

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

China's Support to Iran Since the 12-Day War

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. **Subject:** China's Support to Iran Since the 12-Day War

2. **Purpose:** This paper provides a DIME-based assessment of the scope, character, and implications of People's Republic of China's (PRC) support to the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) following the June 2025 12-Day War and during the current conflict beginning 28 February 2026.

3. **Introduction:**

- a. China and Iran signed a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" agreement in March 2021 and established a long-term framework for cooperation in trade, energy, and infrastructure.¹
- b. After the 12-Day War, China gradually expanded its relations with Iran beyond the purely economic engagement into political, technological, and security cooperation.²
- c. Since the launch of Operation Epic Fury on 28 February 2026, China appears to have adopted a strategy which emphasizes sustaining Iran's political stability by means of diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, and limited technological and military support.³
- d. Although China could likely adjust to a regime change in Iran, the unpredictable consequences and potential spillover effects would represent significant risks for Beijing.
- e. China's current posture reflects a broader effort to expand its influence in the Middle East while avoiding direct confrontation with the United States and its partners.⁴
- f. Main events in the PRC–Iran relations since 2020 are summarized in Annex A.

4. **DIME Approach:**

China's support to Iran is not purely in the security realm, so is best understood through the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) framework. These elements increasingly complementary, reinforcing Iran's ability to withstand sustained military and economic pressure.

a. **Diplomatic (D): A Multipolar Strategic Shield**

- i. China uses diplomatic channels to support Iran and reduce the international pressure on Tehran.
- ii. The PRC leverages its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and its influence within BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to challenge U.S. actions towards Iran.⁵
- iii. Chinese officials maintained communication with Iranian leadership during the crisis, including dialogue between Chinese and Iranian Foreign Ministers. The PRC condemned any

kind of external military operations against Iran, it reaffirmed support for Iran's sovereignty and called for de-escalation.^{3,6}

- iv. The PRC has encouraged Gulf States to maintain balance between the United States and China while continuing economic cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative.⁷
- v. Through these efforts, China does not necessarily block all pressure mechanisms but delays or reframes them, contributing to a more fragmented and less cohesive international response.

b. Informational (I): Digital Infrastructure and ISR Support

- i. China has supported Iran in enhancing its digital and space-based infrastructure.⁸
- ii. Iran has increasingly integrated China's BeiDou-3 satellite navigation system into civilian and military applications.⁹
- iii. In January 2026 China reportedly initiated a Digital Sovereignty Initiative in Iran and replaced Western based firmware with Chinese-developed systems derived from HarmonyOS and related architectures.^{8,10}
- iv. This transition supports stronger data governance and surveillance, allowing Iranian authorities to better control information flows and maintain internal stability during the conflict.
- v. Although not officially proven or admitted by China, some articles suggest that PRC likely provides imagery and signals intelligence to support Iranian situational awareness of the U.S. naval deployments and regional air operations.¹¹

c. Military (M): Capability Development and A2/AD Expansion

- i. Military cooperation between China and Iran appears to be gradually expanding through arms sales, dual-use technology transfers, and naval drills.
- ii. Iran is reportedly close to acquisition of the Chinese CM-302 (YJ-12E) supersonic anti-ship missile, capable of speeds exceeding Mach 3.¹²
- iii. Although it was officially denied by Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, deployment of these systems could significantly enhance Iran's anti-ship capabilities.
- iv. Chinese intermediaries reportedly helped transfer about 1,000 tons of sodium perchlorate in early 2026, which could allow Iran to rebuild its missile stockpiles.¹³
- v. Since the June 2025 war, there has been no publicly confirmed large-scale transfer of Chinese major weapons systems to Iran. However open-source reporting suggests alleged covert supplies of dual-use materials, and anti-stealth radar systems such as the YLC-88 series, which could improve Iran's ability to detect and track advanced aircraft.
- vi. Rather than direct force employment, China's approach emphasizes enabling capability development, allowing Iran to enhance deterrence and operational endurance without triggering overt escalation.
- vii. In practice, this indirect military support model allows Beijing to influence battle space while maintaining plausible deniability and limiting strategic risk.

d. Economic (E): The Financial Stabilization

- i. The economic cooperation remains as the core pillar of China-Iran relations.
- ii. The PRC purchases approximately 80 percent of Iran's crude oil exports, averaging 1.1–1.4 million barrels per day, providing Tehran critical revenue.¹⁴
- iii. Most transactions reportedly occur through different channels, such as digital yuan (e-CNY), to reduce exposure to international sanctions.¹⁵

- iv. The Qom-Yiwu Rail Corridor, which became fully operational in January 2026, provides a direct overland link between central Iran and China's eastern industrial regions.¹⁶
- v. A significant portion of Iranian oil shipments (approximately 90-95 per cent) are transported through covert tanker networks, also known as the Ghost Fleet.¹⁷
- vi. These economic ties create a form of asymmetric interdependence. Iran relies heavily on China for economic survival, while China secures long-term access to discounted energy and expands its regional influence.

5. **Assessment:**

- a. China's engagement with Iran reflects a deliberate and calculated strategy that combines diplomatic and economic tools, supported by technological cooperation and limited military interaction, while still avoiding direct involvement in the conflict.
- b. Beijing's primary objective appears to be preserving stability in Iran while protecting Chinese economic interests and regional influence.
- c. China can reduce international pressure on Tehran diplomatically by leveraging its presence in UNSC, BRICS and the SCO, while presenting itself as a supporter of sovereignty and multilateral dialogue.
- d. Economic cooperation remains the most visible and core element of the relationship. Chinese purchases of Iranian oil and the use of alternative financial mechanisms provide Tehran revenue that helps offset sanctions and wartime economic disruption. Access to discounted Iranian energy strengthens China's long-term energy security.
- e. China's support in areas such as digital infrastructure and satellite navigation may improve Iran's situational awareness and operational resilience while reducing reliance on Western systems.
- f. Although defense cooperation remains limited, cooperation in missile technology, radar systems, and unmanned platforms could gradually strengthen Iran's anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities and support Tehran's broader deterrence posture.
- g. Beijing views Iran not only as a regional partner but also as a strategic counterweight that helps in limiting U.S. influence in the Middle East while supporting China's broader geopolitical and economic objectives.
- h. The interaction of diplomatic shielding, economic support, and technological integration creates a reinforcing system that enables Iran to absorb pressure, prolong resistance, and maintain operational continuity.
- i. More broadly, this suggests a model of indirect competition, where strategic effects are achieved without direct military involvement, allowing Beijing to shape the conflict environment while keeping risk low and maintaining plausible deniability.

6. Annex:



Figure 1 (Key Developments in China-Iran Relations (Visual created using Artificial Intelligence.

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