

Old Middle East, new China

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



China has won America's war on Iran. America has lost that war, but Iran has not won it because Israel will not give up its own war with Iran. It is China that has won because of its aversion to armed conflict, which is a key indicator of its global soft power.

That power is apparent in the Middle East.

There, China conducts its relations with both Arab states and Israel transparently, without the opacity of religion or the legacy of colonialism. This is why Beijing and not Washington may be better equipped one day to resolve the endemic crisis of the Middle East and their central cause: the still unresolved question of Palestine.

The Iran War might show the way to a Middle East with China playing a guiding if not a binding role in the region's affairs.

Why not? Consider where the Middle East stands today in strategic terms.

Two authors writing for the prestigious Brookings Institution in the US in June this year recalled how America's adoption of a forward defence approach since World War II helped it to become a global power. "Insulated by its fortunate geography, the US has honed a model of warfare that emphasises projecting power to counter and defeat threats at a distance rather than on its shores. This approach is predicated on US naval power at sea combined with an unparalleled network of allies and partners on land that grants a combination of access, basing, and overflight permissions," they wrote.

That was then; this is now: "Fast forward to 2026, and it is clear that Iran went to school on the US way of war and understands how to leverage its limited assets to strike at the heart of US power projection capabilities both on land and at sea," the article noted.

Iran tested US forward defence policy by attacking Middle Eastern countries that served as the regional nodes of that policy. It fired thousands of missiles and drones at land targets in its neighbourhood, hitting American bases while striking targets in Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

This way, Teheran made a key strategic point. It acknowledged that it had no way of attacking the US mainland, but it served notice that it had enough belligerent capacity to unsettle America's military partners in the Middle East to the extent of possibly making them question the logic of continuing their strategic dependence on the US.

Teheran warned that "history will record that the Iranian nation sank the superpower of America in the Persian Gulf".

Ignore that boast as but triumphalist propaganda. Yet, what remains true is that although Iran is no military match for America, the Persian nation has taught a superior power the strategic lesson that forward defence is indeed forward but may not be defence enough. There are limits to global reach — or over-reach, as the case may be.

Clearly, US forward-deployed forces in the Middle East are no longer immune to attack. And the countries that host American assets



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are even more vulnerable. America can withdraw from the Middle East if it chooses to one day, but the Arab states cannot.

So, those states have to deal with Iran regionally and not through the global grid of American power.

Arab states might rebuff that message, but it has been sent.

Israel falls into a completely different category. Shi'ite Iran has doctrinal differences with Sunni Arab states, but those differences may nor may not be resolved ultimately within a common Islamic framework. No such framework exists for Israel, the Jewish state whose very existence incenses Iran far more than it does the Arab states.

Israel's contribution to the Iran war is not a strategic choice. It is an existential necessity. America or not, Israel will strive to ensure that Iran cannot use nuclear weapons and its influence in Lebanon — which is essentially a strategic extension of the Persian state — to destroy Israel. America might be Israel's chief security guarantor, but it is not the only one. Israel itself is its own and final security guarantor.

Iran's ayatollahs know that. They know that they can repulse America, but they cannot rebuff Israel.

Hence the current Iran war may well stop. But future wars cannot be wished away.

Unless China has its way.

The Chinese way

The Chinese way derives from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. In it, the great strategist writes: "Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting." But how is that excellence to be achieved? It is through knowledge. "He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight." As an appendage of that observation, he declares that "victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win". How should a warrior choose? Sun Tzu's answer: "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." Why is that so? It is because, among other things, "all warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive".

Although Sun Tzu is not the only variable explaining China's strategic rectitude, his wisdom bears heavily on contemporary history. China has fought essentially three major wars since the end of World War II in 1945: in Korea in the early 1950s, with India in 1962, and with Vietnam in 1979. By contrast, the US has engaged in more than 20 major wars

and military conflicts since 1945. Generally, China has left America to fight wars, while stepping aside to stay out of firing range. The strategy has worked.

Consider Sun Tzu's aphorisms and this history of wars in the cold light of the Iran conflict. China did not fight America. China supported Iran — but without crossing the threshold at which Beijing would become Washington's direct adversary in the Middle East.

Americans themselves recognise this nuanced Chinese role.

The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission noted on March 16 that China helps Iran to evade American sanctions, while Iran supplies China with relatively low-cost oil. However, although Teheran "has sought deeper strategic alignment", China has avoided formal defence commitments to Iran and "is not likely to take significant action to support Iran beyond providing diplomatic support and dual-use supplies". Yet, reportedly, after US strikes began, "China allowed two state-owned Iranian vessels in a Chinese port to be loaded with sodium perchlorate, which is used in solid rocket fuel for missiles".

All this follows Sun Tzu's script. China has won the Iran war without fighting America. It knows that this is not the time for direct conflict: It must keep its gunpowder dry for any confrontation with America over Taiwan. China has won in Iran and is prepared for Taiwan: Thus, it is a victorious warrior. It did not help Iran against America like a defeated warrior who goes to war first and then seeks to win (because nuclear China's fraught relationship with nuclear America exceeds anything that Teheran can possibly do to enhance Beijing's security in world affairs).

China's far-sighted response to the Iran war recalls its comparable reaction to the 20-year American war on Afghanistan, which ended in ignominy for the invaders in 2021 when they withdrew (amidst iconic scenes of chaos reminiscent of their abandonment of Vietnam in 1975).

There was no public display of Chinese triumphalism, something to which Americans are disposed, not least prematurely. Operation Enduring Freedom, the name of the American invasion, ended with the Taliban free to retake Afghanistan in what looks like the enduring rule of turbaned despots and bearded fighters.

Yes, the Americans managed to last in Afghanistan for two decades, but that is a very short period of time in Afghan or American history, to say nothing of China's own his-

tory. Sun Tzu's observations on war relate to larger historical cycles and time spans than the Americans envisaged or the Afghans contested.

Obviously, the Chinese were happy with the inglorious American exit from Afghanistan because it allowed China to expand its influence in Central Asia, secure its own western borders, and watch with quiet satisfaction incremental signs of American decline. However, Beijing knew also that Washington was cutting its losses in Central Asia in order to refinance its ability to confront China in the Indo-Pacific. Hence China's calibrated posture on Afghanistan after America.

The same sober international perspective and reticent national posture are apparent in Beijing's measured response to the American defeat in Iran. There is no diplomatic gloating.

America's humiliation is apparent in the terms of the peace deal that it has signed with Iran, including the provision that the US "undertakes with regional partners to develop a definitive, mutually agreed plan with at least US\$300 billion [\$387.78 billion] for the reconstruction and economic development of the Islamic Republic of Iran".

That sounds suspiciously like war reparations, which a defeated country pays to the victorious one. The American prize is, of course, the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, which controls access to global energy supplies that sustain international economic society and, within it, US prominence. China wins in this scenario, but it would not have collapsed without the American-Iranian deal. Hence, it can afford to look at the deal with a degree of strategic leisure which proves that the future of China does not rest on the American trajectory in world affairs.

This is no small thing. Post-Iran war, China remains free to re-engage the nations of the Middle East after the American disaster in Iran.

Grand strategy

The outlines of Chinese grand strategy, including its approach to the Middle East, are growing clearer by the day. In June 2026, Beijing published a White Paper on global governance that marked its claim to be the architect of a new global order.

Chatham House scholar Yu Jie comments on the White Paper: "China appears caught between ambition and restraint. It increasingly fills the diplomatic space created by American retrenchment — whether by choice or by default — but it does not yet appear willing to bear the costs traditionally associated with hegemonic leadership. However, this may be how China wants it. Chinese policymakers have long insisted that China does not seek hegemony and should not be expected to assume the responsibilities once carried by the US."

Good point. China does not want to be the new America. It wants to remain China in a new world.

The Middle East may well be the test case in China's quest for a new international identity. Beijing's ability to handle the question of Palestine will indicate its capacity to influence events far closer to its borders. Chinese statecraft is time-tested, but the times change.

What China needs is more time.

And America is giving it that time. **E**

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