



THE IRAN STRIKES: AS HISTORY WATCHES, CHINA CALCULATES

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Every great power in history has faced the same challenge: managing multiple threats with finite resources. [Rome](#) collapsed under the strain of defending endless frontiers against simultaneous invasions, internal rebellions, and Persian conflicts. [Britain](#) handed global leadership to America after two world wars drained its capacity to police a worldwide empire. The [Ottoman Empire](#) faced military defeats, nationalist movements, and economic costs that contributed to its declining influence and ultimate collapse in World War I.

The pattern is consistent: military overextension, economic strain from domestic or global commitments, and rising challengers who exploit the hegemon's distraction. Each declining power reached a moment when it could no longer handle multiple pressing threats simultaneously.

The strikes on Iran occur as America confronts this classic dilemma. With China building military capacity to challenge American dominance in the Pacific, Russia grinding through its fourth year of war in Ukraine, escalating tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and now a potential broader Middle Eastern conflict

requiring sustained engagement, the United States faces multi-front pressure that has historically overwhelmed great powers. Yet despite these simultaneous pressures, China remains the central challenge.

While America uses its most advanced weapons and demonstrates continued technological supremacy, this very demonstration reveals deeper strategic vulnerability. Each precision weapon used against Iran is unavailable for potential conflict with China over Taiwan. Every carrier group committed to Middle Eastern operations is [absent from the Pacific theater](#) where China continues unprecedented military exercises around Taiwan. Military leaders have previously [expressed concern](#) about moving advanced weapons stockpiles from the Indo-Pacific to support Middle Eastern operations.

Meanwhile, headlines and leadership attention within the national security apparatus are now tuned to the Middle East, rather than focused on the pacing threats posed by China and Russia. China, Russia, and North Korea are likely watching events, taking notes, and biding their time.

Beijing is already moving systematically to convert American military action into Chinese geopolitical advantage across multiple dimensions.

Following the start of Operation Epic Fury, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi termed the strikes "unacceptable" and called for an immediate ceasefire, warning that it would bring "serious long-term [consequences](#)." China often attempts to showcase itself as ready to "[play a constructive role](#)" in Middle Eastern peace and draw the distinction that China respects sovereignty while America acts unilaterally.

More dangerously, China gains breathing room in its own sphere of influence. American attention, resources, and military assets committed to Middle Eastern operations are unavailable for Pacific deterrence. Beijing can test American or allied resolve in the Sea of Japan or South China Sea by increasing tensions with Japan or the Philippines and exercising pressure on Taiwan, swoon America's

allies and traditional partners, or advance territorial claims while Washington manages Middle Eastern fallout.

The unfolding crisis also underscores the vulnerability of energy for the US and the rest of the world. With roughly a fifth of global oil flowing through the Strait of Hormuz, Iran's ability to disrupt—even temporarily—has already sent [prices surging](#) and markets reeling. Rising energy prices have caused Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, a staunch US ally, to declare a [state of national energy](#) emergency in response to the war in Iran and call for the Philippines and China to resume [high-level talks](#) toward oil and gas cooperation despite tensions in the South China Sea. The meeting marked the first broader discussion on bilateral relations since 2023.

Beijing is also likely taking notes from Iran's closure in the [Strait of Hormuz](#) and regulated port fees. If access to Hormuz can be contested—or even monetized through risk, delay, or selective passage—the implications for the Taiwan Strait are profound. China does not need to invade Taiwan to reshape the strategic environment; it could instead apply pressure through the arteries of global trade, turning disruption itself into a tool of coercion.

Countries concerned about American military interventions become more receptive to Chinese-led initiatives like BRICS expansion and alternative payment systems that are intended to bypass dollar dominance. Already some of the tolls for passage in the Strait of Hormuz are being paid with [Chinese yuan](#). Certainly, China will use the crisis to deepen cooperation with other countries, present itself as a neutral player, and showcase its currency as an alternative payment system to the dollar.

Finally, as Washington expends attention, munitions, and political capital in the Middle East, Beijing gains something far more valuable: time and strategic focus. Crises like Iran allow China to hunker down—shielding its economy from shocks, drawing on reserves, and doubling down on its [long-term priorities](#) in semiconductors, AI, robotics, energy security, and defense industrial capacity. Rather than reacting, Beijing can observe, adapt, and accelerate—studying how the United States allocates resources under pressure while continuing to scale its own systems at home. In this sense, conflict abroad becomes an asymmetric advantage: the United States is pulled into managing immediate crises, while China quietly compounds power where it matters most for long-term competition.

To be sure, Operation Epic Fury is not without potential strategic upside. Demonstrating credible force, degrading Iranian nuclear and conventional capabilities, and reinforcing commitments to regional partners could strengthen US deterrence and reassert influence in a region where China has sought greater economic and diplomatic footholds. A more secure Middle East—particularly one that ensures stable energy flows—could also deny Beijing opportunities to exploit instability. One could argue that Washington is fighting Russia and China systematically through taking out the structures that support it; however, the question is not whether the United States can achieve tactical or even regional gains, but whether those gains outweigh the opportunity cost. If “success” in the Middle East comes at the expense of focus, resources, and momentum in competing against our most formidable long-term threats, Washington risks winning the fight in one theater while ceding its

advantage in the Indo-Pacific—the one that will ultimately define the rest of the century.

For better or worse, the United States now risks overextending resources and attention and faces a fundamental choice familiar to every great power in history. The Iran strikes, while militarily successful, are likely to commit the United States to managing another volatile region or counterterrorism mission at a time when China accelerates its military buildup, and Russia continues testing Western resolve. Tehran has already promised “[everlasting consequences](#)” and [revenge](#), suggesting prolonged instability and terrorism risks ahead even if Operation Epic Fury ends soon.

The next year will be critical. If Iran's military and political threat is neutralized and a more reform-minded leadership comes into power, the United States can even more strongly pivot back to maintaining against the pacing threats like China with enhanced credibility and deterrent effect. If Iran sustains or ups is retaliation and draws America into prolonged Middle Eastern engagement or focus on the counterterrorism mission, Beijing gains exactly the distraction it needs to advance its territorial ambitions and legitimize itself as a more credible alternative to US global leadership.

Whether these strikes mark renewed American strategic focus, or the beginning of dangerous overextension, depends entirely on what comes next. And what comes next will not be determined by policy alone, but by whether the United States can mobilize its industrial base to deliver capability at scale, drive technological innovation, and compete from a position of strength.

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