



## **“ENEMY WITHIN”: HOW CHINESE ANALYSTS VIEW THE US-IRAN WAR**

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The United States and Israel launched a “pre-emptive” joint missile attack on Iran on Feb. 28, in what has been [described](#) as “the largest regional concentration of American military firepower in a generation.”

Named Operation Epic Fury, the strikes followed “dissatisfaction” with the progress of nuclear talks with Iran, spiraling into “decapitation” attacks that killed most of Iran’s top leadership within 48 hours, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iran launched a fierce retaliation in response, [vowing](#) “no leniency.” Initially believed to end in weeks, President Trump now [says](#) the war will end when he “feels it in (his) bones.”

As the conflict escalates, eyes have turned to China, which [inked](#) a \$400 billion deal with Iran in 2021. While [criticizing](#) a war that should “never have happened,” China [clarified](#) its official stance as “objective and impartial,” upholding “non-interference” in international affairs. This muted response has been [labeled](#) by experts as “cool economic and geopolitical pragmatism,” rather than the pursuit of any “anti-West ideology.” While Beijing has so far [shown](#) resilience against surging oil prices, analysts in China worry about a long-drawn war hurting its infrastructural investments in the region.

Chinese participation in the war, however, is not in the cards. Despite sharing close ties with Tehran, Beijing [imports](#) nearly three times more oil from other countries in the region, and its volume of trade with Saudi Arabia exceeds that with Iran 10 times over.

Analysts in China watch the developments with great interest. While some buy the dissatisfaction-with-nuclear-talks argument, others view it as stemming from ambitions to seize oil reserves, akin to the strike on Venezuela in January 2026, and yet others as President Trump’s desperate attempts to shift the gaze away from domestic issues.

### **A “gambler’s mentality”**

The war is [seen](#) in China as the “US-Israel military coalition” having again shown the “cruelty of the law of the jungle.”

Prof. Huang Jing, an expert on American and Pacific Affairs at the Shanghai International Studies University, [defined](#) the “reckless” attack as stemming from a “gambler’s mentality,” which President Trump erroneously thought would be a “once and for all deal.” Highlighting major logistical issues, highly insufficient force and firepower deployment, lack of support from NATO, and lack of contingency plans, Huang believes the attack is fueled by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s success in convincing Washington to join its plans to attack Iran, Trump’s overconfidence after successfully ousting the Maduro government in Venezuela and pressing concerns over an imminent “economic collapse” and “political turmoil” in the US.

Huang states that Trump has failed to attain “any substantial achievements” since taking office. He cites “enormous structural risks” caused by the rapid growth of market capitalization by the “Magnificent Seven” tech companies—Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia, and Tesla (whose combined market value [exceeds](#) the total economic output of the entire EU) —a “severe disconnect” between state investments and expected output from AI industries; a shrinking manufacturing sector [causing](#) a loss of nearly 108,000 jobs in the first year of the Trump 2.0 administration; inability to sufficiently control inflation; nationwide anger over ICE’s enforcement measures; a major setback in tariff enforcements and the ongoing pressure regarding the Epstein files. Due to factors such as these, Huang believes the attack on Iran comes as Trump’s desperate move to expand support, as dissatisfaction [mounts](#) before midterm elections that he cannot afford to lose.

## A house divided

A major issue that Chinese analysts flag is the polarization that the war has incited in American society. According to a CNN poll, nearly 59% Americans surveyed [viewed](#) the war unfavorably. The Democrats have [labeled](#) the strikes a “war of choice” after the Pentagon confirmed in closed-door briefings that while Iran posed an “imminent threat,” there was no intelligence that it was going to attack Washington first. Anger has further [heightened](#) after an ongoing military investigation [confirmed](#) that targeting mistakes on the part of Washington took at least 175 lives, mostly school children, in an attack on the Shajarah Tayyebah Elementary School on Feb. 28 (Trump initially [denied](#) culpability for the attack).

Chinese analysts like Huang note this division creates severe political challenges for the Trump administration, for unlike the wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, prior Congressional approval was not sought, nor public support gathered through media campaigns. Many MAGA supporters, who favored Trump’s policies against foreign intervention, are seen as opposing his decision to attack Iran. Huang believes that the only remaining supporters are “oil tycoons” and the “accelerationist right wing of Silicon Valley,” who see tangible benefits for themselves.

The war is also believed to have taken a huge toll on American soft power and credibility, particularly as Oman, mediating the nuclear talks, [confirmed](#) “substantial progress” in the initial rounds. In an analysis of the briefings and accounts of the talks, the Arms Control Association [noted](#) that while Iran did not agree to the “maximalist terms” demanded by the United States, it did portray “flexibility” which the “ill-prepared” US negotiators failed to receive.

According to many analysts in China, Washington has done itself more harm than good by [portraying](#) itself as a “disruptor” in the region.

## Not an easy fall

Chinese analysts [believe](#) that despite killing the top leadership, regime change in Iran requires far more military commitment than airstrikes. Iran is believed to have defied its weakness vis-à-vis American and Israeli militaries through long preparation for the war, and is claimed to have “broken from convention” by targeting American allies in the region—namely the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kuwait—for hosting American military personnel and allowing US military access to their bases. Tehran’s use of advanced weaponry, such as the four supersonic missiles [allegedly](#) used to attack the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, [destruction](#) of the radar of the THAAD system in Bahrain, and its [attack](#) on high-value targets such as the naval bases and radar systems of the US’ Fifth Fleet are also noted.

Chinese analysts cite American military experts such as retired Lt. Col. Daniel Davis to [note](#) how 90 million Iranians, who inhabit land four times the size of Iraq, “will not surrender easily.” Tehran’s “decentralized” retaliation, a lack of any major domestic turbulence and its swift diplomatic actions are [noted](#) to highlight Washington’s failure.

Iran’s blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, through which passes approximately a quarter of [global seaborne oil trade](#), is noted.

Chinese analysts like Huang believe that this is very likely to cause serious economic turmoil, as oil prices skyrocket. While it will spike inflation rates in the United States, Russia as an oil-producing nation is likely to benefit immensely, as [daily profits](#) since the start of the war amount to nearly \$589 million. Moreover, ending the blockade would require Washington to enter the Strait, which presents a [complex situation](#). Stepping in would place American ships under direct attack from Iran, but not doing so would extend the blockade, worsening economic challenges.

Others [point](#) to a highly adverse situation for Gulf countries. While it is agreed that Tehran lacks the capabilities to “cripple” the United States and Israel, it can very well cause serious harm to the tourism industry in Dubai, Saudi Arabia’s oil exports, and the desalination plants in the UAE. The Houthis’ blockade of the Red Sea, and Hezbollah’s attacks on Israel are noted as having turned the Gulf into a “battlefield.” The repercussions of the war are [expected](#) to be felt beyond the region in the form of not just an energy crisis, but also a food security crisis, as many countries in South Asia such as India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka depend on Tehran for raw materials like urea and ammonia to make fertilizers. Many [believe](#) the assassination of Khamenei, the spiritual leader of the Shia community, presents serious chances of stoking religious conflicts.

Iran’s best bet, Chinese analysts believe, is to do exactly what Washington cannot afford—drag them into an extended, exhaustive war.

While opinion remains divided on who would emerge victorious, many [see](#) the war as inching towards a “protracted conflict,” [continuing](#) so long as the munitions stockpile of the two allows them to sustain, and would end with a self-declaration of victory from both sides. While Tehran is seen as suffering more in terms of casualties, economic impact, and munitions depletion, analysts [point](#) to reports that claim Washington to be spending “over a billion dollars a day.” According to the Pentagon, \$11.3 billion was [spent](#) within the first week of the war.

## Lessons learned

Analysts in China [believe](#) the war presents several lessons for Beijing and others regarding how modern wars are fought. First, the extensive use of AI by the United States and Israel, from tracking surveillance networks and analyzing video footage, to assisting in decision-making, is noted.

Second, the shift from heavy artillery to small and sophisticated munitions is recognized. Third, pragmatism in war is emphasized. Chinese analysts note how the US military’s lack of adoption of special off-road chassis that China and Russia possess and heavy reliance on trailer-mounted transport for modular deployment came as an “unprecedented loss,” as Iran destroyed the AN/FPS-132 radar and two AN/TPY-2 radars. Fourth, in “morale-driven wars,” the use of online discourse and short videos and photographs in a “propaganda war” are considered as important as firepower.

*China Military Bugle*, an official media outlet associated with the People’s Liberation Army, posted a list of five lessons learnt from the war. This includes describing the “enemy within” as the “deadliest threat,” a “blind faith in peace” as the “costliest miscalculation,” “superior firepower” as the “coldest reality,” the

“illusion of victory” as the “cruellest paradox,” and self-reliance as the “ultimate reliance.”

While the war will join a long list of endless debates on who won and who lost, the world is already amid a massive humanitarian crisis. According to the UNHCR, nearly 3.2 million people have been [temporarily displaced](#) in Iran so far, and the situation is expected to worsen as the conflict escalates. Though both sides may claim to have made the other taste defeat, it cannot be denied that the “victor” will be left with a pyrrhic victory.

*The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to [rob@pacforum.org](mailto:rob@pacforum.org) for more information on how to contribute.*