



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## POLICY BRIEF

### The Iran War and the Question of Chinese Great Power

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Volume XI, Issue 15

May 9, 2026



**Delhi Policy Group**

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[www.delhipolicygroup.org](http://www.delhipolicygroup.org)



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### Cover Images:

1. The 48th Chinese naval escort taskforce conducted multi-subject training, focusing on realistic combat scenarios in the Gulf of Aden, in April 2026. Source: [China Military](#)
2. A destroyer flotilla of the navy under the Chinese PLA Eastern Theater Command conducts alongside and astern replenishment-at-sea during a combat training exercise in the East China Sea in April 2026. Source: [China Military](#)
3. Aircraft carriers Liaoning and Shandong of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy carry out a dual-aircraft-carrier formation exercise for the first time in the South China Sea in October 2024. Source: [China Military](#)

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by

Anil Chopra

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## The Iran War and the Question of Chinese Great Power

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### Introduction

There is little doubt that the People's Republic of China has emerged as a economic and technological powerhouse in the 21st century. It has also built up considerable military assets, including the largest Navy in the world. All this should qualify China as a traditional '*great power*'. Many analysts and commentators believe it to be so, and are willing to bestow Beijing with that honorific.

However, in an essentially anarchic, adversarial and competitive international system, some intractable matters of import have necessarily to be settled by force, which continues to be the final arbiter when all other means have failed to achieve desired outcomes. Suffice it to say, any global great power must, therefore, be able to project and sustain military forces across the planet.

Beijing has thus far displayed a marked reluctance to deploy or project significant military power when faced with the possibility of actual armed conflict against any entity other than a markedly weak opposition, or in any region outside of the Western Pacific. Even here, its aggressive military deployments against Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam are undertaken with the near certainty of a measured defensive response from those countries, and the unlikelihood, as yet, of their being provoked into offensive action.

Iran is one of Beijing's closest allies in Asia and is extremely important for China's energy security and influence in the Middle East. However, there has been only the presence of a couple of Chinese destroyers and a replenishment ship in the general area of the theatre of current conflict, which are residual from 'Exercise Maritime Security Belt' held in the Gulf of Oman in early February 2026. China has not shown any inclination or desire to deploy in larger strength as a means of signalling solidarity or military support for Tehran, let alone putting any pressure, in any fashion, on the US forces engaged in combat.

Furthermore, despite the US military posture in the Pacific having been significantly eroded by the Iran conflict, due to diversion of major naval and air assets to US CENTCOM, thus diluting presence and readiness in waters from Northeast Asia to the South China Sea, Beijing has not tested the waters. It could hypothetically have used the now ten-week long relative vacuum to test US and regional response through enhanced military deployment, with little risk of being countered by the US or its

treaty allies. China has done no such thing, and neither has it upped its military profile or activity anywhere in the region.

There is a tendency to view China's military conservatism as emanating from some grand strategy of patience and abiding time to build strength, or by the desire to be viewed as a mature, stabilising power in contrast to the US, or stemming from Sun Tzu's great dictum of winning without fighting, or even not wanting to rock the boat ahead of the much anticipated Trump-Xi summit in mid-May.

Even if there be any truth in any of the above explanations, the decision of China to do nothing more than offer some material, diplomatic and intelligence support to a major ally immersed in a war of survival, will not escape the strategic scrutiny of its friends, allies, foes and military professionals around the globe. In the aftermath of the Iran war, China's reputation as a reliable mentor and dependable ally is likely to be negatively impacted across the entire Indo-Pacific.

### **Great Power and 'Great Power' Status**

China is doubtless increasingly capable of shaping major international outcomes across several domains and has the ability to coerce and deter other major states. In terms of overall strategic weight, including economic might, nuclear forces, industrial capacity, regional military dominance and diplomatic heft, China indeed has great power, and can strongly impact the international system.

However, it does not have the capability to even deploy, let alone fight, across the global canvas. That requires experienced maritime power. The oceans are not subject to Westphalian sovereignty and cover almost three quarters of the planet, enabling legal worldwide access to those who possess maritime power. A great power must therefore necessarily be a naval power.

Whilst air and missile power can certainly be used at great distances, they cannot sustain in the arena of conflict and can only be present momentarily. Bombing can destroy, but cannot guarantee victory, as the Iran war has shown, alongside innumerable historical examples from the London Blitz to Vietnam. Moreover, though airlift of limited numbers of men and material is feasible, moving larger formations of ground troops and sustaining flow of logistics can only be done by sea.

China is clearly limited as far as extra-regional naval projection and expeditionary warfare is concerned, and thus conferring on it the title of *great power* in the classical sense is somewhat premature. It is not yet a full peer of the US or even great powers of yore, such as the Soviet Union or Imperial Britain, in terms of global power projection and combat capability.

Beijing has clearly recognised that great power ambitions require global maritime power and thus the massive thrust on the PLAN. However, global maritime combat capability needs more than just ships and military wherewithal. More importantly, it needs institutional experience and expertise, as well as the political and cultural ethos to risk the loss of military forces thousands of miles away from the homeland.

Let us now examine China through the lens of great power attributes.

## Factors Limiting China's Great Power

To reiterate, China has immense military power: nuclear weapons, hypersonic intercontinental missiles, state of the art assets in space, the world's largest Navy, a massive defence industrial base, and a humongous defence budget. However, there are many factors which limit Beijing from exercising this hard power by means of *great power* military initiatives and responses, and this has more to do with historical, geographical, organisational, structural and even social determinants.

***Combat Experience and Institutional Memory.*** Though Chinese civilisation has been exposed to war for millennia, it has had scant combat experience in the post-Imperial era, other than the Korean War against US-led forces in the early 1950s – a pre-modern conflict characterised by human-wave tactics and low-technology warfare. Prior to the Korean War, the Chinese experience was confined to guerrilla warfare and civil war, other than the defeats inflicted by Japan in the first and second Sino-Japanese wars. Over the last 75 years since the Korean War, it has only experienced very short armed conflicts on its immediate borders with India and Vietnam. This lack of actual combat experience has created a void in national and military institutional memories, and almost certainly reduced the confidence of the political and senior military leadership in being able to fight a prolonged large-scale modern conflict against a strong adversary.

***Expeditionary military capability.*** Deploying military forces at far distances from the homeland is difficult enough, but mainly entails the mastery of complex, timely logistics and communications. However, engaging in combat at extended distances is a totally different dimension, calling for the capability to sustain replenishment of spent ordnance and munitions, the means to undertake repairs of action damage to platforms and infrastructure, and trained reserves to replace personnel casualties. This needs both experience as well as allies and bases in the conflict theatre, as the long lines of communication from the homeland are often too stretched and insecure for sustaining combat in distant regions. Not least, China has had virtually no amphibious experience on any large scale, or under fire.

***Operational Art Expertise.*** Modern militaries focus on the training of their military leadership in 'operational art', which actually translates strategic objectives into

tactical methodology, and is the art of successfully mobilising, deploying and fighting with large military formations over extended front-lines and theatres. This is especially true of the Western powers, who gained considerable experience during the two World Wars and unending European conflicts of the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. For the Chinese, devoid of actual combat experience, this could only be textbook learning, and this is perhaps the weakest link in their military training and capability.

**Maritime Geography.** Expeditionary forces must have fairly guaranteed ingress and egress means to and from the theatre of conflict. China possibly has one of the worst maritime geographies on the planet, which confines its naval forces within the Western Pacific. Chinese units are unable to easily break out into the Pacific through the first and second island chains, or to the Indian Ocean through a few choke points of the Indonesian archipelago. For China, the Indian Ocean could become a trap, as it is landlocked to the north, and transit to and from it also very limited in the west, requiring exposure to the Straits of Bab el Mandeb and the Suez Canal. This also makes deployment further west into the Mediterranean and Atlantic difficult indeed during periods of hostility.

**Historical Insularity.** Chinese civilisation has had considerable periods of insularity over the last five centuries. This Ming-Ching insularity restricted oceanic activity and prioritised continental security over maritime power, leading to an exceptionally prolonged period of maritime stagnation and an inward-looking sino-centric worldview, which is wary of distant wars and entanglements. This attitudinal characteristic can be glimpsed in China's authoritarian system, and likely mitigates against the expansive perspectives required of great powers.

**Political System.** Authoritarian systems are acknowledged to be brittle, with the leadership being wary of public criticism and disenchantment due to any reverses and losses of men and material on the battlefield – in contrast to the leadership in democratic societies, which is used to opposition and criticism and can more readily withstand setbacks in distant wars. The response from authoritarian establishments is almost always structured, with little room for spontaneous improvisation and innovation so vital in prolonged combat.

**Cautious Culture.** The combination of the effects of historical insularity and the political imperative to shield authoritarian leadership is bound to have an effect on the Chinese, systems risk-taking ability, which is inherently high for military operations in the far abroad. The ingrained cultural and systemic cautiousness mitigates against donning the cloak of a great power.

**Military Leadership Void.** Not least, the almost continuous purges of senior military leadership witnessed in the People's Republic over the last few years has further reduced the number of experienced senior officers in the ranks of the combat arms of

the military. Put simply, there is now limited skill in the Chinese armed forces to fight any war, let alone one outside of Beijing's comfort zone in the West Pacific

*US Competition.* In addition to the above factors, China's reluctance to engage militarily anywhere in the world also stems from the risk of having its carefully nurtured image of a near peer competitor of the US punctured by military reversal resulting from an armed confrontation with Washington.

## **The PRC playbook**

China's action and reactions in respect of the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts, and the events in Venezuela, are illustrative of a grand strategy bereft of military action. It has been more than ready to provide support by way of military equipment and intelligence, but not by any overt movement of its own forces.

While Beijing is officially neutral in regard to the Ukraine war, it provides multifaceted support critical to Moscow's war effort without mobilisation of any of its military resources or deployment of military personnel. Its 'no limits' partnership with Moscow has been limited to providing hardware components that are essential for modern warfare but are carefully classified as dual use. It has stayed clear of overt lethal aid. As in other conflicts involving its partners, it facilitates Russian trade and international payments and provides intelligence and diplomatic support.

China has maintained a strictly nonmilitary role in the Gaza conflict, positioning itself as a diplomatic mediator and the champion of Palestinian statehood, limiting its support to humanitarian aid and UN advocacy for the two-state solution.

Despite its all-weather strategic partnership with Venezuela, China shifted quickly from active reinforcement of the regime to strategic damage control following the US military intervention and the capture of Maduro. It has frozen new investments and is focusing on recouping the billions of dollars in outstanding loans from the successor government.

In the case of the Iran war, China has maintained a complex hedging strategy. Again, officially declaring neutrality, and acting as a mediator, Beijing has nevertheless provided indirect and dual-use assistance enabling Iran to boost its economic and combat resilience.

China is Iran's most critical economic partner, effectively underwriting the regime's ability to fund military operations. It has continued to purchase roughly 90% of Iranian oil exports, and facilitates financial transactions for Iran outside the dollar-dominated SWIFT system. As in Ukraine, rather than overt arms shipments, Beijing is providing dual-use materials essential for Iran's missile and drone programs such as semiconductors, chemicals and components.

Furthermore, it has provided critical and targeting and surveillance data using its commercial sector, including satellite imagery and navigation, and has even launched a commercial reconnaissance satellite for Tehran. Keeping its own interest in bringing the war to a early end in focus, China has played a major part in helping convince Iran to accept a ceasefire, and has consistently used its position in the UN Security Council to block resolutions aimed at increasing pressure on Iran.

China's playbook clearly sets aside military operations as a means of addressing risky involvements in conflicts with strong antagonists.

## **Indo-Pacific Ramifications**

The Chinese playbook has not gone unnoticed in the broad stretch of the Indo-Pacific. The developments in the Strait of Hormuz have also brought into focus Beijing's Malacca dilemma, with respect to any future ambitions it may harbour of dominating the Indian Ocean Region. Though QUAD may have currently taken a backseat, new mini-laterals have come into play to disabuse Beijing of notions of any military cakewalk in the region.

### *Western Pacific*

In the Western Pacific, major powers such as Japan, Australia and the Republic of Korea are all upping their military spending, acquiring offensive weapons and platforms, and rapidly enhancing strategic linkages and interoperability, despite frowns and threats from Beijing. Although China's military might remains a major concern, there appears to be the beginnings of military defiance, based on increasing evidence of Beijing's reticence to risk a major military confrontation.

With a new and popular prime minister at the helm, Japan is working on constitutional change, pre-emptive strike capability, export of military hardware, and even nuclear submarine propulsion. Surely and steadily, Tokyo seems to be increasingly willing to raise the military stakes for China should it choose armed conflict in pursuit of its objectives.

The Republic of Korea is recalibrating and strengthening its alliance with the US, expanding beyond traditional military security to include economic initiatives and critical technology. It is moving forward to build nuclear powered attack submarines in the US, following a landmark agreement with the US late last year, and is improving linkages with Japan through an expanded trilateral security mechanism with the United States.

Besides existing linkages with the US and New Zealand, Australia is rapidly strengthening military partnership with Japan and has recently signed up for importing seven Mogami class frigates. It is exploring Tokyo partnering AUKUS Pillar

2, which would also include the ROK. Canberra and Seoul are also currently in the midst of finalising an updated bilateral defence agreement.

These three major powers of the Western Pacific are increasingly supportive of the Philippines and Vietnam in their efforts to keep China's grey zone tactics at bay. Multilateral and mini-lateral defence arrangements and groupings are on the rise such as the IP 4 NATO partners, including Japan, Australia, ROK, and New Zealand, aiming to address China's influence and North Korean provocations in the Western Pacific. Even Asean nations are shedding appeasement and constant concern about offending Beijing, with Jakarta planning to acquire an aircraft carrier, which would up the ante in the South China Sea.

With the US distracted by the Iran war, there appears to be a window of opportunity for Beijing in respect of Taiwan. However, the conflict has also given a sobering demonstration of modern hyper-speed warfare, that is likely to give China pause. The likelihood of military invasion of Taiwan appears minimal, with Beijing shifting towards unification through the political courting of Taipei opposition parties, and by all means short of war. Keeping to its playbook, China seems increasingly cautious about the immediate risks of a high-tech kinetic invasion.

As far as North Korea is concerned, it is likely that Pyongyang will double down on increasing production of drones and missiles and continue increasing its nuclear capabilities as a permanent insurance policy against invasion. However, the high intensity pre-emptive strikes by the US and Israel, the assassination of Khomeini, and China's military hands-off policy on Iran will need to be factored by the DPRK regime.

### *India Ocean Region (IOR)*

Neither navigation through the Arctic Circle, nor a multitude of oil pipelines, nor the hypothetical KRA canal, can mitigate Beijing's Malacca dilemma, both in terms of movement of energy and trade, as well as of warships and military assets to and from the Indian Ocean.

In an era of transparent battle-spaces and the consequent possibilities of interdiction by relatively cheap attack weaponry, transit of ships through the Indonesian straits during periods of hostilities and armed conflict with any major Indian Ocean powers would be an extremely difficult endeavour. This is particularly so given India's military assets positioned in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as well as possible military operations from Australia's Christmas and Cocos islands which are geographically located off the Indonesian archipelago, with Diego Garcia further afield in the IOR.

Even if it were to come to pass, transit of ships through a KRA canal cut in the Thailand land mass would be equally, if not more, difficult than passage through

Malacca, as armed surveillance would make interdiction of ships exiting the canal equally opportune.

It must be underlined that for extra-regional warships present in the IOR during any hostilities with a major power such as India, the Indian Ocean is a virtual trap, as egress would be as difficult as ingress. Any enemy assets in the IOR would be subject to the sustained power of the of the Indian Navy conducting combat operations in the entire IOR from extremely strong bases on its mainland and islands.

As far as the nations of the Indian Ocean littoral are concerned, including those in Africa, West Asia, South Asia and island countries, as also in the hinterland of Central Asia, partnership and alliance with China may need revaluation as far as any military linkages are concerned. It is more than likely that the Iran war will make them balance economic interaction with Beijing with military ties with powers other than China.

## **Conclusion**

Beijing appears to have concluded that its military power is best used for deterrence against and hypothetical parity with the US, as well as imposing fear through potential use of overwhelming force against smaller nations on its periphery.

It could be argued that even without global expeditionary capability, China could still be a great power through economic, technological and diplomatic means, such as by dominating supply chains, critical minerals and niche technologies, and through initiatives such as BRI and non-Western groupings such as BRICS and SCO. The historical record indicates otherwise, and the jury must necessarily be out in regard to this proposition, as the willingness to risk the use of force is an integral attribute of great powers.

Beijing's seeming inclination to eschew combat, both outside the Western Pacific, as well as against any strong military opposition in its immediate neighbourhood, has been underscored further by its actions and inaction during the Iran war.

In sum, though China is a powerful and proximate actor with whom most nations of the Indo-Pacific have strong economic dependencies, Beijing's display of military reticence appears to have given a boost to balance of power strategies in the Indo-Pacific through greater military capability alliances and alignment. Given the current vacuum in the top ranks of China's military leadership, there appears to be a window of opportunity for major powers of the region to collectively balance Beijing's military might and coercive threats, and to stabilise the economically vibrant swath of the Indo-Pacific.

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