

# The benefits of caution: China's role in the Iran-Israel conflict

China's non-committal language in the Israel-Iran conflict underscores a calculated posture: keep a safe diplomatic distance, leave others to manage the fallout, and stand ready to benefit from any eventual return to stability. While Beijing has publicly condemned Israeli and US attacks, its support for Iran has been more low-profile, calling on "the parties" to de-escalate.

The Middle East remains an important but secondary theatre for Beijing, whose foreign policy priorities are mostly concentrated much closer to home. Though it maintains strong economic ties and political leverage in Tehran, Beijing has shown little inclination to deepen its involvement further, lacking both the military commitment and, more importantly, the political will to intervene. After all, the China-Iran relationship, while driven by strategic interests, remains largely transactional. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio himself acknowledged Beijing's influence and stake in regional stability when he called on China to pressure Iran not to close the Strait of Hormuz, one of the most important global shipping routes for crude oil.

China's cautious approach yields strategic gains. As the US becomes again increasingly entangled in the region—to be seen for how long—China benefits by default by staying on the sidelines. The more Washington is absorbed elsewhere, the less focus it can devote to the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Beijing's engagement is likely to remain limited to rhetorical support and symbolic actions, such as its recent backing of a resolution in the UN Security Council. In addition, if the current ceasefire will not hold, mediation from China is unlikely.

Against this backdrop, China's hands-off approach allows it to craft a more "peace-oriented" narrative. This is likely to resonate in many parts of the Global South, reinforcing the perception that the international order led by the US disproportionately serves the interests of Washington and its closest allies.

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