with the reformist newspaper *Shargh*,¹⁰³ he elaborates on several salient points regarding the stance and hesitancy of the Iranian authorities with respect to procuring Chinese arms. He argues that Iran squandered earlier opportunities to buy and train to use Chinese weapons and cannot expect immediate arms

⁹³ See note 75, Azad, July 30, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ>.

⁹⁴ Here is an indicative list of tweets collected: @alhosseini (August 15, 2025):

<https://x.com/alhosseini/status/1956338794971406528> and <https://x.com/alhosseini/status/1956338486329348588>; @JBehieh (July 2): <https://x.com/JBehieh/status/1940458261289095194>; @Jangjouye (July 1): <https://x.com/Jangjouye/status/1939982109546094705>; @javad_farahani (June 29): https://x.com/javad_farahani/status/1939359313094439310; @mahdi_alipour (June 23): https://x.com/mahdi_alipour/status/1937083087109734813.

⁹⁵ This is the case, among others, of the think-tanker Mehdi Kharratiyan, who harshly criticizes reformist administrations in this tweet:

<https://x.com/MehdiKharratya/status/1938676789691183267>.

⁹⁶ See note 79, Fatemeh Sadat Mortazavi, *Farikhhtegan Daily*, July 15, 2025, <https://farikhhtegandaily.com/page/269806/>.

⁹⁷ *Eghtesad 120*, "چین میترسد آخرین مدل پدافند و جنگنده خودش را به ایران بدهد، ولی ما بعد از برجام جدید با آمریکا تکنولوژی آن را در اختیار آمریکاییها بگذاریم/ ما هر زمان نیاز بوده چینیها را معامله، اقتصاد 120 کردیم و به غرب و آمریکا فروختیم – اقتصاد 120", July 28, 2025, <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/بخش-خبر-دیپلماسی-64/4204443-ایران-چین-ایر-ابطه-اقتصادی>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ See note 75, Azad, July 30, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ See note 88, *Asr-e Iran*, July 19, 2025.

¹⁰¹ Press TV, "Iran 'fully ready for any scenario', IRGC chief commander says amid escalating threats," June 12, 2025,

<http://presstv.ir/Detail/2025/06/12/749680/IRGC-Salami-Iran-ready-any-scenario>;

The Sun, "Inside Iran's secret underground 'missile city' packed with ballistic weapons," March 26, 2025,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfyvZ0KBHAc>.

¹⁰² During his tenure, Ambassador Keshavarzadeh was centrally involved in diplomatic work surrounding the negotiation of the 25-year strategic partnership. He is regarded for a substantive understanding of Chinese political economy and diplomatic practice, repeatedly engages Chinese media and think-tanks to explain Tehran's priorities and to promote practical cooperation. Networked within Beijing's official circles, he seeks to translate political rapport into concrete commercial and institutional outcomes. He also deploys public diplomacy (lectures, interviews and cultural outreach) to bolster mutual comprehension and to mitigate misperceptions.

¹⁰³ *Shargh*, "رقص اژدهای زرد [Dance of the Yellow Dragon], July 22, 2025, <https://www.magiran.com/article/4621365>.

transfers after a sudden crisis. Iran historically relied on Western – and later Russian – systems and never seriously pursued Chinese armaments.

According to him:

“We should have pursued the weapons purchase earlier and more steadily, rather than [...] rushing to the Chinese and now expecting that overnight they will give us the weapons we want.”¹⁰⁴

Keshavarzadeh insists that arms contracts and transfers require time, mutual trust and prior planning; emergency appeals will not produce instant results: realistic timelines and sustained engagement are necessary. In the interview, the former ambassador also refers to a matter that has recently returned to the public debate: Iran’s desire to reduce its dependence on U.S. satellites.¹⁰⁵ “I even remember that at one point we attempted to use an alternative Chinese system instead of a GPS system for navigation, but regrettably we did not follow up on that measure.”¹⁰⁶ This testimony is extremely revealing, as it plainly attests to the reflection – and indeed the debate – that has been under way in Iran for years regarding the possibility of equipping and training the armed forces to operate Chinese weapons. He emphasizes that China is now a credible military producer and supplier, and that Iran should establish with it formal, institutionalized long-term defense frameworks: “Its power is now no less than that of the Westerners.” From this account, thus, it would appear that the Iranians have in the past doubted the quality of Chinese weapons.

Hence, Keshavarzadeh puts forward a number of recommendations intended at elevating relations with China to the level of “ironclad” ties, likening them to Sino-Pakistani relations. He stresses the need to broaden and diversify barter mechanisms to circumvent sanctions: non-cash mechanisms, trade-in-kind arrangements and creative logistical frameworks. He criticizes the absence of political will and active diplomacy, as well as what he describes as Iranian “passivity and one-dimensional thinking” – perceiving China solely as an oil buyer – arguing that Tehran must proactively build military, diplomatic and logistical links. He recalls initiatives undertaken during his ambassadorship (led by figures such as **Ali Larijani**¹⁰⁷) and calls for the implementation of a sustained diplomatic campaign and domestic mechanisms to operationalize the relationship, with clear mandates and allocated resources.

Keshavarzadeh also expands his analysis to the regional level, insisting that Iran should capitalize on China’s current strategy of balancing relations across West Asia.

“The Chinese have been able to sign a non-aggression agreement with the GCC as well as with ASEAN. [...] I raised these issues in discussions with Chinese think tanks, and

some of them proposed a similar plan to regulate China’s relations between Iran and GCC countries, [...] a joint non-aggression treaty. [...] An agreement that can concretely lay the foundation for a collective security system in the Middle East.”¹⁰⁸

The former ambassador thus expresses a firm conviction that China could act as a genuine guarantor of regional security, promoting the development of a new architecture, though he seems aware that China neither possesses the capabilities nor necessarily the will to supplant the U.S.

Looking at the economic side of Sino-Iranian relations, **Ehsan Citsaz** and **Behzad Ahmadi** also offer several recommendations. In their view, as with most of the interviewees in this study, there is an imperative need to redesign Iran-China relations from a strategic, not merely short-term or tactical, perspective. This requires preparing Iran’s economy to attract Chinese investment and enhance the country’s transit position: projecting a secure image to investors, pursuing specific projects integrated into BRI networks, reforming domestic legal frameworks, removing banking and financial barriers, and supporting the private sector. At the same time, it is necessary to diversify Iran’s China export portfolio beyond petroleum products by positioning Iran as a technological partner in ICT, AI, engineering, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals, minerals and mining. Iranian firms, they suggest, should expand their presence in the Chinese market via BRI and BRICS forums, trade fairs and e-commerce platforms. Finally, Iran must develop plans to secure loans from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.¹⁰⁹

Citsaz, Ahmadi, as well as Ambassador Keshavarzadeh also emphasize that Iran should “not to put all [its] eggs in China’s basket.”¹¹⁰ To avoid the risks of falling into a “debt trap,” Citsaz and Ahmadi say, “Iran must be careful not to lose sight of its long-term interests (such as ownership of strategic assets or fair pricing of resources) in its thirst for Chinese investment, [...] and must pursue development in a manner that ensures cooperation rather than exploitation.” It is also worth noting that they condition these recommendations on several political preconditions: a reduction in international tensions surrounding Iran, a clarification of mutual expectations, and a redefinition of the bilateral relationship with China “not on the basis of the fantasy of a ‘shared destiny,’ but on a clear understanding of ‘overlapping interests.’”¹¹¹

conclusion

Despite some Iranian commentators being greatly disappointed by Beijing’s conduct during the Twelve-Day War, others were somewhat more understanding of the Chinese position, emphasizing both Beijing’s overall

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ See Zhao Ziwen, “Iran looks to tap into China’s BeiDou navigation system to plug security gaps,” South China Morning Post, August 8, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3321043/iran-looks-tap-chinas-beidou-navigation-system-plug-security-gaps>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ali Larijani, former Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (2008–2020) and, since August 2025, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, is a senior conservative figure and adviser to the Supreme Leader. Between 2018 and 2023 Larijani is widely credited with initiating diplomatic mechanisms to deepen Iran-China ties, notably advancing negotiations that contributed to the 25-year strategic cooperation framework.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ See note 92, Ehsan Citsaz & Behzad Ahmadi, *Donya-e Eqtesad*, July 13, 2025.

¹¹⁰ See note 103, Shargh, July 22, 2025.

¹¹¹ See note 92, Ehsan Citsaz & Behzad Ahmadi, *Donya-e Eqtesad*, July 13, 2025.

diplomatic caution and, more specifically, the limits of its strategic interests in Iran. Against that background, the Iranian leadership has faced criticism for misunderstanding Beijing's objectives, exaggerating Iran's importance for China, and failing to transform the relationship beyond supplying discounted oil.

Interestingly however, the sources suggest that the proposed remedy is not disengagement but rather a cautious doubling down of ties with Beijing. Bilaterally, Iran is expected to pursue Chinese weapons acquisitions more vigorously. If Tehran was not interested before, as Ambassador Keshavarzadeh stated, it now appears that the initiative rests largely with Beijing: it will be China that decides if, and to what extent, Iranian forces gain access to its military technologies. Multilaterally, Tehran aspires to be more integrated in the global initiatives and international organizations launched by Beijing. Greater Iran–Gulf countries coordination, with China as mediator and guarantor, would also be the foundation for a new regional architecture.

It is likely that the main driver of these suggestions is the awareness that, despite the limits of which Iranian commentators are clearly cognizant, China truly remains the only possible great power that is capable and, possibly, willing to help Iran. Indeed, Chinese oil imports from Iran have reportedly reached a new peak.¹¹² While it is far from obvious that Chinese fighter jets will ever become the backbone of the now-destroyed Iranian Air Force or that Chinese investors will start treating Iran as any other country, Beijing clearly wants to keep Iran afloat. If many in Iran continue to oppose being excessively dependent on China, this sense of vulnerability and frustration will likely increase.

¹¹² Dalga Khatinoglu, "Defying 'maximum pressure', China uptake of Iranian oil hits pre-Trump high," *Iran International*, September 12, 2025, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202509121567>

explaining why China refrained from providing military support to Iran.¹¹⁵

Citing Taiwanese, Chinese, and Arab experts, Barakat concluded that “China’s approach of positive neutrality appeared to be a wise decision,” since:

*“The war did not open a broad strategic window for Beijing, neither with respect to Taiwan, nor in the context of geopolitical competition with the U.S., nor even in terms of expanding its influence in the Middle East, where China had not positioned itself as a strong mediator to begin with. Nonetheless, Beijing emerged from the crisis with cumulative experience in managing delicate balances, minimizing risks, and reinforcing its image as a responsible power at a time fraught with high costs and uncertain outcomes.”*¹¹⁶

An even more celebratory interpretation of China’s “active neutrality” appeared in an opinion piece by **Waref Kumayha**, president of the Lebanese-Chinese Dialogue Road Association, published by *Asharq Al-Awsat*. Kumayha also argued that China has emerged from the conflict in a stronger position, cultivating a reputation of a responsible power – including in the Middle East – that does not aspire to replace Washington as hegemon but instead seeks to “share global power” and advance multipolarity.¹¹⁷

According to Kumayha:

*“[China] is neither entirely neutral nor confrontational. [...] It speaks of respect for sovereignty, but does not neglect interests. Through all this, Beijing continues to cultivate the image of a responsible power that does not seek heroic roles in the media, but tangible results on the ground. [...] China has demonstrated that its silence is not an absence, but rather a modus operandi.”*¹¹⁸

A more nuanced and analytical perspective on Beijing’s “cautious stance” was provided by the China Research Unit at the **Emirates Policy Center** (EPC), an Abu Dhabi-based think tank. In their in-depth analysis, EPC researchers noted that China’s “balanced” approach to the conflict was not immediate: Beijing initially issued a sharp condemnation of Israel for violating Iranian sovereignty. According to the study, it was only after Chinese President **Xi Jinping**, on July 17, urged “all parties” to de-escalate that China adopted a more moderate tone toward Israel. The analysts further suggested that, beyond safeguarding its long-term relationship with Tel Aviv, Beijing may have also been hedging against the

possibility of an Iranian defeat, as both Chinese experts and wider public have shown decreasing confidence in Tehran.¹¹⁹

The analysis identified four strategic considerations underpinning China’s restrained posture, particularly its reluctance to provide decisive support to Iran. First, direct military support to Iran would imperil Beijing’s long-term interests, especially its reputation as a neutral and responsible actor. Second, long-standing concerns over Iran’s aggressive regional strategy, coupled with new apprehensions regarding Israel since October 7. Third, China’s limited leverage over both Iran and Israel. Fourth, wariness of opening a new front with the U.S. while simultaneously seeking progress in trade negotiations and maintaining focus on Taiwan.¹²⁰

The Future of China-Iran Relations and their Regional Implications

Although many Arab commentators express understanding – if not outright approval – of China’s rhetoric and “neutrality,” Beijing was not regarded as a credible alternative to the U.S. when it comes to regional security or conflict mediation. This does not necessarily imply enthusiasm for Washington’s own conduct. Saudi analysts, for example, have criticized the United States’ “belated” military response to the Houthi movement in Yemen, contrasting the American offensive with the Gulf’s current priorities of “development and peace.”¹²¹ Yet, even critics tend to see no immediate substitute for U.S. security leadership in the region.

The Israel-Iran war seemingly reinforced this perception. *Asharq Al-Awsat* published an AFP piece quoting experts from both inside and outside the region, all agreeing that the conflict laid bare the limits of Chinese influence in the Middle East. **Ahmed Aboudouh**, associate fellow with Chatham House and Head of the China Research Unit at the EPC, was direct regarding Beijing’s supposed leverage over Tehran, observing that “China’s position in the Middle East has been very weakened since the beginning of the conflict,” adding that “everyone in the region understands that China has little, if any, influence to play a real role in de-escalation.”¹²²

Arab analysts generally interpreted the erosion of China’s potential security role not as a loss for their own states,

¹¹⁵ Šarbel Barakāt, “ḥiyād’ al-Šīn fī ‘ḥarb al 12 yauman’... Taiwan kaṛiğ ‘ḥasābāt al-nār” [China’s “neutrality” in the “12-Day War”... Taiwan is outside the “fire calculations”], *Al Majalla*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.majalla.com/node/326182/سياسة/حياد-الصين-في-حرب-ال-12-يوم-تايلوان-خارج-حسابات-النار>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Wārf Qamīḥa, “l-Šīn wa-al-Irān wa-Isrā’īl... lu’ba al-tawāzun fī Šarqin iatağaiyar” [China, Iran, and Israel... The balancing act in a changing East], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, June 28, 2025, <https://aawsat.com/في-العمق/حصار-الأسبوع/5159071-الصين-وايران-واسرائيل-لعبه-التوازن-في-شرق-يتغير>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ China Research Unit, “Al-Mufaḍala bayn al-sayyī’ wa-al-aswa’: Kayfa nazarat al-Šīn ilā al-ḥarb al-Irāniyya-al-Isrā’īliyya, wa kayfa satata’ātā ma’a natā’ijihā?” [China’s Tough Choice: How Did Beijing View the Iran-Israel War, and How Will It Deal With Its Consequences?], *Emirates Policy Center*, June 26, 2025, <https://epc.ae/ar/details/featured/kayf-nazarat-alsayn-ila-alharb-aliranial-israyilia> [English translation available at: <https://www.epc.ae/en/details/featured/china-s-tough-choice-how-did-beijing-view-the-iran-israel-war-and-how-will-it-deal-with-its-consequences-1>].

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Mišārī al-Dāīdī, “wullī ḥarrahā man taūallā qārrahā” [And the one who warmed it was the one who took control of it], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 26, 2024, <https://aawsat.com/الرأي/4813876-ول-حارها-من-تولى-قارها>.

¹²² *Asharq Al-Awsat*, “al-Šīr’ al-Isrā’īlī – al-Irānī iud’ifu al-nufūḡ al-Šīnī fī Al-Šarq al-Āwsat” [The Israeli-Iranian conflict is weakening Chinese influence in the Middle East], June 24, 2025, <https://aawsat.com/شؤون-اقليمية/5157917-الصراع-الإسرائيلي-اليراني-يضعف-النفوذ-الصيني-في-الشرق-الأوسط>.

but rather as a setback for Iran.¹²³ From their perspective, Tehran emerged as the principal loser: the war exposed the hollowness of its partnerships with China and Russia, while at the same time demonstrating the solidity of the U.S.–Israel alliance, even under the mercurial leadership of President **Donald Trump**.

Some Gulf analysts expressed barely concealed satisfaction at Iran's predicament. Saudi commentator **Adel Alharbi**, writing for *The Independent Arabia* (also noted for having ties to the Saudi Royal Family), remarked that Tehran, "despite its revolutionary rants and inflated slogans, now appears more exposed than ever, surrounded by fluid alliances."¹²⁴

He argued that:

*"Even Russia, despite having received generous Iranian support in the war in Ukraine, refrained from taking an explicit stance, instead opting for tepid statements [...] China has remained almost entirely silent, especially as it had little incentive to expend political capital on a file lacking both clear prospects and broad international consensus. Beijing realizes that Iranian escalation harms its interests more than it harms Washington's, as 45% of China's oil imports transit through the Strait of Hormuz, making Beijing arguably more invested in appeasement than Tehran itself."*¹²⁵

Despite the conspicuous lack of support from Tehran's allies in the so-called "trilateral axis" with Moscow and Beijing, Arab observers widely agreed that Iran has little choice but to continue courting China, especially to modernize its air and defense capabilities. Reports have surfaced that Tehran hopes to acquire Chinese J-10C fighter jets, which proved effective in the Pakistan–India dogfights earlier this year.¹²⁶

However, the London-based, secular, pan-Arab daily **Al-Arab**, while acknowledging these ambitions, cautioned that "this option does not appear as guaranteed as the Iranian leadership hopes":

*"While Beijing has signaled a general willingness to cooperate, it avoids entering into direct military commitments that could draw it into an undesirable confrontation with the U.S. or jeopardize its economic interests."*¹²⁷

The **EPC's China Research Unit** likewise contended that "Iran's military weakness and ineffectiveness during the war may result in a shift in Chinese strategic thinking," noting that "Iran may have lost its functional advantage in

China's strategic calculations as a counterweight to Western influence capable of keeping American focus and attention on the Middle East for decades."¹²⁸

Nevertheless, according to their view, China may continue to export arms to Iran, assist with industrial reconstruction, and provide diplomatic backing – while opposing any Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons – driven by a more profound concern:

*"A deeper concern for the Chinese Communist Party is the prospect that regime change in Iran could become a declared objective of U.S. policy. [...] A forced effort to unseat Iran's leadership could trigger internal chaos or civil conflict, with unpredictable regional consequences [fueling] narratives that justify direct challenges to China's own political system and embolden efforts to undermine the Communist Party's hold on power. In other words, the security requirements of the regime in Beijing will continue to drive China's opposition to any externally driven attempt, particularly by Israel and the United States, to overthrow Iran's ruling establishment."*¹²⁹

Among analysts and media linked to Gulf governments, the dominant tone toward China remains neutral and pragmatic, likely reflecting their own countries' strong economic ties with China and their ambivalence toward a conflict that pitted their erstwhile principal rival, Iran, against Israel, a state increasingly seen as the main source of regional instability and a serial violator of national sovereignty.

Although there is limited coverage, independent pan-Arab outlets appear to have adopted a more critical stance. The London-based digital daily *Rai al-Youm*, known for its oppositional and often pro-"resistance" perspectives, published an article by analyst **Mahdi Mubarak Abdullah** asserting that China's actions amounted to a "complete betrayal of Iran." Possibly suggesting that the implications of Chinese behavior may extend beyond Iran, he wrote that the crisis revealed that Beijing's diplomacy is designed only to protect its own economic and strategic interests.¹³⁰

For Abdullah, the lesson is clear:

*"China is not a reliable friend in times of crisis and will often turn its back when its partners most need support. Those who look to Beijing as a steadfast ally and a cornerstone of their security and stability must recognize that such expectations are badly misplaced. China's diplomacy, whether soft or hard, is essentially instrumental and transactional."*¹³¹

¹²³ Rasūl Āl Hāyī, "mushārakat Buzkīyān bi-qimmat Shīnghāy.. mādḥā ḥaqqaqat Ṭahrān jarā' siyāsāt al-ittijāh sharqan?" ماذا "مشاركة بزشكيان بقيمة شنغهاي.. مآدحها حققها طهران جراء سياسة الاتجاه شرقاً؟ [Pezeshkian's participation in the Shanghai summit.. What has Tehran achieved as a result of the 'look-east' policy?], *Al Jazeera*, September 4, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2025/9/4/مشاركة-بزشكيان-بقيمة-شنغهاي-ماذا-حققت>.

¹²⁴ 'Adel al-Ḥarbī, "ḥarb al-12 yauman: inkišāf al-ḥašāša" يومًا: انكشاف الهشاشة [The 12-Day War: Fragility Exposed], *The Independent Arabia*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.independendarabia.com/node/626499/أراء-حرب-ال-12-يومًا-انكشاف-الهشاشة>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ BBC Monitoring, "Briefing: Media assess China's possible missile, fighter jet sales to Iran," July 10, 2025, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b00047xk>.

¹²⁷ *Al-Arab*, "al-Šīn ḥiyar maḍmūn li-taḥdīṭ tirsāna Irān al-'askariya" الصين خيار غير مضمون لتحديث ترسانة إيران العسكرية [China is an uncertain option for modernizing Iran's military arsenal], July 17, 2025, <https://alarab.co.uk/الصين-خيار-غير-مضمون-لتحديث-ترسانة-إيران-العسكرية>.

¹²⁸ See note 119, China Research Unit, Emirates Policy Center, June 26, 2025.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Mahdī Mubārak 'Abd Allah, "kaifa ḥālat mašālīḥ al-Šīn al-ḥāšša 'an da'im Irān?" كيف حالت مصالح الصين الخاصة عن دعم إيران؟ [How did China's own interests prevent it from supporting Iran?], *Rai al-Youm*, July 05, 2025, <https://www.raialyoum.com/كيف-حالت-مصالح-الصين-الخاصة-عن-دعم-إيران/>.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Conclusion

China was not a central focus of Arabic-language media coverage during the Israel–Iran conflict. The few commentators who did consider the potential role of the People’s Republic initially welcomed Beijing’s calls for de-escalation and its “positive neutrality,” a reaction likely shaped by anxiety over a possible spillover and negative attitudes toward the two belligerents.

However, the spillover into the Gulf exposed the fragility of the regional order and reignited fears that any future escalation could endanger the Gulf states’ aspirations for peace, development and regional cooperation. As such, China’s self-focused and risk-averse approach has come under closer scrutiny. Arab analysts generally expressed an understanding of the strategic logic behind Beijing’s reluctance to provide direct military support for Iran, attributing its caution to the desire to preserve economic and diplomatic ties with Israel and the U.S.

Debates have also focused on the future of Sino–Iranian relations. Some Gulf commentators argued, often with a measure of satisfaction, that Tehran misjudged Beijing’s reliability, leaving Iran increasingly isolated and dependent on a transactional and unpredictable partner. It remains to be seen whether the Israeli strike on Qatari territory, which has seemingly revealed the limits of U.S. concern for Gulf sovereignty and security, might lead Arab commentators to reconsider China’s potential role in regional security.

CONCLUSION

by Leonardo Bruni

This report sought to examine the expert debates on the future of Sino-Middle Eastern relations, both within the region and in China itself, in the immediate aftermath of the Israel-Iran War. Although this deadly yet fortunately short and contained conflict will likely be remembered as a turning point in the Middle East's security landscape, history continues its unrelenting forward march, with new, significant developments already beginning to reshape the regional and Chinese debates we have explored.

The most consequential development is the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, brokered through the intervention of the Trump administration. This long-awaited deal has enabled Israeli and Palestinian hostage exchanges, as well as a fragile halt to the violence, that, according to the International Court of Justice, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, numerous national governments, multiple UN experts and special rapporteurs, as well as many scholars and genocide specialists, has amounted to an act – or provoking a plausible risk – of genocide endured by the population of the Gaza Strip over the past two years.¹³²

The ceasefire, signed on October 9, culminated in a summit in Sharm el-Sheikh. Notably absent, however, were representatives from Israel, Hamas, Iran, and, for our purposes, China. Although Beijing welcomed the deal, it played no direct role in achieving the ceasefire.¹³³ While it would be inaccurate to claim that China made no diplomatic efforts – Beijing did help broker a now largely forgotten agreement among Palestinian factions to establish a unity government in July 2024 – its involvement over the past year has been mostly

limited to supporting the positions of Arab and Muslim states.¹³⁴ However, China's absence from Sharm el-Sheikh should not be overstated. There has been considerable debate over the extent to which the European, Arab, and Muslim states represented at the summit actually contributed to ending the war.¹³⁵

Indeed, from the perspective of Chinese commentators, little has changed in terms of regional dynamics. Their assessment – that regional actors seem incapable, unwilling or ineffective in shaping the regional order – appears as valid as ever. However, the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, which saw the world's leaders line up to celebrate Trump as the "President of Peace," demonstrated also that China's much-anticipated decline of U.S. influence in the Middle East still is a distant reality.¹³⁶

Nonetheless, implementing Trump's 20-point peace plan is a fragile endeavor: Hamas' willingness to disarm and relinquish control remains uncertain, ceasefire violations by Israel are frequent, and the proposed installation of a transitional authority under former British Prime Minister Tony Blair has drawn criticism for its perceived colonial undertones.¹³⁷ Upholding this fragile peace could place the U.S. in a difficult position, possibly exposing its limited leverage, capacity, and political will in the region's future, just as China's own limits were revealed during the Twelve-Day War.

The end of the fighting in Gaza also leads Israel to face an uncertain future as it awaits to see whether its international standing improves.¹³⁸ Its military operations over the past year – which have extended beyond Palestine to Syria,

¹³² International Court of Justice, "South Africa v. Israel, Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (Provisional Measures)," January 26, 2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192/provisional-measures>; Amnesty International, "Amnesty International investigation concludes Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza" December 5, 2024,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>; Human Rights Watch, "Israel's Crime of Extermination and Acts of Genocide in Gaza," December 19, 2024,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/19/israels-crime-extermiation-acts-genocide-gaza>;

Department of International Relations and Cooperation - Republic of South Africa, "South Africa delivers evidence of Israel genocide to ICJ, October 28, 2024, <https://dirco.gov.za/south-africa-delivers-evidence-of-israel-genocide-to-icj/>;

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Israel has committed genocide in the Gaza Strip, UN Commission finds," September 16, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/israel-has-committed-genocide-gaza-strip-un-commission-finds>;

Raz Segal, "A Textbook Case of Genocide," *Jewish Currents*, October 13, 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide>.

¹³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Wáng Yì jiù jiāshā chōngtú dáchéng dì yī jiēduàn xiéyì biǎomíng lìchǎng" 王毅就加沙冲突达成第一阶段协议表明立场 [Wang Yi States China's Position on First-Phase Agreement Regarding the Gaza Conflict], October 11, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202510/t20251011_11730824.shtml.

¹³⁴ *Global Times*, "China welcomes statement by 21 Arab and Islamic countries on Israel-Iran conflict, calling for de-escalation of situation: FM spokesperson," June 17, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202506/1336344.shtml>.

¹³⁵ James Crisp & Joe Barnes, "Europe is stuck on the sidelines of Gaza peace deal," *The Telegraph*, October 18, 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/10/18/gaza-peace-europe-sidelined/>.

¹³⁶ Ferdinand Knapp, "Europe hails Trump's Israel-Gaza peace announcement," *Politico*, October 9, 2025,

<https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-hail-donald-trump-gaza-peace-plan-israel/>;

Asharq Al-awsat, "Arab, Western Countries Hail Trump's Peace Plan for Gaza," September 30, 2025,

<https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5191903-arab-western-countries-hail-trump-s-peace-plan-gaza>.

¹³⁷ *Le Monde* with AFP, "Hamas launches Gaza crackdown as Trump vows to disarm group," *Le Monde*, October 15, 2025,

https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/10/15/hamas-launches-gaza-crackdown-as-trump-vows-to-disarm-group_6746445_4.html;

Sally Ibrahim, "From Lebanon to Gaza, Israel is imposing a very violent 'ceasefire'," *The New Arab*, October 30, 2025,

<https://www.newarab.com/news/lebanon-gaza-israel-imposes-very-violent-ceasefire>;

Maziar Motamedi, "Why is the divisive Tony Blair now touted for post-Gaza war interim role?," *Al Jazeera*, September 28, 2025,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/28/why-is-the-divisive-tony-blair-now-touted-for-post-gaza-war-interim-role>.

¹³⁸ Jamie Dettmer, "Israel bets the world will forgive and forget Gaza," *Politico*, October 1, 2025,

<https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-war-in-gaza-benjamin-netanyahu/>.

Lebanon, Yemen, Tunisia, Iran, and Qatar – together with their humanitarian consequences, have inflamed global condemnation. This backlash is not confined to the Global South. Across Europe and the broader West, a growing number of governments have recognized a Palestinian state, civil society and activists have mobilized to attempt to break the blockade of Gaza, while labor strikes and mass protests have been organized in solidarity with Palestinians.

A catabasis into pariah-state status (a well-present fear within the Israeli establishment¹³⁹) may explain Israeli experts' willingness to interpret China's "balanced" rhetoric during the war with Iran as an olive branch. Anxiety over isolation may be driving a desire to cultivate ties with any global actor, including Beijing, despite lingering mistrust over China's stance on Palestine and its ties with Iran.

However, any potential "normalization," tentatively suggested by Israeli scholars and diplomats, now appears moot following Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision to blame Israel's isolation not on his government's actions but on Qatar and China, accusing them of orchestrating a "media siege" against Israel.¹⁴⁰ An immediate diplomatic chill followed, with *China Daily* publishing an editorial affirming that "what Israel today describes as 'isolation' is in fact the outcome of its own policies."¹⁴¹

Meanwhile, Iran confronts similar prospects of international isolation, albeit primarily in the economic sphere. As anticipated by Chinese scholars, although U.S. strikes have substantially damaged – but not destroyed – Iran's nuclear infrastructure, Tehran remains resolute in upholding its right to a nuclear program as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Nevertheless, on August 28, the E3 – France, Germany and the United Kingdom – announced their intention to trigger the snapback mechanism, thereby reinstating pre-2015 UN sanctions. Citing Iran's restrictions on inspectors' access to its nuclear facilities, the Europeans were likely motivated by an eagerness to show continued relevance despite their marginalization and to align with Washington in hopes of securing U.S. support for Ukraine and European security.¹⁴² This

impulse is reflected in their endorsement of Trump's call for "zero enrichment," a non-starter for Tehran and inconsistent with the original terms of the nuclear deal.¹⁴³

China and Russia have backed Iran's challenge of the E3's authority, with Tehran accusing the European powers of not only failing to fulfill their commitments to economic normalization, having declined to resist the first Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, but also of refraining from condemning Israel's attacks on Iran.¹⁴⁴ Beijing and Moscow have accordingly signaled they will not respect or will attempt to circumvent the reimposed sanction regime.¹⁴⁵ Amid these developments, Iran's oil production and exports have only risen, with China remaining its largest customer.¹⁴⁶ Consequently, Iranian analyses describing Beijing as the only major power willing to offer Tehran meaningful economic and diplomatic support appear increasingly vindicated, in contrast to Iranian reformists' erstwhile – now largely illusory – hopes of reestablishing ties with the West.¹⁴⁷

Across the Gulf, the states of the Arab world and especially those of the Gulf Cooperation Council are grappling with the ramifications of Israel's deadly strike on Qatar.¹⁴⁸ While President Trump has claimed that Washington was unaware of the operation, the extensive coordination between U.S. and Israeli militaries has cast doubt on the reliability of assumed American security guarantees – many now perceive U.S. commitments to Gulf security as secondary to Israel's regional ambitions.¹⁴⁹ In the wake of the strike, Washington has attempted to repair relations by pledging a NATO Article 5-style security agreement with Qatar, something long desired by other Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Trump has also appeared to apply new pressure on Israel, possibly contributing to the Gaza ceasefire.¹⁵⁰

However, it remains to be seen whether these measures will be sufficient to rebuild confidence. Should mistrust persist, this moment may mark the first real step toward the greater regional autonomy and multipolar orientation envisioned by Chinese scholars and policymakers.

¹³⁹ Nava Freiberg, Lazar Berman & Tol Staff, "Netanyahu admits Israel economically isolated, says will need to become 'super-Sparta'," *The Times of Israel*, September 15, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-admits-israel-is-economically-isolated-will-need-to-become-self-reliant/>.

¹⁴⁰ Nava Freiberg "PM says Qatar, China attempting to 'blockade' Israel politically, but 'the US is with us'," *The Times of Israel*, September 15, 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/pm-says-qatar-china-attempting-to-blockade-israel-politically-but-the-us-is-with-us/.

¹⁴¹ Li Yang, "Israel's 'isolation' is not caused by others, but of its own making," *China Daily*, September 19, 2025, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202509/19/WS68cc9a3fa3108622abca199a.html>.

¹⁴² Ellie Geranmayeh, "The risks of the draw: Europe's post-snapback move on Iran," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 29, 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-risks-of-the-draw-europes-post-snapback-move-on-iran/>.

¹⁴³ Laurence Norman & Noemie Bissierbe, "Europeans Shift to Back Trump's Zero-Enrichment Demand," *The Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/iran-israel-conflict-latest-news/card/europeans-shift-to-back-trump-s-zero-enrichment-demand-QQ27IIESHRYD4XOXUHGS>.

¹⁴⁴ Riccardo Alcaro, "The Tragic Irony of the E3's Snapback Move on Iran," *IAI Commentaries*, September 8, 2025, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/tragic-irony-e3s-snapback-move-iran>.

¹⁴⁵ Maryam Sinaiee, "Tehran pins hopes on Russia and China to blunt sanctions impact," *Iran International*, October 4, 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202510034828>

¹⁴⁶ Umud Shokri, "Iran's Oil Exports: Resilience Amid Sanctions and 'Snapback'," *Stimson Center*, October 2, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/irans-oil-exports-resilience-amid-sanctions-and-snapback/>.

¹⁴⁷ For more on the evolution of the domestic Iranian debate on China see our report: Enrico Fardella & Andrea Ghiselli (eds.), "Power Shifts? China's Growing Influence in the Gulf: Key Trends and Regional Debates in 2023," *ChinaMed Project*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.chinamed.it/publications/power-shifts-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-gulf-key-trends-and-regional-debates-in-2023>.

¹⁴⁸ Ahmed Aboudouh, "Egypt now sees Israel as an imminent threat," *Chatham House*, September 17, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/09/egypt-now-sees-israel-imminent-threat>

¹⁴⁹ *The Economist*, "America can't or won't protect its friends in the Gulf," September 10, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/09/10/america-cant-or-wont-protect-its-friends-in-the-gulf>.

¹⁵⁰ Dasha Burns & Diana Nerozzi, "Qatar was the turning point: How Israel's bombing of Doha ignited a peace process," *Politico*, October 10, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/10/10/qatar-was-the-turning-point-how-israels-bombing-of-doha-ignited-a-peace-process-00604017>.

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