



China might take Iran's side in a war with US

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Abstract

China's ties with Iran are crucial to its energy and geopolitical strategies, and with Russia also in the mix, a broader conflagration is a real possibility. The current U.S.-Iran stand-off is not about Iran, but about China—which Washington considers a peer competitor. Because U.S. controls most of oil-rich Persian Gulf via Arab proxies in the “left flank” and can impose a naval embargo on China's oil supplies in a conflict over Taiwan Straits or South China Sea, Chinese strategists believe if Beijing and Moscow expand relations with Tehran, they can maintain “minimum balance” in the “east bank” to thwart Washington. Against the backdrop of rapidly deteriorating Sino-U.S. ties in a new Cold War, China would likely support Iran in a war with the U.S.

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Analysis

After the US assassination of Iran's General Qasem Soleimani on Friday, Germany's *Spiegel Online* observed that this is akin to a declaration of war on Iran.¹ Now the US Congress is scrambling for a debate on a formal declaration of war, although it will unlikely block the Trump White House's march toward the battlefield.²

Last March, President Donald Trump reviewed the Pentagon's plan to send 120,000 US troops to counter Iran, and the current military buildup of deploying 3,500 more US troops to the region may be part of that plan.³ Also, in 2017, a think-tank that enjoys close ties with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Trump White House, sent a seven-page memo outlining plans for regime change in Iran, and the current scenario seems to be taken out of this playbook.⁴

The next question is, how will regional powers react to a US-Iran war?

China and Russia already seem to have answered that question via their war games in the Gulf of Oman last week, and the signal to the US is that Iran is not isolated and has powerful allies.⁵ Indeed, last year retired US Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor already warned that a war with Iran could draw in China and Russia.⁶

Currently, China's reaction is to urge both Iran and the US to maintain calm and de-escalate tensions, and closely monitor the situation. Beijing does not want war and needs Mideast stability to pursue the Belt and Road Initiative Eurasian integration plan. It has large stakes in Iran's stability: It is the largest buyer of Iranian oil, China is Iran's largest trading partner, and Iran is a key geographic node for the BRI.

Up to now, China has tried to balance its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East and set up a firewall between the two, although Iran is more significant in China's strategic calculus given the fact Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf countries are still under the US security umbrella and host US military bases. China is also against further Western-sponsored regime change in the region, and Iran is an important partner in counterbalancing US hegemony and the drive toward a multipolar world.

'It's not about Iran. It's about China'

Should a US-Iran war break out and the Iranian government is overthrown, it would be devastating for China's regional interests. As Robert Kaplan wrote in a New York Times article titled "This isn't about Iran. It's about

¹ Maximilian Popp, "Trump's Declaration of War: Conflict with Iran Could Be Inevitable after Killing of General", *Spiegel Online*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/killing-of-iran-general-soleimani-akin-to-war-declaration-a-1303566.html>

² Lindsay Wise and Rebecca Davis O'Brien, "Lawmakers Call for Debate, Legal Justification Before Any Possible Iran War", *Wall Street Journal*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/sen-kaine-to-file-resolution-calling-for-debate-prior-to-any-possible-iran-war-11578072521>; Andrew Clevenger, "Congress unlikely to check Trump's power to start war with Iran", *Roll Call*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.rollcall.com/news/congress/congress-unlikely-check-trumps-power-start-war-iran>

³ Devan Cole, "NYT: White House reviews plan that would send up to 120,000 U.S. troops to Middle East", *CNN*, May 4, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/14/politics/us-troops-middle-east-iran/index.html>; Elizabeth McLaughlin, "Pentagon to deploy roughly 3,500 more troops to Middle East with others placed on alert status, amid tensions with Iran", *ABC News*, January 3, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/pentagon-deploy-roughly-3500-troops-middle-east-amid/story?id=68052645>; Kyle Mizokami, "All the U.S. Military Hardware headed to the Middle East", *Popular Mechanics*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/a30420240/middle-east-us-hardware/>; Gordon Lubold and Nancy A. Youssef, "Trump Administration Considers 14,000 More Troops for Mideast", *Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-administration-considers-14-000-more-troops-for-mideast-11575494228>

⁴ Michael Crowley, "Trump allies push White House to consider regime change in Tehran", *Politico*, June 25, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/06/25/trump-iran-foreign-policy-regime-change-239930>; <https://twitter.com/mdubowitz/status/120779391164477442>

⁵ "Russia, China and Iran launch Gulf of Oman war games", *Financial Times*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/3d5a4cf0-288f-11ea-9a4f-963f0ec7e134>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxoEww81hbY>



China," the current US-Iran standoff is about something much vaster.⁷

Geography matters in geopolitics and the Gulf of Oman separates not only Oman and Iran but also Oman and Pakistan, where China has completed a state-of-the-art port at Gwadar. It is a hinge uniting the Middle East, the South Asian subcontinent and East Asia in China's BRI.

China is also a net importer of oil and obtains half its supply from the Persian Gulf. Yet the US Navy maintains control of the sea lines of communications. As such, China is worried about, first, US restriction of China's oil imports over a clash across the Taiwan Strait or in the South China Sea and, second, events abroad that might lead to price volatility hurting the Chinese economy. Most important, China needs Iran in the "east flank" of the Persian Gulf to prevent a full blockade by the US Navy.⁸

This insurance plan against a remote contingency was spelled out in a 2000 article published by the prestigious Chinese Society for Strategy and Management (CSSM) in its influential Strategy and Management Journal. The article's author Tang Shiping, an associate research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), argued that the US already controls the west bank of the oil-rich Persian Gulf via its pro-American proxies (Saudi Arabia and smaller Gulf states), in effect rendering it an "internal sea" for the US, and challenges to that position are likely to fail.

Yet if China and Russia expand relations with Iran, they could maintain a "minimum balance" to thwart US moves. Since securing oil imports from the Gulf requires both US-controlled west bank and the China-and-Russia-supported Iranian east bank, this axis would prevent the US from implementing oil embargoes against other countries, and Washington would not shut off China's Gulf oil supplies, since China, Russia and Iran control the Gulf's "east bank."

A great power conflict?

In the past, China's Mideast posture was a balancing act of engaging Iran while simultaneously not alienating the US. However, what has changed now is the rapid deterioration of Sino-US relations and decoupling over the past year in a new Cold War.⁹ With US hostility and "maximum pressure" toward Beijing, Moscow and Tehran (all under US sanctions), Washington is driving all three to coalesce, as evidenced in the recent joint military exercise in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean.

Thus as Colonel Douglas Macgregor and Dr Lydia Wilson of Oxford University caution, should the US attack Iran in a full-scale war, it could herald the additional entry of two nuclear powers to the theater, and transform the bilateral war into one of great-power conflict.¹⁰

⁷ Robert D. Kaplan, "This isn't about Iran. It's About China", *New York Times*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/opinion/trump-iran-china.html>

⁸ Christina Lin, "China's Persian Gulf Strategy and a Nuclearizing Iran 2009", *China Brief*, Vol 9, Issue 21, October 22, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-persian-gulf-strategy-israel-and-a-nuclearizing-iran-2009/>

⁹ Clay Chandler and Naomi Xu Elegant, "Kissinger's Warning: U.S.-China 'in the Foothills' of an Escalating Cold War", November 23, 2019, <https://fortune.com/2019/11/23/kissingers-warning-u-s-and-china-in-the-foothills-of-an-escalating-cold-war/>

¹⁰ Ian Schwartz, "Ret. Col. Macgregor: Attacking Iran Would Provoke a War, Create a Coalition Of The Willing Against Us", *Real Clear Politics*, June 21, 2019, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2019/06/21/ret_col_macgregor_attacking_iran_would_provoke_a_war_create_a_coalition_of_the_willing_against_us.html; Claire Anderson, "US-Iran war: China and Russia will aid Tehran's retaliation on Trump, says conflict expert", *Daily Express*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1223736/iran-news-world-war-3-china-russia-donald-trump-news-usa-General-Qassem-Soleimani>



Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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