ChinaMED Project

Pubblicazioni anno progettuale 2025-26

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Le opinioni contenute nelle presenti pubblicazioni sono espressione degli autori e non rappresentano necessariamente le posizioni del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.

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Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale

ChinaMed Project, T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute
Raccolta pubblicazioni - anno progettuale 2025/2026

- **pp. 2-7: Sintesi delle attività svolte dal progetto ChinaMed nell'a.p. 2025/2026**
  - Elenco e link a tutti gli interventi sui media, pubblicazioni e ai *ChinaMed Observer*, articoli di analisi dei principali contenuti pubblicati dai media cinesi e dei Paesi dell'area mediterranea sulle relazioni sino-mediterranee.
- **pp. 8–26: *China's Energy Strategy: The Case of North Africa***
  - Giorgia Facchini, Mariateresa Natuzzi e Bianca Pasquier. A cura di Enrico Fardella e Andrea Ghiselli. 23 ottobre 2025. Torino: T.wai. Disponibile anche all'indirizzo: https://www.chinamed.it/publications/chinas-energy-strategy-the-case-of-north-africa
    Il rapporto analizza il ruolo della Cina nel settore energetico nordafricano. Tradizionalmente concentrata sulle importazioni di petrolio, Pechino sta ampliando il proprio coinvolgimento includendo una crescente attenzione alle energie rinnovabili.
- **pp. 27–55: *China–Middle East Relations After the Twelve-Day War: An Analysis of Chinese, Israeli, Iranian and Arab Expert Debates***
  - Amanda Chen, Andrea Ghiselli, Theo Nencini, Francesco Scala, Veronica Turrini, and Miriam Verzellino. A cura di Enrico Fardella e Leonardo Bruni. 5 novembre 2025. Torino, T.wai. Disponibile all'indirizzo: https://www.chinamed.it/publications/china-middle-east-relations-after-the-twelve-day-war-an-analysis-of-chinese-israeli-iranian-and-arab-expert-debates La Guerra dei Dodici Giorni ha profondamente trasformato gli equilibri di sicurezza regionali, con implicazioni per il ruolo e l'influenza della Cina in Medio Oriente. Attraverso l'analisi dei dibattiti accademici e mediatici sviluppatisi in Cina e nei Paesi della regione, nonché delle dichiarazioni ufficiali di Pechino, questo report esplora l'evoluzione delle percezioni riguardo alla presenza, ruolo e influenza della Cina nel contesto mediorientale.
- **pp. 56–80: *The Sino-Moroccan Rapprochement Analysis of Geoeconomic Convergence, Diplomatic Calibration and Media Narratives in a Changing Maghreb***
  - Bianca Pasquier e Imane Ezzehouany. A cura di Amanda Chen e Leonardo Bruni. 26 giugno 2026. Torino: T.wai. Disponibile anche all'indirizzo: https://www.chinamed.it/publications/the-sino-moroccan-rapprochement-an-analysis-of-geoeconomic-convergence-diplomatic-calibration-and-media-narratives-in-a-changing-maghreb
    Il rapporto esamina le relazioni tra Cina e Marocco e le loro implicazioni per le catene di approvvigionamento, la questione del Sahara Occidentale e gli equilibri di potere regionali.
- **pp. 81–98: *La mediazione cinese nel conflitto israelo-palestinese: sfide e opportunità***
  - Xiaoyu Lu e Amanda Chen, China's mediation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: challenges and opportunities, on "OrizzonteCina" 2/2025, pp. 49-65, doi: 10.82002/119546 https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.82002/119546
    Questo articolo scientifico analizza il ruolo della Cina come mediatore in Medio Oriente dal 2022 fino al cessate il fuoco nella Striscia di Gaza dell'ottobre 2025. Lo studio esamina come Pechino abbia cercato di affermarsi come alternativa alle potenze occidentali, facendo leva sulla propria flessibilità diplomatica, su un approccio inclusivo e sui canali di dialogo mantenuti con la leadership e le diverse fazioni palestinesi.
- **pp. 99–128: *La Chine en Moyen-Orient à l'issue de la guerre des douze jours: une analyse des débats d'experts chinois, israéliens, iraniens et arabes***
  - Traduzione in lingua francese preparata da Bianca Pasquier del report *China–Middle East Relations After the Twelve-Day War*. Disponibile all'indirizzo: https://www.chinamed.it/publications/la-chine-en-moyen-orient-a-lissue-de-la-guerre-des-douze-jours-une-analyse-des-debats-dexperts-chinois-israeliens-iraniens-et-arabes

Nel seguito sono riepilogati i principali risultati conseguiti, articolati per tipologia di attività:

- Pubblicazione di **n. 15 ChinaMed Observer** con sintesi analitica dei principali articoli pubblicati sui media cinesi e dei paesi dell'area mediterranea riguardo alle relazioni sino-mediterranee:
  1. Diminishing U.S. Influence? Chinese Official Positions and Expert Debate on the Israel-Iran Conflict, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/diminishing-us-influence-chinese-official-positions-and-expert-debate-on-the-israel-iran-conflict
  2. From Estrangement to Reassessment? Israeli Media and Expert Views on China After the Twelve-Day War, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/from-estrangement-to-reassessment-israeli-media-and-expert-views-on-china-after-the-twelve-day-war
  3. An Unreliable Friend: Arab Perspectives on China After the Twelve-Day War, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/an-unreliable-friend-arab-perspectives-on-china-after-the-twelve-day-war
  4. Iranian Experts Debate the Future of the Iran-China Relationship After the Twelve-Day War, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/iranian-experts-debate-the-future-of-the-iran-china-relationship-after-the-twelve-day-war
  5. Mediterranean Anxieties over the Sino-Moroccan Rapprochement: French, Algerian, and Tunisian Media Perspectives, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/mediterranean-anxieties-over-the-sino-moroccan-rapprochement-french-algerian-and-tunisian-media-perspectives
  6. From Geoeconomics to a Chinese Diplomatic Shift on the Western Sahara? Moroccan Press Coverage of FM Bourita's Visit to Beijing, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/from-geoeconomics-to-a-chinese-diplomatic-shift-on-the-western-sahara-moroccan-press-coverage-of-fm-bouritas-visit-to-beijing
  7. All Eyes on Gaza: China's View on Trump's 20-Point Peace Plan, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/all-eyes-on-gaza-chinas-view-on-trumps-20-point-peace-plan
  8. An "Emotional Shift" in Israel? Rapprochement with Taipei during the Gaza War, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/an-emotional-shift-in-israel-rapprochement-with-taipei-during-the-gaza-war
  9. China and the Libyan Crisis: Maintaining a Foot in the Door in a Changing Region, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/china-and-the-libyan-crisis-maintaining-a-foot-in-the-door-in-a-changing-region
  10. How Chinese Experts are Reacting to the American-Israeli Strikes on Iran, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/how-chinese-experts-are-reacting-to-the-american-israeli-strikes-on-iran
  11. Israeli Experts Converge: China Can't Afford to Back Iran, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/israeli-experts-converge-china-cant-afford-to-back-iran
  12. Regime Survival and International Implications: China's Perspective on the Iran Crisis, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/regime-survival-and-international-implications-chinas-perspective-on-the-iran-crisis
  13. The Real Victor: The Arab Media Debate on China and the Iran War, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/the-real-victor-the-arab-media-debate-on-china-and-the-iran-war
  14. From Neutrality to Strategic Ambiguity: China and the Western Sahara Conflict, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/from-neutrality-to-strategic-ambiguity-china-and-the-western-sahara-conflict
  15. China's Industrial Footprint in Morocco: The Case of Tanger Tech, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/chinas-industrial-footprint-in-morocco-the-case-of-tanger-tech

Oltre ai consueti ChinaMed Observer, sono state realizzate due interviste di approfondimento condotte dai nostri ricercatori con esperti della regione. Questi contributi sono stati introdotti in particolare nei casi di Iran e Palestina, dove la limitata disponibilità di fonti stampa ha reso necessario integrare l'analisi con testimonianze dirette e valutazioni specialistiche:

1. Interview: Why China Has Not and Will Not Come to Iran's Rescue w/ Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/interview-why-china-has-not-and-will-not-come-to-irans-rescue-w-esfandyar-batmanghelidj
2. Interview: A Palestinian Perspective - The Weight of Expectation on China in the Middle East w/ Razan Shawamreh, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/interview-a-palestinian-perspective---the-weight-of-expectation-on-china-in-the-middle-east-w-razan-shawamreh

Le due interviste sono state considerate a tutti gli effetti parte integrante della serie ChinaMed Observer poiché sostituiscono due numeri tradizionali nei casi in cui la scarsità di fonti aperte ha richiesto una metodologia basata su interviste ad esperti.

Infine, è stata pubblicata un'analisi tematica sulla Serbia, un formato atipico rispetto ai consueti ChinaMed Observer, realizzata come studio pilota per sviluppare una metodologia di mappatura dei principali stakeholder coinvolti nella formulazione delle politiche nazionali nei confronti della Cina. Il caso studio costituisce un modello metodologico replicabile per futuri studi dedicati a Iran, Turchia, Arabia Saudita, Israele, Italia, Spagna, Francia, Marocco ed Egitto.

1. A Year and a Half After the Novi Sad Tragedy: Who Drives China-Backed Infrastructure in Serbia?, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/a-year-and-a-half-after-the-novi-sad-tragedy-who-drives-china-backed-infrastructure-in-serbia

- Svolgimento di **attività seminariali per un totale di 10 incontri**, comprendenti:
  1. **n. 1 serie di seminari** (8 seminari in totale) sulla presenza cinese nel Mediterraneo nell'ambito della Belt and Road Initiative: "China and the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present" (8 seminari), ottobre-dicembre 2025, ChinaMed e Università di Napoli "L'Orientale", https://www.chinamed.it/event/china-and-the-middle-east-from-the-cold-war-to-the-present-webinar-series---fall-2025
  2. Svolgimento di **n. 2 seminari** (11 giugno 2025) all'interno della TOChina Summer School sulla presenza cinese nel Mediterraneo allargato con il contributo di esperti provenienti dalla regione
     1. "China as a mediation superpower: norms, practices, narratives" con Prof. Lu Xiaoyu (Peking University) https://www.chinamed.it/event/china-as-a-mediation-superpower-norms-practices-narratives
     2. "What horizons for China-Gulf relations?" con Najla Alzarooni (University of Sharjah) https://www.chinamed.it/event/what-horizons-for-china-gulf-relations

- **Pubblicazioni accademiche** relative al ruolo della Cina nel Mediterraneo allargato:
  1. Lu X., & Chen A., (2025) "China's mediation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: challenges and opportunities", *OrizzonteCina* 16 (2), https://doi.org/10.82002/119546
  2. Alsudairi, M., & Ghiselli, A., (8 agosto 2025), *Narratives of Sino-Middle Eastern Futures: In the Eye of the Beholder*, Cambridge University Press, https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/narratives-of-sinomiddle-eastern-futures/9ED65BBD5309CF1D7943B0B604E5F8A5

3. Facchini, G., Natuzzi, M., & Pasquier, B., (23 ottobre 2025), *China's Energy Strategy: The Case of North Africa*, Torino, T.wai, https://www.chinamed.it/publications/chinas-energy-strategy-the-case-of-north-africa
4. Enrico Fardella & Leonardo Bruni [eds.], (5 novembre 2025), *China–Middle East Relations After the Twelve-Day War: An Analysis of Chinese, Israeli, Iranian and Arab Expert Debates*, Torino, T.wai, https://www.chinamed.it/publications/china-middle-east-relations-after-the-twelve-day-war-an-analysis-of-chinese-israeli-iranian-and-arab-expert-debates
    a. È disponibile una traduzione di questo research note in lingua francese: https://www.chinamed.it/publications/la-chine-en-moyen-orient-a-lissue-de-la-guerre-des-douze-jours-une-analyse-des-debats-dexperts-chinois-israeliens-iraniens-et-arabes
5. Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni [eds.], (26 giugno 2026), The Sino-Moroccan Rapprochement Analysis of Geoeconomic Convergence, Diplomatic Calibration and Media Narratives in a Changing Maghreb, Torino, T.wai, https://www.chinamed.it/publications/the-sino-moroccan-rapprochement-an-analysis-of-geoeconomic-convergence-diplomatic-calibration-and-media-narratives-in-a-changing-maghreb

- **Interventi sui media** relativi al ruolo della Cina nel Mediterraneo allargato:

1. Fardella, E., (13 luglio 2025), *Perché la Cina non può permettersi una Russia sconfitta. L'analisi di Fardella*, Formiche, https://formiche.net/2025/07/cina-russia-guerra-stati-uniti-analisi-di-fardella/#btmcnt
2. Ghiselli, A., (5 agosto 2025), *Did the Israel-Iran war expose China's Middle East policy?*, Atlantic Council, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/did-the-israel-iran-war-expose-chinas-middle-east-policy/
3. Zhao, Z., (8 agosto 2025), *Iran looks to tap into China's BeiDou navigation system to plug security gaps*, South China Morning Post, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3321043/iran-looks-tap-chinas-beidou-navigation-system-plug-security-gaps
4. Fardella, E., Rossi, E., (28 agosto 2025), *China's Strategic Outlook on Ukraine and Global Equilibrium: A Dive into Beijing's Pro-Russian Neutrality*, Choice, https://chinaobservers.eu/chinas-strategic-outlook-on-ukraine-and-global-equilibrium-a-dive-into-beijings-pro-russian-neutrality/
5. Yan, S., (3 settembre 2025), *How China is secretly arming Russia*, The Telegraph, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/09/03/how-china-is-secretly-arming-russia/
6. Fardella, E., (9 ottobre 2025), *Italia-Cina, la postura di Roma tra atlantismo e pragmatismo. L'analisi di Fardella*, Formiche, https://formiche.net/2025/10/italia-cina-la-postura-di-roma-tra-atlantismo-e-pragmatismo-lanalisi-di-fardella/
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8. Alsudairi, M., Ghiselli, A., (14 ottobre 2025), *China-Middle East Cooperation: In the Eye of the Beholder*, The Diplomat, https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/china-middle-east-cooperation-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder/
9. Fardella, E., Pettis, M., (25 ottobre 2025), *Il peso cinese sull'economia europea. La versione di Pettis e Fardella*, Formiche, https://formiche.net/2025/10/il-peso-cinese-sulleconomia-europea-la-versione-di-pettis-e-fardella/#btmcnt
10. Turrini, V., (22 novembre 2025), *Cina-Iran, cosa c'è dietro la freddezza di Pechino. Report ChinaMed*, Formiche, https://formiche.net/2025/11/cina-iran-cosa-ce-dietro-alla-freddezza-di-pechino-report-chinamed/#btmcnt

11. Verzellino, M., (23 novembre 2025), *La strategia digitale di Pechino in Nord Africa. El Kadi analizza rischi e opportunità*, Formiche, https://formiche.net/2025/11/la-strategia-digitale-di-pechino-in-nord-africa-el-kadi-analizza-rischi-e-opportunita/?amp
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13. Facchini, G., (30 novembre 2025), *La Cina come mediatore in Medio Oriente. L'analisi di Jesse Marks*, Formiche, https://formiche.net/2025/11/la-cina-come-mediatore-in-medio-oriente-lanalisi-di-jesse-marks/#btmcnt
14. Fardella, E., Pettis, M., (3 dicembre 2025), *How Europe can harness its economic power*, Engelsberg Ideas, https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/how-europe-can-harness-its-economic-power/
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27. Ramzy, A., (3 marzo 2026), *Why China Is Doing So Little to Help a Friend Under Fire*, The Wall Street Journal, https://www.wsj.com/world/iran-china-war-strategy-4e0132fc?st=bVpVQR&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink

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37. De la Merced, M. J., Gallogly, N., Kessler, S., McGregor, G., Mount, I., O'Keefe, B., Ross Sorkin, A., Testa, J., Warner, B., (9 marzo 2026), *Investors and Trump Face an Iran Dilemma*, The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/09/business/dealbook/markets-trump-iran.html
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CHINA'S ENERGY STRATEGY

The Case of North Africa

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Edited by
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INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINA*MED* PROJECT

The wider Mediterranean is a vast region that stretches from the Iranian Plateau to the Strait of Gibraltar, from the Alps to the Horn of Africa. It is an area characterized by longterm trends, but it is also the epicenter of centrifugal forces that connect Europe, Africa, and Asia. Our research team at ChinaMed Project analyses how the dynamics of this region intersect with one of the most consequential macro-trends of this century: the transition of China, with its 1.4 billion people, from the periphery to the center of the international system.

Our research platform's mission is to track and investigate how China's presence in the region is changing the balance of power on the ground in a nuanced, yet incremental fashion. We achieve this by collecting data and creating indicators that analyze China's growing economic, commercial, and security ties with the countries of the wider Mediterranean, which we make publicly available at ChinaMed Data.

Moreover, we publish the ChinaMed Observer, sharp and focused analyses of the media discourses in China and the countries of the wider Mediterranean region on the most recent events and the most pressing trends in Sino-Mediterranean relations.

We also actively engage with and participate in the expanding connections between China and the wider Mediterranean through a range of academic initiatives including: the China Management & Business Program, scientific publications, and academic events. The ChinaMed Project, a part of the TOChina Hub developed by the University of Turin and promoted by the Torino World Affairs Institute, carries out these initiatives and its research through its partnerships such as those with the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme at Durham University, the China-Global South Project, and the Asian Studies Unit of the Research Department of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. ChinaMed also enjoys the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Fondazione CRT, one of Italy's largest charitable foundations.

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It is a pleasure to express our gratitude for the support provided to our project – in accordance with Article 23 bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967 – to the Unit for Analysis, Policy Planning, Statistics and Historical Documentation of the Directorate General for Public and Cultural Diplomacy of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, its brilliant head Counsellor Giuliana Del Papa, and her valuable team. It goes without saying that the views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China's role in North Africa's energy sector is undergoing a transformation. Once primarily focused on oil imports, Beijing is now expanding its engagement to include a growing emphasis on green energy. This shift reflects both China's domestic pivot toward renewables and North Africa's urgent need for energy diversification and climate resilience.

Since the 1990s, China's energy policy has evolved dramatically. After becoming a net oil importer in 1993, the country began investing heavily in foreign energy partnerships. Domestically, China has moved from a dependency on coal toward a more diversified energy mix, underpinned by major legal and institutional reforms, rapid technological advancements, and a drive to lead in global renewable markets, especially in wind, solar, and hydropower. As China's oil demand levels off, its international energy strategy increasingly prioritizes clean energy cooperation.

In North Africa, although China's overall energy footprint remains smaller than that of Europe, its presence is steadily expanding, particularly in countries with clear energy transition strategies and conducive investment environments. In Egypt, Chinese firms are leading major solar and wind energy projects. In Morocco and Tunisia, partnerships in renewable energy and green technology manufacturing signal strategic alignment with national decarbonization goals. By contrast, Algeria and Libya, despite their vast energy potential, present more challenging environments due to governance issues, opaque regulatory systems, and political instability. In these contexts, Chinese companies have adopted a cautious, selective approach, engaging in limited fossil fuel and renewable ventures while avoiding large-scale commitments. Overall, China's engagement in North Africa is nuanced and varies significantly across the region. Its approach is shaped by each country's institutional capacity and political risk profile. For deeper cooperation to materialize, North African governments will need to ensure transparent regulations, predictable investment frameworks, and credible clean energy transition plans, conditions under which China is more likely to expand its role significantly.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, China's presence in Africa has expanded significantly, evolving from limited engagement to comprehensive and multifaceted partnerships across the continent. While trade volumes and Chinese investments have grown steadily in various sectors, the energy relationship between China and North African countries remains comparatively underdeveloped. Historically rooted in fossil fuel cooperation, these ties are now gradually shifting and expanding to include various forms of engagement in the renewable energy sector, reflecting broader global trends and domestic policy shifts in both China and North Africa.

Against this background, this report seeks to explore the evolving dynamics of this relationship by examining the energy strategies pursued by China and North African states. The first section explores the evolution of China's energy strategy and its intersection with foreign policy objectives. The second section provides an outline of the North African energy landscape and China's current role within it. Then, the third section examines the specific trends in China's energy engagement with Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco. Finally, the fourth section summarizes the main findings, highlighting possible future developments alongside the challenges and opportunities facing the actors involved.

The Evolution of China's Energy Strategy

China's energy strategy has undergone profound transformations over recent decades. Until the early 1990s, the country enjoyed a high degree of self-reliance in crude oil production, benefiting from the discovery of large domestic oil fields in the late 1950s. However, the premature depletion of these reserves forced China to rethink its approach to energy security. This section analyzes how China responded to the oil price shock of the early 1990s and explores the strategies the country has adopted since then. In particular, it examines the role played by refineries in the crude oil sector, as well as the development of Beijing's renewable energy policies and their surrounding legal framework.

The origins of China's modern petroleum industry date back to the 1950s, when Beijing launched initiatives to locate domestic oilfields. In 1959, China discovered the Daqing Oil Field, the country's largest oil deposit, followed soon after by other major finds such as the Shengli and Dagang fields. These discoveries enabled China to achieve its goal of self-sufficiency in oil production, and by the 1970s, Beijing gradually started exporting oil to countries like Japan, North Korea and Vietnam.[1] Since China's domestic production consisted mainly of sweet (i.e., low-sulfur) crude oil, the state invested in refining infrastructure designed specifically to process solely this type of oil. Another reason contributing to this focus was technological: following the Sino-Soviet split and the departure of Soviet experts from China, local engineers lacked the knowledge necessary to process sour (i.e., high-sulfur) crude oil.

While this limitation did not pose an immediate constraint, it became increasingly problematic as China's economy boomed in the 1980s. By 1993, domestic oil production could no longer meet rapidly rising demand, with China becoming a net importer.

Initially, the Chinese government viewed crude oil imports as a temporary measure while initiatives were being launched to find new domestic reserves. Confident in these efforts, policymakers showed little interest in building new refineries, especially those capable of processing sour crude oil. As a result, Chinese imports during this period mostly consisted of sweet crude. At the same time, the newly reformed national oil companies (NOCs), especially Sinopec, CNOOC and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), began actively seeking alternatives abroad, focusing on countries that produce sweet crude. Notably, these initiatives predated Jiang Zemin's *Going Global* strategy. It could even be argued that the NOCs were the true pioneers of this outward-looking approach, with the central government merely formalizing a strategy that was already taking shape on the ground.

It soon became clear that foreign oil imports would become a "new normal," as domestic demand for crude oil and petroleum products continued to surge while no major new fields were discovered.[2] This realization led to a major reorientation of Beijing's approach to the NOCs. Although the central leadership initially resisted allowing the NOCs to upgrade their refineries to process sour crude in the 1990s, it eventually recognized the necessity of such investments as well as diversifying suppliers.[3] The widening price between sweet and sour crude further led Beijing to recognize the urgency of such investments, despite upgrading and building refineries being an expensive and long process.

As a result of this increased processing capacity, China surpassed the United States in the 2000s to become the world's largest energy consumer. This was driven not only by oil imports from its traditional suppliers such as Libya, Sudan, Angola and Oman but also a rapid expansion in the imports of cheaper sour crude from countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.[4] This shift is reflected in the changing composition of China's crude imports: in 2005, the ratio of sweet to sour crude stood at 74% to 26%, while by 2015, the balance had shifted to 44% sweet and 56% sour.

Over the past decade, China's crude oil import patterns have continued to evolve. According to the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University,[5] by 2015, the Middle East rose to account for approximately 50% of China's oil

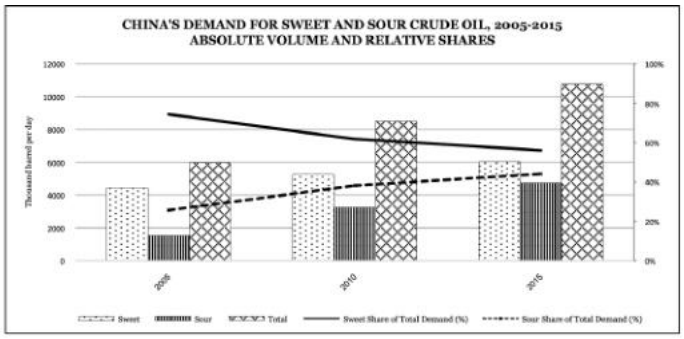
[1] Per Högselius, "The Saudi Arabia of the Far East? China's rise and fall as an oil exporter," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 2, no. 3 (2015): 411-418. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2015.04.004.

[2] Inwook Kim, "Refining the Prize: Chinese Oil Refineries and Its Energy Security," *Pacific Review* 29, no. 3 (2016): 361–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2015.1022584.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Christophe de Gouvello (co-ord.), Noureddine Berrah (main auth.), Yanqin Song, et al., "Renewable Energy Development in China: A 40-Year China-World Bank Partnership," The World Bank, 2021, https://documents.worldbank.org/pt/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/162841638508597254/renewable-energy-development-in-china-a-40-year-china-world-bank-partnership.



Source: IHS Markit

total imports, a proportion that has since remained relatively stable (however, accurately estimating the origin of China's oil imports is challenging due to Iranian imports not being officially declared). In contrast, imports from Africa dropped from 19.2% in 2015 to 8.8% in 2024. This decline is primarily due to decreased oil extraction and exports from Angola, Sudan and South Sudan. As of 2024, Russia has emerged as China's biggest crude oil supplier, accounting for 20% of total imports, followed by Saudi Arabia (14%), Malaysia (13%), Iraq (11%) and Oman (7%).[6]

At present, China stands on the cusp of a major transition that is likely to have profound and lasting effects on its energy strategy and foreign policy. Between 2003 and 2023, China's oil demand grew at an average annual rate of 5.8%.[7] However, projections for 2024 estimate oil demand growth between -1.6% and 2%, with a similar decline expected in 2025.[8] In December 2024, Sinopec announced that China's oil consumption is set to peak by 2027.

One of the key factors behind this change is the development of China's renewable energy sector and the electrification of its economy. For example, China's total electric vehicle fleet has already displaced over one million barrels per day of implied oil demand, an amount roughly equivalent to Oman's daily oil production. This figure is expected to rise by an additional 600,000 barrels per day over the next year.[9]

China's current energy trajectory is the result of a long journey that can be broadly divided into four major phases.[10] The first phase, lasting up to 1993, was characterized by a persistent imbalance between energy demand and supply, driven by the rapid economic growth following the introduction of economic reforms in the late 1970s. This period saw a heavy reliance on coal, leading to severe environmental issues such as high levels of pollution and widespread deforestation.[11] To address the issue of power shortages in rural areas, the government implemented a decentralized, small-scale renewable energy system comprising mainly of small hydropower projects, biogas, efficient stoves and solar water heaters. Wind and photovoltaic technologies also played a minor role in this early stage.

Although hydropower capacity expanded significantly during this period, its share of total installed generation capacity declined from 31% in 1980 to 24% in 1994 due to the rapid growth in fossil fuel-based generation. However, through foreign investments, particularly the Lubuge Hydropower Project in Yunnan province, China gained expertise in modern project management practices and engineering, paving the way for future large-scale hydropower projects.[13]

The second phase began in 1994 with the adoption of China's *Agenda 21*,[14] which, for the first time, identified renewable energy as an independent energy sub-sector, as well as a key pillar of China's development strategy.[15] This marked a turning point in China's energy strategy, based also on a growing awareness of the need to improve efficiency across the energy sector. For instance, although the developing wind power industry experienced growth in terms of both energy production and installation, Chinese wind farms underperformed compared to those built by international manufacturers. In response, Beijing introduced new market-based policies and further opened the sector to both domestic and foreign investors.

Beyond the wind industry, there was broad consensus that China lacked an adequate legal framework for renewable energy, and that existing laws and regulations were poorly implemented and scarcely respected. This led to the development of a new legal and regulatory framework. Notably, in the mid-90s, the government launched the Renewable Energy Development Project (REDP), widely considered as the catalyst for photovoltaic development in China.[16] The REDP reinforced the country's commitment to renewable energy and paved the way for the China Renewable Energy Scale-up Program (CRESP), whose first phase, initiated in the 2000s, consisted in creating a legal, regulatory, and policy framework for scaling up renewable energy development.

To sum up, the key distinctions between the pre- and post-1994 periods are the transition from a planned to market-based economy, the creation of a legal framework able to support the growth of the renewable energy sector within that market-based system, and a shift in focus from addressing rural needs to aligning renewable energy development with broader development priorities.[17]

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[6] Erica Downs, "China's Oil Demand, Imports and Supply Security," Center on Global Energy Policy, April 30, 2025, https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/publications/chinas-oil-demand-imports-and-supply-security/.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Roger Quinn, "Electric Trucks and the Future of Chinese Oil Demand," Rhodium Group. July 1, 2025, https://rhg.com/research/electric-trucks-and-the-future-of-chinese-oil-demand/.

[10] See note 5, The World Bank, 2021.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

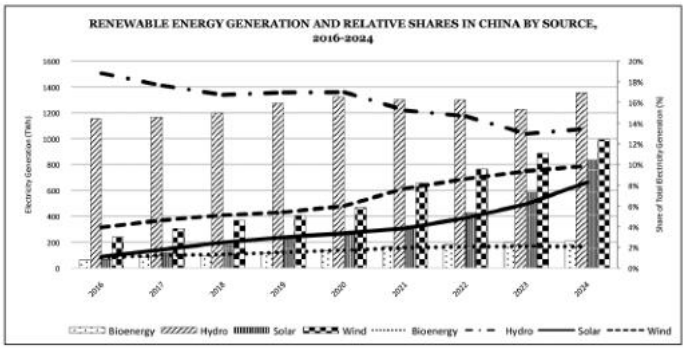
[14] Ministry of Ecology and Environment – The People's Republic of China, "China's Agenda 21: from Strategy to Action," October 3, 1997, http://www.cciced.net/ccicedPhoneEN/Events/AGMeeting/1997_4009/meetingplace_4010/201609/t20160922_89428.html.

[15] See note 5, The World Bank, 2021.

[16] The World Bank, "China - Renewable Energy Development Project," Project Performance Assessment Report No. 54860, June 1, 2010, https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/151251468023956810/china-renewable-energy-development-project.

[17] See note 5, The World Bank, 2021.

These institutional and policy shifts, together with the enactment of the Renewable Energy Law (REL) in 2005 (amended in 2009), marked the beginning of the third stage (2005-2017). During this stage, the share of renewables in the national energy mix expanded steadily, competing with coal for dominance. Hydropower continued to lead, followed by wind and solar photovoltaic, and to a lesser extent, biomass and geothermal energy.[18] This period also saw the globalization of China's renewable energy industry. Indeed, the expansion of the Chinese renewable industry helped lower international unitary costs, making renewable technologies more affordable for other developing countries. By the 2010s, China had become the global leader in solar photovoltaic supply chains.



Source: Ember - Yearly Electricity Data (2025)

The fourth and current stage began in 2018 with China's National Energy Administration issuing the *Notice on Matters Related to Photovoltaic Power Generation*.[19] This initiated a new era for China's renewable energy development, characterized by the scaling back of subsidies, greater reliance on market-oriented trends, and improved efficiency in wind and photovoltaic capacity.[20] These measures spurred further growth. Following the approval of the renewable energy-focused 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), which set ambitious targets, China's wind power generation increased by over 300% between 2016 and 2024, reaching 991.60 TWh[21]. During the same period, China's solar output similarly surged from 66.53 TWh to 834.10 TWh.[22] According to a 2024 report by the International Hydropower Association, China also maintained its global lead in the hydropower sector, with a total installed capacity of 412,540 MW in 2023, accounting for nearly 29% of the world's total.[23] Hydropower remains China's largest source of clean electricity, contributing 13% to the national power supply in 2024.[24] Given projections of increased rainfall in the coming years,[25] China's hydropower capacity is expected to increase, further supporting the country's efforts to peak its greenhouse gas emissions.

Beijing's push for renewable energy has also been integrated into its foreign policy, including its engagement with North Africa and the Middle East. This approach was formalized with the "1+2+3" cooperation model, proposed in the 2016 *Arab Policy Paper*, published by the State Council and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[26] This framework identifies energy, both traditional and renewable sources, as a pillar of China-Arab relations. It was designed to diversify China's energy partnerships and enhance its energy security, but also to support the green transition in the region, securing space for Chinese firms and technology. This renewable energy-focused policy built upon earlier measures, for example, the People's Bank of China's 2016 *Guidelines for Establishing the Green Financial System*, which encouraged enterprises to increase investments in the green energy sector, both at home and abroad.[27]

As a result, China has become increasingly involved in renewable energy projects across the region, where countries such as Morocco, Egypt and Jordan are emerging as driving forces in the regional transition toward clean energy. A notable example is China's 2019 acquisition of a 49% stake in ACWA Power, a leading Saudi Arabian energy company, through the Silk Road Fund. This strategic investment also gave China a stake in major projects like the Noor Solar Power Station in Morocco, the world's largest concentrated solar power plant.
To conclude, China's energy strategy has undergone a profound transformation, shaped by both changing economic needs, such as those following the economic reforms of the 1980s, and strategic shifts toward renewable energy and electrification. Inevitably, these changes have also shaped Beijing's foreign policy priorities, including its growing engagement with North Africa.

North Africa's Energy Landscape and China's Role

While the previous section focused on the evolution of China's energy policy and its implications for foreign policy, this section turns to the North African energy landscape and China's growing involvement.

North Africa is characterized by a highly diverse energy landscape. Some countries, such as Algeria and Libya, are major producers and exporters of hydrocarbons. Others, like

[18] Ibid.

[19] National Development and Reform Commission, "Guānyú 2018 nián guāngfú fādiàn yǒuguān shìxiàng de tōngzhī (fā gǎi néngyuán〔2018〕823 hào)" 关于2018年光伏发电有关事项的通知(发改能源〔2018〕823号) [Notice on matters related to PV power generation in 2018], October 9, 2018, https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/tz/201806/t20180601_962736.html.

[20] See note 5, The World Bank, 2021.

[21] Our World in Data, "Electricity generation from wind power – China," Ember (2025), Energy Institute - Statistical Review of World Energy (2025), Accessed July 5, 2025, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/wind-generation?tab=chart&country=~CHN.

[22] Ibid.

[23] International Hydropower Association, "2024 World Hydropower Outlook," June 12, 2024, https://www.hydropower.org/publications/2024-world-hydropower-outlook.

[24] Muyi Yang and Siyao Zhang, "China," Ember - Energy Trends, Last updated April 9, 2025, Accessed July 5, 2025, https://ember-energy.org/countries-and-regions/china/.

[25] Matthew Zeitlin, "Hydropower is Surging in China," *Heatmap*, July 8, 2024, https://heatmap.news/economy/china-floods-hydropower.

[26] The State Council – The People's Republic of China. "China's Arab Policy Paper," January 13, 2016, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2016/01/13/content_281475271412746.htm.

[27] The People's Bank of China, "Guidelines for Establishing the Green Financial System," August 31, 2016, http://www.pbc.gov.cn/english/130721/3133045/index.html.

Morocco and Tunisia, rely heavily on energy imports to meet domestic demand.[28] Meanwhile, countries such as Egypt have transitioned from being energy exporters to net importers due to rising consumption and the absence of significant crude oil discoveries in recent years.[29]

This energy context exists alongside a high vulnerability to climate change, which is increasingly seen as a contributing factor to regional instability and conflict.[30] However, North Africa also has excellent potential for renewable energy development, especially solar energy. A transition toward green energy could attract foreign investment and generate employment opportunities, including in hydrocarbon-rich countries.[31]

Most North African countries have set ambitious targets to increase the share of renewables in their overall energy mix. However, progress toward these goals varies significantly across the region.

Among these states, Morocco stands out as the most ambitious. In 2009, the country adopted the National Energy Strategy, aiming to increase the contribution of renewables, including hydropower, wind and solar, to 42% of installed capacity by 2020 and 52% by 2030.[32] While the 2020 target was missed by 4.9%, Morocco remains on track to meet its 2030 goal.[33] As of 2022, wind accounted for 71.6% of Morocco's renewable electricity generation, followed by solar thermal at 11.5%, and hydropower at 9.1%.[34]

Algeria also launched a significant renewable energy development program for the 2015-2030 period, with a target of achieving a 37% share (22 GW) of renewable energy in power capacity by 2030.[35] Nevertheless, by 2020, renewables accounted for only 0.7% of total power generation.[36] Regarding Libya, a 2010 target aimed for renewables to cover 10% of electricity demand by 2025. However, this objective was significantly compromised in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising.[37]

In Tunisia, a net energy importer that would benefit from an increase of domestic clean energy production, the renewable sector remains significatively underdeveloped. According to an August 2024 report, electricity production from solar energy reached only 3.26%, while wind and hydropower contributed just 1.7% and 0.09%, respectively.[38] These figures suggest that the country is far from meeting the targets outlined in the 2015 revised *Tunisian Solar Plan*, which set the goal of increasing renewable energy's share from 3% in 2016 to 30% in 2030.[39] The Plan envisions that 46% of new renewable energy will come from wind, 39.6% from solar photovoltaic, 11.8% from concentrated solar power, and 2.6% from biomass.[40]

Egypt, aiming to boost its renewable energy sector, launched an *Integrated Sustainable Energy Strategy* (ISES-2035) in 2016. This strategy focuses on developing renewable energy and energy efficiency, with the aim of satisfying 42% of electricity demand through renewable sources by 2035.[41] Currently, hydropower accounts for 9% of energy consumption (90% of which is

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[28] International Energy Agency (IEA), "Clean Energy Transitions in North Africa," September 2020: 19, https://www.iea.org/reports/clean-energy-transitions-in-north-africa.

[29] Nikolaus Supersberger and Laura Führer, "Integration of Renewable Energies and Nuclear Power into North African Energy Systems: An Analysis of Energy Import and Export Effects." Energy Policy, At the Crossroads: Pathways of Renewable and Nuclear Energy Policy in North Africa, vol. 39, no. 8 (2011): 4458. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2010.12.046;
U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), "Egypt," Last updated August 13, 2024, Accessed July 5, 2025, https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/egy.

[30] See note 28, IEA, September 2020; In Libya fossil fuels account for almost all the national energy's demand. In Algeria, natural gas and crude oil account for 95% of domestic energy production. In Egypt's current energy structure, 88 percent of Egypt's energy consumption comes from oil and natural gas, while Tunisia mostly relies on natural gas. In Morocco, in 2023 the total energy supply was composed of coal for the 31.7%, oil for 58% and biofuels and waste for 5.6%.
Robin Mills, "A Fine Balance: The Geopolitics of the Global Energy Transition in MENA," In *The Geopolitics of the Global Energy Transition*, edited by Manfred Hafner and Simone Tagliapietra. Springer International Publishing, 2020: 115. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39066-2_6.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Fatima Zahra Ainou, Mohsin Ali, and Muhammad Sadiq, "Green Energy Security Assessment in Morocco: Green Finance as a Step toward Sustainable Energy Transition," *Environmental Science and Pollution Research* 30, no. 22 (2023): 61411–29. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11356-022-19153-7.

[33] Khadidja Sakhraoui, Redha Agadi, Christian von Hirschhausen, and Güvenc Sarper Ege, "Energy Policy in Morocco: Analysis of the National Energy Strategy's Impact on Sustainable Energy Supply and Transformation," *Next Research* 1, no. 2 (2024): 100072. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nexres.2024.100072.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Cecilia Camporeale, Roberto Del Ciello, and Mario Jorizzo, "Beyond the Hydrocarbon Economy: The Case of Algeria" In *Sustainable Energy Investment - Technical, Market and Policy Innovations to Address Risk.* edited by Joseph Nyangon and John Byrne. IntechOpen, 2021. https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.91033.

[36] U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), "Algeria," Last updated June 5, 2023, Accessed July 5, 2025, https://www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/dza.

[37] Mohamed Almaktar, and Mohamed Shaaban, "Prospects of Renewable Energy as a Non-Rivalry Energy Alternative in Libya," *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 143 (June 2021): 110852. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rser.2021.110852.

[38] Observatoire National de l'Energie et des Mines – Ministère de l'Industrie, des Mines et de l'Énergie – Republique Tunisienne, "Conjoncture Energétique Août 2024," August 2024, https://www.energiemines.gov.tn/fileadmin/docs-u1/Conjoncture_%C3%A9nerg%C3%A9tique_Ao%C3%BBt__2024.pdf.

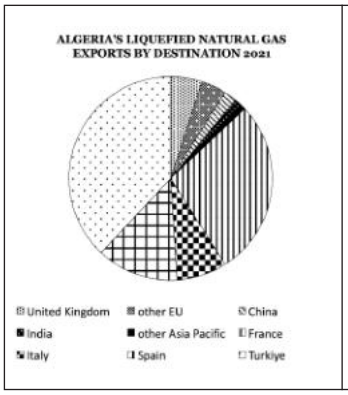
[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

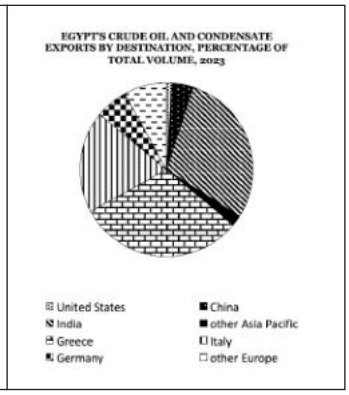
[41] International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), "Renewable Energy Outlook Egypt," October 2018, https://www.irena.org/-/media/Files/IRENA/Agency/Publication/2018/Oct/IRENA_RE_Outlook_Egypt_2018_EN_summary.pdf;
Salma I. Salah, Mahmoud Eltaweel, and C. Abeykoon. "Towards a Sustainable Energy Future for Egypt: A Systematic Review of Renewable Energy Sources, Technologies, Challenges, and Recommendations." Cleaner Engineering and Technology 8 (June 2022): 100497. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clet.2022.100497.

produced by the Aswan High Dam, which has a capacity of 2300 MW[42]), while wind and solar contribute approximately 2% and 1%, respectively.[43] Egypt is also attempting to position itself as a global hub in the emerging green hydrogen sector, with the ambitious target of installing 11.62 GW of hydrogen production capacity by 2035.[44]

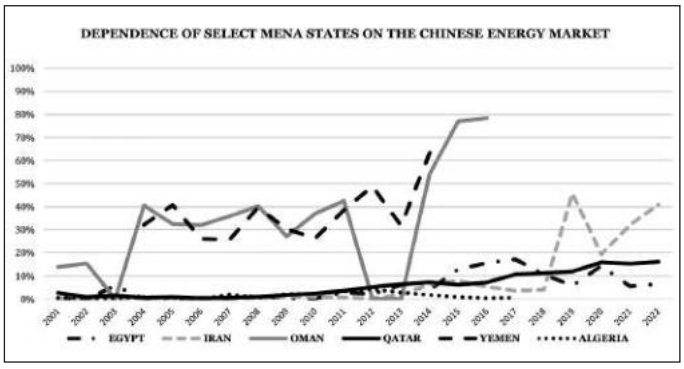
China's presence in the North African energy landscape remains relatively limited compared to that of European countries. For example, in Algeria, as of 2021, 68% of crude oil and 96% of natural gas exports were directed toward European markets, while only 2% of liquefied natural gas went to China.[45] Similarly, in Egypt, 64% of crude oil exports went to Europe, with just 4% going to China.[46]



Source: BP's 2022 Statistical Review of World Energy



Source: Global Trade Tracker



Source: ITC Trade Map; data compiled and elaborated by ChinaMed. Also accessible via https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east

These figures illustrate that Egypt's dependence on the Chinese energy market was significantly lower than that of many Middle Eastern countries. Nonetheless, China's role in the region is expected to expand with the evolving global energy transition. Despite the uneven pace in adopting clean energy technologies, North African countries have shown great interest in green energy development and are increasingly attentive to China's contributions in this field.[47]

Indeed, as explored in greater detail in the next section, several large-scale wind and solar energy projects have already been developed through joint ventures between state-owned North African companies and Chinese firms. Prominent examples of local actors include the state-owned company Société Tunisienne de l'Electricité et du Gaz (STEG), which plays a key role in policy development, supervision and maintenance of renewable projects.[48] In Algeria, the Algerian Renewable Energy Company, a joint venture involving the two largest state-owned enterprises in the country's energy sector, is, by law, a shareholder in all renewable energy projects implemented nationwide.[49] In Morocco, the 2020 *Draft Law No 40-19* has further empowered state actors in archiving national transition goals, granting local administrations the authority to participate in the planning and deployment of renewable projects and reorganize electricity market operations accordingly.[50]

When it comes to nuclear energy, China's involvement in North Africa remains limited. Although some forms of cooperation are emerging in Egypt and Algeria, they have not yet resulted in significant transfers of nuclear technology or the establishment of major nuclear projects.

The next section examines the cases of Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco to trace the evolution of energy relations between China and North African states, and to situate this dynamic within the broader context of the global energy transition and international partnerships.

Evolving Energy Ties between China and Key North African Countries

Egypt

Egypt has maintained a long-standing energy partnership with China, particularly in the fossil fuel sector. Although fossil fuels continue to rank among Egypt's primary exports to China, they account for only a small share of China's extensive energy needs. Consequently, the most substantial Chinese energy investments in Egypt to date have concentrated on hydrocarbons. One early example is the Egyptian Chinese Drilling Company (ECDC), established in 1998 as the first petroleum industry joint venture between

[42] Ibid.

[43] See note 29, EIA, Accessed July 5, 2025.

[44] Wei Shen and Han Chen, "China's Role in Egypt's Low-carbon Energy Transition: From Renewable Energy to Green Hydrogen," International Institute of Green Finance, April 2023: 16.

[45] See note 36, EIA, Accessed July 5, 2025.

[46] See note 29, EIA, Accessed July 5, 2025.

[47] Davide Giacomo Zoppolato and Shisong Jiang, "China-MENA Energy Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative: Megaprojects, Economic Planning, and a Pragmatic Approach to the 'Green' Transition," *The Journal of World Energy Law & Business* 16, no. 2 (2023): 143–59. https://doi.org/10.1093/jwelb/jwac042.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), "Environmental Performance Reviews Morocco," October 25, 2021, https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/ECE_CEP_170_En.pdf.

the two countries. Today, the ECDC is Egypt's largest private drilling contractor, operating eight internationally compliant land rigs.[51]

However, the energy relationship between the two countries has evolved in recent years. Driven by the goals of Egypt's *Integrated Sustainable Energy Strategy*, Chinese companies traditionally focused on fossil fuels, such as the CNPC, are now increasingly expanding into renewables and clean energy projects. This shift mirrors broader trends of Chinese firms pursuing sustainable investment opportunities globally.[52]

China's growing role in Egypt's renewable energy transition is evident in the development of the Benban Solar Park in Aswan, one of the largest solar energy projects in the world. Chinese companies Chint and TBEA were awarded and executed two Engineering, Procurement, and Construction (EPC) contracts, contributing a combined 350 MW, around 25% of the park's total 1,465 MW capacity.[53] Moreover, China Three Gorges Asia-Africa Green Energy Investment Limited has emerged as Benban's second-largest investor, managing five projects totaling 321 MW.[54] Covering 37 square kilometers, Benban serves as a flagship initiative in Egypt's renewable strategy and highlights the significant potential for Chinese involvement in the region's expanding solar energy capacity.

Beyond Benban, China has also participated in other Egyptian solar energy ventures. China Energy Engineering Corporation is currently developing a solar plant in northern El Gouna,[55] while CNG Egypt New Energy Glass Company, affiliated with China Glass Holding, has invested in photovoltaic glass production in the Suez Canal Economic Zone.[56] Collaboration has also extended to solar technology research: a solar energy and electricity storage research lab was established in Sohag in 2015 as part of ongoing technical cooperation between the two countries.[57]

While solar cooperation has been robust, Chinese involvement in Egypt's wind and hydropower sectors is still developing. However, several key investments have been made, particularly in wind. PowerChina, a major Chinese state-owned enterprise, signed an EPC contract with Suez Wind Energy to develop a 1.1 GW wind power project in the Red Sea Governorate.[58] This will be PowerChina's largest overseas wind project to date, featuring 138 turbines supplied by China's Envision Energy.[59] It follows PowerChina's earlier completion of a 500 MW wind power project in Ras Ghareb, completed in 2022.[60]

Despite Egypt's global hydrogen ambitions, Chinese involvement in Egypt's hydrogen market remains currently limited, though there have been notable contributions. For instance, China CEEC signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2022 for the development of a green hydrogen project,[61] and in 2024, China Energy has signed on to a major initiative in the Suez Canal Economic Zone, as announced by Egyptian Prime Minister Madbouli.[62] Despite these developments, China faces stiff competition in the sector, notably from France, which recently secured a $7.6 billion deal with Egypt to develop a major green hydrogen and ammonia complex near Ras Shokeir on the Red Sea .[63]

Among North African countries, Egypt is the closest to constructing a nuclear power plant, thanks to a 2014 agreement with ROSATOM.[64] This Russian state corporation is behind the 4.8 GW El Dabaa plant, which began construction in 2022.[65] China's involvement in Egypt's nuclear energy sector, by contrast, is minimal. A 2015 Memorandum of Understanding between China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) and Egypt's Nuclear Power Plant Authority outlined potential cooperation in nuclear power projects, but there has been no significant follow-up.[66] Egypt has instead kept the door open to partnering with other countries, including South Korea.

China is also involved in Egypt's hydropower sector. In 2018, Sinohydro, a subsidiary of PowerChina, secured a contract to build a 2,400 MW pumped storage hydropower plant at Mount Attaqa, with China Eximbank financing 85% of the project. However, the viability of Egypt's hydropower capacity is increasingly uncertain due to the potential impact of the

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[51] Khaled A. El-Mattrawy, "Chinese Investment in Egypt: Towards Prospects of Mutual Interests," Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) – The Egyptian Cabinet, October 2024: 6, https://idsc.gov.eg/upload/DocumentLibraryIssues/AttachmentA/9128/Chinese%20Investment%20in%20Egypt-%20Towards%20Prospects%20of%20Mutual%20Interests%20%20%20%20%20.pdf.

[52] Ibid., 11.

[53] See note 44, Wei Shen and Han Chen, April 2023: 11.

[54] *Xinhua*, "Chinese company helps to galvanize Egypt's clean energy development," June 20, 2024, https://english.news.cn/20240620/4fca2a0294494588ac4a707bfa17b311/c.html.

[55] See note 44, Wei Shen and Han Chen, April 2023: 11.

[56] Suez Canal Economic Zone, "With investments of $300 million SCZONE celebrating the foundation stone Ceremony for the "New Energy Glass" project in Sokhna," November 28, 2024, https://sczone.eg/with-investments-of-300-million-sczone-celebrating-the-foundation-stone-ceremony-for-the-new-energy-glass-project-in-sokhna/.

[57] See note 44, Wei Shen and Han Chen, April 2023: 12.

[58] *bne Intellinews*, "PowerChina signs EPC contract to build 1.1GW Suez Wind Project in Egypt," August 1, 2025, https://www.intellinews.com/powerchina-signs-epc-contract-to-build-1-1gw-suez-wind-project-in-egypt-360387/.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] See note 44, Wei Shen and Han Chen, April 2023: 17.

[62] The Egyptian Gazette, "PM urges China Energy to swiftly establish factories to localise renewable energy industries," September 5, 2024, https://egyptian-gazette.com/egypt/pm-urges-china-energy-to-swiftly-establish-factories-to-localise-renewable-energy-industries/.

[63] State Information Service (Egypt), "Egypt, France Sign 7 Billion Euro Deal for Green Hydrogen Facility," April 8, 2025, https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/206977/Egypt%2C-France-sign-7-billion-euro-agreement-to-build-green-hydrogen-plant-in-Ras-Shoukair.

[64] Heba Taha, "Nuclear Revival in North Africa? Developments in Algeria, Libya, and Egypt," South African Institute of International Affairs, May 20, 2021, https://saiia.org.za/research/nuclear-revival-in-north-africa-developments-in-algeria-libya-and-egypt/.

[65] Enerdata, "Russia's Rosatom starts construction on El-Dabaa nuclear plant Unit 4 (Egypt)" January 25, 2024, https://www.enerdata.net/publications/daily-energy-news/russias-rosatom-starts-construction-el-dabaa-nuclear-plant-unit-4-egypt.html.

[66] China National Nuclear Corp, "CNNC signs MOU with Egyptian nuclear power plant authority," May 29, 2015, https://en.cnnc.com.cn/2015-05/29/c_1022848.htm.

Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which may reduce the Nile River's inflow to Egypt.[67] This adds a layer of complexity to Sino-Egyptian energy relations, given Beijing's role as a key financier and equipment supplier for the dam. While a point of contention in Sino-Egyptian diplomatic ties, the GERD has so far not seriously disrupted bilateral relations.[68]

In conclusion, China has become a key player in Egypt's energy transition, with notable investments in a variety of renewable energy projects while maintaining a strong presence in hydrocarbons. However, although Chinese companies play a growing role, they are neither the sole nor necessarily the preferred partners for Egypt in its energy diversification efforts. This is particularly evident in the nuclear and hydrogen sectors. Additionally, China's involvement in the GERD project presents a potential obstacle to deeper energy cooperation with Egypt in the years ahead.

Algeria

While European firms maintain a strong presence in Algeria's energy sector, largely due to their deep-rooted historical and commercial ties, major Chinese NOCs such as Sinopec, CNOOC and CNPC have succeeded in establishing a foothold in the country.[69] These companies have invested in strategic oil exploration projects and contributed to the construction of vital refining infrastructure, including the facilities in Adrar and Skikda. One of the most prominent examples of Sino-Algerian cooperation in the hydrocarbons sectors is the agreement between Sinopec and Algeria's state-owned energy giant, Sonatrach, centered on the Zarzaitine oil field.[70] First signed in 2003 and renewed in 2022, the $490 million production-sharing agreement aims to extract 95 million barrels through the drilling of 12 new wells, refurbishment of gas lift units, and implementation of emissions reduction measures.

The recent discovery of significant shale gas reserves in Algeria has also presented new avenues for foreign investors, including China.[71] Should Algeria successfully develop its shale gas industry, it could attract increased interest from Chinese companies seeking to expand their global portfolios in unconventional energy sources. More broadly, this growing partnership aligns with Algeria's strategy of attracting greater foreign capital into its energy sector.[72]

In parallel with its hydrocarbon investments, China has shown a growing interest in supporting Algeria's energy diversification strategy. This was underscored by a Memorandum of Understanding signed between Sinopec and Sonatrach in 2024, which explicitly included renewable energy initiatives.[73] A notable example of Chinese investment in Algeria's solar energy sector is the photovoltaic project developed by Yingli, a leading Chinese solar energy firm.[74] PowerChina has also played a significant role in the development of a 233 MW solar power plant in Adrar, one of Algeria's most ambitious renewable energy initiatives.[75] The project, developed by a consortium led by Yingli, alongside Sinohydro Corp and China Hydropower Engineering Consulting Group, consists of 16 separate solar parks and represents PowerChina's largest overseas solar EPC contract to date.[76]

More recently, PowerChina began work on a 220 MW solar photovoltaic plant in Biskra, while a Chinese consortium launched an 80 MW project in Ouled Djellal, just south of Biskra.[77] Both projects are slated for completion by 2025.[78] These developments are part of Algeria's 2 GW solar auction held in November 2023, in which Chinese companies secured nine out of the fifteen projects.[79] In March 2024, the China State Construction Engineering Corporation also commenced construction on a 200 MW solar plant in El M'Ghair.[80] Further expanding energy cooperation, a major agreement was signed between the Algerian conglomerate Elec and China's LONGi Green Energy to establish a local manufacturing plant for high-efficiency solar panels.[81] However, despite these

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[67] Mai Wagih Alsadeq, Yasmin Nassar, and Ahmed Wagdy Abd Eldayem. "Predicted Effect of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Epilimnion Temperature in the High Aswan Dam Reservoir." World Water Policy 11, no. 2 (2025): 439–60. https://doi.org/10.1002/wwp2.12249.

[68] Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, Ngo Valery Ngo, Choumbou Raoul Fani Djomo, et al. "The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Egyptian National Security, and Human and Food Security in the Nile River Basin." *Cogent Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2021): 1875598. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1875598.

[69] Yahia H. Zoubir, "Les relations de la Chine avec les pays du Maghreb : la place prépondérante de l'Algérie." Économie. *Confluences Méditerranée* 109, no. 2 (2019): 91–103. https://doi.org/10.3917/come.109.0091.

[70] Dania Saadi, "Algeria's Sonatrach, Sinopec sign $490 mil production sharing agreement for Zarzaitine," S&P Global, May 29, 2022, https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/crude-oil/052922-algerias-sonatrach-sinopec-sign-490-mil-production-sharing-agreement-for-zarzaitine.

[71] Simone Tagliapietra, "Energy in North Africa: Challenges and Opportunities," *Atlantic Community*, March 4, 2019, https://atlantic-community.org/energy-in-north-africa-challenges-and-opportunities/.

[72] U.S. Department of State, "2023 Investment Climate Statements: Algeria," Accessed July 5, 2025, https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-investment-climate-statements/.

[73] *Reuters*, "Algeria's Sonatrach, China's Sinopec sign MoU to expand cooperation - statement," June 7, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/algerias-sonatrach-chinas-sinopec-sign-mou-expand-cooperation-statement-2024-06-07/.

[74] *Power Technology*, "Top five solar PV plants in operation in Algeria," September 9, 2024, https://www.power-technology.com/data-insights/top-five-solar-pv-plants-in-operation-in-algeria/

[75] Militsa Mancheva, "PowerChina cuts ribbon on 233-MW PV plant in Algeria," Renewables Now, January 25, 2016, https://renewablesnow.com/news/powerchina-cuts-ribbon-on-233-mw-pv-plant-in-algeria-510285/

[76] Ibid.

[77] *Enerdata*, "Chinese firms begin construction of two solar projects (300 MW) in Algeria," April 24, 2024, https://www.enerdata.net/publications/daily-energy-news/chinese-firms-begin-construction-two-solar-projects-300-mw-algeria.html

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Hana Saada, "Algeria, China Seal Strategic Solar Energy Pact,| *Dzair Tube*, April 21, 2025, https://www.dzair-tube.dz/en/algeria-china-seal-strategic-solar-energy-pact/.

developments, China faces significant challenges in scaling up its role in Algeria's energy sector. Chief among these is the country's complex regulatory environment, widespread corruption, and institutional opacity, particularly within Sonatrach.[82]

Beyond solar energy, nuclear power has emerged as a potential area of collaboration. An early example of Chinese involvement is the nuclear reactor built by CNNC in Ain Oussara, completed in 1993.[83] While Algeria's nuclear ambitions remain modest and largely theoretical, China's expertise could provide valuable support if Algiers decides to seriously pursue nuclear energy. Financial and institutional constraints, however, continue to impede progress, much like in Algeria's renewable energy plans.[84] Nevertheless, a meeting in April 2025 between the Algerian government and the president of CNNC may signal a new phase in bilateral nuclear cooperation, in particular regarding the previously established specialized working group tasked with preparing and launching a project for the production of radioactive isotopes in Algeria.[85]

To sum up, Algeria's push for energy diversification presents enhanced opportunities for China. Yet, potential cooperation remains largely unrealized. Beijing continues to approach the Algerian energy sector with caution, mindful of persistent governance challenges, corruption, opaque decision-making processes, and unpredictable policy shifts. These factors have historically deterred foreign investors, and China is no exception, as they contribute to an investment climate that remains difficult to navigate, thereby limiting the scale and speed of potential Chinese engagement in Algeria's energy transition.[86]

Libya

Prior to the 2011 revolution, Chinese firms such as CNPC, Sinopec, and CNOOC were actively involved in infrastructure and energy projects across Libya, drawn by China's interest in securing access to Libya's high-quality sweet crude oil.[87] However, the outbreak of conflict in 2011 forced the abrupt suspension of Chinese operations, with many Chinese businesses being attacked, looted, and forced to evacuate, leading to a near-complete Chinese withdrawal from the country.[88]

For much of the following decade, Libya's instability and fragmented governance deterred foreign investors, including from Chinese companies.[89] Nevertheless, since 2018, both Libyan governments and Beijing have gradually worked to restore energy cooperation.[90] That year, PetroChina signed an oil purchase deal with Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC),[91] followed by a 2019 agreement with CNPC involving both crude oil purchases and exploration projects.[92] In 2023, Libyan Minister of Economy, Muhammad al-Hawaij, formally invited Chinese companies to return, announcing the creation of the Libyan-Chinese Joint Economic Chamber to encourage investment and highlight opportunities in fossil fuels and infrastructure.[93]

While Libya remains focused on revitalizing its fossil fuel sector, authorities also have signaled an intention to diversify its energy mix. China has supported Libya's nascent renewable energy efforts, particularly in solar and wind energy. A notable example is the 100 MW Kufra solar farm, located in southeastern Libya, which spans 200 hectares and aims to alleviate energy shortages in the region.[94] Additionally, PowerChina, in partnership with the French state-owned EDF, is developing a 1,500 MW solar plant in eastern Libya, representing one of the most ambitious renewable initiatives in the country.[95]

Despite these promising initiatives, Libya's internal divisions continue to hinder investment. Political fragmentation, frequent leadership changes, and security concerns have created a highly uncertain business environment, slowing progress in both the fossil fuel and renewable energy

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[82] John Calabrese, "The New Algeria" and China, *Middle East Institute*, January 26, 2021, https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-algeria-and-china.

[83] Le Monde, "Les experts s'interrogent toujours sur la véritable nature du réacteur nucléaire d'Aïn-Oussera au sud d'Alger," May 26, 1991, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1991/05/26/les-experts-s-interrogent-toujours-sur-la-veritable-nature-du-reacteur-nucleaire-d-ain-oussera-au-sud-d-alger_4006307_1819218.html.

[84] Victor Dionne, "Algérie: vers le nucléaire… et le vert?," *Perspective Monde*, March 4, 2021, https://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMAnalyse/3090

[85] Jonathan Fulton, "China-Algeria meeting on nuclear energy cooperation, Kuwaiti delegation in Beijing for political consultations, Zhai Jun on the road again - this time in Doha," *The China-MENA Newsletter*, April 28, 2025, https://chinamenanewsletter.substack.com/p/china-algeria-meeting-on-nuclear

[86] See note 72, Simone Tagliapietra, March 4, 2019;
François Lafargue, "The economic presence of China in the Maghreb: Ambitions and limits," *Observatoire du monde arabo-musulman e du Sahel* 3, no. 294, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, October 29, 2018. https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/programmes/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/publications/en/294.pdf.

[87] Frederic Wehrey and Sandy Alkoutami, "China's Balancing Act in Libya," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 10, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/05/chinas-balancing-act-in-libya.

[88] Mordechai Chaziza, "China's Libya Policy and the BRI: Sights Set on the Future," Middle East Institute, December 22, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-libya-policy-and-bri-sights-set-future.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Sami Zaptia, "PetroChina to buy Libyan oil," *LibyaHerald*, March 2, 2018, https://libyaherald.com/2018/03/petrochina-to-buy-libyan-oil/.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Sami Zaptia, "Libya and China discuss oil cooperation in Libya," LibyaHerald, July 26, 2019, https://libyaherald.com/2019/07/libya-and-china-discuss-oil-cooperation-in-libya/.

[93] Jonathan Fulton, "Beijing is making inroads in North Africa," *Atlantic Council*, October 15, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/china-north-africa-focac-cascf-trade/.

[94] Sami Zaptia, "Foundation stone laid for a 100-megawatt solar power project in Kufra – to be implemented by Chinese," *LibyaHerald*, March 2, 2020, https://libyaherald.com/2020/03/foundation-stone-laid-for-a-100-megawatt-solar-power-project-in-kufra-to-be-implemented-by-chinese/.

[95] Antonino Neri, "La Libia punta a diversificare il suo mix energetico," *Energia Oltre*, October 4, 2024, https://energiaoltre.it/la-libia-punta-a-diversificare-il-suo-mix-energetico.

sectors.[96] Frequent disruptions in oil production have made foreign investors cautious, while renewable projects face bureaucratic and logistical obstacles.[97] Nevertheless, China's neutrality between Libya's rival governments has enabled it to engage with both sides and to maintain access to Libya's significant oil reserves, particularly in the east, where much of the country's energy infrastructure is located.[98]

In essence, Sino-Libyan energy ties suffered a severe blow in 2011. While full re-engagement has been slow, China is cautiously exploring opportunities to rebuild relations and, possibly, expand them to include renewable energy projects. So far, Beijing has opted for selective involvement rather than committing to large-scale investments.[99] This approach could shift if Libya achieves greater political stability, which would create a more favorable context for reconstruction and energy cooperation.[100]

Tunisia

Unlike Libya and Algeria, Tunisia is not a hydrocarbon exporter, and fossil fuels do not dominate its trade relationship with China.[101] However, Tunisia's growing focus on renewable energy has made it an increasingly attractive market for Chinese companies seeking opportunities in the sector. With its proximity to both Europe and Libya, Tunisia offers strategic advantages for Chinese investors looking to expand in North Africa and the rest of the region.[102]

In recent years, Tunisia has pursued an ambitious energy diversification strategy, with China seen by Tunisian policymakers as an important partner. This was demonstrated by Prime Minister Kamel Maddouri during his speech at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in September 2024, where he reaffirmed Tunisia's commitment to providing "all necessary structures and guarantees" to Chinese firms, particularly in the renewables sectors.[103] China has responded cautiously but with increasing interest, engaging politically and economically through new deals and investments.

In 2019, a key milestone was achieved with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Tunisian authorities and Chinese renewable energy companies on solar energy development.[104] This collaboration has extended beyond the supply of Chinese photovoltaic materials, which now dominate Tunisia's solar panel imports, to include significant Chinese investments.[105] One notable example is the Kairouan photovoltaic power plant, a 100 MW facility built with Chinese expertise.[106] In addition to Kairouan, China has committed $200 million for two new solar power plants, reinforcing its commitment to Tunisia's energy transition.[107]

Despite this growing cooperation, China faces stiff competition from European firms who continue to dominate Tunisia's energy sector.[108] A clear example of Europe's strong presence is the Elmed project, a planned 200 km long submarine high voltage electricity cable interconnection with Italy, backed by over €450 million in EU and European funding.[109] Similarly, France's HDF Energy is leading a major green hydrogen project, which is expected to generate clean energy for both domestic use in Tunisia and export to Europe.[110]

Beijing has also expressed interest in large-scale infrastructure projects through the Belt and Road Initiative, progress has been slow to say the least. Most projects outlined in the 2018 Memorandum of Understanding remain in the planning stages, including the development of Tunisia's southern port of Zarzis into an economic and trade hub and the 140 km railway linking the coastal city of Gabes.[111] A likely factor is Tunisia's ongoing economic and political crisis, which has complicated Tunis' capacity to implement major initiatives, slowing down potential Chinese investments. [112]

Ultimately, while Tunisia offers a promising renewable energy market for Chinese green energy and infrastructure investment, persistent political and economic uncertainty remain obstacles to deeper cooperation. Should Tunisia provide a more stable and transparent investment climate, Chinese firms could play a larger role in the country's energy transition in the years ahead.

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[97] See note 97, Antonino Neri, October 4, 2024.

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[111] Louis Dugit-Gros and Sarbina Henneberg, "China's Presence in Tunisia: How Far Has It Come, and Where Is It Headed?," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *PolicyWatch* no. 3728, April 6, 2023, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-presence-tunisia-how-far-has-it-come-and-where-it-headed.

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Morocco

As in the case of Tunisia, China's involvement in Morocco is concentrated primarily in the renewable energy sector. Morocco has articulated one of the most ambitious energy transition strategies on the African continent, a vision that aligns well with China's expanding role as a global leader in green technologies. This alignment has fostered a steadily growing partnership between the two countries, with China emerging a key player in Morocco's ongoing transition toward sustainable energy and emerging industries.

In recent years, Morocco has made significant investments in solar, wind, and green hydrogen projects, with Chinese companies playing increasingly prominent roles. A flagship example of Sino-Moroccan collaboration is the Ouarzazate Solar Farm, one of the world's largest solar energy installations, located in southern Morocco.[113] Initially supported by Chinese investment, the plant remains central to Morocco's renewable energy strategy. The involvement of China's State Power Investment Corporation in its development highlights the depth and continuity of the bilateral relationship in this sector.[114]

China has also supported Morocco's efforts to expand its wind energy capacity.[115] Notable projects include the Tangier and Nador wind farms, both of which have benefited from Chinese financing and operational support. The Tangier Wind Farm, in particular, recently saw three Chinese companies selected as operators.[116] Moreover, the Mohammed VI Tanger Tech City, an innovation hub focused on green tech and renewables, has been positioned to attract Chinese investment, aiming to further integrate Chinese clean energy companies, such as those in electric vehicle and battery sectors, into Morocco's broader industrial ecosystem.[117]

Although Morocco is rapidly scaling up its renewable capacity, fossil fuels continue to play a significant role in its energy mix. Accordingly, China and Morocco maintain also collaborative ties in oil and gas. CNPC, for instance, has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Morocco's National Office for Hydrocarbons and Mines.[118] Another example is the expansion of the Jerada Power Plant by SEPCO III Electric Power Construction, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, which reflects how despite Morocco's efforts to phase out coal, ongoing Sino-Moroccan cooperation in conventional energy still plays a role in the country's energy grid.[119]

To conclude, as Morocco continues its energy transition, China remains an essential partner, supporting the country's diversification efforts while deepening economic and technological ties. This collaboration not only advances Morocco's ambition to become a regional leader in clean energy but also exemplifies China's flexible and pragmatic approach to energy diplomacy in North Africa.

Conclusion

China's energy strategy has undergone a radical re-orientation over the past three decades. Once defined by an attempt to establish a crude oil self-reliance, China became a net oil importer in 1993. Since the early 2000s, Beijing has actively constructed a domestic legal and policy framework to foster the development of renewable energy. The 2005 *Renewable Energy Law* and the 2016 "1 + 2 + 3" *Arab Policy Paper* represent two milestone documents that noy only embedded renewable energy into China's national agenda but also projected it outward into foreign policy. The internationalization of Chinese energy interests, specifically in the MENA region, has been accelerated by domestic overcapacity in renewable energy-related products, especially solar panels, facilitating a shift from so-called "barrel diplomacy" to a new form of "kilowatt-hour diplomacy."

North Africa serves as an illustrative, if uneven, proving ground for this outward-facing green energy strategy. China's presence in North Africa has transitioned from that of a crude oil importer to a supplier of renewable energy technologies and infrastructure. While China's footprint in the region remains smaller than Europe's long-standing economic and political influence, the accelerating energy transition across the region is opening new space for Chinese engagement. Nevertheless, this expansion occurs within a competitive environment marked by significant variability in political stability, regulatory transparency, and international alignments.

Egypt exemplifies how large-scale Chinese EPC contracts and equity investments can accelerate national flagship projects, such as the Benban Solar Park or the Red Sea giant wind complex. However, even in cases of deep cooperation, non-Chinese actors often retain primacy in sensitive sectors, such as nuclear power. In contrast, Algeria offers a mirror image: an energy resource-rich state where Chinese firms are cautiously engaged in solar auctions and shale prospects but are constrained by opaque regulation and entrenched corruption. In Libya, Chinese operators have only tentatively re-entered the energy sector, balancing oil off-take and pilot renewable initiatives, but remain hostage to political fragmentation and security risks. Morocco and Tunisia, by contrast, have welcomed Chinese finance and technology in concentrated solar power, wind farms, and green-tech manufacturing. However, intense European competition and domestic political volatility continue to temper the depth of Chinese engagement.

What emerges from this landscape is not a uniform "renewables rush," but rather a pattern of differentiated engagement. Where national decarbonization roadmaps are credible and governance obstacles manageable, Chinese

[113] Mohamad Zreik, "The Belt and Road Initiative and Morocco: Opportunities and Challenges for Strengthening Economic Relations with China," Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, July 2024, https://mipa.institute/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Zreik-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-and-Morocco.pdf.

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[117] Yahia H. Zoubir, "Expanding Sino-Maghreb Relations: Morocco and Tunisia," Chatham House, 26 February, 2020 (Updated 30 June 2022), https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/02/expanding-sino-maghreb-relations.

[118] See note 115, Mohamad Zreik, July 2024.

[119] Ibid.

firms tend to move rapidly beyond EPC contracting to take on equity stakes, establish joint ventures, and invest in local manufacturing or R&D hubs. Where regulatory frameworks are unpredictable or security risks acute, Chinese firms content themselves with low-commitment, incremental projects that preserve future investment options without overexposure.
For North African governments, sustaining Chinese interest without crowding out domestic industry or European climate finance will require clearer procurement procedures, predictable feed-in tariffs and robust social and environmental safeguards.

With regard to nuclear energy, although Sino-North African cooperation remains limited, China has signaled growing interest, as demonstrated by its recent Memorandum of Understanding with Saudi Arabia. In a context of intensifying strategic competition, particularly with the United States, nuclear cooperation could emerge as a powerful tool in China's regional diplomacy.[120] It is therefore plausible that China's role in the North African nuclear sector will expand in the future, especially if regional governments seek alternatives to Western nuclear technology providers.

In conclusion, despite persistent challenges, ranging from governance deficits and political instability to global competition, China's role in North Africa's energy future is poised to grow. The dual pressures of climate change and energy security are prompting both China and its North African partners to seek deeper, more sustainable forms of energy cooperation. Whether this leads to a transformative partnership will depend on the extent to which both sides can align long-term strategic interests with the immediate realities of local energy governance and international politics.

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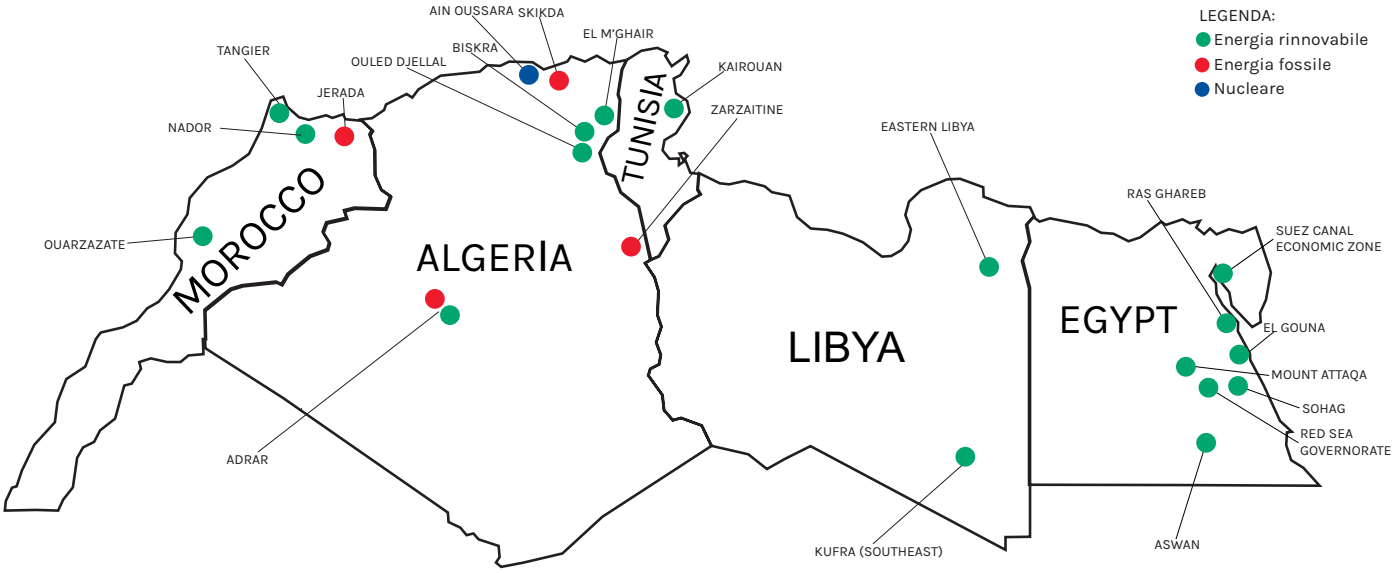

Chinese Energy Investments in North Africa

Country	Location / Area	Type of Energy	Project
Egypt	Aswan	Renewable – Solar	Benben Solar Park
Egypt	El Gouna (north)	Renewable – Solar	Solar plant
Egypt	Suez Canal Economic Zone	Renewable – Solar	Photovoltaic glass production
Egypt	Sohag	Renewable – Solar	Solar & electricity storage research lab
Egypt	Red Sea Governorate	Renewable – Wind	Wind power project
Egypt	Ras Ghareb	Renewable – Wind	Wind power project
Egypt	Mount Attaqa	Renewable – Hydropower	Pumped-storage hydropower plant
Algeria	Adrar	Fossil – Refining	Refining infrastructure
Algeria	Skikda	Fossil – Refining	Refining infrastructure
Algeria	Zarzaitine	Fossil – Oil	Oil field
Algeria	Adrar	Renewable – Solar	Solar power plant
Algeria	Biskra	Renewable – Solar	Photovoltaic plant
Algeria	Ouled Djellal (south of Biskra)	Renewable – Solar	Photovoltaic plant
Algeria	El M'Ghair	Renewable – Solar	Solar plant
Algeria	Ain Oussara	Nuclear	Nuclear reactor
Libya	Kufra (southeast)	Renewable – Solar	Solar farm
Libya	Eastern Libya	Renewable – Solar	Solar plant
Tunisia	Kairouan	Renewable – Solar	Photovoltaic power plant
Morocco	Ouarzazate	Renewable – Solar	Solar Farm
Morocco	Tangier	Renewable – Wind	Wind farm
Morocco	Nador	Renewable – Wind	Wind farm

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2025 Israel–Iran War has profoundly reshaped the Middle East's security landscape, with relevant implications for Sino–Middle Eastern relations. By analyzing scholarly and media discussions in China and across the region, alongside Chinese official statements, this report assesses how the war has influenced perceptions of China's role and future in the Middle East.

Much of the media debate focused on how, despite their partnership, China refrained from providing direct material support to Iran during the war. Beijing's official response, centered on calls for de-escalation and respect for sovereignty, was widely interpreted as "balanced" and "neutral," sparking debate over China's commitment to its regional relationships. Chinese experts largely echoed official rhetoric, condemning U.S. and Israeli actions while also analyzing the deeper causes of the conflict. Given the limited reactions to the U.S. intervention in Israel's favor, many Chinese commentators also questioned whether regional actors are truly capable of advancing a multipolar order, exposing contradictions in the prevailing Chinese narrative of Western decline. Additionally, the lack of analysis on China's potential role revealed uncertainty among Chinese scholars about Beijing's ability to contribute meaningfully to regional stabilization, underscoring its seemingly limited leverage.

Nevertheless, across the Middle East, Beijing is not regarded as an irrelevant actor. Scholars and commentators from the region continue to view China as an indispensable partner their governments should continue to engage with. In Israel, public discourse remained wary of China's ties with Iran, yet several experts and diplomats interpreted Beijing's "balanced stance" as an opportunity to reset bilateral relations, driven by trade and Israeli fears of diplomatic isolation. In Iran, while disappointment over China's muted response was widespread, many commentators directed criticism toward their own government for failing to deepen strategic cooperation with Beijing, particularly in the domains of defense and infrastructure. Across the Arab world, and in Gulf state-aligned media especially, China's "positive neutrality" was generally welcomed. Overall, Middle Eastern analysts acknowledged and even justified Beijing's pragmatism and restraint, viewing its posture as consistent with its broader strategic priorities.

This report concludes by exploring some recent developments noting that while China's role in the Middle East remains constrained by its caution and limited capacity, regional observers regard and will likely continue to perceive Beijing as an indispensable economic, strategic, and diplomatic partner. The war has prompted reassessments of China's reliability, but not a desire for disengagement; instead, many experts in the region appear to be advocating for recalibrated partnerships grounded in mutual interests rather than idealized expectations. As the regional context continues to evolve, Sino–Middle Eastern relations remain as relevant, and debated, as ever.

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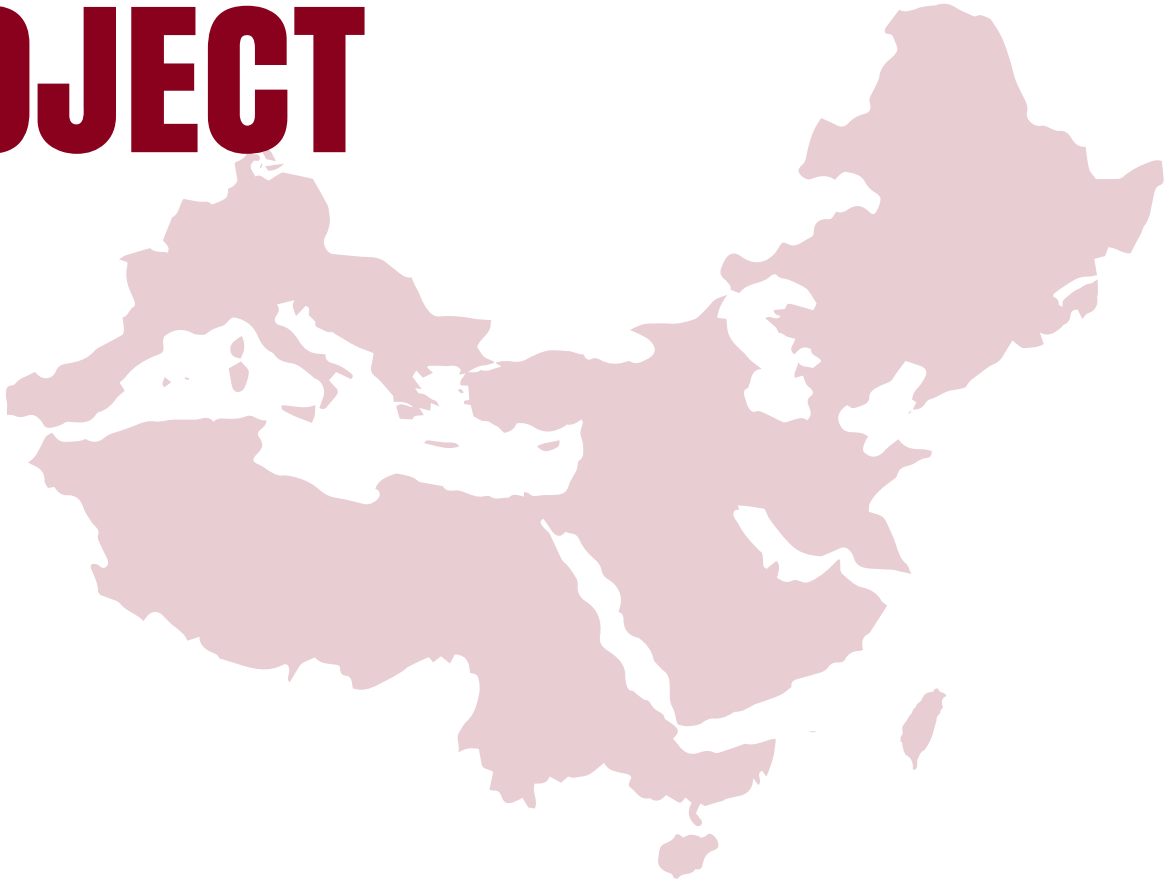
INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINAMED PROJECT



The wider Mediterranean is a vast region that stretches from the Iranian Plateau to the Strait of Gibraltar, from the Alps to the Horn of Africa. It is an area characterized by long-term trends, but it is also the epicenter of centrifugal forces that connect Europe, Africa and Asia. Our research team at the ChinaMed Project analyses how the dynamics of this region intersect with one of the most consequential macro-trends of this century: the transition of China, with its 1.4 billion people, from the periphery to the center of the international system.
Our research platform's mission is to track and investigate how China's presence in the region is changing the balance of power on the ground in a nuanced, yet incremental fashion. We achieve this by collecting data and creating indicators that analyze China's growing economic, commercial, and security ties with the countries of the wider Mediterranean, which we make publicly available at ChinaMed Data.

Moreover, we publish the ChinaMed Observer – sharp and focused analyses of the media discourses in China and the countries of the wider Mediterranean region on the most recent events and the most pressing trends in Sino-Mediterranean relations.

We also actively engage with and participate in the expanding connections between China and the wider Mediterranean through a range of academic initiatives including: the China Management and Business Program, scientific publications, and academic events. The ChinaMed Project, a part of the TOChina Hub developed by the University of Turin and promoted by the Torino World Affairs Institute, carries out these initiatives and its research through various partnerships, including those with the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme at Durham University, the China Global South Project, and the Asian Studies Unit of the Research Department of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. ChinaMed also enjoys the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Fondazione CRT, one of Italy's largest charitable foundations.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 13, 2025, Israel launched a series of air strikes against Iran, targeting nuclear facilities, military installations, air defense systems, as well as prominent military leaders, politicians and nuclear scientists.[1] Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** justified the operation as a "preemptive strike," claiming it necessary to prevent Iran's purportedly imminent development of a nuclear weapon. In response, Iran carried out drone and missile strikes against Israel, with both sides hitting military and civilian targets.

On June 21, the United States intervened in support of Israel, launching air strikes against three Iranian nuclear sites. According to U.S. President **Donald Trump**, the stated objective was to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities and bring the war to an end. On June 23, Iran retaliated by launching missiles at a U.S. military base in Qatar; no casualties were reported. The following day, Iranian state television announced a ceasefire with Israel, just hours after Trump declared that an agreement had been reached.

Christened the "Twelve-Day War" by President Trump, this brief, intense conflict marked the culmination of a prolonged, multidimensional, and steadily escalating confrontation between Tel Aviv and Tehran. While tensions over Iran's nuclear program have long simmered, open hostilities erupted following the outbreak of the Gaza War. In the months since October 7, 2023, Israel escalated its military operations in the region far beyond Hamas, engaging in sustained clashes with the other members of the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance," including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. Alongside precipitating catastrophic humanitarian crises, these operations have brought Israel into increasingly direct conflict with Iran, particularly after the Israeli airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, 2024, and, later that year, the assassinations of Hamas political leader **Ismail Haniyeh** and Hezbollah leader **Hassan Nasrallah**.

The June 2025 war represented the most dramatic escalation in this ongoing struggle, resulting in the deaths of approximately thirty Israelis and over one thousand Iranians, including hundreds of women and children, with thousands more wounded on both sides. Whether this conflict constitutes a lasting geostrategic turning point remains uncertain; nonetheless, it exposed Israel's regional military predominance (albeit not its invulnerability), revealed critical weaknesses in Iran's air defense and intelligence capabilities, as well as unsettled Arab states, fearful of the disruption that a wider escalation across the Middle East would entail.

Beyond its immediate implications, the Twelve-Day War also cast a light on China's role and influence (or lack thereof) in the Middle East. In recent years, Beijing has been increasingly discussed as a relevant actor in the region, not solely in economic but also in diplomatic terms, exemplified by its contribution to the Iran–Saudi rapprochement in March 2023. However, since the onset of the Gaza War, China has appeared either unwilling or unable to meaningfully engage with the region's rapidly evolving security landscape.

Beijing's muted response to Israel's strikes against Iran, ostensibly its most important regional partner, has reignited debate over the depth of China's commitment to the Middle East. Despite the Iran–China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement, Beijing facilitating Tehran's normalization of ties with Gulf states, and Iran's admission into China-backed multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS, the People's Republic refrained from any substantive diplomatic or strategic reaction to Israel's attack. This inaction has raised doubts about the solidity and limits of the China–Iran partnership, often framed by Western analysts as a key part of a broader revisionist coalition – alongside Russia and, at times, North Korea – challenging the existing international order.[2]

Some commentators have also interpreted China's restrained response, in light of Israel's proven military superiority and the United States' adamant support for Israeli security, as damaging Beijing's credibility in the eyes of Middle Eastern actors.[3] However, as this report shows, this perception is not widely shared among the region's scholars and commentators. To better understand these differing perceptions and broader regional trends, the ChinaMed Research Team examined expert and media debates in China, Israel, Iran, and the Arab world concerning Sino–Middle Eastern relations in the immediate aftermath of the Israel–Iran War.

While less explicit than their Western counterparts, Chinese commentators appeared, through omission, to express uncertainty about how Beijing could meaningfully contribute to conflict resolution or regional stabilization. Official statements and expert analyses offered few concrete policy proposals, with the commentary emerging from China mostly focused on analyzing regional states' motivation and whether they are genuinely capable of, or committed to, advancing a new multipolar order in partnership with China, rather than articulating a China-led framework, revealing the tensions within China's prevailing narrative of a declining West.

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[1] For a detailed timeline of events leading up to and during the Israel–Iran war, see Kevin Huggard & Mallika Yadwad, "The road to the Israel-Iran war", Brookings, July 23, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-road-to-the-israel-iran-war/.

[2] Jean-Loup Samaan, "Is the cautious China-Iran military cooperation at a turning point?," Atlantic Council, August 29, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/is-the-cautious-china-iran-military-cooperation-at-a-turning-point;
Simone McCarthy, "China was on the sidelines of the Iran-Israel war. That's just where it wanted to be," *CNN*, July 18, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/18/china/china-iran-sco-israel-axis-intl-hnk.

[3] John Calabrese, "The 12-day Israel-Iran war: China's response and its implications," Middle East Institute, July 10, 2025, https://www.mei.edu/publications/12-day-israel-iran-war-chinas-response-and-its-implications;
Anna Borshchevskaya & Grant Rumley, "Exploiting Fault Lines in Iran's Relations with Russia and China After the Israel War," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 1, 2025, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exploiting-fault-lines-irans-relations-russia-and-china-after-israel-war;
Jesse Marks, "Iran's bid for Beijing's backing meets its limits," *East Asia Forum*, August 22, 2025, https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/08/22/irans-bid-for-beijings-backing-meets-its-limits.

By contrast, analysts across Israel, Iran, and the Arab world did not hesitate to recognize China's long-term importance for the region's future. Although many expressed concerns over Beijing's approach, they largely view China as an indispensable actor for their countries' trade relations, economic development and foreign policies, often welcoming, to varying degrees, its "neutrality." Quite a few experts not only explained, but also defended China's restrained response, urging their governments to preserve or even strengthen relations with Beijing.

In Israel, while public discourse emphasized purported Chinese support for Tehran, reflecting enduring mistrust; several Israeli experts interpreted China's "balanced" stance as a potential olive branch, with them encouraging Tel Aviv to seize the opportunity to repair ties. While in Iran, disappointment over China's muted reaction was overshadowed by the domestic criticism levied against Tehran for its failure to deepen cooperation with China, perceived as the only major power capable of and potentially willing to assist the Islamic Republic. Across the Arab world, particularly in Gulf-aligned media, China's calls for de-escalation, its posture of "positive neutrality," and its perceived "betrayal" of Tehran were broadly welcomed.

We hope readers will appreciate this effort to provide an informed overview of Chinese and regional perspectives on Sino–Middle Eastern relations with the aim of enriching ongoing discussions among scholars, analysts, and policymakers concerning China's role in the region amid the rapidly evolving international order.

A PASSIVE REGION, AN ABSENT CHINA: CHINESE OFFICIAL STATEMENTS AND EXPERT DEBATE AFTER THE TWELVE-DAY WAR

by Miriam Verzellino and Andrea Ghiselli

The Chinese official response to the Israel–Iran War followed a familiar script: criticism of Israel and the United States, calls for an immediate ceasefire, and appeals for a return to diplomacy. However, despite Chinese diplomats' sharp words, China's overall stance appeared cautious, with Beijing providing no direct support to Iran. This seemingly ambivalent stance, alongside the Chinese leadership's apparent hesitance to directly condemn Israel and the U.S., led to significant speculation among Middle Eastern analysts about the future of China's relations with Tehran and Tel Aviv (a topic explored in the following chapters of this report).

Chinese commentators mostly adhered to, or expanded upon, Beijing's official line. Their analyses largely blamed the outbreak of war on Washington's erratic policy and Israel's *carte blanche* to act unilaterally. Yet, many struggled to square this conflict within the usual narrative of a declining U.S. and an ascendant China-led order. They noted that regional actors, such as Arab states, Russia and Europe, had proved neither willing nor able to halt the hostilities. As for China itself, commentary was sparse and guarded, betraying a shared frustration: Tehran matters, but Beijing has limited leverage.

China's Official Position

On June 13, **Lin Jian,** a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, stated that China was deeply concerned about Israel's attack on Iran and its consequences, clarifying Beijing's opposition to any violation of Iran's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity. He also urged all parties to promote regional peace, avoid further escalation, and emphasized China's readiness to play a constructive role in de-escalating the crisis.[4]

On the same day, the remarks by China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, **Fu Cong,** on the situation in the Middle East were published, stating that China urges Israel to "immediately cease all military adventurism," and called on all relevant parties to abide by the UN Charter and international law, resolving disputes through political and diplomatic means.[5]

The following day, Chinese Foreign Minister **Wang Yi** held a telephone conversation with his Iranian counterpart, **Abbas Araghchi.** According to the official Chinese readout, Wang "unequivocally condemned Israel's violation of Iran's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity," adding that Israel's actions constitute a "serious breach of the purposes and principles of the UN Charter." He underscored the gravity of the attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities, warning that such actions set a dangerous precedent with potentially catastrophic consequences.[6]

On June 17, more than four days into Israel's military campaign, Chinese President **Xi Jinping** addressed the conflict during the second China–Central Asia Summit in Astana. Expressing deep concern over the rising tensions in the Middle East caused by Israel's military actions against Iran, Xi reaffirmed Beijing's opposition to any infringement of the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of other countries, and reiterated China's readiness to work with all parties to play a constructive role for peace in the Middle East. What particularly caught the attention of commentators across Israel, Iran, and the Arab world was his appeal to "all parties" to work to rapidly de-escalate the conflict and avoid further escalation, a seemingly "balanced" formulation that called not only upon Tel Aviv, but also Tehran.[7]

During the emergency meeting of the UN Security Council held on June 22, the day after the U.S. launched strikes against three nuclear sites in Iran, **Fu Cong** stated that China strongly condemns the U.S. attacks on Iran and the bombing of nuclear facilities, putting forth four appeals calling for an immediate ceasefire, the effective protection of civilians, a commitment to dialogue and negotiation, and swift action by the Security Council.[8]

[4] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Èr líng èr wǔ nián liù yuè shí sān rì wài jiāo bù fā yán rén Lín Jiàn zhǔ chí lì xíng jì zhě huì" 2025年6月13日外交部发言人林剑主持例行记者会 [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian held a regular press conference on June 13, 2025], June 13, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250613_11648029.shtml.

[5] Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN, "Remarks on the Situation in the Middle East by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council Briefing," June 13, 2025, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202506/t20250614_11648590.htm.

[6] Lu Yuansheng, "Wáng Yì fēnbié tóng yīlǎng wàizhǎng、 yǐsèliè wàizhǎng tōnghuà" 王毅分别同伊朗外长、以色列外长通话 [Wang Yi had phone calls with the Iranian and Israeli counterparts respectively], Guancha, June 14, 2025, https://m.guancha.cn/internation/2025_06_14_779390.shtml.

[7] Yan Jun, "Xí Jìnpíng : gèfāng yīnggāi tuīdòng zhōngdōng júshì jǐnkuài jiàngwēn" 习近平：各方应该推动中东局势尽快降温 [Xi Jinping: all parties should promote a de-escalation in the Middle East as soon as possible], CCTV, June 17, 2025, https://content-static.cctvnews.cctv.com/snow-book/index.html?item_id=4495386130084596908.

[8] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Remarks on Iran by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council Emergency Meeting," June 22, 2025, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202506/t20250623_11654794.htm.

On June 23, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson **Guo Jiakun** reported that China, along with Russia and Pakistan, had circulated a draft resolution at the Security Council, referring to the four appeals proposed by Fu Cong.[9] This marked the first instance in which China seemed to go beyond rhetorical condemnation, although no vote on the draft resolution took place.

On June 24, Israel and Iran reached a ceasefire agreement. At subsequent press conferences, **Guo Jiakun** stated that China had repeatedly emphasized that the correct path to achieving a ceasefire is through dialogue rather than military means. He also emphasized that China and Iran are traditional friends, and that Beijing is willing to continue its partnership with Tehran and work to safeguard peace in the Middle East.[10]

Israel's Motivations According to Chinese Experts

During the initial stage of the Israel–Iran War, Chinese experts debated Israel's reasons for launching military strikes against Iran, generally identifying three main drivers. In sum, their perspectives do not substantially differ from those of their foreign counterparts.

The first reason was to prevent Iran from developing nuclear capabilities. According to **Li Shaoxian**, President of the China–Arab Research Institute at Ningxia University, Tel Aviv had been restrained by the Biden administration from launching a "lethal strike" on Iranian nuclear facilities, but Trump's return to office shifted the regional context, intensifying U.S. pressure on Tehran.[11] **Tian Wenlin**, Director of the Institute of Middle East Studies at Renmin University's Regional National Research Institute, invoked the Chinese idiom "choose the lesser of two evils" (liǎng hài xiāng quán qǔ qí qīng 两害相权取其轻), arguing that Israel acted to neutralize a future Iranian nuclear threat despite the heavy costs. While Israel's strikes represented the most "unprecedented existential challenge" faced by Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Tian concluded that they might ultimately backfire by reinforcing Tehran's resolve to expand its nuclear program.[12]

The second was to obstruct a potential new Iran nuclear deal. **Li Shaoxian** emphasized Israeli concern over U.S.–Iran negotiations (including a sixth round scheduled for June 15), which Israel firmly opposed if the resulting deal would allow continued uranium enrichment by the Islamic Republic.[13] **Liu Zhongmin,** Professor at the Middle East Studies Institute at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), added that "Trump 2.0" exacerbated this situation by failing to restrain Tel Aviv during these talks, while simultaneously aggravating instability in other regional flashpoints, including Israel–Palestine, the Red Sea and Syria.[14]

The third was to foment chaos in Iran. **Ding Long,** also a professor at SISU's Middle East Studies Institute, contended that the strikes, targeting Iranian political and military leaders, aimed to provoke domestic political upheaval, potentially threatening regime stability.[15]

Involved or Not? Regional Actors, the United States, China, Russia and Europe

For **Niu Xinchun,** Executive Director of the China-Arab Research Institute at Ningxia University, the Israel–Iran war was the most dangerous moment for the Middle East since October 7, 2023. Unlike previous crises, this was a direct clash between two sovereign states, both major military powers, a situation made even more perilous by U.S. involvement.[16] **Ding Long** echoed this view, describing Israel's strike on Iran as a full-scale declaration of war.[17]

Assessing the likelihood of broader regional escalation, **Liu Qiang**, Senior Research Fellow and Chairman of the Academic Committee of the Shanghai Centre for RimPac Strategic and International Studies, observed that on June 16, 2025, twenty-one Arab and Muslim countries issued a joint statement condemning Israel's attack. While the declaration called for

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[9] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2025 nián 6 yuè 23 rì wàijiāobù fāyánrén Guō Jiākūn zhǔchí lìxíng jìzhěhuì, 2025年6月23日外交部发言人郭嘉昆主持例行记者会, [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun held a regular press conference on June 23, 2025], June 23, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250623_11655121.shtml.

[10] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "2025 Nián 6 yuè 24 rì wàijiāo bù fāyán rén Guō Jiākūn zhǔchí lì xíng jìzhě huì" 2025年6月24日外交部发言人郭嘉昆主持例行记者会 [On June 24, 2025, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun hosted a regular press conference], June 24, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250624_11657850.shtml; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "2025 Nián 6 yuè 25 rì wàijiāo bù fāyán rén Guō Jiākūn zhǔchí lì xíng jìzhě huì" 2025年6月25日外交部发言人郭嘉昆主持例行记者会 [On June 25, 2025, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun hosted a regular press conference], June 25, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250625_11658600.shtml.

[11] Zhang Wenjun, "Yǐsèliè wèishénme xuǎnzài cǐshí kōngxí yīlǎng" zhuānjiā fēnxī" 以色列为什么选在此时空袭伊朗？专家分析 [Why does Israel attack Iran? Expert analysis], *CCTV*, June 13, 2025, https://ysxw.cctv.cn/article.html?toc_style_id=feeds_default&item_id=16726319730139111086&channelId=1119.

[12] Feng Qikun, "Zhōngdōng júshì zǒuxiàng shīkòng? Zhuānjiā jiědú cǐ cì yǐ yī chōngtú bèihòu yuányīn yǔ yǐngxiǎng 中东局势走向失控？专家解读此次以伊冲突背后原因与影响 [Is the situation in the Middle East getting out of control? Experts interpret the causes and impacts behind the Israel-Iran conflict], *CRI online*, June 13, 2025, https://news.cri.cn/20250613/8c21ac01-e2ed-8cc8-2fcf-652e5e1b5341.html.

[13] See note 11, Zhang Wenjun, *CCTV*, June 13, 2025.

[14] Liu Zhongmin, "Zhōngdōng ruì píng | tèlǎngpǔ de "sānwú" zhèngcè shì yǐsèliè yīlǎng chōngtū de zhòngyào gēnyuán" 中东睿评｜特朗普的“三无”政策是以色列伊朗冲突的重要根源 [Trump's "three nos" policy is an important source of the Israel-Iran conflict], The Paper, June 17, 2025, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30991499.

[15] *The Paper*, "Zāo wǔ lún kōngxí hòu Yīlǎng liào hěnhuà: Jiāng wú zhǐjìng bàofù! Duōfāng jǐngjí fāshēng! Yǐsèliè wèihé cǐshí dòngshǒu? Zhuānjiā fēnxī zhǔyào yǒu 3 dà mùdì!" 遭五轮空袭后伊朗撂狠话：将无止境报复！多方紧急发声！以色列为何此时动手？专家分析主要有3大目的 [After five rounds of air strikes, Iran said cruelly: there will be endless retaliation! Multi-party emergency voice! Why is Israel doing it at this time? There are three main purposes of expert analysis], June 13, 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30979310.

[16] Su Xiaojing, "Yīlǎng duì yǐsèliè bàofù yǐ zhǎnkāi zhōngdōng chǔyú “zuì wéixiǎn” shíkè zhuānjiā fēnxī" 伊朗对以色列报复已展开 中东处于“最危险”时刻 专家分析 [Iran has already responded to Israel. The experts analysis: the Middle East is in the most dangerous moment], CNR, June 14, 2025, https://news.cnr.cn/sq/20250614/t20250614_527210408.shtml.

[17] Zhao Yifan & Han Jiaojiao, "Quánmiàn xuānzhàn"! Zhuānjiā jiědú yǐsèliè xíjí yīlǎng gēnběn yuányīn “全面宣战”！专家解读以色列袭击伊朗根本原因 ["Declaration of total war"! Experts explain the root cause of Israel's attack on Iran], *Sina Finance*, June 13, 2025, https://finance.sina.com.cn/jjxw/2025-06-13/doc-inezxpez7122647.shtml.

respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, Liu argued that this appeal for peace was "in reality, a clear-cut show of choosing sides" by Middle Eastern states, including major regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, siding in favor of Iran.[18]

Nevertheless, **Tian Wenlin** and other Chinese experts contended that Arab states lack both the strength and the motivation to challenge Israel, noting that they have taken no substantive actions against Tel Aviv over the Gaza War. Given their longstanding disagreements with Iran, Tian and the others concluded that Arab states would likely "stand by and watch."[19]

Regarding the U.S., **Liu Zhongmin** characterized the second Trump administration's Middle East policy as "the three noes": immoral, chaotic, and inconsistent (wúdào, wúxù, wúcháng; 无道、无序、无常):

> *"[American foreign policy is] Immoral because the United States has abandoned the so-called 'universal values' of the past, such as saving the Middle East and democratic transformation; […] chaotic because there is a lack of systematic and coordinated strategic planning in the Middle East policy of the United States; […] Inconsistent because there is a lack of durability and sustainability, which has led to the continuous decline of the credibility of U.S. Middle East policy."*[20]

Similarly, **Sun Degang** argued that the Trump administration operates on a transactional basis, and that **Steve Witkoff,** the U.S. special envoy for Middle East affairs, lacks a clear strategy and an understanding of the complexity of regional dynamics. As a result of Washington's inability "to consider the consequences of its actions" and its capacity to "only take one step at a time," the Israel–Iran situation spiraled out into an "uncontrolled, chaotic conflict."[21]

Liu Zhongmin concurs, adding that the Middle East has shifted from U.S. hegemony toward greater multipolarity, though the implications of this shift for China remain unclear. Regarding China's role in the region, **Liu Qiang** argued that Iran's security is a matter of national security for Beijing. He explained:

> *"For China, how to ensure that Iran, the most fragile link in the international security chain, does not break due to this military conflict with Israel, or even a possible joint strangulation by the U.S. and Israel, requires taking proactive and positive actions to ensure that the impact on China's national interests is minimized."*[22]

Liu Zhongmin wrote that the constructive role of emerging powers, represented by China, has become more prominent through the promotion of practical cooperation around the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Development Initiative.[23] Nevertheless, neither **Liu Qiang** nor **Liu Zhongmin** offered concrete examples of what China could do. This lack of concrete proposals has unsurprisingly not prevented some Chinese media outlets from highlighting statements from Iranian officials thanking China for "providing support in the most difficult moment"[24] and for "understanding Iran's position."[25]

As to Russia, **Sun Degang** observed that although Moscow has expressed a willingness to mediate the Israel–Iran conflict, it remains mired in its own war with Ukraine. He also noted how Israel is unlikely to trust Russia, given Tel Aviv's alignment with Kyiv. Similarly, **Liu Zhongmin** emphasized Russia's focus on Ukraine, noting how its earlier withdrawal from Syria had undermined Iranian security by dooming the Assad regime.[26]

Regarding Europe, **Dong Yifan**, Associate Research Fellow at the Belt and Road Academy of Beijing Language and Culture University, describes Europe as trapped in an awkward "two-hard" dilemma: eager to promote a ceasefire, yet unable to adopt a position independent from the U.S. and Israel.[27] According to Dong, Europe struggles to reconcile its geopolitical ambitions with its actual capacity to influence events, revealing the contradictions between its moral responsibilities and practical interests.

Cui Hongjian, a senior research fellow and director of the Department for European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), added that Iran's negotiations with European countries are largely symbolic, as European governments are unlikely to pursue an independent diplomatic track with Tehran for fear of jeopardizing relations with Washington and Tel Aviv.[28]

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[18] Liu Qiang, "Liú Qiáng： yǐsèliè yǔ yīlǎng jūnshìchōngtū de kě yùjiàn hé bùkěyùjiàn de wēixiǎnxìng" 刘强：以色列与伊朗军事冲突的可预见和不可预见的危险性 [Liu Qiang: The foreseeable and unforeseen dangers of military conflict between Israel and Iran], Aisixiang, June 20, 2025, https://www.aisixiang.com/data/164046.html.

[19] See note 12, Feng Qikun, *CRI online*, June 13, 2025.

[20] See note 14, Liu Zhongmin, *The Paper*, June 17, 2025.

[21] Zhu Runyu, "Yīlǎng háixiǎng jìxù hé měiguó tánpàn? zhuānjiā：“dǎtòng” yǐsèliè cáiyǒu tánpàn dǐqì" 伊朗还想继续和美国谈判？专家：“打痛”以色列才有谈判底气 [Does Iran still want to continue negotiations with the United States? Expert: Only by "striking" Israel can it have the confidence to negotiate], *The Paper*, June 17, 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30995725

[22] See note 18, Liu Qiang, *Aisixiang*, June 20, 2025.

[23] See note 14, Liu Zhongmin, *The Paper*, June 17, 2025.

[24] *Sina*, "Gǎnxiè Zhōngguó zhèngfǔ hé rénmín zài Yīlǎng zuì jiānnán shíkè jǐyǔ de zhīchí" 感谢中国政府和人民在伊朗最艰难时刻给予的支持 ["We thank the Chinese government and people for the support given during Iran's most difficult time"], June 29, 2025, https://cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/1887344341/707e96d502001myf8.

[25] *Sohu*, "Yīlǎng fángzhǎng liányè gǎndào Zhōngguó, dāngmiàn gǎnxiè Zhōngfāng zhīchí, Shànghé shí guó fángzhǎng quánbù dàoqí" 伊朗防长连夜赶到中国，当面感谢中方支持，上合十国防长全部到齐 [The Iranian Defense Minister rushed to China overnight to personally thank the Chinese side for its support. All ten defense ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization were present], June 26, 2025, https://www.sohu.com/a/908051021_121462186.

[26] Chen Qinhan, "Yuánzhuō | cǐ lún yǐ yī chōngtū huìdǎozhì yīlǎng zhèngquán gēngdié ma?" 圆桌 | 此轮以伊冲突会导致伊朗政权更迭吗？[Will this Israel-Iran conflict lead to regime change in Iran?], *The Paper*, June 17, 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30992652.

[27] Dong Yifan, "Dǒng Yīfán: Yǐ yī chōngtú, ōuzhōu lìchǎng wèihé níng bā?" 董一凡：以伊冲突，欧洲立场为何拧巴？[Dong Yifan: Why is Europe's position so awkward in the Israel-Iraq conflict?], *Aisixiang*, June 24, 2025, https://www.aisixiang.com/data/164215.html.

[28] *CCTV*, "Ōuzhōu jiēshǒu yī hé huìtán yǒu nǎxiē kǎoliáng? Zhuānjiā fēnxī" 欧洲接手伊核会谈有哪些考量？专家分析 [What considerations does Europe have in taking over the Iran nuclear talks? Expert analysis], June 19, 2025, https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20250619A08FLO00.

Looking at the Future

Chinese experts also explored how Iran might pursue peace. **Liu Zhongmin** argued that even if Iran chooses a peaceful course, its options are constrained by regional and international factors, including the erosion of U.S. global leadership and the weakening of international institutions such as the UN Security Council.[29]

Jin Liangxiang, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for West Asian and African Studies and Associate Professor at the Institute for International Strategic Studies, noted that while the Trump administration expressed interest in negotiating with Iran, it faced several challenges. In particular, Washington would likely continue to be unable to restrain Israel, given the strong influence of pro-Israel lobby groups and "Jewish capital" within U.S. politics.[30]

After Trump's announcement of a ceasefire between Israel and Iran, the Chinese expert debate shifted toward evaluating this truce's durability. **Li Zixin**, Associate Researcher at CIIS, suggested that the Trump administration seems to have a "stop there" approach, attempting to avoid long-term entanglement in the Middle East as it does not align with Trump's domestic political interests.[31] According to Li, the ceasefire was possible as all three parties could claim victory to their domestic audiences: the U.S. "destroyed" Iran's nuclear facilities, Iran retaliated against the largest U.S. military base in the region, and Israel sabotaged the U.S.–Iran talks and interrupted Tehran's nuclear program.[32]

Liu Zhongmin offered a similar assessment but cautioned that Iran is unlikely to abandon its nuclear ambitions, warning that hostility with Israel will likely persist.[33] **Wang Lixin**, Assistant Research Fellow at the Institute of International Relations at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, stressed the uncertainty of the post-U.S. intervention environment: on one hand, Trump appears motivated to rapidly secure regional stability; on the other, he has the chance to strengthen the pressure on Iran, raising the risk of a new round of escalation.[34]

Conclusion

China's official position was critical toward Israel and the U.S., a stance consistent with its responses to previous crises in the region. Many Chinese experts echoed their government's line, expressing serious concerns over the escalation, blaming Washington's policy for enabling Tel Aviv, while also acknowledging Israel's rationale and U.S. claims of having "destroyed" Iran's nuclear capabilities.

It is also clear from their words that Chinese analysts struggled to reconcile this crisis with the well-established narrative of U.S. decline in the Middle East and the parallel rise of China and other non-Western powers as they viewed regional actors, Russia, and Europe as lacking the will or capacity to resolve such a crisis.

As to China's role, there appears to be an underlying frustration, likely shared by Chinese officials and experts: Iran is an important partner but there is little that China can seriously do to help or assist Tehran. The few references to China in the sources reviewed are largely generic, suggesting that there is no interest to discuss a situation in which Beijing cannot, or does not wish to, commit to a substantive role.

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[29] Sun Degang, "Péngpài xīnwén ： Sūn Dégāng：yuánzhuō｜ yīsèliè cǐ lún néng dǎozhì yīlǎng zhèngquán gēngdié ma? "澎湃新闻：孙德刚：圆桌｜以色列此轮能导致伊朗政权更迭吗？[The Paper: Sun Degang: Round Table: Can Israel's round lead to regime change in Iran?] Institute of International Studies Fudan University, June 17, 2025, https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/43/66/c6893a738150/page.htm.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Shi Xunfeng, "Túshuō gǔn yīsèliè yǔ yīlǎng tínghuǒ, zhōngdōng júshì zǒuxiàng rúhé" 图说丨以色列与伊朗停火，中东局势走向如何 [Illustration丨A ceasefire between Israel and Iran, what is the direction of the situation in the Middle East?], *The Paper*, June 24, 2025, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_31032902.

[32] *CNR*, "Yǐ yī 12 tiān zhànzhēng jiéshù tínghuǒ kě chíxù ma? Zhuānjiā fēnxī" 以伊12天战争结束 停火可持续吗？专家分析 [Is the ceasefire sustainable after 12 days of war in Iraq? Expert analysis], June 25, 2025, https://news.cnr.cn/sq/20250625/t20250625_527228959.shtml.

[33] *The Paper*, "Liú Zhōngmín jiàoshòu jiù yīsèliè yǔ yīlǎng tínghuǒ jiēshòu xīnhuá shè cǎifǎng" 刘中民教授就以色列与伊朗停火接受新华社采访 [Professor Liu Zhongmin was interviewed by Xinhua News Agency on the ceasefire between Israel and Iran], Shanghai International Studies University, June 24, 2025, https://mideast.shisu.edu.cn/07/02/c3991a198402/page.htm.

[34] *Sina*, "Yǐ Yī tínghuǒ néng fǒu chíxù? Zhuānjiā: quēfá zhànlüè hùxìn, chōngtú huò chángqī huà" 以伊停火能否持续？专家：缺乏战略互信，冲突或长期化 [Will the Israel-Iran ceasefire last? Experts: there is lack of strategic mutual trust, the conflict may be protracted], June 25, 2025, https://news.sina.com.cn/w/2025-06-25/doc-infchyza7831346.shtml.

FROM ESTRANGEMENT TO REASSESSMENT? ISRAELI PERSPECTIVES ON CHINA AFTER THE TWELVE-DAY WAR

by Amanda Chen

Even prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Israeli experts and media had voiced mounting concern over Beijing's ties with Tehran, devoting considerable coverage to reports of alleged Sino-Iranian military cooperation. These anxieties persisted during and after the Twelve-Day War, despite China's denial of the allegations.

This predominantly negative media portrayal of China is illustrative of the lingering feeling of estrangement toward China within Israeli public opinion.[35] At the same time, the perceived limitations of China's partnership with Iran seems to have led several Israeli China and security experts to view the conflict as a potential turning point for reassessing bilateral relations with Beijing.

General Suspicion: Is China Arming Iran?

In early June, in the weeks leading up to the war, Israeli news outlets widely circulated a report from *The Wall Street Journal* alleging that, even in the shadow of the nuclear talks, Tehran had purchased from Beijing thousands of tons of military components – including rocket propellants used in ballistic missile production – to rebuild military systems previously damaged by Israeli strikes in October 2024.[36] It was speculated that parts of these shipments might be destined to Iran-backed groups in the region, such as the Houthis in Yemen. These reports raised widespread concern about Tehran's re-armament and the significance of alleged, though unverified, Chinese support.[37]

Following the outbreak of war, suspicion of possible continued Chinese support for Iran was raised again by Western media and reported by *Maariv* when cargo flights departing from China had mysteriously disappeared from the radar near the Iranian border.[38] The rumor was later debunked by **Tuvia Gering**, a visiting researcher at the Israel-China Policy Center of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), who explained to *Maariv* that the planes had merely stopped over in Turkmenistan and belonged to Luxembourg cargo airline Cargolux, adding that "beyond simple logic – it is hard to believe that a major European cargo company would be used to transfer advanced weapons from China to Iran."[39] Nonetheless, the expert cautioned that while the likelihood of Sino-Iranian military cooperation may be low, it "should not be dismissed, and must be closely monitored."[40]

This line of reporting persisted even after the war formally ended with a U.S.-brokered ceasefire on June 24. For instance, Israeli media framed the visit of Iranian Defense Minister **Aziz Nasirzadeh** to China on June 25, where he attended the conference of defense ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as further evidence of alleged direct Chinese support for Iran's rearmament.[41]

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[35] Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, "Enduring Disillusionment: The Israeli Media Debate on China in 2024," *ChinaMed Observer*, February 11, 2025, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/enduring-disillusionment-the-israeli-media-debate-on-china-in-2024.

[36] Laurence Norman, "Iran Orders Material From China for Hundreds of Ballistic Missiles," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 5, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/world/iran-orders-material-from-china-for-hundreds-of-ballistic-missiles-1e874701;
Guy Ulster, "Divuach - Iran Hizmina MeSin Chomarim LeYitzur Meot Tilim Balistim" דיווח: איראן הזמינה מסין חומרים לייצור מאות טילים בליסטיים [Report: Iran ordered materials from China to produce hundreds of ballistic missiles], Walla, June 6, 2025, https://news.walla.co.il/item/3755426;
Israel Hayom, "HaHazmana HaIranit MeSin: Markivim LeYitzur Tilim Balistim BeMishkal Alfei Tonot | Divuach" ההזמנה האיראנית מסין: מרכיבים לייצור טילים בליסטיים במשקל אלפי טונות - והקשר לחות'ים | דיווח [The Iranian order from China: components for the production of ballistic missiles weighing thousands of tons - and the connection to the Houthis | Report], June 6, 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/middle-east/article/18126465;
Srugim News, "Chashash BeIsrael MeHaMahalach HaChadash Shel Iran" חשש בישראל מהמהלך החדש של איראן [Israel's concern about Iran's new move], June 6, 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1133805-חשש-בישראל-מהמהלך-החדש-של-איראן;
Ynet, "Divuach - Iran Hizmina MeSin Chomarim LeYitzur Meot Tilim Balistim" דיווח: איראן הזמינה מסין חומרים לייצור מאות טילים בליסטיים [Report: Iran ordered materials from China to produce hundreds of ballistic missiles], June 6, 2025, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hkas5jj7xg.

[37] Yair Amar, "BaOlam Chosfim: Ze HaMakor HaMaftia LaNeshek HaMitkadem Shel HaChutim" בעולם חושפים: זה המקור המפתיע לנשק המתקדם של החות'ים [The world reveals: This is the surprising source of the Houthis' advanced weapons], *Srugim News*, June 8, 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1134317-בעולם-חושפים-זה-המקור-המפתיע-לנשק-המתק.

[38] Sophia Yan, "China sends mystery transport planes into Iran," *The Telegraph*, June 17, 2025, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/06/17/china-sends-mystery-transport-planes-into-iran/.

[39] *Maariv*, "Ma Mastir Tzir HaResha? Tisot Mistoriot Yatz'u MeSim – VeNe'elmu MeHaRadar Samuch LeIran?" מה מסתיר ציר הרשע? טיסות מסתוריות יצאו מסין – ונעלמו מהרדאר סמוך לאיראן [What is the Axis of Evil hiding? Mysterious flights left China – and disappeared from radar near Iran], June 20, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1207286.

[40] See note 38, Sophia Yan, *The Telegraph*, June 17, 2025.

[41] Dudi Kogan, "Iran Kvar Ovedet Al HaShikum: HaBikur Shel Sar HaBitachon BeSin" איראן כבר עובדת על השיקום: הביקור של שר הביטחון בסין [Iran is already working on reconstruction: Defense Minister's visit to China], *Israel Hayom*, June 25, 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/article/18281419.

Yair Amar, political correspondent for the right-wing outlet *Srugim*, reported that Nasirzadeh's visit was likely to be a part of a procurement campaign to acquire new air defense systems and even the Chinese J-10 fighter jet, believed to be based on the cancelled Israeli Lavi aircraft (which Egypt allegedly is also interested in acquiring).[42] Analysts emphasized that the J-10, which demonstrated notable effectiveness during Pakistani aerial engagements against India in early May, could significantly challenge Israel's air superiority in the Middle East should it be acquired by regional states.[43] *Middle East Eye*, citing anonymous Arab officials, reported that both the U.S. and its Arab allies were aware of Iranian re-armament efforts, further alleging that Tehran pays for missiles with oil shipments.[44]

Experts' Reaction: There is Still Room for Cooperation

Amid overwhelming suspicion in the Israeli media landscape regarding Chinese military support for Iran, Israeli experts and diplomats offered different and more nuanced views. While some interpreted the reports as enduring proof of Sino-Israeli estrangement, most adopted a more cautious tone, urging for a reassessment of Israel's China policy. These experts noted that ultimately, despite the media coverage, Beijing's diplomacy during the war did not directly harm Israel and might even turn to Tel Aviv's advantage if managed well.

One of the most critical views of China was expressed by Israel's Ambassador to Washington, **Yechiel Leiter,** who strongly criticized alleged Sino-Iranian military cooperation. In an interview for *The Voice of America*, later republished by *Ynet*, the ambassador warned that Israel should prioritize preventing China from helping Iran rebuild its missile program, noting that despite its interest in "maintaining good relations with the Chinese people," Israel cannot agree to China "working hand in hand with a country that openly threatens to destroy us."[45]

Nadav Eyal, columnist for *Yediot Ahronot*,[46] echoed these concerns, opining that "the issue [of Chinese military cooperation with Iran] is very troubling and may have strategic implications," despite official sources claiming that Beijing "did not confirm the allegation."[47] For his part, **Yoram Evrom**, an Associate Professor of Political Science and Chinese Studies at the University of Haifa, observed that even if China was taking the risk to help Iran, it would probably supply equipment classified as "dual-use" to go under the radar, because fundamentally, Beijing does "not risk its interests for others."[48]

Unlike her U.S.-based counterpart, Israel's Consul General to Shanghai, **Ravit Baer**, conveyed a more pragmatic message in an interview with *Bloomberg TV* that later appeared on *Maariv*. She directly appealed to Beijing to restrain Iran's rearmament, stating that "China is the only one capable of influencing Iran," but that as long as China continues to buy oil from Iran, it will be difficult to curb Tehran's aggressive policy.[49] At the same time, she warned that an Iranian air force strengthened by Chinese J-10 aircraft would not only represent a threat to Israel, but also to other Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia, a country vital to Beijing's regional interests and ambitions.[50] Nonetheless, while acknowledging the political divergence between Tel Aviv and Beijing, she underscored the robust bilateral trade figures as a proof that:

> *"Even if we disagree politically, that doesn't mean we can't cooperate. There is still a positive dialogue."*[51]

Several analysts echoed Baer's perspective, emphasizing how Beijing had pressured Tehran not to close the Strait of Hormuz, despite the Iranian parliament unanimously endorsing the measure on June 22, shortly after the U.S. strikes on Iranian

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[42] Yair Amar, "Mitkonenim LaMilchama HaBa'a? Sar HaHagana HaIrani Higia LeMasa Rechesh BeSin" מתכוננים למלחמה הבאה? שר ההגנה האיראני הגיע למסע רכש בסין [Preparing for the next war? Iranian Defense Minister arrives in China on a procurement trip], *Srugim News*, June 25, 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1143285-מתכוננים-למלחמה-הבאה-שר-ההגנה-האיראני; Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, "Israeli Media Examines Trade and Tech Relations with China," *ChinaMed Observer*, February 25, 2025, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/israeli-media-examines-trade-and-tech-relations-with-china.

[43] Neta Bar, "Yecholot Muchachot VeMekorot Israelim: Ze Matos HaKrav SheIran Meunienet Liknot MeSin" יכולות מוכחות ומקורות ישראליים: זה מטוס הקרב שאיראן מעוניינת לקנות מסין [Proven capabilities and Israeli sources: This is the fighter jet that Iran is interested in buying from China], *Israel Hayom*, June 27, 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/middle-east/article/18292340.

[44] *Maariv*, "Chashavtem SheLeIran Nigmeru HaTilim? Chaval - HaMa'atzma SheMemalet Et HaMachsanim BeTehran" חשבתם שלאיראן נגמרו הטילים? חבל - המעצמה שממלאת את המחסנים בטהרן [Did you think Iran ran out of missiles? Too bad - the superpower that is filling the warehouses in Tehran], July 8, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1212691.

[45] Sean Mathews, "Iran receives Chinese surface-to-air missile batteries after Israel ceasefire deal," *Middle East Eye*, July 7, 2025, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-receives-chinese-surface-air-missile-batteries-after-israel-ceasefire-say-sources; Itamar Eichner, "Shagrir Israel BeArtzot HaBrit Neged Sin: 'Mesaya'at LeIran Lehachayot Et Tochnit HaTilim Shela'" שגריר ישראל בארה"ב נגד סין: "מסייעת לאיראן להחיות את תוכנית הטילים שלה" [Israeli Ambassador to the US Against China: "Helping Iran Revive Its Missile Program"], *Ynet*, July 26, 2025, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/s1hffvfwgl.

[46] *Yediot Ahronot* (Ynet's paper version) and *Israel Hayom* are Israel's most widely read news platforms.

[47] Nadav Eyal, "Iran Rotza Leshakem Et Ma'arach HaTilim - BeEzrat Sin; Israel 'Mutredet Meod'" איראן רוצה לשקם את מערך הטילים - בעזרת סין; ישראל "מוטרדת מאוד" [Iran wants to rebuild its missile system - with China's help; Israel is "very concerned"], Ynet, August 15, 2025, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hkc5q2odgg.

[48] Dudi Kogan, "HaMilchama Yim Iran Hochicha: HaOlam Adain Shayach LeWashington" המלחמה עם איראן הוכיחה: העולם עדיין שייך לוושינגטון [The war with Iran proved: The world still belongs to Washington], *Israel Hayom*, June 24, 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/usa/article/18273678.

[49] *Maariv*, "Hitya'ashu MeTrump? HaDrisha HaChariga Shel Israel MeSin Neged Iran" התייאשו מטראמפ? הדרישה החריגה של ישראל מסין נגד איראן [Have they given up on Trump? Israel's unusual demand from China against Iran], July 7, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/article-1212395.

[50] Ibid.

[51] *Maariv*, "Bimkom Lehitasek Yim Iran Yeshirot - Israel Pona LeTzinor HaChamtzan Shela" במקום להתעסק עם איראן ישירות - ישראל פונה לצינור החמצן שלה [Instead of dealing with Iran directly, Israel turns to its oxygen pipeline], July 2, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1210887.

nuclear sites.[52] On June 23, Israeli media underscored Beijing's involvement, reporting that Chinese Foreign Minister **Wang Yi** (王毅) had called his Iranian counterpart **Abbas Araghchi** "to prevent even more severe economic damage to global trade."[53] **Amatzia Baram**, a professor emeritus of Middle East history at the University of Haifa, explained that China, in particular, had a strong interest in preventing the war from escalating as it "very much needs Iranian oil" and would be "the first to suffer" from a disruption in supply.[54]

While some analysts attributed China's pressure on Iran primarily to economic considerations, others contended that this episode revealed "cracks in the anti-Western axis," given that neither Moscow nor Beijing offered Tehran substantial support during the war. Notably, China refrained from attempting to isolate Israel at the United Nations as some had expected.[55] **Galia Lavi,** Director of the Israel–China Policy Center at the INSS, argued that Beijing's measured rhetoric since Israel's "pre-emptive strike" on June 13 reflected both China's caution to avoid entanglement in the conflict and its consistent opposition to Iran developing nuclear weapons, which Beijing sees as a scenario detrimental to its own strategic interests in the region. She added that "this balancing policy shows that Beijing does not see itself as part of the Iranian axis," but rather, that it strives to delicately balance its relationships with Iran, Israel, and the Arab states.[56]

A Turning Point for Bilateral Relations?

In contrast to the harsh statements issued in the aftermath of Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023, Chinese state media refrained from directly criticizing Israel during its war with Iran, limiting itself to condemning the violation of Iran's sovereignty, while urging restraint and de-escalation. Beijing's softer rhetoric toward Tel Aviv is a continuation of a trend that started last year, marked by the arrival of the new Chinese ambassador to Israel, **Xiao Junzheng** (肖军正).[57] In early July, Xiao gave an interview to *Israel Hayom* in which he strongly denied allegations that China had provided military support to Iran, including the transfer of missiles and J-10 fighter jets. He dismissed such claims as misinformation, declaring that "a lie repeated 1000 times remains a lie."[58] *Israel Hayom* reporters agreed that, to some extent, the interview embodied "the change in Chinese tone toward Israel during the war."[59]

Doron Cucos, a researcher of international relations and East Asia and guest contributor at the Mitvim Institute, characterized China's rhetorical shift and Israel's military success against Iran as a "watershed moment" for reshaping Tel Aviv's bilateral relations with Beijing.[60] Cucos argued that Tel Aviv should seek alignment with Beijing on issues where their interests converge, "particularly on containing Iran's nuclear ambitions and curbing regional instability."[61]

Geopolitics analyst Dr. **Anat Hochberg-Marom** also considered the war a turning point for China's regional strategy: while Israeli and U.S. military strikes challenged and weakened Iran, they simultaneously heightened China's dependence on Arab Middle Eastern oil exporters. As such, she encouraged Tel Aviv to seize the opportunity to "adopt a new, pragmatic foreign policy" toward China and strengthen relations with Beijing.[62] Hochberg-Marom went as far as to argue that "amid mounting global criticism of Israel, the renewal of nuclear talks with Iran, and the unpredictable foreign policy of the President of the United States," recognition from China could rehabilitate Israel's image in the Global South, whereas Beijing for its part would enhance its image as a credible conflict mediator.[63]

While closer Sino-Israeli cooperation was generally viewed as feasible and even desirable, most experts remained less

[52] Yair Amar, "Srugim News, Sin Shigra Azhara Charifa LeIran: 'Tza'ad SheLo Mekubal Aleinu'" סין שיגרה אזהרה חריפה לאיראן: "צעד שלא מקובל עלינו" [China issued a stern warning to Iran: "A step that is unacceptable to us"], June 23, 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1141999-סין-שיגרה-אזהרה-חריפה-לאיראן-צעד-שלא-מ;
Maariv, "Bachru BaKesef Al Cheshbon Asakim: HaMasar HaMashpil Shel Rusia VeSin LeIran" בחרו בכסף על חשבון עסקים: המסר המשפיל של רוסיה וסין לאיראן [Choose money over business: Russia and China's humiliating message to Iran], June 30, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/article-1210333;
Srugim News, "Shavua Akharei Hafsakat HaEsh: Maka Kasha Nosefet LeIran" שבוע אחרי הפסקת האש: מכה קשה נוספת לאיראן [A week after the ceasefire: Another hard blow to Iran], June 30, 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1145171-שבוע-אחרי-הפסקת-האש-מכה-קשה-נוספת-לאירא;
Dean Shmuel Elmas, "Rega Acharei Hafsakat HaEsh, Iran Yotzet LeIskat Anak. Al HaPerek: Metosei Krav Chadashim" רגע אחרי הפסקת האש, איראן יוצאת לעסקת ענק. על הפרק: מטוסי קרב חדשים [Moments after ceasefire, Iran enters into huge deal. On the agenda: new fighter jets], *Globes*, July 3, 2025, https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001514359.

[53] *Maariv*, "Iran Notra Levada: BeTehran Zoamim Al HaRusim, Gam Sin Medashdeshet" איראן נותרה לבדה: בטהרן זועמים על הרוסים, גם סין מדשדשת [Iran is left alone: Tehran is furious with the Russians, China is also floundering], June 23, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/article-1208232.

[54] Maya Cohen, "Lo Osim Cheshbon: Vladimir Putin VeSin Tzfuyim Lintosh Et Iran" לא עושים חשבון: ולדימיר פוטין וסין צפויים לנטוש את איראן [No calculations: Vladimir Putin and China are expected to abandon Iran, *Maariv*, June 19, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/article-1206484.

[55] *Maariv*, "HaShagrir HaIrani Leshe'avar Boche: Eich HaRusim Mochrim Otanu Kol Pa'am MeChadash" השגריר האיראני לשעבר בוכה: איך הרוסים מוכרים אותנו כל פעם מחדש [Former Iranian ambassador cries: How the Russians sell us out over and over again], July 7, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1212380.

[56] Galia Lavi, "Sin, Iran VeIsrael: Diplomatia Zehira BeZira Boeret" סין, איראן וישראל: דיפלומטיה זהירה בזירה בוערת [China, Iran and Israel: Cautious Diplomacy in a Burning Arena], INSS, June 13, 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/he/social_media/סין-איראן-וישראל-דיפלומטיה-זהירה-בזיר/.

[57] See note 35, Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, *ChinaMed Observer*, February 11, 2025,

[58] Yair Amar, "Shagrirut Sin BeIsrael Machchisha: Lo He'evarnu Ma'archot Tilim LeIran" שגרירות סין בישראל מכחישה: לא העברנו מערכות טילים לאיראן [Chinese Embassy in Israel Denies: We Did Not Transfer Missile Systems to Iran], *Srugim News*, July 9, 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1149149-שגרירות-סין-בישראל-מכחישה-לא-העברנו-מע.

[59] Dudi Kogan & Erez Linn, "Shagrir Sin Al HaHashamot BeIsrael: 'Ha'avarat Neshek LeIran? Sheker'" שגריר סין על ההאשמות בישראל: "העברת נשק לאיראן? שקר" [Chinese Ambassador on Israel's Accusations: "Transferring Weapons to Iran? A Lie"], Israel Hayom, July 10, 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/other/article/18390553.

[60] Doron Cucos, "China's strategic shift: Navigating relations with Israel, Iran in a changing Middle East - opinion," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 22, 2025, https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-861723.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Anat Hochberg-Marom, "Itut MeBeijing: Yitachen SheSin Hevina SheIsrael Hi Neches - VeYesh Lechach Siba | Dr. Anat Hochberg-Marom" איתות מבייג'ינג: ייתכן שסין הבינה שישראל היא נכס - ויש לכך סיבה | ד"ר ענת הוכברג-מרום [Signal from Beijing: China may have realized that Israel is an asset - and there's a reason for that | Dr. Anat Hochberg-Marom], *Maariv*, August 1, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/journalists/opinions/article-1219979.

[63] Ibid.

optimistic about China's potential role as a mediator. **Dudi Kogan**, writing for *Israel Hayom*, contended that the war and the American intervention underscored Washington's enduring primacy as security provider in the Middle East.[64]

Galia Lavi and **Ori Sela** from the Israel–China Policy Center at the INSS shared the same perspective, arguing that, against the backdrop of the conflict, "the region's countries never expected more than rhetoric from China in the first place" as they "distinguish between China's importance in economic and infrastructure matters from political-military issues, where they clearly rely on the United States."[65] Similarly, **Roy Ben Tzur,** a Research Assistant hailing from the same institution, added that, in light of China's perceived diplomatic alignment with Israel's adversaries, Beijing's credibility as mediator will remain compromised unless it "chooses to balance its positions and recognize the complexity" of the security threats facing Tel Aviv.[66]

Conclusion

The Israeli media debate on China during and after the war with Iran revealed a notable shift of tone compared to the previous year, as documented in our report.[67] Although the extensive media coverage of Beijing's alleged military support for Tehran reflected lingering estrangement toward China within Israeli public opinion, several China and security experts interpreted the conflict as an opportunity to reassess bilateral ties.

Among those publicly advocating for a rapprochement with China was **Ravit Baer**, Israel's consul to Shanghai, who emphasized the importance of preserving bilateral trade relations, which "did not deteriorate significantly despite the conflicts since 2023,"[68] and whose continuity may assist in sustaining Israel's economy during wartime. The reemergence of a more pragmatic outlook toward China among some Israeli experts, however, was shaped not only by economic considerations but also by diplomatic factors, in particular, the efforts of China's new ambassador to Israel and Beijing's subsequent softening of its rhetoric toward Tel Aviv.

Nevertheless, despite the resilience of trade and the growing diplomatic outreach, these trends have not significantly reshaped Israeli perceptions of China. National security concerns remain paramount, and while an increasing number of analysts support expanding cooperation with China, few extend that optimism to Beijing's oft-stated aspirations to serve as a mediator in the Middle East.

[64] See note 48, Dudi Kogan, *Israel Hayom*, June 24, 2025.

[65] Galia Lavi & Ori Sela, "Committed to Itself: China and the Israel-Iran War," INSS Insight No. 2003, July 14, 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-iran-israel/.

[66] Roy Ben Tzur, "Biased Neutrality: China's Rhetoric Amid Escalating Tensions in the Middle East," INSS Insight No. 2004, August 14, 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-middle-east-2025/.

[67] Enrico Fardella, Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, "China in the Shadow of October 7: Israeli Media Coverage of China in 2024," ChinaMed Project, March 21, 2025, https://www.twai.it/journal/chinamed-report-2024/.

[68] See note 51, *Maariv*, July 2, 2025.

LOOKING INWARD BEFORE LOOKING EAST: IRANIAN PERSPECTIVES ON CHINA AFTER THE TWELVE-DAY WAR

by Theo Nencini and Veronica Turrini

Many Iranians expected a stronger Chinese response to Israeli strikes. Instead, Beijing's reaction was limited to a delayed condemnation and, as far as we know, no tangible assistance. In the aftermath, senior Iranian officials, including Defense Minister **Aziz Nasirzadeh** and Foreign Minister **Abbas Araghchi**, travelled to Beijing and publicly thanked China for its "valuable support."[69]

Yet, the evident Chinese circumspection during the Twelve-Day War had a significant impact on the domestic Iranian debate on the relationship with China, with pronounced reactions that ranged from criticizing China for not doing enough to blaming the Iranian government for failing to convince Beijing of Tehran's importance and value as a partner.

Below Expectations, at Least for Some

China's initial hesitancy to promptly and unequivocally condemn the initial Israeli strikes has unsettled many Iranian experts from institutional circles, academia and the media.

"China hasn't condemned the attack before Iran's reciprocation, but only asked for self-restraint," stressed **Mehdi Kharratiyan,** the director of the Institute for Policy Revival.[70] His interpretation is that, from a Chinese vantage, the Islamic Republic might conceivably have been on the brink of collapse after Israel's first blow. That is no trivial matter, given that many Iranian commentators regard closer ties with China as a form of "life-insurance" enabling their sanctions-constricted state to endure. As the academic and policy analyst **Rahman Qahremanpour**[71] observes, "This may have consequences on China's credibility,"[72] an assessment shared by others.

Qahremanpour attributes Beijing's restraint to the absence of any coherent Chinese security strategy for the region: in his words, China "has no security plan for the Middle East."[73] He invokes former Iranian ambassador to China **Mohammad Hossein Malaek** (1997–2001), who maintained that "China has no major plan beyond Pakistan."[74] From this standpoint, Chinese interests in the region are largely confined to securing oil supplies from the Persian Gulf and advancing infrastructure investments linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Hence, Qahremanpour contends that Iran cannot reasonably entrust its security to China: "What kind of power are you if, in a time of crisis, you say 'I do not enter into this; solve your problems yourselves'?"

Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, Director of the China–MENA Project at the Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran (CSRMESS), amplifies this verdict by asserting that "Iran and China cannot have a strategic relationship."[75] She argues that because China pursues a non-aligned foreign policy and therefore maintains no formal allies, only "hierarchized" partners, "Iran cannot expect the same level of protection that the U.S. grants to its allies. […] A partnership with China implies an absence of obligations and no military support, and in the event that the Europeans adopt the snapback mechanism, China will not sell arms to Iran."[76]

For other commentators, the issue lies in China failing to understand Iran's strategic importance. **Mehdi Khorsand**, Head of Tehran Municipality's Economic Diplomacy Department and a specialist in Eurasian affairs, articulates

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[69] *Bloomberg News*, "Iran's Defense Minister Visits China in First Trip Since War," June 25, 2025, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-06-25/iran-s-defense-minister-visits-china-in-his-first-trip-since-war; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Wang Yi Meets with Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi," July 16, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202507/t20250717_11672131.html.

[70] The Institute for Policy Revival (اندیشکده احیای سیاست) is a small Iran-focused think-tank that produces live streamed video-based analyses in Persian but publishes little formal academic research and lacks clearly documented institutional affiliations.

[71] Qahremanpour is a specialist in disarmament and international affairs, formerly director of the Disarmament Research Group at Iran's Center for Strategic Research, and editor-in-chief of *Hamshahri Diplomatic,* known for his extensive media commentary on Iran's nuclear diplomacy and for having been detained between 2011 and 2014 following criticism of nuclear policy.

[72] He presents his analysis in an interview for the YouTube channel "Azad", a podcast and video platform linked to the Sharif University of Technology: *Azad*, پیدا و پنهان جنگ ۱۲ روزه گفتگوی رحمان قهرمانپور و مهدی خراتیان [The visible and hidden aspects of the 12-day war. Conversation with Rahman Qahremanpour and Mehdi Kharratiyan], July 15, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vp1EzPREjC0&t=102s.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Although this exact wording could not be traced, Qahremanpour's reformulation may reasonably be regarded as plausible, given Malaek's established manner of analyzing China's foreign policy and strategic priorities.

[75] Azad, مزور؟ یوگتفگ دماح یافو ی و هیکز ۱۲ سانشنادزی هیچ تبیغ گنج رد نیچ [China's Absence in the 12-Day War? A Conversation Between Hamed Vafaei and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas], July 30, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ.

[76] Ibid.

this bluntly: “only Iran can be China’s strategic partner in the region as an ‘independent’ and ‘anti-Western’ actor.”[77]

There are, however, also Iranian voices that are somewhat less critical of Beijing, appearing to have accepted that expecting much from China reflects a misunderstanding of its foreign policy. For example, **Hossein Qaheri,** President of the Iran–China Institute for Strategic Studies and a prominent figure in the informal channels between the two states,[78] contends that “China hasn’t kept a passive approach during the war.”[79] He notes that “China maintained its purchases of Iranian oil and provided Iran with essential items […] and had a clear stance on Iran.”[80]

Qaheri attributes China’s distance to recurring frictions in the bilateral relationship, notably the uneven implementation of numerous agreements and contracts across sectors – energy, industry, transport and ICT. Since the first major oil and gas contracts were signed in 2004, several projects, including many major ones, have been cancelled or deferred.[81] The same pattern has been evident in civil-engineering projects.[82] These setbacks, he stresses, cannot be ascribed solely to U.S. sanctions: in many instances contracts were terminated owing to technically inadequate Chinese implementation, while in others delays stemmed from the administrative burdens and rigidities that characterize the Iranian state apparatus.[83] It is on this basis that Qaheri delivers the trenchant, if bitter, assessment that “the Chinese don’t have ‘strategic trust’ in Iran anymore.”[84] From his perspective, the signing of the Iran–China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement in March 2021 was essentially symbolic.

Hamed Vafaei, Director of the Asia Research Center and co-director of the University of Tehran’s Confucius Institute,[85] situates Chinese reserve toward Iran within the fundamental principles of China’s foreign policy. According to him, Beijing’s approach to the Iran–Israel conflict unfolded in three phases: hesitation (“wait to see if the Iranian government was still stable and able to answer back”[86]), decision (condemnation of the attack) and consolidation (offer for mediation).[87]

In an interview with *Asr-e Iran*,[88] Vafaei elaborates on his perspective, citing reports that the Chinese themselves describe their position as “Sitting on a mountain and watching the tigers fight.” He thus cautions that “Iran should not expect direct and full support from China,” insofar as “its support must be analyzed within the framework of China’s own rationality and national interests.”[89] Vafaei stresses that China does not seek commitments, and that the very basis of its foreign policy should be understood as distinct from that of the United States.

He emphasizes the particularity of the Chinese viewpoint in which Iran, “which has little more to offer than oil,”[90] has seen its strategic weight decline significantly in Beijing’s energy security calculations. In this respect, Vafaei highlights that China has markedly diversified its oil imports, and that Iran’s share, although still significant (10–13%), is likely to recede over the medium- to long-term and, above all, “is not sufficient for China to become seriously involved in Iranian affairs.”[91]

In an article published in the economic newspaper *Donya-e Eqtesad*, **Ehsan Citsaz,** Deputy Minister of Communications, and **Behzad Ahmadi,** Advisor for International Affairs to the Minister of Communications, both holding research positions at the University of Tehran, further develop this argument:

> *“China has a balanced approach to protect its multifaceted interests in the region, and it is unrealistic for Iran to expect it to jeopardize its relations with Israel and the United States. Therefore, it seems that our romantic view of China is the product of years of myth-making and strategic wishful thinking, rather than an accurate understanding of the behavior of a pragmatic power.”*[92]

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[77] Fatemeh Sadat Mortazavi, ا هژا ز ا باواخ رادیب ؟دوشی م [Will the dragon wake up?], *Farikhtegan Daily*, July 15, 2025, https://farhikhtegandaily.com/page/269806/.

[78] Hossein Qaheri’s professional endeavors center on strengthening Iran-China bilateral relations, emphasizing economic, commercial, and scientific cooperation. As CEO of several companies – Iran-China Cooperation Development Group, Nikan Industrial Group, and Naipco Investment Company – he spearheads partnerships with Chinese conglomerates in energy, trade, and industrial sectors. Additionally, he holds board positions at Alabusiness Bank and the Bashir Saleh Institute, fostering financial and technological synergies with Chinese entities, and presides over the Cryptocurrency Exchange Association, focusing on blockchain collaborations with Chinese digital platforms. More information can be found on his website: https://hosseinghaheri.com/.

[79] Fatemeh Sadat Mortazavi, روزه منفعل بود؟ | فرهیختگان آنلاین ۱۲ چین واقعا در جنگ [Was China really passive in the 12-day war?], Farikhtegan Daily, July 15, 2025, https://farhikhtegandaily.com/news/210606/چین-واقعا-در-جنگ-۱۲-روزه-منفعل-بود؟/.

[80] Ibid.

[81] News Agencies, "Iran says Chinese state oil firm has withdrawn from $5bn deal," *Al Jazeera*, October 7, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/10/7/iran-says-chinese-state-oil-firm-has-withdrawn-from-5bn-deal; *Reuters*, "Iran says China’s Sinopec might not develop Yadavaran oilfield," May 2, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/currencies/iran-says-chinas-sinopec-might-not-develop-yadavaran-oilfield-idUSKCN1S8191/

[82] *Reuters*, "Iran cancels $2 billion dam deal with China: report," May 31, 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/iran-cancels-2-billion-dam-deal-with-china-report-idUSBRE84U085/

[83] *Reuters*, "Iran cancels oilfield deal with China’s CNPC," April 30, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/commodities/iran-cancels-oilfield-deal-with-chinas-cnpc-idUSL6N0NM2D3/; Mahdi Rahmati, Mahdi Rojhani & Mohammad Amin Raoof, "Causes of Delays in Iranian Building Construction Projects," *AUT J. Civil Eng.*, 5(4), February 19, 2022, http://doi.org/10.22060/ajce.2022.19293.5725.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Confucius Institutes are usually run jointly by the host (local) university and a Chinese partner, and most institutes have co-leadership arrangements that include a local (host-side) director and a Chinese (partner-side) director or co-director.

[86] See note 75, *Azad*, July 30, 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ.

[87] He reiterates his analysis at the 3rd International Conference on "The Decline of the United States: The New Era of the World" (August 19, 2025): China’s Approach to the Twelve-Day War in Three Phases: Hesitation, Decision, and Consolidation.

[88] *Asr-e Iran*, روزه طرف ایران را نگرفت؟ ۱۲ چرا چین در جنگ [Why didn’t China side with Iran in the 12-day war?], July 19, 2025, https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/1077981/چرا-چین-در-جنگ-۱۲-روزه-طرف-ایران-را-نگرفت .

[89] Ibid.

[90] See note 75, *Azad*, July 30, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ehsan Citsaz & Behzad Ahmadi, رابطه اقتصادی ایران و چین [Iran-China Economic Relations], *Donya-e Eqtesad*, July 13, 2025, https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/بخش-خبر-دیپلماسی-64/4204443-رابطه-اقتصادی-ایران-چین .

A Failed Strategy

While many Iranian commentators have seemingly come to accept the limits of Chinese assistance, and even to sympathize with the reasons behind Beijing's caution, their criticism of the Iranian leadership's own China policy is considerably sharper.

As noted above, **Hamed Vafaei** posits that a long-standing assumption has shaped the Iranian debate on China: namely, that Iran plays a critical role in China's regional calculus. As he writes:

> *"The Islamic Republic is the western wall of defense of China. If it falls, China is going to be affected and injured. This was in the head of our politicians in these years: if we cut the oil, China is going to face problems; if there is no Iran, China is going to be affected by challenges. If we don't keep America occupied in this region, America will go after China."*[93]

However, the sources we consulted, including sustained monitoring of X (formerly Twitter),[94] converge on a clear criticism of how successive Iranian governments have mishandled the relations with China. Experts are explicit about where responsibility lies. Whether their critique is directed at the "ruling elite" or specific administrations (notably the Rohani years, 2013–2021, and the Pezeshkian government since 2024[95]), their assessments echo **Mehdi Khorsand**'s observation that "the Chinese have repeatedly made major offers of economic and infrastructure [cooperation] to Iran […] but there was no effective response from the Iranian authorities."[96]

Employing terms often associated with China's own Middle East policy, **Hossein Qaheri** told *Eghtesad 120* that "Iran's China policy is essentially opportunistic. Iran only turned to China when it needed it, i.e. when the West turned its back on Iran."[97] He argues that the Iran–China partnership is scarcely "strategic" so long as Iranian leaders have not clarified the deeper meaning of these concepts, and, more importantly, so long as they have not reached agreement with their Chinese counterparts on how to integrate their bilateral relationship into their respective foreign policy frameworks. It is in this sense that Qaheri states unambiguously that "Iran should change its approach toward China."[98]

Hamed Vafaei advances a similar line:

> *"Iran must enter into a real strategic dialogue with China. Relations should not be limited to official visits, statements or slogans such as the Silk Road. The two countries should discuss what can concretely be Iran's role in the realization of China's initiatives. […] China's initial uncertainty – during the Twelve-Day War – proves we severely lack a system of strategic bilateral relations."*[99]

He develops this argument further by comparing the Iranian case with Sino–Saudi and Sino–Emirati relations:

> *"Iran has not established its position in Beijing's strategic mindset. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have, by contrast, become part of China's value chain. […] If Iran cannot consolidate its share in China's value chain, it should not expect China to defend it in the security sphere. Iran has to demonstrate to China that Israel's attack on one of its partners is equivalent to an attack on Chinese interests."*[100]

These debates ultimately converge on the core issue animating Iranian discussions on China policy, both within and outside the country: arms procurement. Israeli strikes have starkly laid bare the serious technical and operational shortcomings of Iran's defense apparatus. Iranians now have fully recognized the technological backwardness of their armed forces, despite the rhetoric and shows of strength advanced by entities such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.[101] The imperative to acquire advanced Chinese weaponry – especially anti-aircraft systems, which have demonstrated their efficacy in the recent Indo–Pakistani clash – pervades the deliberations and observations of Iranian analysts.

The most lucid and well-contextualized perspective comes from **Mohammad Keshavarzadeh**, Iran's former ambassador to China (2018–2023).[102] In an interview with the reformist newspaper *Shargh*,[103] he elaborates on several salient points regarding the stance and hesitancy of the Iranian authorities with respect to procuring Chinese arms. He argues that Iran squandered earlier opportunities to buy and train to use Chinese weapons and cannot expect immediate arms

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[93] See note 75, *Azad*, July 30, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ.

[94] Here is an indicative list of tweets collected: @alhosseini (August 15, 2025): https://x.com/alhosseini/status/1956338794971406528 and https://x.com/alhosseini/status/1956338486329348588; @JBehieh (July 2): https://x.com/JBehieh/status/1940458261289095194; @Jangjouye (July 1): https://x.com/Jangjouye/status/1939982109546094705; @javad_farahani (June 29): https://x.com/javad_farahani/status/1939359313094439310; @mahdi_alipour (June 23): https://x.com/mahdi_alipour/status/1937083087109734813.

[95] This is the case, among others, of the think-tanker Mehdi Kharratiyan, who harshly criticizes reformist administrations in this tweet: https://x.com/MehdiKharratya/status/1938676789691183267.

[96] See note 79, Fatemeh Sadat Mortazavi, *Farikhtegan Daily*, July 15, 2025, https://farhikhtegandaily.com/page/269806/.

[97] *Eghtesad 120*, چین میترسد آخرین مدل پدافند و جنگنده خودش را به ایران بدهد، ولی ما بعد از برجام جدید با آمریکا تکنولوژی آن را در اختیار آمریکاییها بگذاریم/ ما هر زمان نیاز بوده چینیها را معامله کردیم و به غرب و آمریکا فروختیم – اقتصاد 120 [China is afraid to give its latest defense and fighter jet model to Iran, but after the new JCPOA with the U.S., we will make its technology available to the Americans / We have traded with the Chinese whenever needed and sold it to the West and the U.S.], July 28, 2025, https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/بخش-خبر-دیپلماسی-4443/64-رابطه-اقتصادی-ایران-چین.

[98] Ibid.

[99] See note 75, *Azad*, July 30, 2025.

[100] See note 88, *Asr-e Iran*, July 19, 2025.

[101] *Press TV*, "Iran 'fully ready for any scenario', IRGC chief commander says amid escalating threats," June 12, 2025, http://presstv.ir/Detail/2025/06/12/749680/IRGC-Salami-Iran-ready-any-scenario;
The Sun, "Inside Iran's secret underground 'missile city' packed with ballistic weapons," March 26, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfyvZ0KBHAc.

[102] During his tenure, Ambassador Keshavarzadeh was centrally involved in diplomatic work surrounding the negotiation of the 25-year strategic partnership. He is regarded for a substantive understanding of Chinese political economy and diplomatic practice, repeatedly engages Chinese media and think-tanks to explain Tehran's priorities and to promote practical cooperation. Networked within Beijing's official circles, he seeks to translate political rapport into concrete commercial and institutional outcomes. He also deploys public diplomacy (lectures, interviews and cultural outreach) to bolster mutual comprehension and to mitigate misperceptions.

[103] *Shargh*, رقص اژدهای زرد [Dance of the Yellow Dragon], July 22, 2025, https://www.magiran.com/article/4621365.

transfers after a sudden crisis. Iran historically relied on Western – and later Russian – systems and never seriously pursued Chinese armaments.

According to him:

> *"We should have pursued the weapons purchase earlier and more steadily, rather than [...] rushing to the Chinese and now expecting that overnight they will give us the weapons we want."*[104]

Keshavarzadeh insists that arms contracts and transfers require time, mutual trust and prior planning; emergency appeals will not produce instant results: realistic timelines and sustained engagement are necessary. In the interview, the former ambassador also refers to a matter that has recently returned to the public debate: Iran's desire to reduce its dependence on U.S. satellites.[105] "I even remember that at one point we attempted to use an alternative Chinese system instead of a GPS system for navigation, but regrettably we did not follow up on that measure."[106] This testimony is extremely revealing, as it plainly attests to the reflection – and indeed the debate – that has been under way in Iran for years regarding the possibility of equipping and training the armed forces to operate Chinese weapons. He emphasizes that China is now a credible military producer and supplier, and that Iran should establish with it formal, institutionalized long-term defense frameworks: "Its power is now no less than that of the Westerners." From this account, thus, it would appear that the Iranians have in the past doubted the quality of Chinese weapons.

Hence, Keshavarzadeh puts forward a number of recommendations intended at elevating relations with China to the level of "ironclad" ties, liking them to Sino-Pakistani relations. He stresses the need to broaden and diversify barter mechanisms to circumvent sanctions: non-cash mechanisms, trade-in-kind arrangements and creative logistical frameworks. He criticizes the absence of political will and active diplomacy, as well as what he describes as Iranian "passivity and one-dimensional thinking" – perceiving China solely as an oil buyer – arguing that Tehran must proactively build military, diplomatic and logistical links. He recalls initiatives undertaken during his ambassadorship (led by figures such as **Ali Larijani**[107]) and calls for the implementation of a sustained diplomatic campaign and domestic mechanisms to operationalize the relationship, with clear mandates and allocated resources.

Keshavarzadeh also expands his analysis to the regional level, insisting that Iran should capitalize on China's current strategy of balancing relations across West Asia.

> *"The Chinese have been able to sign a non-aggression agreement with the GCC as well as with ASEAN. [...] I raised these issues in discussions with Chinese think tanks, and some of them proposed a similar plan to regulate China's relations between Iran and GCC countries, [...] a joint non-aggression treaty. [...] An agreement that can concretely lay the foundation for a collective security system in the Middle East."* [108]

The former ambassador thus expresses a firm conviction that China could act as a genuine guarantor of regional security, promoting the development of a new architecture, though he seems aware that China neither possesses the capabilities nor necessarily the will to supplant the U.S.

Looking at the economic side of Sino-Iranian relations, **Ehsan Citsaz** and **Behzad Ahmadi** also offer several recommendations. In their view, as with most of the interviewees in this study, there is an imperative need to redesign Iran-China relations from a strategic, not merely short-term or tactical, perspective. This requires preparing Iran's economy to attract Chinese investment and enhance the country's transit position: projecting a secure image to investors, pursuing specific projects integrated into BRI networks, reforming domestic legal frameworks, removing banking and financial barriers, and supporting the private sector. At the same time, it is necessary to diversify Iran's China export portfolio beyond petroleum products by positioning Iran as a technological partner in ICT, AI, engineering, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals, minerals and mining. Iranian firms, they suggest, should expand their presence in the Chinese market via BRI and BRICS forums, trade fairs and e-commerce platforms. Finally, Iran must develop plans to secure loans from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.[109]

Citsaz, Ahmadi, as well as Ambassador Keshavarzadeh also emphasize that Iran should "not to put all [its] eggs in China's basket."[110] To avoid the risks of falling into a "debt trap," Citsaz and Ahmadi say, "Iran must be careful not to lose sight of its long-term interests (such as ownership of strategic assets or fair pricing of resources) in its thirst for Chinese investment, [...] and must pursue development in a manner that ensures cooperation rather than exploitation." It is also worth noting that they condition these recommendations on several political preconditions: a reduction in international tensions surrounding Iran, a clarification of mutual expectations, and a redefinition of the bilateral relationship with China "not on the basis of the fantasy of a 'shared destiny,' but on a clear understanding of 'overlapping interests.'"[111]

Conclusion

Despite some Iranian commentators being greatly disappointed by Beijing's conduct during the Twelve-Day War, others were somewhat more understanding of the Chinese position, emphasizing both Beijing's overall

[104] Ibid.

[105] See Zhao Ziwen, "Iran looks to tap into China's BeiDou navigation system to plug security gaps," South China Morning Post, August 8, 2025, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3321043/iran-looks-tap-chinas-beidou-navigation-system-plug-security-gaps.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ali Larijani, former Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (2008–2020) and, since August 2025, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, is a senior conservative figure and adviser to the Supreme Leader. Between 2018 and 2023 Larijani is widely credited with initiating diplomatic mechanisms to deepen Iran–China ties, notably advancing negotiations that contributed to the 25-year strategic cooperation framework.

[108] Ibid.

[109] See note 92, Ehsan Citsaz & Behzad Ahmadi, *Donya-e Eqtesad*, July 13, 2025.

[110] See note 103, *Shargh*, July 22, 2025.

[111] See note 92, Ehsan Citsaz & Behzad Ahmadi, *Donya-e Eqtesad*, July 13, 2025.

diplomatic caution and, more specifically, the limits of its strategic interests in Iran. Against that background, the Iranian leadership has faced criticism for misunderstanding Beijing's objectives, exaggerating Iran's importance for China, and failing to transform the relationship beyond supplying discounted oil.

Interestingly however, the sources suggest that the proposed remedy is not disengagement but rather a cautious doubling down of ties with Beijing. Bilaterally, Iran is expected to pursue Chinese weapons acquisitions more vigorously. If Tehran was not interested before, as Ambassador Keshavarzadeh stated, it now appears that the initiative rests largely with Beijing: it will be China that decides if, and to what extent, Iranian forces gain access to its military technologies. Multilaterally, Tehran aspires to be more integrated in the global initiatives and international organizations launched by Beijing. Greater Iran–Gulf countries coordination, with China as mediator and guarantor, would also be the foundation for a new regional architecture.

It is likely that the main driver of these suggestions is the awareness that, despite the limits of which Iranian commentators are clearly cognizant, China truly remains the only possible great power that is capable and, possibly, willing to help Iran. Indeed, Chinese oil imports from Iran have reportedly reached a new peak.[112] While it is far from obvious that Chinese fighter jets will ever become the backbone of the now-destroyed Iranian Air Force or that Chinese investors will start treating Iran as any other country, Beijing clearly wants to keep Iran afloat. If many in Iran continue to oppose being excessively dependent on China, this sense of vulnerability and frustration will likely increase.

[112] Dalga Khatinoglu, "Defying 'maximum pressure', China uptake of Iranian oil hits pre-Trump high," *Iran International*, September 12, 2025, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202509121567

AN "UNRELIABLE" FRIEND: ARAB PERSPECTIVES ON CHINA AFTER THE TWELVE-DAY WAR

by Francesco Scala and Leonardo Bruni

Although Iranian-backed groups have previously targeted sites in the Gulf, the direct strike by Tehran on the American military base in Qatar showcased Gulf states' vulnerability to regional escalation and their reliance on the United States-led security architecture. In response, Qatar's leadership swiftly condemned the Iranian attack, affirmed its right to respond militarily, and received immediate backing from fellow Gulf states. However, the conflict was rapidly contained: tensions cooled after Iranian President **Masoud Pezeshkian** called to express regret and the U.S. backed a ceasefire between Israel and Iran.

This rapid reconciliation is a testament to the resilience of the renewed ties between the Islamic Republic and the Gulf. Strikingly absent from this process, however, has been China, despite its much-publicized role as mediator and guarantor of the earlier Saudi–Iranian rapprochement.

China was also largely absent or overlooked in Arabic-language media discussions on the region's evolving security landscape. This omission should not be mistaken for hostility: when China was mentioned during and immediately after the Israel–Iran War, Arab commentators often praised its "positive neutrality." Yet, in the aftermath of the conflict, renewed attention was given to Beijing's decision not to provide direct support to Iran. Here, Arab commentators expressed understanding of China's pragmatism and strategic motivations, although there was debate on whether the war exposed the limits of Beijing's regional influence.

Regarding the future of Sino–Iranian relations, Gulf-aligned media outlets displayed a degree of satisfaction that Tehran now finds itself dependent on a self-interested and unreliable partner. However, at the same time, a few Arab journalists, particularly those writing for independent pan-Arab outlets, raised concerns about the risks of relying on China, concerns that extend well beyond Iran's predicament.

Positive Views on China's "Positive Neutrality"

Arab media devoted extensive coverage to the Israel–Iran war, closely tracking statements from Israeli, Iranian, and U.S. officials as well as unfolding military operations. China's expressions of concern received attention as well, though to a lesser degree. While these calls for de-escalation, respect for sovereignty, and the rejection of the use of force were generally portrayed in a neutral – if not mildly positive – light, Arabic-language analyses often voiced skepticism about China's willingness or capacity to shape outcomes in the region.

For example, in the days preceding the U.S. strikes on Iran, the London-based daily *Asharq Al-Awsat*, which has ties to the Saudi Royal Family, published an article summarizing research from The Washington Institute for Middle East Policy, a pro-Israel American think tank. The piece dismissed the prospect of any significant Chinese role in the conflict, arguing that although "China relies on Iran for oil and to counter U.S. influence [and] would lose a lot from any large-scale war between Iran and Israel involving the U.S., it can do little about it." Drawing on both American and Chinese analysts, the article stressed that Beijing was unlikely to intervene militarily to defend Iran. Instead, while China prefers regional stability, it could even stand to benefit from prolonged U.S.' entanglement in the Middle East, an outcome that might divert Washington's attention and resources away from East Asia while offering Beijing lessons relevant to a potential crisis over Taiwan.[113]

The article also highlighted Beijing's "remarkably measured" stance, noting that Chinese statements avoided both explicitly condemning Israel and any direct call for the U.S. not to attack Iran. However, it dismissed the notion that this restraint signaled an effort by China to position itself as a mediator, arguing instead that "Israel is likely to question China's neutrality as a mediator due to its bias toward Iran and outreach to Hamas," and emphasizing that "it is unclear whether China has made any specific efforts to find a diplomatic solution."[114]

After the Iran–Israel ceasefire, the limited Arab commentary on China did not reproach Beijing for its lack of action or its apparent diplomatic ambiguity. On the contrary, some Arab analysts expressed positive views of China's rhetoric and relative impartiality. For example, in an article for *Al Majalla*, another Saudi-owned London-based outlet, Lebanese journalist **Charbel Barakat** characterized China's refusal to unequivocally condemn Israel and its restraint as "calculated positive neutrality." For Barakat, this posture reflected not an inability to act but rather a deliberate approach "imbued with caution and selectivity." While acknowledging the debates among Chinese scholars about China's long-held foreign policy principles, Barakat argued that strategic considerations, in particular regarding Taiwan, were the decisive factor in

[113] *Asharq Al-Awsat*, "Taqrīr: muhāğima Amrīka al-Irān sataẓharu maḥdudiya quwa al-Ṣīn" تقرير: مهاجمة أميركا لإيران ستظهر محدودية قوة الصين [Report: US attack on Iran will show China's limited power], June 24, 2025, https://aawsat.com/تقرير-مهاجمة-أميركا-لإيران-ستظهر-محدودية-قوة-الصين/5156440-شؤون-إقليمية?__cf_chl_rt_tk=YeHlCw5MdDOsb3n.PZYwpTolOmPl_uPu5y1g3DAKSWY-1755876619-1.0.1.1-MYxWjABJNBDmRMNIDz8Gduvb1ge7gvPPhqWbNrHxxac.

[114] Ibid.

explaining why China refrained from providing military support to Iran.[115]

Citing Taiwanese, Chinese, and Arab experts, Barakat concluded that "China's approach of positive neutrality appeared to be a wise decision," since:

> *"The war did not open a broad strategic window for Beijing, neither with respect to Taiwan, nor in the context of geopolitical competition with the U.S., nor even in terms of expanding its influence in the Middle East, where China had not positioned itself as a strong mediator to begin with. Nonetheless, Beijing emerged from the crisis with cumulative experience in managing delicate balances, minimizing risks, and reinforcing its image as a responsible power at a time fraught with high costs and uncertain outcomes."*[116]

An even more celebratory interpretation of China's "active neutrality" appeared in an opinion piece by **Waref Kumayha,** president of the Lebanese–Chinese Dialogue Road Association, published by *Asharq Al-Awsat.* Kumayha also argued that China has emerged from the conflict in a stronger position, cultivating a reputation of a responsible power – including in the Middle East – that does not aspire to replace Washington as hegemon but instead seeks to "share global power" and advance multipolarity.[117]

According to Kumayha:

> *"[China] is neither entirely neutral nor confrontational. […] It speaks of respect for sovereignty, but does not neglect interests. Through all this, Beijing continues to cultivate the image of a responsible power that does not seek heroic roles in the media, but tangible results on the ground. […] China has demonstrated that its silence is not an absence, but rather a modus operandi."*[118]

A more nuanced and analytical perspective on Beijing's "cautious stance" was provided by the China Research Unit at the **Emirates Policy Center** (EPC), an Abu Dhabi-based think tank. In their in-depth analysis, EPC researchers noted that China's "balanced" approach to the conflict was not immediate: Beijing initially issued a sharp condemnation of Israel for violating Iranian sovereignty. According to the study, it was only after Chinese President **Xi Jinping**, on July 17, urged "all parties" to de-escalate that China adopted a more moderate tone toward Israel. The analysts further suggested that, beyond safeguarding its long-term relationship with Tel Aviv, Beijing may have also been hedging against the possibility of an Iranian defeat, as both Chinese experts and wider public have shown decreasing confidence in Tehran.[119]

The analysis identified four strategic considerations underpinning China's restrained posture, particularly its reluctance to provide decisive support to Iran. First, direct military support to Iran would imperil Beijing's long-term interests, especially its reputation as a neutral and responsible actor. Second, long-standing concerns over Iran's aggressive regional strategy, coupled with new apprehensions regarding Israel since October 7. Third, China's limited leverage over both Iran and Israel. Fourth, wariness of opening a new front with the U.S. while simultaneously seeking progress in trade negotiations and maintaining focus on Taiwan.[120]

The Future of China-Iran Relations and their Regional Implications

Although many Arab commentators express understanding – if not outright approval – of China's rhetoric and "neutrality," Beijing was not regarded as a credible alternative to the U.S. when it comes to regional security or conflict mediation. This does not necessarily imply enthusiasm for Washington's own conduct. Saudi analysts, for example, have criticized the United States' "belated" military response to the Houthi movement in Yemen, contrasting the American offensive with the Gulf's current priorities of "development and peace."[121] Yet, even critics tend to see no immediate substitute for U.S. security leadership in the region.

The Israel–Iran war seemingly reinforced this perception. *Asharq Al-Awsat* published an *AFP* piece quoting experts from both inside and outside the region, all agreeing that the conflict laid bare the limits of Chinese influence in the Middle East. **Ahmed Aboudouh,** associate fellow with Chatham House and Head of the China Research Unit at the EPC, was direct regarding Beijing's supposed leverage over Tehran, observing that "China's position in the Middle East has been very weakened since the beginning of the conflict," adding that "everyone in the region understands that China has little, if any, influence to play a real role in de-escalation."[122]

Arab analysts generally interpreted the erosion of China's potential security role not as a loss for their own states,

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[115] Šarbel Barakāt, "'ḥiyād' al-Ṣīn fī 'ḥarb al 12 yauman'… Taiwan ḳariğ 'ḥasābāt al-nār'" "حسابات النار" تايوان خارج "حرب الـ 12 يوما"... "حياد" الصين في [China's "neutrality" in the "12-Day War"… Taiwan is outside the "fire calculations"], Al Majalla, June 25, 2025, https://www.majalla.com/node/326182/سياسة/حياد-الصين-في-حرب-الـ12-يوما-تايوان-خارج-حسابات-النار.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Wārf Qamīḥa, "l-Ṣīn wa-al-Irān wa-Isrā'il… lu'ba al-tawāzun fī Šarqin iatağaiyar" الصين وإيران وإسرائيل... لعبة التوازن في شرقٍ يتغير [China, Iran, and Israel… The balancing act in a changing East], Asharq Al-Awsat, June 28, 2025, https://aawsat.com/في-العمق/حصاد-الأسبوع/5159071-الصين-وإيران-وإسرائيل-لعبة-التوازن-في-شرقٍ-يتغير.

[118] Ibid.

[119] China Research Unit, "Al-Mufāḍala bayn al-sayyi' wa-al-aswa': Kayfa naẓarat al-Ṣīn ilā al-ḥarb al-Irāniyya–al-Isrā'īliyya, wa kayfa satata'āṭā ma'a natā'ijihā?" المُفاضلة بين السيئ والأسوأ: كيف نظرت الصين إلى الحرب الإيرانية-الإسرائيلية، وكيف ستتعاطى مع نتائجها؟ [China's Tough Choice: How Did Beijing View the Iran-Israel War, and How Will It Deal With Its Consequences?], Emirates Policy Center, June 26, 2025, https://epc.ae/ar/details/featured/kayf-nazarat-alsiyn-ila-alharb-al-irania-al-israyilia [English translation available at: https://www.epc.ae/en/details/featured/china-s-tough-choice-how-did-beijing-view-the-iran-israel-war-and-how-will-it-deal-with-its-consequences-].

[120] Ibid.

[121] Mišārī al-Ḏāīdī, "wulli ḥārrahā man taūallā qārrahā" ولّ حارّها من تولّى قارّها [And the one who warmed it was the one who took control of it], Asharq Al-Awsat, January 26, 2024, https://aawsat.com/الرأي/4813876-ولّ-حارّها-من-تولّى-قارّها.

[122] *Asharq Al-Awsat*, "al-širā' al-Isrā'ilī – al-Irānī iuḍ'ifu al-nufūḏ al-Ṣīnī fī Al-Šarq al-Āwsaṭ" الصراع الإسرائيلي - الإيراني يُضعف النفوذ الصيني في الشرق الأوسط [The Israeli-Iranian conflict is weakening Chinese influence in the Middle East], June 24, 2025, https://aawsat.com/شؤون-إقليمية/5157917-الصراع-الإسرائيلي-الإيراني-يُضعف-النفوذ-الصيني-في-الشرق-الأوسط.

but rather as a setback for Iran.[123] From their perspective, Tehran emerged as the principal loser: the war exposed the hollowness of its partnerships with China and Russia, while at the same time demonstrating the solidity of the U.S.–Israel alliance, even under the mercurial leadership of President **Donald Trump.**

Some Gulf analysts expressed barely concealed satisfaction at Iran's predicament. Saudi commentator **Adel Alharbi,** writing for *The Independent Arabia* (also noted for having ties to the Saudi Royal Family), remarked that Tehran, "despite its revolutionary rants and inflated slogans, now appears more exposed than ever, surrounded by fluid alliances."[124]

He argued that:

> "*Even Russia, despite having received generous Iranian support in the war in Ukraine, refrained from taking an explicit stance, instead opting for tepid statements […] China has remained almost entirely silent, especially as it had little incentive to expend political capital on a file lacking both clear prospects and broad international consensus. Beijing realizes that Iranian escalation harms its interests more than it harms Washington's, as 45% of China's oil imports transit through the Strait of Hormuz, making Beijing arguably more invested in appeasement than Tehran itself.*"[125]

Despite the conspicuous lack of support from Tehran's allies in the so-called "trilateral axis" with Moscow and Beijing, Arab observers widely agreed that Iran has little choice but to continue courting China, especially to modernize its air and defense capabilities. Reports have surfaced that Tehran hopes to acquire Chinese J-10C fighter jets, which proved effective in the Pakistan–India dogfights earlier this year.[126]

However, the London-based, secular, pan-Arab daily ***Al-Arab,*** while acknowledging these ambitions, cautioned that "this option does not appear as guaranteed as the Iranian leadership hopes":

> "*While Beijing has signaled a general willingness to cooperate, it avoids entering into direct military commitments that could draw it into an undesirable confrontation with the U.S. or jeopardize its economic interests.*"[127]

The **EPC's China Research Unit** likewise contended that "Iran's military weakness and ineffectiveness during the war may result in a shift in Chinese strategic thinking," noting that "Iran may have lost its functional advantage in China's strategic calculations as a counterweight to Western influence capable of keeping American focus and attention on the Middle East for decades."[128]

Nevertheless, according to their view, China may continue to export arms to Iran, assist with industrial reconstruction, and provide diplomatic backing – while opposing any Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons – driven by a more profound concern:

> "*A deeper concern for the Chinese Communist Party is the prospect that regime change in Iran could become a declared objective of U.S. policy. […] A forced effort to unseat Iran's leadership could trigger internal chaos or civil conflict, with unpredictable regional consequences [fueling] narratives that justify direct challenges to China's own political system and embolden efforts to undermine the Communist Party's hold on power. In other words, the security requirements of the regime in Beijing will continue to drive China's opposition to any externally driven attempt, particularly by Israel and the United States, to overthrow Iran's ruling establishment.*"[129]

Among analysts and media linked to Gulf governments, the dominant tone toward China remains neutral and pragmatic, likely reflecting their own countries' strong economic ties with China and their ambivalence toward a conflict that pitted their erstwhile principal rival, Iran, against Israel, a state increasingly seen as the main source of regional instability and a serial violator of national sovereignty.

Although there is limited coverage, independent pan-Arab outlets appear to have adopted a more critical stance. The London-based digital daily *Rai al-Youm*, known for its oppositional and often pro-"resistance" perspectives, published an article by analyst **Mahdi Mubarak Abdullah** asserting that China's actions amounted to a "complete betrayal of Iran." Possibly suggesting that the implications of Chinese behavior may extend beyond Iran, he wrote that the crisis revealed that Beijing's diplomacy is designed only to protect its own economic and strategic interests.[130]

For Abdullah, the lesson is clear:

> "*China is not a reliable friend in times of crisis and will often turn its back when its partners most need support. Those who look to Beijing as a steadfast ally and a cornerstone of their security and stability must recognize that such expectations are badly misplaced. China's diplomacy, whether soft or hard, is essentially instrumental and transactional.*"[131]

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[123] Rasūl Āl Ḥāyī, "mushārakat Buzkīyān bi-qimmat Shīnghāy.. mādhā ḥaqqaqat Ṭahrān jarāʾ siyāsat al-ittijāh sharqan?" مشاركة بزشكيان بقمة شنغهاي.. ماذا حققت طهران جراء سياسة الاتجاه شرقا؟ [Pezeshkian's participation in the Shanghai summit.. What has Tehran achieved as a result of the 'look-east' policy?], Al Jazeera, September 4, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2025/9/4/مشاركة-بزشكيان-بقمة-شنغهاي-ماذا-حققت.

[124] 'Adel al-Ḥarbī, "ḥarb al-12 yauman: inkišāf al-hašāša" حرب الـ12 يوما: انكشاف الهشاشة [The 12-Day War: Fragility Exposed], The Independent Arabia, June 25, 2025, https://www.independentarabia.com/node/626499/آراء/حرب-الـ12يوما-انكشاف-الهشاشة.

[125] Ibid.

[126] BBC Monitoring, "Briefing: Media assess China's possible missile, fighter jet sales to Iran," July 10, 2025, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b00047xk.

[127] *Al-Arab*, "al-Ṣīn ḫiyar maḍmūn li-taḥdīṯ tirsāna Irān al-'askariya" الصين خيار غير مضمون لتحديث ترسانة إيران العسكرية [China is an uncertain option for modernizing Iran's military arsenal], July 17, 2025, https://alarab.co.uk/الصين-خيار-غير-مضمون-لتحديث-ترسانة-إيران-العسكرية.

[128] See note 119, China Research Unit, Emirates Policy Center, June 26, 2025.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Mahdī Mubārak 'Abd Allah, "kaifa ḥālat maṣāliḥ al-Ṣīn al-ḫāṣṣa 'an da'im Irān?" كيف حالت مصالح الصين الخاصة عن دعم ايران؟ [How did China's own interests prevent it from supporting Iran?], Rai al-Youm, July 05, 2025, https://www.raialyoum.com/كيف-حالت-مصالح-الصين-الخاصة-عن-دعم-ايران/.

[131] Ibid.

Conclusion

China was not a central focus of Arabic-language media coverage during the Israel–Iran conflict. The few commentators who did consider the potential role of the People's Republic initially welcomed Beijing's calls for de-escalation and its "positive neutrality," a reaction likely shaped by anxiety over a possible spillover and negative attitudes toward the two belligerents.

However, the spillover into the Gulf exposed the fragility of the regional order and reignited fears that any future escalation could endanger the Gulf states' aspirations for peace, development and regional cooperation. As such, China's self-focused and risk-averse approach has come under closer scrutiny. Arab analysts generally expressed an understanding of the strategic logic behind Beijing's reluctance to provide direct military support for Iran, attributing its caution to the desire to preserve economic and diplomatic ties with Israel and the U.S.

Debates have also focused on the future of Sino–Iranian relations. Some Gulf commentators argued, often with a measure of satisfaction, that Tehran misjudged Beijing's reliability, leaving Iran increasingly isolated and dependent on a transactional and unpredictable partner. It remains to be seen whether the Israeli strike on Qatari territory, which has seemingly revealed the limits of U.S. concern for Gulf sovereignty and security, might lead Arab commentators to reconsider China's potential role in regional security.

CONCLUSION

by Leonardo Bruni

This report sought to examine the expert debates on the future of Sino–Middle Eastern relations, both within the region and in China itself, in the immediate aftermath of the Israel–Iran War. Although this deadly yet fortunately short and contained conflict will likely be remembered as a turning point in the Middle East's security landscape, history continues its unrelenting forward march, with new, significant developments already beginning to reshape the regional and Chinese debates we have explored.

The most consequential development is the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, brokered through the intervention of the Trump administration. This long-awaited deal has enabled Israeli and Palestinian hostage exchanges, as well a fragile halt to the violence, that, according to the International Court of Justice, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, numerous national governments, multiple UN experts and special rapporteurs, as well as many scholars and genocide specialists, has amounted to an act – or provoking a plausible risk – of genocide endured by the population of the Gaza Strip over the past two years.[132]

The ceasefire, signed on October 9, culminated in a summit in Sharm el-Sheikh. Notably absent, however, were representatives from Israel, Hamas, Iran, and, for our purposes, China. Although Beijing welcomed the deal, it played no direct role in achieving the ceasefire.[133] While it would be inaccurate to claim that China made no diplomatic efforts – Beijing did help broker a now largely forgotten agreement among Palestinian factions to establish a unity government in July 2024 – its involvement over the past year has been mostly limited to supporting the positions of Arab and Muslim states.[134] However, China's absence from Sharm el-Sheikh should not be overstated. There has been considerable debate over the extent to which the European, Arab, and Muslim states represented at the summit actually contributed to ending the war.[135]

Indeed, from the perspective of Chinese commentators, little has changed in terms of regional dynamics. Their assessment – that regional actors seem incapable, unwilling or ineffective in shaping the regional order – appears as valid as ever. However, the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, which saw the world's leaders line up to celebrate Trump as the "President of Peace," demonstrated also that China's much-anticipated decline of U.S. influence in the Middle East still is a distant reality.[136]

Nonetheless, implementing Trump's 20-point peace plan is a fragile endeavor: Hamas' willingness to disarm and relinquish control remains uncertain, ceasefire violations by Israel are frequent, and the proposed installation of a transitional authority under former British Prime Minister Tony Blair has drawn criticism for its perceived colonial undertones.[137] Upholding this fragile peace could place the U.S. in a difficult position, possibly exposing its limited leverage, capacity, and political will in the region's future, just as China's own limits were revealed during the Twelve-Day War.

The end of the fighting in Gaza also leads Israel to face an uncertain future as it awaits to see whether its international standing improves.[138] Its military operations over the past year – which have extended beyond Palestine to Syria,

[132] International Court of Justice, "South Africa v. Israel, Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (Provisional Measures)," January 26, 2024, https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192/provisional-measures;
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https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/;
Human Rights Watch, "Israel's Crime of Extermination and Acts of Genocide in Gaza," December 19, 2024,
https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/19/israels-crime-extermination-acts-genocide-gaza;
Department of International Relations and Cooperation - Republic of South Africa, "South Africa delivers evidence of Israel genocide to ICJ, October 28, 2024, https://dirco.gov.za/south-africa-delivers-evidence-of-israel-genocide-to-icj/;
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Israel has committed genocide in the Gaza Strip, UN Commission finds," September 16, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/israel-has-committed-genocide-gaza-strip-un-commission-finds;
Raz Segal, "A Textbook Case of Genocide," *Jewish Currents*, October 13, 2023, https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide.

[133] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Wáng Yì jiù jiāshā chōngtú dáchéng dì yī jiēduàn xiéyì biǎomíng lìchǎng" 王毅就加沙冲突达成第一阶段协议表明立场 [Wang Yi States China's Position on First-Phase Agreement Regarding the Gaza Conflict], October 11, 2025,
https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202510/t20251011_11730824.shtml.

[134] *Global Times*, "China welcomes statement by 21 Arab and Islamic countries on Israel-Iran conflict, calling for de-escalation of situation: FM spokesperson," June 17, 2025, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202506/1336344.shtml.

[135] James Crisp & Joe Barnes, "Europe is stuck on the sidelines of Gaza peace deal," *The Telegraph*, October 18, 2025, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/10/18/gaza-peace-europe-sidelined/.

[136] Ferdinand Knapp, "Europe hails Trump's Israel-Gaza peace announcement," *Politico*, October 9, 2025,
https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-hail-donald-trump-gaza-peace-plan-israel/;
Asharq Al-awsat, "Arab, Western Countries Hail Trump's Peace Plan for Gaza," September 30, 2025,
https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5191903-arab-western-countries-hail-trump's-peace-plan-gaza.

[137] *Le Monde with AFP*, "Hamas launches Gaza crackdown as Trump vows to disarm group," *Le Monde*, October 15, 2025,
https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/10/15/hamas-launches-gaza-crackdown-as-trump-vows-to-disarm-group_6746445_4.html;
Sally Ibrahim, "From Lebanon to Gaza, Israel is imposing a very violent 'ceasefire'," *The New Arab*, October 30, 2025,
https://www.newarab.com/news/lebanon-gaza-israel-imposes-very-violent-ceasefire;
Maziar Motamedi, "Why is the divisive Tony Blair now touted for post-Gaza war interim role?," *Al Jazeera*, September 28, 2025,
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/28/why-is-the-divisive-tony-blair-now-touted-for-post-gaza-war-interim-role.

[138] Jamie Dettmer, "Israel bets the world will forgive and forget Gaza," *Politico*, October 1, 2025,
https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-war-in-gaza-benjamin-netanyahu/.

Lebanon, Yemen, Tunisia, Iran, and Qatar – together with their humanitarian consequences, have inflamed global condemnation. This backlash is not confined to the Global South. Across Europe and the broader West, a growing number of governments have recognized a Palestinian state, civil society and activists have mobilized to attempt to break the blockade of Gaza, while labor strikes and mass protests have been organized in solidarity with Palestinians.

A catabasis into pariah-state status (a well-present fear within the Israeli establishment[139]) may explain Israeli experts' willingness to interpret China's "balanced" rhetoric during the war with Iran as an olive branch. Anxiety over isolation may be driving a desire to cultivate ties with any global actor, including Beijing, despite lingering mistrust over China's stance on Palestine and its ties with Iran.

However, any potential "normalization," tentatively suggested by Israeli scholars and diplomats, now appears moot following Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision to blame Israel's isolation not on his government's actions but on Qatar and China, accusing them of orchestrating a "media siege" against Israel.[140] An immediate diplomatic chill followed, with *China Daily* publishing an editorial affirming that "what Israel today describes as 'isolation' is in fact the outcome of its own policies."[141]

Meanwhile, Iran confronts similar prospects of international isolation, albeit primarily in the economic sphere. As anticipated by Chinese scholars, although U.S. strikes have substantially damaged – but not destroyed – Iran's nuclear infrastructure, Tehran remains resolute in upholding its right to a nuclear program as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Nevertheless, on August 28, the E3 – France, Germany and the United Kingdom – announced their intention to trigger the snapback mechanism, thereby reinstating pre-2015 UN sanctions. Citing Iran's restrictions on inspectors' access to its nuclear facilities, the Europeans were likely motivated by an eagerness to show continued relevance despite their marginalization and to align with Washington in hopes of securing U.S. support for Ukraine and European security.[142] This impulse is reflected in their endorsement of Trump's call for "zero enrichment," a non-starter for Tehran and inconsistent with the original terms of the nuclear deal.[143]

China and Russia have backed Iran's challenge of the E3's authority, with Tehran accusing the European powers of not only failing to fulfill their commitments to economic normalization, having declined to resist the first Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, but also of refraining from condemning Israel's attacks on Iran.[144] Beijing and Moscow have accordingly signaled they will not respect or will attempt to circumvent the reimposed sanction regime.[145] Amid these developments, Iran's oil production and exports have only risen, with China remaining its largest customer.[146] Consequently, Iranian analyses describing Beijing as the only major power willing to offer Tehran meaningful economic and diplomatic support appear increasingly vindicated, in contrast to Iranian reformists' erstwhile – now largely illusory – hopes of reestablishing ties with the West.[147]

Across the Gulf, the states of the Arab world and especially those of the Gulf Cooperation Council are grappling with the ramifications of Israel's deadly strike on Qatar.[148] While President Trump has claimed that Washington was unaware of the operation, the extensive coordination between U.S. and Israeli militaries has cast doubt on the reliability of assumed American security guarantees – many now perceive U.S. commitments to Gulf security as secondary to Israel's regional ambitions.[149] In the wake of the strike, Washington has attempted to repair relations by pledging a NATO Article 5-style security agreement with Qatar, something long desired by other Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Trump has also appeared to apply new pressure on Israel, possibly contributing to the Gaza ceasefire.[150]

However, it remains to be seen whether these measures will be sufficient to rebuild confidence. Should mistrust persist, this moment may mark the first real step toward the greater regional autonomy and multipolar orientation envisioned by Chinese scholars and policymakers.

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[139] Nava Freiberg, Lazar Berman & ToI Staff, "Netanyahu admits Israel economically isolated, says will need to become 'super-Sparta'," *The Times of Israel*, September 15, 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-admits-israel-is-economically-isolated-will-need-to-become-self-reliant/.

[140] Nava Freiberg "PM says Qatar, China attempting to 'blockade' Israel politically, but 'the US is with us'," *The Times of Israel*, September 15, 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/pm-says-qatar-china-attempting-to-blockade-israel-politically-but-the-us-is-with-us/.

[141] Li Yang, "Israel's 'isolation' is not caused by others, but of its own making," *China Daily*, September 19, 2025, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202509/19/WS68cc9a3fa3108622abca199a.html.

[142] Ellie Geranmayeh, "The risks of the draw: Europe's post-snapback move on Iran," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 29, 2025, https://ecfr.eu/article/the-risks-of-the-draw-europes-post-snapback-move-on-iran/.

[143] Laurence Norman & Noemie Bisserbe, "Europeans Shift to Back Trump's Zero-Enrichment Demand," *The Wall Street Journal*, https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/iran-israel-conflict-latest-news/card/europeans-shift-to-back-trump-s-zero-enrichment-demand-QO271IESHRYD4X0XUHGS.

[144] Riccardo Alcaro, "The Tragic Irony of the E3's Snapback Move on Iran," *IAI Commentaries*, September 8, 2025, https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/tragic-irony-e3s-snapback-move-iran.

[145] Maryam Sinaiee, "Tehran pins hopes on Russia and China to blunt sanctions impact," *Iran International*, October 4, 2024, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202510034828

[146] Umud Shokri, "Iran's Oil Exports: Resilience Amid Sanctions and 'Snapback'," Stimson Center, October 2, 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2025/irans-oil-exports-resilience-amid-sanctions-and-snapback/.

[147] For more on the evolution of the domestical Iranian debate on China see our report: Enrico Fardella & Andrea Ghiselli (eds.), "Power Shifts? China's Growing Influence in the Gulf: Key Trends and Regional Debates in 2023," *ChinaMed Project*, April 15, 2024, https://www.chinamed.it/publications/power-shifts-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-gulf-key-trends-and-regional-debates-in-2023.

[148] Ahmed Aboudouh, "Egypt now sees Israel as an imminent threat," Chatham House, September 17, 2025, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/09/egypt-now-sees-israel-imminent-threat

[149] *The Economist*, "America can't or won't protect its friends in the Gulf," September 10, 2025, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/09/10/america-cant-or-wont-protect-its-friends-in-the-gulf.

[150] Dasha Burns & Diana Nerozzi, "'Qatar was the turning point': How Israel's bombing of Doha ignited a peace process," *Politico*, October 10, 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/2025/10/10/qatar-was-the-turning-point-how-israels-bombing-of-doha-ignited-a-peace-process-00604017.

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THE SINO-MOROCCAN RAPPROCHEMENT

An Analysis of Geoeconomic Convergence, Diplomatic Calibration and Media Narratives in a Changing Maghreb

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THE SINO-MOROCCAN RAPPROCHEMENT

An Analysis of Geoeconomic Convergence, Diplomatic Calibration and Media Narratives in a Changing Maghreb

Edited by
AMANDA CHEN & LEONARDO BRUNI

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sino–Moroccan rapprochement has been driven by a convergence between China's efforts to secure its role in global value chains and Morocco's export-led economic model. This pragmatic engagement has accelerated since Rabat's accession to the BRI in 2017, particularly in the renewable energy, infrastructure, and logistics sectors.

Tanger Tech City, an industrial free zone co-developed by Chinese and Moroccan firms, has developed into a flagship BRI project that has attracted investments from major Chinese EV component and battery manufacturers. Strategically located between the Tanger Med port and Atlantic corridors, the Tech City seamlessly integrates industrial capacity with global trade routes.

Morocco's rise as a middle power and growing importance in China's regional strategy has turned into diplomatic leverage that appears to have recalibrated Beijing's longstanding neutrality on the Western Sahara conflict. Without endorsing Moroccan sovereignty, Beijing has increasingly accommodated Rabat's position while carefully managing its partnership with Algeria.

Against this backdrop, disruptions catalyzed by the Hormuz blockade have internationalized the Western Sahara issue as external actors reevaluate the region as an alternative corridor for energy and trade flows. Consequently, Morocco's Autonomy Proposal for resolving the conflict has gained further traction as a viable framework for promoting economic security and regional stability.

Amid the shifting balance of power, the Sino–Moroccan rapprochement has become a prism through which French, Algerian, Tunisian and other external actors are reassessing their strategies to adapt to and harness the geopolitical momentum in the Maghreb.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINAMED PROJECT

The wider Mediterranean is a vast region that stretches from the Iranian Plateau to the Strait of Gibraltar, from the Alps to the Horn of Africa. It is an area characterized by long-term trends, but it is also the epicenter of centrifugal forces that connect Europe, Africa and Asia. Our research team at the ChinaMed Project analyses how the dynamics of this region intersect with one of the most consequential macro-trends of this century: the transition of China, with its 1.4 billion people, from the periphery to the center of the international system.

Our research platform's mission is to track and investigate how China's presence in the region is changing the balance of power on the ground in a nuanced, yet incremental fashion. We achieve this by collecting data and creating indicators that analyze China's growing economic, commercial, and security ties with the countries of the wider Mediterranean, which we make publicly available at ChinaMed Data.

Moreover, we publish the ChinaMed Observer – sharp and focused analyses of the media discourses in China and the countries of the wider Mediterranean region on the most recent events and the most pressing trends in Sino-Mediterranean relations.

We also actively engage with and participate in the expanding connections between China and the wider Mediterranean through a range of academic initiatives including: the China Management and Business Program, scientific publications, and academic events. The ChinaMed Project, a part of the TOChina Hub developed by the University of Turin and promoted by the Torino World Affairs Institute, carries out these initiatives and its research through various partnerships, including those with the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme at Durham University, the China Global South Project, and the Asian Studies Unit of the Research Department of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. ChinaMed also enjoys the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Fondazione CRT, one of Italy's largest charitable foundations.

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INTRODUCTION

Disclaimer: The terminology and analysis presented in this Report do not necessarily reflect the personal views of the authors or official stance of the ChinaMed Project, T.wai. For the sake of consistency, this Report employs the commonly recognized term of "Western Sahara."

The rapprochement between Morocco and China has emerged as one of the most significant geopolitical developments in North Africa in recent years. This Report examines the growing Sino–Moroccan partnership through three analytical angles: geoeconomic convergence, conflict management in Western Sahara, and regional perceptions among Morocco's Mediterranean neighbors.

Chapter 1 traces the evolution of the Sino–Moroccan relationship by analyzing Tanger Tech City, an industrial free zone co-developed by Chinese and Moroccan firms, as a case study. Since establishing a "strategic partnership" in 2016 and Rabat's accession to the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017, bilateral economic ties have expanded rapidly, driven by a convergence between China's efforts to secure green value chains and Morocco's export-led economic model and ambitious decarbonization agenda. Attracted by the Kingdom's geographic position, free trade access to European and American markets, and large reserves of green transition minerals, Chinese investment has concentrated in renewable energy infrastructure and electric vehicle component and battery manufacturing.

Chapter 2 examines China's evolving approach to the Western Sahara conflict against the backdrop of deepening Sino–Moroccan economic cooperation. Moroccan experts and media circles have increasingly discussed whether geoeconomic convergence may translate to political alignment, pointing to China's abstention on United Nations Security Council Resolution 2797 (2025), which endorsed Morocco's autonomy proposal as the basis for resolving the conflict, as a meaningful shift. Our analysis of regional media discourse and Chinese diplomatic behavior suggests that as economic ties deepened, Beijing appears to have adopted a more ambiguous position accommodating Rabat's diplomatic priorities – an approach that has complicated its balancing act between Morocco and Algeria.

Chapter 3 looks at how the partnership between Morocco and China has been perceived in the region through French, Algerian and Tunisian media debates. Drawing on media analysis, it examines how regional narratives have framed the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement not only as an economic development, but as a catalyst of broader recalibrations of power in the Maghreb, and the restructuring, if not erosion, of France's historical prominence in it.

Overall, the Sino–Moroccan rapprochement intersects with wider trends, accelerated by disruptions to trade and energy flows in the Gulf, which have transformed the region into a theater of great-power competition. While China endeavors to maintain access to the wider Mediterranean, Morocco's rise as a middle power – supported by its relative stability, renewable energy potential, industrial and trade connectivity – has reinforced its regional position and widened its diplomatic leverage in the emerging world order.

CHAPTER 1

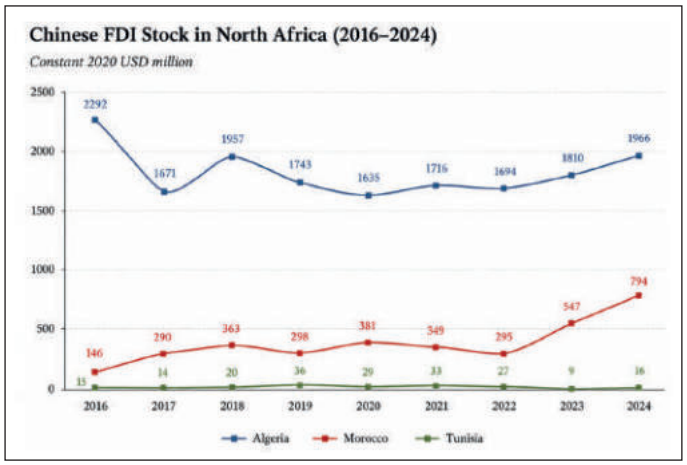
CHINA'S INDUSTRIAL FOOTPRINT IN MOROCCO: MOHAMMED VI TANGER TECH CITY AS A CASE STUDY

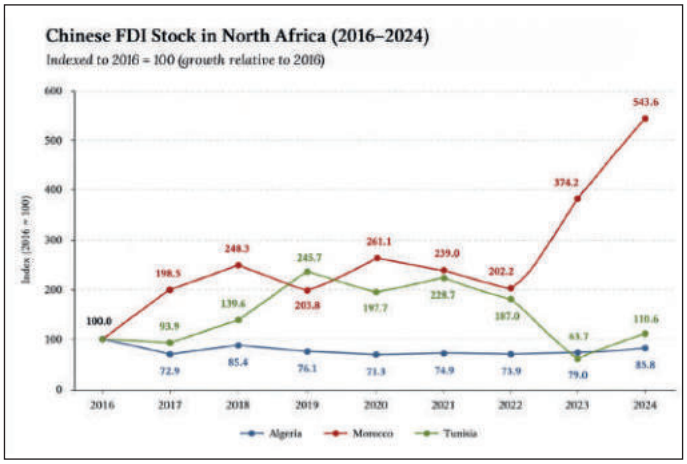
By Imane EZZEHOUANY and Amanda CHEN

This Chapter examines the evolution of Sino-Moroccan economic ties in the context of Morocco's accession to the Belt and Road Initiative, focusing on Tanger Tech City as an emerging platform for green manufacturing driven by a convergence of geoeconomic interests between the two countries.

China and Morocco established a strategic partnership in 2016, during King **Mohammed VI**'s state visit. The following year, Rabat became the first African country to join the BRI. Since then, the value of Chinese assets in the Kingdom increased from $146 million in 2016 to **$794** million in 2024. Although Algeria continued to host larger volumes of Chinese investment, with FDI stock reaching $1.97 billion in 2024, Morocco recorded the strongest expansion, increasing its Chinese FDI stock by more than *fivefold* over the same period.

This rapid expansion strongly reflects Morocco's attractiveness as an emerging industrial platform for Chinese manufacturers.[1] The trend was driven less by traditional development finance than by private firms aligning their overseas strategy with Beijing's new national priorities:





Comparison of Chinese FDI stock trends in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia between 2016-2024
Source: PRC Ministry of Finance; data compiled and elaborated by ChinaMed.
Also accessible via https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/north-africa/morocco

the globalization of its renewable energy industry and the consolidation of the green value chain.[2]

Morocco holds over 70% of the world's phosphate reserves, a key component of lithium-iron-phosphate batteries, alongside deposits of cobalt, manganese, nickel and copper.[3] Combined with the Kingdom's renewable energy potential and free trade access to European and American markets, this mineral endowment has made Morocco an attractive destination for Chinese industries linked to the green transition.

Chinese technological know-how aligns with Rabat's decarbonization goals and ambition to become a regional hub for renewable energy production.[4] Chinese firms are already involved in major projects, including the Noor solar complex in Ouarzazate[5] – the world's largest concentrated solar power plant – and a wind turbine blades factory in Nador for export and domestic needs. These strategic investments positioned

[1] Amanda Chen, "The Sino-Moroccan Green Partnership in the Shadow of the Iran War," *Stimson Center North Africa Program*, May 28, 2026. https://www.stimson.org/2026/the-sino-moroccan-green-partnership-in-the-shadow-of-the-iran-war/.

[2] Francesca Congiu, "From infrastructures to strategic minerals: mapping Chinese capital in Morocco (2004–2024)," *OrizzonteCina,* Vol. 16 No. 2 (2025): 24–48, https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.82002/119545.

[3] *L'Opinion*, "Batteries pour véhicules électriques: BTR New Material s'apprête à investir 4,9 milliards de dirhams dans une nouvelle usine au Maroc" [Batteries for Electric Vehicles: BTR New Material Prepares to Invest 4.9 billion Dirhams in a New Factory in Morocco], April 25, 2024, https://www.lopinion.ma/Batteries-pour-vehicules-electriques-BTR-New-Material-s-apprete-a-investir-49-milliards-de-dirhams-dans-une-nouvelle_a48324.html.

[4] *Moroccan Ministry of Commerce*, "Décarbonation de l'industrie" [Industrial decarbonization], https://www.mcinet.gov.ma/fr/content/industrie/decarbonation-de-lindustrie.

[5] The Noor solar complex is a blended finance, multi-stakeholder project co-developed by the Moroccan Agency for Sustainable Energy (MASEN) and Saudi ACWA Power. The Chinese firms SEPCOIII and CHINT were involved in the design and building of the plants alongside other international engineering companies. See "World Bank, *Morocco - Noor Ouarzazate Concentrated Solar Power Project (English)* (Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group), http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099032625151032430.

Chinese companies as key players in Morocco's path toward decarbonization.[6]

At the industrial level, Chinese EV component and battery manufacturers that have nearshored to Morocco benefit not only from proximity to mineral resources, but also from Rabat's export networks and integrated automotive ecosystem spearheaded by **Stellantis/Peugeot** in Kenitra and **Renault** in Tangiers that have positioned it as Africa's top car manufacturer.[7] From Beijing's perspective, relocating part of its EV manufacturing capacity to Morocco may act as a potential avenue for circumventing trade restrictions from the European Union and the U.S., with both of which Rabat enjoys free trade agreements.

On its part, Rabat has implemented a supportive policy framework. The 2022 Investment Charter further enhanced the country's attractiveness by providing investment incentives to domestic and foreign firms alike. This convergence fostered a growing partnership that strengthens Beijing's position in emerging value chains while accelerating the Kingdom's path toward a net-zero economy.

In this context, **Tanger Tech City**, a flagship BRI project co-developed by Chinese and Moroccan stakeholders, has become a preferred destination for Chinese industrial investment. Although segments of the Moroccan press often echo European narratives that portray Chinese investments as opportunistic attempts to circumvent tariffs, Moroccan experts across political orientations generally view Tanger Tech City as a national enterprise for stimulating economic growth, improving infrastructure, and encouraging domestic production in the emerging sector of green technologies.

Tanger Tech City and the Political Economy of the BRI

The *Mohammed VI Tanger Tech City* was launched in 2017, the same year Morocco joined China's BRI. Spanning over 2,167 hectares, it is among the largest industrial parks in the Kingdom – comprising a free trade zone and an urban settlement.[8] From its inception, the project was expected to attract up to $10 billion from 200 Chinese companies operating in high-value-added sectors such as aeronautics, automobiles, and communication and information technology, alongside creating 100,000 jobs and providing housing for 300,000 residents within a decade.[9]

Despite the ambition, however, the project remains in the development phase due to initial disputes over asset distribution between the first Chinese partner and the local sponsor, **BMCE Bank of Africa.**[10] This challenge reflected broader host-country sensitivities regarding control, ownership and sovereignty concerns related to BRI infrastructure. With regard to the dispute, the former president of the Tangier Region, **Ilyas El Omari,** asserted: "The company that will own the city and build it needs to be Moroccan. We welcome Chinese companies but only as investors."[11] Moreover, the site's susceptibility to flooding created technical hurdles that further deterred companies from moving in.

At this critical juncture, the Moroccan state intervened by signing a new agreement with state-owned **China Communications Construction Company** (CCCC), which acquired a 35% stake in the project. Moroccan stakeholders retained majority control through BMCE (25%), the Tangier-Tetouan-Hoceima regional government (20%) and the **Tanger Med Special Agency.**[12] Following this restructuring, nearly 30 companies have signed contracts with the **Tanger Tech Development Company (SATT),**[13] including 12 Chinese investors from the electric vehicle and battery sectors.[14]

Tanger Tech City thus performs a dual geoeconomic function. On the one hand, it facilitates the expansion of Chinese industrial presence along the BRI by operating as a gateway to Western markets thanks to Morocco's strategic location and free trade agreements. On the other, Chinese capital and localised production can support Morocco's industrial development and domestic value-capture.

A Sino-Moroccan "Corridor" for Automotive Electrification

Positioned on the Strait of Gibraltar between Africa and Europe, Tanger Tech has often been described as the North African counterpart of Shanghai, the world's largest and busiest container port. The comparison reflects both Rabat's ambition to position itself as a critical logistics hub and Chinese efforts to retain access to global markets.

From the Tech City, Chinese companies facing high tariffs applied to products originating from China may export to the EU and the U.S. without trade barriers. In a statement released to the Moroccan independent news magazine *TelQuel*, former Chinese Ambassador to Rabat **Li Changlin** noted, "Our companies faced difficulties in Europe and chose to thrive in Morocco."[15]

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[6] Mariateresa Natuzzi, Bianca Pasquier and Giorgia Facchini, "China's Energy Strategy: The Case of North Africa," *ChinaMed Project,* October 23, 2025, p. 16, https://www.chinamed.it/publications/chinas-energy-strategy-the-case-of-north-africa.

[7] Margarita Arredonds, "Morocco becomes Africa's leading car producer," *Atalayar*, August 16, 2024, https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/economy-and-business/morocco-becomes-africas-leading-car-producer/20240816190000204184.html.

[8] *Le Matin,* "La zone franche d'exportation Tanger Tech étendue à 494 hectares" [The Tanger Tech export free zone has been expanded to 494 hectares], March 14, 2025, https://lematin.ma/economie/la-zone-franche-dexportation-tanger-tech-etendue-a-494-hectares/268318.

[9] *Morocco World News*, "Tangier: King Mohammed VI Launches $ 1 Billion Chinese Investment Project," March 20, 2017, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/03/101112/tangier-king-mohammed-vi-launch-largest-chinese-investment-project-north-africa/.

[10] Yassine Majdi, "From Mirage to Reality: the Real Story of Tanger City," *TelQuel*, January 8, 2025, https://telquel.ma/2025/01/08/from-mirage-to-reality-the-real-story-of-tanger-tech_1912054.

[11] Ruth Sherlock, Lama Al-Arian & Sandy Wei, "Will Morocco's Chinese-Funded 'Tech City' Ever Break Ground?," *NPR*, October 3, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/10/03/638297986/will-moroccos-chinese-funded-tech-city-ever-break-ground.

[12] Badiaa Hamama, "Morocco's Chinese Funded Tech City: the Shanghai of North-Africa?," *Il giornale dell'architettura*, December 29, 2020, https://ilgiornaledellarchitettura.com/2020/12/29/moroccos-chinese-funded-tech-city-the-shanghai-of-north-africa/.

[13] Safae Hadri, "Industry: Tanger Tech Revs Up with Chinese Investments," *TelQuel*, July 15, 2024, https://telquel.ma/2024/07/15/industry-tanger-tech-revs-up-with-chinese-investments_1882781.

[14] MAP, "Batteries automobiles : Deux géants chinois s'installent à Tanger Tech" [Automotive batteries: Two Chinese giants set up shop at Tanger Tech], *L'Opinion*, May 14, 2024, https://www.lopinion.ma/Batteries-automobiles-Deux-geants-chinois-s-installent-a-Tanger-Tech_a54106.html.

[15] Yassine Majdi, "Li Changlin: (Chinese) companies have experienced difficulties in Europe and have chosen Morocco to prosper," *Telquel*, December 27, 2024, https://telquel.ma/2024/12/27/li-changlin-chinese-companies-have-experienced-difficulties-in-europe-and-have-chosen-to-prosper-in-morocco_1910250.

Early investors in the Tech City include **Sentury Tire**, which established a radial-tire manufacturing plant in 2023, alongside **Bonsing Corporation** (automotive textile coating), **Haomei Material** (aluminum profiles), **Hailing Group** and **Lingyun Industrial** (automotive components).[16] Taiwan-based **Froch Enterprise**, a stainless-steel producer, also announced a $30 million investment to set up a local subsidiary.[17] More recently, both Chinese lithium battery giants **Shinzoom** and its competitor **BTR New Material** have established cathodes and anodes plants projected to start production in 2026.[18]

While Morocco already hosts Western automotive manufacturers like Renault and Stellantis/Peugeot, Chinese firms are contributing to the electrification and diversification of the automotive value chain by localizing parts of production to the Kingdom.

Due to its proximity to Tanger Med, Africa's largest container port, the Tech City functions as a strategic industrial-logistics corridor linking production to export routes. In this configuration, the flagship BRI project may also enhance the supply chain resilience of Chinese firms as global trade continues to reroute via the Cape of Good Hope amid volatility in the Gulf and the Red Sea. Under these conditions, the Sino–Moroccan platform may emerge as a stable alternative, bolstering both Rabat's position as a logistics hub and China's continued access to global value chains.

Strategic Resilience amid External Pressure

The economic entanglement between Beijing and Rabat has unfolded amid growing US-China trade frictions. While these tensions have enhanced Morocco's attractiveness to Chinese investors, they have also raised concerns among local actors regarding the long-term reliability of the free trade agreements that underpin the Kingdom's export-oriented economic model. **Hassan Sentissi,** President of the Moroccan Association of Exporters, lamented that the recent 10% tariffs imposed by the U.S. on Moroccan exports have been a disappointing setback for Moroccan companies engaged in international trade.[19] Similarly, the European Commission's decision on March 14, 2025, to impose countervailing duties on Moroccan exports of aluminum wheels also drew attention.[20] As a clear consequence, **Dika Morocco Africa,** a subsidiary of the Chinese **Citic Group**, suspended the construction of its fourth aluminum factory in Kenitra, and redirected investments to Portugal in order to bypass these measures.[21]

These U.S. and European tariffs were interpreted as aimed at curbing Chinese economic influence rather than a direct challenge to Morocco itself. Yet, the President of the Moroccan Automotive Federation **Adil Zaid** warned that even limited measures targeting only specific products "could have a far more significant impact on Morocco's appeal as an industrial hub" if extended to other strategic sectors.[22]

Positioned as a new industrial frontier, Tanger Tech City finds itself caught at the intersection of global trade rivalries and Morocco's national development objectives. While Moroccan media have consistently highlighted the project's potential to attract foreign and especially Chinese capital, generate employment, and consolidate the Kingdom's role in the emerging industries, Rabat must contend with growing European and American scrutiny of Chinese geoeconomic influence in the region.

Yet, persisting volatility in global supply chains amid the Hormuz blockade may strengthen Morocco's diplomatic leverage as external actors, and European partners in particular, accelerate decarbonization strategies reliant on access to its renewable energy base and logistical corridors. In this sense, the Sino-Moroccan partnership was driven not only by shifts in the international economy, but by Rabat actively positioning itself to shape emerging trade and industrial networks linking Africa, Europe, and Asia.

Against this background, the next Chapter turns to China's evolving diplomatic position on the Western Sahara dispute to assess whether deepening Sino-Moroccan ties may be influencing Beijing's traditionally neutral approach to the conflict – a possibility increasingly discussed in Moroccan media and expert commentary.

[16] Fatima Ezzahra Rachidi, "Lingyun Industrial et Haomei New Materials projettent de produire au Maroc des composants automobiles" [Lingyun Industrial and Haomei New Materials plan to produce automotive components in Morocco], *Médias24*, February 17, 2025, https://medias24.com/2025/02/17/lingyun-industrial-et-haomei-new-materials-projettent-de-produire-au-maroc-des-composants-automobiles/.

[17] Soufiane Sbiti, "À Tanger Tech, neuf investisseurs primo-installés pour lancer la zone industrielle" [At Tanger Tech, nine first-time investors have set up shop to launch the industrial zone], *Le Desk,* December 24, 2025, https://ledesk.ma/datadesk/a-tanger-tech-neuf-investisseurs-primo-installes-pour-lancer-la-zone-industrielle/.

[18] *Médias24*, "BTR New Material Group prévoit l'achèvement de ses deux usines à Tanger d'ici 2026" [BTR New Material Group plans to complete its two factories in Tangier by 2026], January 8, 2025, https://medias24.com/2025/01/08/btr-new-material-group-prevoit-lachevement-de-ses-deux-usines-a-tanger-dici-2026/.

[19] Rochdi Mokhliss, "Droits de douane américains : une « douche froide » pour les exportateurs marocains (ASMEX)" [US tariffs: a "cold shower" for Moroccan exporters (ASMEX)], Le Matin, April 3, 2025, https://lematin.ma/economie/droits-de-douane-us-une-douche-froide-pour-les-exportateurs-asmex/271013.

[20] Adil Faouzi, "EU Aluminum Wheel Tax on Morocco Reveals Trade War Brewing with China, Morocco World News, March 24, 2025, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/03/187365/eu-aluminum-wheel-tax-on-morocco-reveals-trade-war-brewing-with-china/.

[21] Hespress, "Morocco to challenge EU tariffs on aluminum car wheels exports," March 20, 2025, https://en.hespress.com/106146-morocco-to-challenge-eu-tariffs-on-aluminum-car-wheels-exports.html.

[22] Safae Hadri, "EU surcharges on aluminum wheels: what Moroccan industrialists think," *Telquel*, April 3, 2025, https://telquel.ma/2025/04/03/eu-surcharges-on-aluminum-wheels-what-moroccan-industrialists-think_1924689

CHAPTER 2

FROM GEOECONOMICS TO DIPLOMATIC RECALIBRATION: CHINA'S EVOLVING POSITION ON THE WESTERN SAHARA CONFLICT

By Imane EZZEHOUANY, Bianca PASQUIER and Amanda CHEN

This Chapter briefly outlines the historical background of the Western Sahara conflict before examining the evolution of China's position and perceived diplomatic recalibration since the establishment of the Sino-Moroccan Strategic Partnership in 2016. It then explores Beijing's increasingly complex balancing act between Rabat and Algiers in the shifting regional dynamics, and great-power competition over strategic corridors and resources in the Maghreb accelerated by the Iran War.

For decades, China has maintained a position of cautious neutrality on the Western Sahara conflict, balancing its relations with both Morocco and Algeria while supporting UN-led processes. As Sino-Moroccan economic cooperation deepened in recent years, however, the Moroccan discourse around the bilateral relationship has gradually expanded to discussing prospects of securing Beijing's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.[23]

This shift became evident after Chinese President Xi Jinping's unexpected stopover in Casablanca in November 2024, which Moroccan and international observers interpreted as a political rapprochement signalling Rabat's privileged role in China's Maghreb strategy. This perception intensified after the Spanish media outlet *Espiral 21* reported that Beijing was allegedly preparing to open a consulate in Laayoune, the largest city in Western Sahara, and invest in a land bridge connecting the territory to the Canary Islands.[24] Although neither Beijing nor Rabat confirmed the claims, **Jawad Kerdoudi,** President of the Moroccan Institute of International Relations (IMRI), observed that "there is no smoke without fire."[25]

Expectations heightened when Moroccan FM **Nasser Bourita** visited China in September 2025, during which the two ministries of exterior established a Strategic Dialogue mechanism to strengthen political consultation and coordination on bilateral, regional, and global issues. Despite the lack of explicit references to Western Sahara in the official communiqué, discussions on "regional and international issues of *common interest*" were interpreted as reflecting a convergence on principles such as sovereignty and territorial integrity, in opposition to separatism and extremism.[26] China's abstention on UNSCR 2797 in October was subsequently received by Moroccan commentators as a diplomatic recalibration implicitly favouring Rabat's Autonomy Proposal for resolving the conflict.

Shortly before the vote, Chinese FM **Wang Yi** had reportedly phoned his Algerian counterpart **Ahmed Attaf** to explain Beijing's stance. The exchange underscores China's increasingly delicate balancing act between Algeria and Morocco, one that appears to be tilting subtly toward Rabat as economic ties deepen. At the same time, the Western Sahara dispute has become embedded within great power rivalry – a trend accelerated by the disruptions precipitated by the Iran War – as external actors reassess the mineral-rich region through the prism of geoeconomic competition and strategic connectivity.

Within this evolving context, the United States has sought to preserve influence along the Atlantic corridor by encouraging a rapprochement between Morocco and Algeria/Polisario. China, for its part, has also come to view the region as a pillar of its long-term industrial and connectivity strategy, one that hinges upon a predictable and stable security environment. These dynamics, combined with the rapid expansion of Sino-Moroccan economic ties, have raised the question whether Beijing may be adopting a calibrated ambiguity compatible with Morocco's autonomy plan – allowing it to safeguard its strategic interests in the region without incurring meaningful political costs.

A Brief History of the Conflict

Origins of the Western Sahara War (1975–1991)

The Western Sahara conflict dates back to the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1976, when both Morocco and Mauritania laid territorial claims to the region. Both countries entered into armed conflict with the **Polisario Front**, a Sahrawi political

[23] Khadija Alimoussa, "بوريطة يزور الصين لتعزيز التعاون.. صبري: محطة أساسية لإنهاء النزاع المفتعل حول الصحراء" [Bourita visits China to strengthen cooperation… Sabri: a key stage to end the contrived Western Sahara dispute], *Tel/Quel*, September 18, 2025, https://ar.telquel.ma/بوريطة-يزور-الصين-لتعزيز-التعاون-مع-ب/.

[24] *Espiral 21*, "China ofrece un puente con Canarias entre España y Marruecos" [China offers a bridge with the Canary Islands between Spain and Morocco], November 13, 2024, https://espiral21.com/china-ofrece-un-puente-con-canarias-entre-espana-y-marruecos/.

[25] *Atlantic Radio,* "Sahara : vers une reconnaissance de la Chine?" [Sahara: Towards Chinese recognition?], November 20, 2024, https://atlanticradio.ma/podcast/sahara-vers-une-reconnaissance-de-la-chine.

[26] Mohammed Jaabouk, "Sahara: China reassures Morocco ahead of October UN deadline," *Yabiladi*, September 20, 2025, https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/176879/sahara-china-reassures-morocco-ahead.html.

and military organization supported by Algeria that seeks the independence of Western Sahara.[27]

Ahead of the Spanish withdrawal, Morocco and Mauritania had requested an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to clarify the legal status of the territory. While the ICJ acknowledged the existence of legal ties of allegiance between the Sultans of Morocco and certain tribes in Western Sahara, stating that the territory was not Terra Nullius before Spanish colonization, it concluded that such ties did not constitute claims for territorial sovereignty under international law.[28]

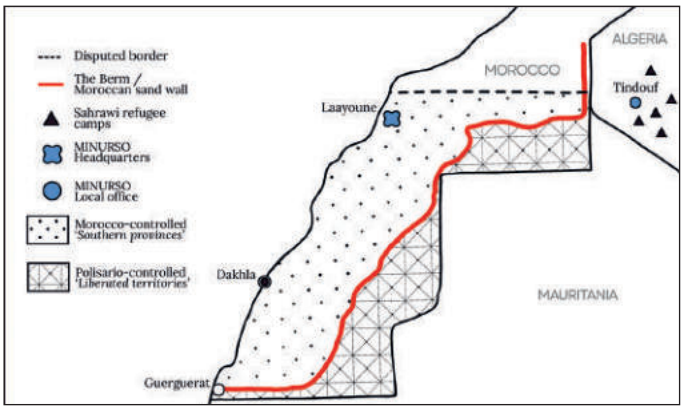
Morocco rejected the judgment, arguing that the Court ignored the concept of bay'a, the "act of allegiance" to the leader, in Islamic jurisprudence and within the Moroccan monarchical system.[29] A few months later in November 1975, King Hassan II organized the "Green March," during which nearly 350,000 unarmed Moroccans entered Western Sahara to assert the Kingdom's territorial claim.

The four-day march forced Spain to the negotiating table and precipitated the Madrid Agreement with both Morocco and Mauritania, to whom it delegated administrative responsibilities in the process to "decolonize" the territory of Western Sahara, while affirming that the views of the local population would be respected. [30]

However, politically and practically, this paved the way for Morocco and Mauritania to take control of the territory after Spain's withdrawal in 1976. The Polisario Front rejected the partition and launched a war of independence against both countries by proclaiming the **Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).**[31] While Mauritania withdrew in 1979, over the years, Morocco has built a defensive wall known as the "sand berm," encircling over 80% of the territory, with the remaining 20% under Polisario control. Since the eruption of the conflict, several Sahrawi refugees also fled into neighboring Algeria, where their descendants continue to live to this day relying on international humanitarian aid.

From MINURSO to Morocco's Autonomy Proposal

In 1991, a ceasefire was announced by the United Nations Security Council (res 690/1991) with the establishment of MINURSO, a UN mission tasked with overseeing a demilitarized buffer zone along the sand berm, and the organization of a



Territorial Division and Disputed Borders in Western Sahara (ChinaMed Project)

referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara. However, the referendum was repeatedly delayed due to Morocco and the Polisario's disagreement over the eligibility criteria for Sahrawi voters, leading to a prolonged political stalemate.[32] The repercussions of the impasse were not confined to the territory, but affected the geopolitical equilibrium of the entire region.

Due to Algeria's long-standing support for the Polisario, the Western Sahara issue remains among the main drivers of its diplomatic tension with Morocco. Rabat has long been wary of Algiers' role in the conflict, maintaining that its political, logistical, and diplomatic support for the Polisario makes it a key actor in the dispute.[33] **Jawad Kerdoudi,** President of the Moroccan Institute of International Relations (IMRI), asserts that Algeria's refusal to recognize itself as a party to the conflict makes it "responsible" for the impasse.[34]

Regional tension and fundamental disagreements between Rabat and the Polisario/Algiers significantly undermined MINURSO's mission. According to **Riccardo Fabiani,** North Africa Director of the International Crisis Group, "There were so many diplomatic and bureaucratic obstacles to the implementation of the referendum that it has become unattainable."[35] **Sarah Zaaimi,** a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's North Africa Program, further criticized the mission for "remaining paralyzed for years".[36]

Since 2007, Rabat has shifted its approach by promoting an Autonomy Proposal for Western Sahara to be recognized under its sovereignty. This initiative has shifted the focus of the dispute from holding a referendum on independence

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[27] *Al Jazeera*, "'abraz 'ahdath qadiat al-sahra' al-gharbia" أبرز أحداث قضية الصحراء الغربية [Major events in the Western Sahara issue], November 3, 2015, https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2015/11/3/أبرز-أحداث-قضية-الصحراء-الغربية;
UN, "Background," *MINURSO – United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara,* https://minurso.unmissions.org/en/background.

[28] Shoji Matsumoto, "On additional issues in the Western Sahara Advisory Opinion," *Policy Center for the New South,* January 21, 2021. https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/additional-issues-western-sahara-advisory-opinion.

[29] Jérôme Besnard, ed., *Rethinking the Sahara Dispute: History and Contemporary Perspectives,* trans. Nasser Bouchiba, preface by Yehuda Lancry (Rabat: Editions Bouregreg, 2024).
https://en.hespress.com/82047-new-book-in-chiniese-examines-sahara-dispute-through-history-and-contemporary-perspectives.html.

[30] UN, "Declaration of principles on Western Sahara (Madrid Accords), Spain-Morocco-Mauritania," November 14, 1975, *United Nations Treaty Series,* Vol. 988, p. 257, I-14450. https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20988/volume-988-i-14450-english.pdf.

[31] The Polisario Front proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976 with a government in exile in Algeria. It has been a full member of the African Union (AU), and its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), since 1982. As for the United Nations, the SADR is not recognized as a member state although it maintains a representative in New York to coordinate with MINURSO.

[32] Andrei Popoviciu, "The failed diplomacy between Morocco and Polisario," *Al Jazeera*, November 18, 2020.
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/18/the-failed-diplomacy-between-morocco-and-polisario.

[33] *African Press Agency*, "Western Sahara conflict is a Morocco-Algeria proxy war – Russian think tank," March 17, 2026.
https://apanews.net/western-sahara-conflict-as-morocco-algeria-proxy-war-russian-think-tank/.

[34] Jawad Kerdoudi, "La résolution 2602 du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU sur le Sahara favorable au Maroc" [UN Security Council Resolution 2602 on the Sahara is favorable to Morocco], *EcoActu*, November 2, 2021, https://ecoactu.ma/la-resolution-2602-du-conseil-de-securite/.

[35] Ibid, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/18/the-failed-diplomacy-between-morocco-and-polisario.

[36] Sarah Zaaimi, "Why it's time to terminate the UN's dysfunctional mission in Western Sahara," *Atlantic Council*, April 9, 2025.
https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/why-its-time-to-terminate-the-uns-dysfunctional-mission-in-western-sahara/.

as originally mandated by MINURSO, to finding a "mutually acceptable" political solution, which Morocco asserts is only possible through its autonomy plan.[37] Yet, the Polisario has maintained its demands for a referendum and rejected the Moroccan initiative. For its part, Rabat does not recognize the Polisario's claim to self-determination, which further stalls mediation efforts over the conflict.

The Abraham Accords and Growing Support for Rabat's Position

Tensions have grown since November 2020, when the ceasefire broke down after Morocco used force to remove unarmed Sahrawi protestors near Guerguerat, in the UN-monitored buffer zone on the border with Mauritania. The SADR subsequently declared the end of the ceasefire, although hostilities remained limited as both the Moroccan army and Polisario fighters retreated almost immediately.[38] The international community reacted with caution, as even Algeria urged both parties to avoid further escalation.[39]

In December, the first Trump Administration recognized Moroccan sovereignty on the territory as part of the Abraham Accords in exchange for Morocco normalizing its relations with Israel. Although the development led Algiers to break diplomatic relations with Rabat in 2021 over its perception of Moroccan-Israeli ties as a national security threat, Morocco's position on the Western Sahara dispute has since continued to garner international support.

Over the past years, Morocco has encouraged the opening of consulates in the territory and accelerated its large-scale infrastructure and development projects in the Western Saharan cities of Laayoune and Dakhla under the banner of its Atlantic Initiative.[40] By leveraging diplomatic outreach and geoeconomic incentives, especially among land-locked Sub-Saharan states seeking maritime access, Rabat has bolstered its sovereignty claim with growing international support.

According to Morocco's Permanent Representative to the United Nations **Omar Hilale,** more than 120 countries today endorse Morocco's Autonomy Plan as a serious, credible basis for resolving the issue.[41] Egypt and land-locked Mali were the latest countries to present their support. Following Rabat's historic success at the UN Security Council with the adoption of Resolution 2797 in October 2025, an emerging international consensus around Morocco's position on Western Sahara appears to be prompting even China to recalibrate its traditional approach toward the conflict amid the shifting regional balance of power.

China's Evolving Position on Western Sahara

From Early Revolutionism to Diplomatic Neutrality

Beijing has historically adopted a position of cautious neutrality toward the Western Sahara conflict, refraining from explicitly taking sides between Rabat and the Algiers-backed Polisario, and consistently declining to recognize either claim.[42] Yet, this may appear odd when considering that in the early years since its foundation, China had supported anti-colonial struggles and national liberation movements in Third World countries through arms transfers and by training foreign fighters with its People's Liberation Army.

For instance, China had not only supported Algeria's provisional government since 1958, but also supplied it with weapons in its war of independence against France. Yet, this kind of military and political assistance was not offered to the Algiers-backed Polisario Front. Beijing's differing approach toward the Algerian decolonization movement and the SADR were a result of a profound shift in its foreign policy in the 1970s. China was transitioning from the international revolutionism of the Mao era to a posture of peaceful development driven by economic growth under the leadership of **Deng Xiaoping.**

When the Western Sahara war broke out in 1975, Beijing had just regained its seat at the UN Security Council[43] and was adjusting its role within the international system from that of a revisionist/challenger to that of a normative player. In this context, **Wu Wanjun** from Sun Yat-sen University and **Pedro Sobral** from Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages interpreted Beijing's "non-interference" policy toward Western Sahara as a result of this pragmatic shift, aimed at maximizing Chinese economic interests in North Africa while balancing relations with both Morocco and Algeria.[44]

As a consequence, despite the Polisario's self-identification as a "national liberation movement," China did not extend the same level of ideological and material support it had previously provided to other national liberation movements. Moreover, Wu and Sobral argue that perceived similarities between Taiwan and Western Sahara as separatist regions supported by foreign powers may have consolidated a consensus between Beijing and Rabat, where "both sides remain neutral and do not interfere in each other's domestic issues."[45]

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[37] *United Nations Security Council*, "Letter dated 11 April 2007 from the Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General," S/2007/206, April 13, 2007. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/MINURSO%20S2007%20206.pdf.

[38] *International Crisis Group,* "Time for International Re-engagement in Western Sahara," March 10, 2021. https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/middle-east-north-africa/western-sahara/b082-time-international-re-engagement-western-sahara.

[39] *Ambassade d'Algérie en France,* "L'Algérie déplore vivement les graves violations du cessez-le-feu dans la zone d'El Guerguerat au Sahara occidental" [Algeria strongly deplores the serious ceasefire violations in the El Guerguerat area of Western Sahara], November 13, 2020. https://amb-algerie.fr/6419/lalgerie-deplore-vivement-les-graves-violations-du-cessez-le-feu-dans-la-zone-del-guerguerat-au-sahara-occidental/.

[40] Simon Roger, "A Dakhla, au Sahara occidental, le Maroc intensifie sa politique de grands travaux" [In Dakhla, in Western Sahara, Morocco is intensifying its policy of major public projects], *Le Monde Afrique*, September 6, 2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2025/09/06/a-dakhla-au-sahara-occidental-le-maroc-intensifie-sa-politique-de-grands-travaux_6639205_3212.html.

[41] Safaa Kasraoui, "Hilale: Autonomy Plan is Demonstration of Morocco's Goodwill, Only Path to Western Sahara Dispute," *Morocco World News,* November 17. 2025. https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/11/268259/hilale-autonomy-plan-is-demonstration-of-moroccos-goodwill-only-path-to-western-sahara-dispute/.

[42] Jamal Laadam, "The Chinese stance on the Moroccan Sahara shifts from neutrality to subtle backing of sovereignty", *Modern Diplomacy,* July 18, 2025, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/07/18/the-chinese-stance-on-the-moroccan-sahara-shifts-from-neutrality-to-subtle-backing-of-sovereignty.

[43] This occurred in 1971, when the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 2758, which recognized the representatives of the People's Republic of China as "the only lawful representatives of China to the United Nations," a resolution for which Algeria was one of the principal sponsors.

[44] Wanjun Wu and Pedro Sobral, "China's non-interference policy towards Western Sahara conflict," *Africana Studia* No. 29 (2018): 132. https://ojs.letras.up.pt/index.php/AfricanaStudia/article/view/7633.

[45] Wu and Sobral, "China's non-interference policy towards Western Sahara conflict," 134. https://ojs.letras.up.pt/index.php/AfricanaStudia/article/view/7633.

In spite of China's position of diplomatic neutrality and support for MINURSO's mandate by providing peacekeeping personnel to the mission, Moroccan, Algerian and Sahrawi commentators have interpreted Beijing's stance as a form of veiled support for either claim.

In this regard, **Fadoua Ammari** from Hassan II University in Casablanca and **Rida Lyammouri** from the Policy Center for the New South have noted that Polisario representatives were excluded from the 2024 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) despite their African Union membership. In their view, "participation in these summits is structured around China's diplomatic recognition policy, which excludes the SADR as a legitimate government of a sovereign state."[46] *Atalayar*, a Spanish-based publication focused on Maghreb–Europe relations, went as far as suggesting that by excluding the Polisario, this China–Africa summit clearly supported "Morocco's territorial integrity."[47]

These comments did not go unnoticed, spurring reactions from the Algerian and the Sahrawi press. Writing for the Algerian channel *Al24* News, **Latifa Ferial Naili** critiqued Moroccan media's "falsely claimed victory" by clarifying that the SADR has never participated in FOCAC due to it being a bilateral mechanism between China and select African countries, and not a multilateral event involving the entirety of the African Union.[48] [49] For its part, *The Sahara Press* responded to the perceived Moroccan media campaign by emphasizing that:

> *"China has constant and unwavering positions on the issue of decolonization in Western Sahara […] reflected in the statements of representatives of this country at the United Nations, particularly in the Security Council, as well as in the communiqués issued by the Chinese authorities on many occasions."*[50]

This divergence in interpretations raises a broader question about the extent to which China's professed neutrality may be masking a more calibrated form of managed, strategic ambiguity.

From Neutrality to Strategic Ambiguity: Moroccan Perceptions of China's Diplomatic Shift

King **Mohammed VI**'s visit to China in 2016 took place at a critical moment for Morocco. Just weeks earlier, UN Secretary General **Ban Ki-moon** had described Morocco's presence in Western Sahara as an "occupation," a position that Washington also appeared to support.[51] In this context, the visit heralded a new orientation in Rabat's diplomacy toward strategic diversification while maintaining its traditional alliances with the United States and Europe. As China's economic presence expanded in the Kingdom, Rabat's expectation grew that deeper ties may, over time, foster greater Chinese receptiveness on Western Sahara.[52]

Officially, Beijing's doctrine remained unchanged: China continued to affirm support for a UN-led process based on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. Yet, since 2018, its behavior at the UN began to show small but meaningful adjustments compatible with Rabat's position.[53] China voted in favor of UNSCR 2440 (2018) and 2602 (2021), both of which framed the Moroccan plan as "a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution" to the conflict based on compromise.[54]

Moroccan commentators increasingly interpreted these developments as evidence of a diplomatic recalibration. Notably, China's abstention during the UN Security Council vote in October 2025 that formally endorsed Morocco's "Western Sahara Autonomy Proposal" was widely perceived not only as a pragmatic shift, but a subtle yet meaningful diplomatic win. **Hicham Ismaili,** Ph.D. student at the University of Fes' Laboratory of Political Studies and Public Law, observed that although "ideological consistency and relationships with other African nations may prevent a full-throated endorsement," China's vote can be considered a "tacit acceptance" of the plan.[55]

The Observatorio de la Política China, a Spanish foreign policy publication, reached a similar assessment that was circulated by the Moroccan news outlet Hespress, noting that:

> *"Although China's principles have clearly favored a solution through self-determination, in practice, its actions have become more ambiguous and pragmatic over time."*[56]

Other analysts explicitly linked this diplomatic evolution to Morocco's growing importance for Chinese industrial and connectivity interests in North Africa. While China's earlier favourable stance at the Security Council may have indicated an attempt to align with the prevailing consensus within the international community, Ammari and Lyammouri regard Beijing's posture in October 2025 as a direct result of geoeconomic calculus.[57]

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[46] Fadoua Ammari and Rida Lyammouri, "La Chine et la Russie face à la question du Sahara marocain : vers une convergence des intérêts stratégiques" [China and Russia on the issue of the Moroccan Sahara: toward a convergence of strategic interests], *Policy Center for the New South*, June 13, 2025, p. 16. https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/la-chine-et-la-russie-face-la-question-du-sahara-marocain-vers-une-convergence-des.

[47] Raúl Redondo, "Le Forum de coopération Chine-Afrique soutient l'intégrité territoriale du Maroc" [The China-Africa Cooperation Forum supports Morocco's territorial integrity], *Atalayar*, September 5, 2024 https://www.atalayar.com/fr/articulo/politique/forum-cooperation-chine-afrique-soutient-lintegrite-territoriale-du-maroc/20240905120720204834.html.

[48] Latifa Ferial Naili, "Morocco's Makhzen Regime Uses Fictitious Claims of SADR Exclusion from FOCAC to Distract from Tokyo Scandal," *Al24 News*, August 24, 2024. https://al24news.dz/en/moroccos-makhzen-regime-uses-fictitious-claims-of-sadr-exclusion-from-focac-to-distract-from-tokyo-scandal/.

[49] It may be interesting to note that the other country excluded from the 53 African states parties to FOCAC out of 55 AU members is the Kingdom of Eswatini, the last African country to recognize the Republic of China instead of the PRC.

[50] *The Sahara Press,* "Participation of SADR in FOCAC Summit: Makhzen regime is engaged in propaganda of fictitious victory to cover up its scandal in Tokyo," August 26, 2024, https://www.spsrasd.info/en/2024/08/26/4874.html.

[51] Samir Bennis, "Why Morocco is Disappointed With the US Position on Western Sahara," Morocco World News, May 12, 2016, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/05/109506/why-morocco-is-disappointed-with-the-us-position-on-western-sahara/.

[52] Samir Bennis, "What Impact of Morocco-China Strategic Partnership on Western Sahara?," Morocco World News, May 21, 2016. https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/05/109279/what-impact-of-morocco-china-strategic-partnership-on-western-sahara/.

[53] Ammari and Lyammouri, [China and Russia on the issue of the Moroccan Sahara], p. 4. https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/la-chine-et-la-russie-face-la-question-du-sahara-marocain-vers-une-convergence-des.

[54] UN Security Council, "Resolution 2440 (October 31, 2018)," UN Doc S/RES/2440 (2018), https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2440(2018).

[55] Hicham Ismaili, "China's Delicate Balance: Predicting Beijing's Position on Morocco's Autonomy Plan at UNSC" Morocco World News, October 30, 2025, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/10/265914/chinas-delicate-balance-predicting-beijings-position-on-moroccos-autonomy-plan-at-unsc/.

[56] Tawfiq Boufertih, "مرصد السياسة الصينية : بكين تميل إلى الحكم الذاتي في الصحراء المغربية" [Chinese Policy Observatory: Beijing tends toward autonomy in the Moroccan Sahara], Hespress, November 7, 2025, https://www.hespress.com/-1650995مرصد-السياسة-الصينية-بكين-تميل-إلى-الحل.html.

[57] Ammari and Lyammouri, [China and Russia on the issue of the Moroccan Sahara], p. 12. https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/la-chine-et-la-russie-face-la-question-du-sahara-marocain-vers-une-convergence-des.

Chinese companies maintain an active presence across the Kingdom from Tanger Med to the Gotion High-Tech gigafactory in Kenitra. These investments, according to the experts, depend on a regional stability that China could secure only by supporting Morocco's integration of the Western Sahara "provinces":

"A pacified Sahara, well integrated into Morocco, could become a space of opportunity: exploitation of mineral resources (the Sahara holds reserves of phosphates, of which Morocco is the world's leading exporter), development of renewable energy (wind and solar power in the desert), and infrastructure projects linking Morocco to the rest of Africa (trans-Saharan highways, energy links, and a future gas pipeline)."[58]

In a similar vein, **Lahoucine Bekkar Sbaai**, a Moroccan lawyer specializing in migration, human rights, and the Sahara conflict, holds that Morocco's accession to the BRI, its reliability as an investment and trade partner, its strategic location, and its expanding economic cooperation with China are all indicators that "if this trend continues on its current trajectory, China's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara may only be a matter of time."[59]

Experts also linked this apparent recalibration to Rabat's consistent support for the One-China principle in international fora, particularly on "sensitive issues such as Hong Kong and Taiwan,"[60] to which Beijing may be responding by "demonstrating an understanding of Morocco's sovereignty concerns."[61]

However, these interpretations were not universally shared within Moroccan commentary. **Souad Mekkaoui**, co-founder of the Moroccan pro-government magazine *Maroc Diplomatique*, criticized China's abstention as remaining constrained by its longstanding partnership with Algeria, contrasting it with what she described as a "clear-sighted choice" by major Western powers – including Spain, France, the UK, the U.S., and Germany.[62]

Despite widespread optimism around a Sino-Moroccan political rapprochement, critical assessments such as this reflect the growing diplomatic complexity facing Beijing as tensions between Rabat and Algiers remain unresolved.

China's Delicate Balancing Act in the Maghreb

China's expanding footprint in both Morocco and Algeria has made strict neutrality increasingly complex. At the same time, growing international support for Morocco's position have deepened Algerian perceptions of strategic encirclement.

France's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in 2024 followed by President Xi's stopover in Casablanca later that year generated unease in Algiers, where some officials inferred that Beijing's position no longer reflected the depth of Algerian support for China on issues such as Taiwan and Tibet.[63]

Reflecting these frustrations, the Algerian ambassador to China reportedly conveyed to **Yahia Zoubir,** a prominent expert on China–North Africa relations, his dissatisfaction with Beijing's ambivalence:

"We have supported China on many issues, including China gaining a seat at the UN. We told our Chinese partners that Western Sahara is a different question from Tibet or Xinjiang to no avail."[64]

Chinese officials nonetheless continued attempting to reassure Algeria of the importance Beijing attached to the bilateral relationship. In an interview with Zoubir, a former Chinese ambassador to Morocco observed that "ties with Algeria are more important and more comprehensive than those with Morocco."[65]

Similarly, while Moroccan observers widely interpreted China's abstention on UNSCR 2797 as a diplomatic success, Beijing's UN representative **Fu Cong** justified the decision by referring to imbalances in the US-led draft, a rhetoric that neither opposed the text nor shielded Algeria's preferences.[66]

In practice, Beijing attempted to manage the tension by exercising heightened caution around projects that touched contested zones.[67] For instance, reports documented Chinese purchases of Western Saharan phosphates between 2018 and 2021, after which sourcing stopped.[68] Beijing also showed hesitation over the Gâra Djebilet project – among the world's largest iron ore reserves – located in Algeria's Tindouf Province, home to Sahrawi refugee camps and a long-standing source of contestation between Rabat and Algiers over mining rights.[69]

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[58] Ibid.

[59] Lahoucine Bekkar Sbaai, "Le Maroc et la Chine: la diplomatie économique au service de la souveraineté sur le Sahara" [Morocco and China: Economic diplomacy in service of sovereignty over the Sahara], *Atalayar*, November 5, 2025, https://www.atalayar.com/fr/opinion/lahoucine-bekkar-sbaai/maroc-et-chine-diplomatie-economique-au-service-souverainete-sur-sahara/20250609110500215700.html.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ammari and Lyammouri, [China and Russia on the issue of the Moroccan Sahara], p. 5. https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/la-chine-et-la-russie-face-la-question-du-sahara-marocain-vers-une-convergence-des.

[62] Souad Mekkaoui, "Sahara: La Russie a choisi, à quand le courage de la Chine ?" [Sahara: Russia has made its choice, when will China show the courage?], *Maroc Diplomatique,* October 19, 2025, https://maroc-diplomatique.net/sahara-la-russie-a-choisi-a-quand-le-courage-de-la-chine/.

[63] Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, "China's Participation in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: A Case of Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy?," *Journal of Contemporary China,* Vol. 27 No. 110 (2018): 133. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1389019.

[64] Yahia H. Zoubir, "Algeria and China: Shifts in political and military relations," *Global Policy,* Volume 14, Special Issue (2023): 62. https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13115.

[65] Ibid, https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13115.

[66] Imane Ezzehouany, "From Geoeconomics to a Chinese Diplomatic Shift on the Western Sahara? Moroccan Press Coverage of FM Bourita's Visit to Beijing," *ChinaMed Project,* December 1, 2025. https://chinamed.substack.com/p/from-geoeconomics-to-a-chinese-diplomatic.

[67] Alessandro Giuli, "The strategic caution of Russia and China in Western Sahara," *MedOr Italian Foundation,* June 7, 2022, https://www.med-or.org/en/news/la-prudenza-strategica-di-russia-e-cina-nel-sahara-occidentale.

[68] Eduard Soler i Lecha and Inés Arco Escriche, "The Western Sahara conflict in a post-hegemonic world: interests, values and foreign policy strategies," *The Journal of North African Studies* Vol 30, No. 4: 579–610. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2025.2500472.

[69] Mohammed Jaabouk, "Algeria and Morocco's joint exploitation of the Gara Djbilet iron mine ignored for a new project," *Yabiladi*, April 1, 2021. https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/108002/algeria-morocco-s-joint-exploitation-gara.

A comparable pattern appeared in the security domain. As Algeria increased purchases of advanced Chinese arms following disruptions to Russian supplies amid the Ukraine war,[70] Morocco also acquired Chinese combat UAVs as part of its defense diversification efforts.[71] Even reports of Polisario members using commercially available Chinese drones illustrate how China's technological footprint reaches all sides without translating into political alignment.[72]

Taken together, developments since 2016 suggest that China has moved beyond declarative neutrality toward a strategy of managed ambiguity. Rather than openly endorsing Morocco's sovereignty claims, its investments, diplomatic behavior, and cautious silences shape an environment increasingly compatible with Morocco's autonomy narrative while preserving the balance necessary to maintain its partnership with Algeria. This approach allows Beijing to expand regional influence without assuming the political costs of a formal alignment.

Beijing and the Shifting Regional Balance of Power

Great–Power Rivalry and the Internationalization of Western Sahara

China's evolving posture on the conflict intersects today with a broader reconfiguration of power across North Africa where the Western Sahara issue has evolved from a regional territorial dispute to being recast as a central theater of competing global alignments.[73]

As traditional Western influence is weakened by a fragmented Mediterranean policy, China and Russia have consolidated their presence, treating the region as a strategic pivot connecting Europe and the Sahel to global trade routes. Consequently, the fate of Western Sahara now conditions the viability of critical assets – including Atlantic maritime gateways, trans-Saharan connectivity, and emerging renewable energy networks.

In this context, the United States has intensified diplomatic efforts to encourage a settlement between Morocco and Algeria. Washington's urgency appears driven by a strategic concern that prolonged instability could create openings for rival powers along the Atlantic façade – a maritime sphere that has historically remained within the Western security orbit.

Since late 2025, the United States has organized several confidential meetings aimed at finding a formula that addresses Morocco's autonomy proposal while maintaining a meaningful role for Algeria.[74] The signing of the first-ever U.S.-Algeria military cooperation agreement under the second Trump administration suggests that Algiers may indeed be recalibrating its own strategic alliances, potentially moving toward a framework that could lead to regional pacification.[75]

Yet, internal challenges continue to limit the prospects for a sustainable reconciliation in both Morocco and Algeria. **Raouf Farrah,** an Algerian political science researcher, observed in the *Middle East Eye* that a visible gap persists between state policies and domestic public opinion, particularly regarding the role of external powers in the region.[76]

In Morocco, the normalization with Israel has created friction with a population that maintains a strong alignment with the Palestinian cause. Meanwhile in Algeria, any perceived shift on Western Sahara risks contradicting the long-standing anti-colonial narrative that underpins the government's domestic legitimacy. This internal friction could make any formal agreement brittle or difficult to implement in the long term.

China's Role in the Region: Influence Without Alignment

The March 2026 Iran War and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz further accelerated the geopolitical significance of North Africa. While the United States seeks to stabilize the region to contain rival influence, China increasingly views the Maghreb as a strategic alternative for energy diversification and industrial connectivity. **Zhang Chuchu** of Fudan University described North Africa as a potential "new fulcrum for energy security," while **Jonathan Fulton** questioned whether the region may become a "Second Gulf" for Chinese interests.[77]

In this context, Algeria's role as a vital fossil-energy supplier has gained renewed importance, while Morocco remains structurally exposed to energy shocks and domestic economic pressure.[78] Yet despite Algiers' energy leverage, Rabat has continued to advance its autonomy plan for Western Sahara, including efforts to link the Polisario to Iran in order to secure further American support.[79]

At the same time, China's search for alternative supply chain routes insulated from Gulf volatility increasingly intersects with Morocco's infrastructure advantage, renewable energy ambitions, and Atlantic connectivity. More broadly, both

[70] Yahia H. Zoubir, "China in the Maghreb: Forging a New Era of Geopolitical Influence," *Middle East Council on Global Affairs,* October 20, 2025, https://mecouncil.org/publication/china-in-the-maghreb-forging-a-new-era-of-geopolitical-influence/.

[71] Samir Bennis, "Morocco Acquires Advanced Chinese TB-001K Combat Drone," *Morocco World News,* February 10, 2025. https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/02/164709/morocco-acquires-advanced-chinese-tb-001k-combat-drone/.

[72] Soler i Lecha and Arco Escriche, "The Western Sahara conflict in a post-hegemonic world," https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2025.2500472.

[73] Bianca Pasquier, "Mediterranean Anxieties over the Sino-Moroccan Rapprochement: French, Algerian, and Tunisian Media Perspectives," *ChinaMed Project,* November 10, 2025. https://chinamed.substack.com/p/mediterranean-anxieties-over-sino.

[74] Yassine Ben Driss, "Western Sahara Dispute Entered Its Final Chapter Behind Closed Doors in Madrid," *Morocco World News,* February 12, 2026. https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2026/02/278575/western-sahara-dispute-entered-its-final-chapter-behind-closed-doors-in-madrid/.

[75] Margarita Arredondas, "Algeria redirects military cooperation to the US in response to Russia's influence in the Sahel," *Atalayar*, January 25, 2025. https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/algeria-redirects-military-cooperation-to-the-us-in-response-to-russias-influence-in-the-sahel/20250123163610210285.html.

[76] Adlene Meddi, "War on Iran: How Algeria and Morocco manoeuvre the fallout," *Middle East Eye,* March 15, 2026. https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/between-threats-and-opportunities-algeria-and-morocco-manoeuvre-fallout-war-iran.

[77] Chuchu Zhang, "How Iran War Is Reshaping China's Geo-Economic Cooperation with North Africa," *Stimson Center North Africa Program*, March 27, 2026. https://www.stimson.org/2026/how-iran-war-is-reshaping-chinas-geo-economic-cooperation-with-north-africa/.

[78] Hafed Al Ghwell, "Impacts of the Iran War on North Africa, the Sahel, and the Mediterranean," *Stimson Center North Africa Program,* March 31, 2026. https://www.stimson.org/2026/impacts-of-the-iran-war-on-north-africa-the-sahel-and-the-mediterranean/

[79] *North Africa Post,* "Strikes on Iran to weaken Polisario, Hezbollah and Houthi proxy networks," March 31, 2026. https://northafricapost.com/95865-strikes-on-iran-to-weaken-polisario-hezbollah-and-houthi-proxy-networks.html.

Chinese and regional long-term strategies converge on the necessity of a predictable security environment in the Maghreb predicated on stability in Western Sahara.

Ultimately, given the intractable nature of the territorial dispute, Beijing is unlikely to assume a political role despite its regional stakes.[80] Instead, China is expected to continue maintaining influence by expanding economic interdependence with both Morocco and Algeria, while accommodating the emerging consensus surrounding the Moroccan autonomy proposal internationally. As for managing the mediation process for resolving the conflict, China will likely defer to other powers – such as the United States – which also retains a strategic interest in stabilizing the region.

Against this backdrop of evolving but restrained Chinese engagement in the Maghreb, the next Chapter shifts from conflict management to regional perceptions, examining how France, Algeria, and Tunisia have interpreted the Sino–Moroccan rapprochement.

[80] Sun & Zoubir, "China's Participation in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East and North Africa," 237. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1389019.

CHAPTER 3

MEDITERRANEAN ANXIETIES OVER THE SINO-MOROCCAN RAPPROCHEMENT: FRENCH, ALGERIAN, AND TUNISIAN PERSPECTIVES

By Bianca PASQUIER

Although the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement has primarily been interpreted through the lens of economic pragmatism and Morocco's ambition to diversify its international partnerships, it has also triggered a range of reactions in France, Algeria, and Tunisia – each filtered through distinctive political, historical, and media lenses. This Chapter examines how experts and mediate debates in these countries have interpreted and responded to deepening Sino-Moroccan ties.

Historically one of Rabat's closest partners, France has expressed concern over its waning influence in the Kingdom as China's presence expands. The Algerian discourse revealed a mix of anxiety and denial, driven by fears that closer ties between Beijing and Rabat could further deepen its regional marginalization. Tunisian media, by contrast, struck a tone that oscillated between admiration and self-reflection regarding Tunis' own place in the region.

This comparative approach highlights how the China-Morocco rapprochement functions as both a mirror and a catalyst of broader power reconfigurations in the Maghreb, challenging colonial hierarchies and inviting local elites to reassess their foreign policy orientations.

France's Waning Influence Amid China's Rise

Franco-Moroccan relations have fluctuated dramatically over the past decade, reflecting deeper tensions between postcolonial legacies and Rabat's global partnerships. In recent years, relations deteriorated due to a series of political and diplomatic crises, notably the European Parliament's January 2023 vote condemning the Kingdom for failing to respect press freedom, and France's restrictive visa policy targeting Moroccan nationals.[81] These developments provoked a sharp reaction from Rabat, with King **Mohammed VI** declaring that "our relations are neither good nor friendly" in response to President **Emmanuel Macron's** February 2023 speech on France-Africa relations, in which he outlined Paris' new policy for the continent.[82]

However, following the chill in France's relations with Algeria, the Élysée recalibrated its Maghreb policy in favor of Rabat, with Macron's state visit to Morocco in October 2024 marking a turning point.[83] During the visit, the French President explicitly recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, an unprecedented gesture that signaled both reconciliation and an attempt to reassert France's strategic interests in the region.[84] This Franco-Moroccan diplomatic thaw led to a series of reciprocal ministerial visits in 2025, which showcased Paris' efforts to restore the confidence that had eroded over years of mutual suspicion.

French media and policy analysts increasingly acknowledged Morocco's indispensable role in France's regional strategy, especially as relations with Algeria remain strained. The conservative magazine *Le Point* noted that "the Maghreb countries are moving further and further away from Paris," emphasizing France's growing need to secure a reliable partner in North Africa.[85] *Le Monde* journalist **Frédéric Bobin** similarly observed that "faced with the impasse on reconciliation with Algiers, Paris is inclined to rebalance its Maghreb diplomacy in favor of Rabat, particularly on Western Sahara."[86]

Despite the apparent rapprochement, official French discourse remained cautious. The Quai d'Orsay maintained that "its

[81] *Jeune Afrique,* "La réponse du Maroc à Macron: «Nos relations ne sont ni bonnes ni amicales »" [Morocco's response to Macron: "Our relations are neither good nor friendly"], March 1, 2023. https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1423034/politique/la-reponse-du-maroc-a-macron-nos-relations-ne-sont-ni-bonnes-ni-amicales/.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Brahim Oumansour, "Politique étrangère marocaine: nouvelle donne au Sahara occidental ?" [Moroccan Foreign Policy: A New Deal in Western Sahara?], *French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS),* November 8, 2024. https://www.iris-france.org/politique-etrangere-marocaine-nouvelle-donne-au-sahara-occidental/:

[84] Ibid.

[85] *BBC News Afrique,* "Géopolitique : la France va-t-elle perdre son influence au Maghreb après son déclin en Afrique subsaharienne?" [Geopolitics: Will France lose its influence in the Maghreb after its decline in sub-Saharan Africa?], October 12, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-67039986.

[86] Frédéric Bobin, "Au Maghreb, la tentation du recentrage de la France vers le Maroc" [In the Maghreb, the temptation of France refocusing on Morocco], *Le Monde,* March 11, 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/03/11/au-maghreb-la-tentation-du-recentrage-de-la-france-vers-le-maroc_6221303_3232.html.

diplomacy in the region is not a zero-sum game," suggesting that warming relations with Morocco do not necessarily imply a cooling of ties with Algeria.[87] Yet, beneath this rhetoric of balance lay an implicit acknowledgment of Morocco's growing leverage. "Though a small market on a global scale, Morocco has managed to position itself as a preferred interlocutor and economic partner for European countries – such as France and Spain – as well as for most French-speaking sub-Saharan nations," observed **Frédéric Maury,** CEO of *Jeune Afrique,*[88] and **Nadia Rabbaa**, a UN Communications Specialist.[89]

Against this background, the strengthening of Sino–Moroccan relations is perceived as a challenge to France's historical prominence in the region. As journalist **Mohand Hakhifi** observed in *Arab News,* "France's traditional and historical preponderance in Morocco is tending to diminish in favor of China, a country for which Morocco represents many interests, especially related to infrastructure investments."[90] More concretely, Chinese investments have reshaped Morocco's economic landscape, particularly in sectors once dominated by French influence.

Sino–French competition in the transport sector over Morocco's high-speed rail network exemplifies this shift. Through competitive pricing and strategic lobbying, China's state-owned **China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC)** outcompeted French bidders in the Marrakech–Agadir railway project.[91]

The competitive dynamic extends to emerging sectors of the green economy. As *Jeune Afrique*'s **Bilal Mousjid** noted, "between industrial ambitions and power struggles, Morocco has become the new arena of Sino–European competition."[92] Similarly, *Le Monde* has also criticized Brussels' inertia in the global battery race, where Chinese giants **CATL** and **BYD** lead the field.[93] **Hakim El-Karoui,** head of the French strategic consulting firm Volentia, further observed that Morocco's interest lies not merely in attracting investment, but in acquiring technological know-how – a domain in which "the Chinese are much more advanced than the Europeans."[94]

In this context, French media have often adopted a dual narrative: casting China's growing presence as a cause for alarm while simultaneously calling on France to "wake up" and respond. The French state-owned radio news network *RFI*, for instance, portrayed the influx of Chinese tourists and investors into the Cherifian Kingdom as both beneficial and destabilizing.[95] While acknowledging that "relations with China are seen as a way to strengthen Morocco's position vis-à-vis the West," such alarmist framings reveal persistent anxieties about a perceived "Chinese colonization" of France's former protectorate.[96]

Morocco's strategic tightrope between Paris and Beijing has become increasingly apparent in expert commentary. Economist **Abdelmalek Alaoui**, CEO of the Guepard Group, observed in a research note for the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique that Rabat's decision to distance itself from the BRICS – which China has increasingly shaped into an "anti-G7" platform – reflected an acute awareness that deepening ties with Beijing could jeopardize its long-standing partnerships with the West.[97] Conversely, **François Lafargue** from the Paris School of Business cautioned against exaggerating this shift, suggesting that China's presence in the Maghreb remains largely "complementary to European investments."[98]

Ultimately, the overall tone of French media betrayed an underlying anxiety: that France's traditional influence in Morocco is being outpaced by a more agile and pragmatic competitor. The head of a French CAC 40 company quoted in *Le Monde* captured the sense of unease: "The Moroccan Minister of Industry told us that the Chinese were contacting him every day and that we needed to wake up before it was too late."[99]

As France contends with China's growing presence in Morocco, its neighbors Algeria and Tunisia observe these developments through the prism of regional competition. Beijing's expanding investments in the Moroccan economy have heightened both countries' awareness of their own strategic positioning in the Maghreb.

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[87] Ibid.

[88] *Jeune Afrique* is a French-language pan-African weekly news magazine founded in 1960 in Tunis, known for its in-depth political, economic, and cultural coverage of Africa and its diaspora. The magazine, the most widely read pan-African news source, is currently headquartered in Paris..

[89] Frédéric Maury & Nadia Rabbaa, "Le Maroc, un pont d'or pour la Chine ?" [Morocco, a golden bridge for China?], *Jeune Afrique,* December 29, 2015. https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/286294/economie-entreprises/maroc-pont-dor-chine/.

[90] Mohand Hakhifi, "L'influence de la France recule au Maroc au profit de la Chine" [France's influence in Morocco is declining in favor of China], *Arab News,* June 16, 2021. https://www.arabnews.fr/node/106251/monde-arabe

[91] Amin Rboub, "TGV Marrakech-Agadir: Guerre entre Paris et Pékin" [Marrakech-Agadir high-speed train: War between Paris and Beijing], *L'Économiste*, December 3, 2019. https://www.leconomiste.com/1053898-tgv-marrakech-agadir-guerre-entre-paris-et-pekin/;
BFM Business, "Le Maroc veut deux nouvelles lignes de TGV" [Morocco wants two new high-speed rail lines], January 31, 2022. https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/entreprises/transports/le-maroc-veut-deux-nouvelles-lignes-de-tgv_AV-202201310192.html;
Abdelmalek Alaoui, "Réconciliation avec le Maroc : le voyage des gros contrats," [Reconciliation with Morocco: the large contracts visit], *La Tribune,* October 27, 2024. https://www.latribune.fr/economie/politique/reconciliation-avec-le-maroc-le-voyage-des-gros-contrats-1009874.html.

[92] Bilal Mousjid, "Du cobalt au lithium, la Chine prend racine au Maroc… et Paris s'en méfie" [From cobalt to lithium, China is taking root in Morocco... and Paris is wary], *Jeune Afrique*, October 6, 2025. https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1727834/economie-entreprises/du-cobalt-au-lithium-la-chine-prend-racine-au-maroc-et-paris-sen-mefie/.

[93] *Le Monde*, "La grande faiblesse de l'Europe face à la Chine" [Europe's great weakness in the face of China], July 25, 2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/07/25/la-grande-faiblesse-de-l-europe-face-a-la-chine_6623852_3232.html, (also available in English).

[94] Mohand Hakhifi, *Arab News*, June 16, 2021. https://www.arabnews.fr/node/106251/monde-arabe.

[95] Matthias Raynal, "Au Maroc, le retour des touristes chinois, une aubaine économique?" [In Morocco, the return of Chinese tourists, an economic boon?], *RFI* Podcast "Afrique économie," September 25, 2025. https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/afrique-%C3%A9conomie/20250924-au-maroc-le-retour-des-touristes-chinois-une-aubaine-%C3%A9conomique.

[96] Clea Broadhurst, "Avec le Maroc, la Chine s'offre un pont vers l'Europe en réinventant ses partenariats stratégiques en Afrique" [With Morocco, China is building a bridge to Europe by reinventing its strategic partnerships in Africa], *RFI* Podcast "À la une en Asie," October 29, 2024. https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/%C3%A0-la-une-en-asie/20241029-avec-le-maroc-la-chine-s-offre-un-pont-vers-l-europe-en-r%C3%A9inventant-ses-partenariats-strat%C3%A9giques-en-afrique.

[97] Abdelmalek Alaoui, "La nouvelle partition géopolitique du Maroc" [Morocco's new geopolitical division], Note de la FRS n°19/2023, *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique,* October 19, 2023. https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/notes/nouvelle-partition-geopolitique-maroc-2023.

[98] François Lafargue, "La présence économique de la Chine au Maghreb: Ambitions et limites" [China's Economic Presence in the Maghreb: Ambitions and Limits], *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique,* October 29, 2018. https://www.frstrategie.org/programmes/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/presence-economique-chine-maghreb-ambitions-limites-2018.

[99] Alexandre Aublanc, "Le Maroc, porte d'entrée de la Chine sur l'Union européenne" [Morocco, China's gateway to the European Union], *Le Monde,* September 6, 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/09/06/le-maroc-porte-d-entree-de-la-chine-sur-l-union-europeenne_6305265_3212.html.

Algeria's Concerns about Regional Isolation

Algerian media presented diverging interpretations of China's regional engagement, largely reflecting their political and institutional affiliations. Official outlets portrayed Sino-Algerian ties as exemplary and thriving, while independent and foreign commentators highlighted their stagnation and a growing anxiety over Morocco's deepening partnership with Beijing.

State media such as *Radio Algérienne* described the 2025 China-Algeria Forum as a milestone in bilateral ties, with the signing of eight agreements valued at over two billion USD in areas such as automobiles, railways, and agriculture that will reportedly generate "thousands of jobs."[100] The Chinese ambassador to Algiers **Dong Guangli** hailed Algeria as "an ideal destination for Chinese investors," a rhetoric mirrored by Algerian political figures and official coverage.[101]

Assembly President **Ibrahim Boughali** praised China's "consistent stance in favor of just causes" in reference to Beijing's support for Palestine and Western Sahara,[102] while *Carrefour d'Algérie* even described the partnership as "perfect," identifying the automotive industry as a flagship sector of cooperation.[103]

By contrast, foreign and independent analysts suggested an ambivalent and less optimistic picture. As the German researcher **Isabelle Werenfels** noted in *Le Petit Journal Marocain,* "while Algeria remains a market for China, Morocco has become a collaborative player in high-value-added projects."[104] At the same time, China's aforementioned abstention on the UNSCR 2797 endorsing Morocco's autonomy plan was interpreted as a clear limit of Beijing's "comprehensive strategic partnership" with Algiers.

While Morocco's partnership with Beijing has become increasingly strategic, Algeria's position remains largely transactional and overshadowed by the Sino-Moroccan economic entanglement.

Independent Algerian journalist **Abdou Semmar,** founder of the investigative outlet *Algérie Part,* has been a vocal critic of his government's triumphalist rhetoric. On his YouTube channel, where he regularly reposts *Algérie Part*'s live investigative discussions, Semmar argued that real Chinese investment has dwindled since the end of **Abdelaziz Boutefika**'s presidency (1999-2019), as China increasingly perceives Algeria as "an unstable and closed-off country."[105] He further noted that Chinese President **Xi Jinping'**s stopover in Casablanca in November 2024 went almost unmentioned in Algerian state media, an omission that, he commented, "is not trivial" and "heralds a new geopolitical configuration that threatens Algeria's regional influence."[106]

Semmar pointed to the relocation of a truck manufacturing project from Algeria to Morocco and the inauguration of the Shanghai-Casablanca air route as evidence of this shift, warning and lamenting that: "**Abdelmadjid Tebboune** is isolating us … all major projects have been diverted to Morocco."[107]

He also interpreted the meeting between the Algerian President Tebboune and the head of the French shipping giant **CMA-CGM** to discuss deeper involvement in Algerian port infrastructure as an indication of Algeria's intention to "turn its back on China" in favor of renewed cooperation with France – a development he views as symptomatic of Algiers' shifting alliances and waning appeal to Chinese investors.[108]

Thus, while official Algerian discourse continued to celebrate a "perfect friendship," independent and foreign media depicted a reality of missed opportunities and a growing sense of diplomatic isolation.

Tunisia Between Self-Reflection, Comparison and Catching Up

While Algeria remained locked in competition with its western neighbor, Tunisia adopted a more nuanced stance, acknowledging Morocco's success and even viewing its trajectory as a potential model for its own development. Sino-Tunisian relations are often described as cordial and historically grounded, yet structurally limited. Many observers thus see significant room for growth, provided that Tunis can define a coherent strategy, perhaps by drawing lessons from Rabat's experience.

Appeals for deeper cooperation were widespread. As *Al Maghreb* reported, the Chinese ambassador to Tunisia, **Wan Li,** called for "a new starting point for broader cooperation" on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties.[109]

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[100] *Radio Algérienne,* "Algérie-Chine : volonté commune des opérateurs économiques de promouvoir le partenariat bilatéral" [Algeria-China: Common desire of economic operators to promote bilateral partnership], April 15, 2025. https://news.radioalgerie.dz/fr/node/63066.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Meriem Djouder, "Algérie – Chine : Partenariat consolidé" [Algeria – China: Consolidated Partnership], *Le Jeune Indépendant,* June 10, 2025. https://www.jeune-independant.net/algerie-chine-partenariat-consolide/.

[103] B. Habib, "Algérie-Chine: L'entente parfaite" [Algeria-China: Perfect understanding], *Le Carrefour d'Algérie N°7161,* April 20, 2025. https://lecarrefourdalgerie.dz/media/magazines/pdf/253491-190425.pdf.

[104] *Le Petit Journal Marocain,* "Le Maroc devient un allié de la Chine, l'Algérie était et reste une cliente" [Morocco becomes an ally of China, Algeria was and remains a client], November 30, 2024. https://www.lepetitjournalmarocain.com/2024/11/30/maroc-partenaire-chine-algerie-cliente/.

[105] Abdou Semmar, "La Chine s'éloigne dangereusement de l'Algérie pour privilégier le… Maroc" [China is moving dangerously away from Algeria to focus on… Morocco], *Youtube*, October 4, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYeNcO2KE_Y.

[106] Abdou Semmar, "Le Président chinois XI Jinping préfère Casablanca à Alger : les chinois ont-ils ignoré l'Algérie?" [Chinese President XI Jinping prefers Casablanca to Algiers: have the Chinese ignored Algeria?], *Youtube*, November 24, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYASNDMRCI0.

[107] Abdou Semmar, "Le Président chinois XI Jinping préfère Casablanca à Alger : les chinois ont-ils ignoré l'Algérie?" [Chinese President XI Jinping prefers Casablanca to Algiers: have the Chinese ignored Algeria?], *Youtube*, November 24, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYASNDMRCI0;
Abdou Semmar, "La Chine ne mise plus sur l'Algérie et lui préfère le Maroc : réveillez-vous monsieur Tebboune!" [China no longer relies on Algeria and prefers Morocco: wake up, Mr. Tebboune!], *Youtube*, January 20, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NTrJ8xUzZM.

[108] Abdou Semmar, "Tourner le dos aux chinois et tout miser sur les français : l'énorme bêtise que veut faire Tebboune" [Turning one's back on the Chinese and betting everything on the French: the enormous stupidity that Tebboune wants to commit], *Youtube*, June 8, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_WTljIJ9gY.

Similarly, *La Presse* celebrated the "mutually beneficial and friendly relations" between the two countries, emphasizing opportunities in green energy, agribusiness, and artificial intelligence.[110] Tourism has emerged as a particularly dynamic field, following a new cooperation agreement between the Tunisian Federation of Travel and Tourism Agencies (FTAV) and the Sino–North African Education Innovation Association for university exchanges, which brought 25,000 Chinese tourists to Tunisia in 2024.[111]

Yet, **Donia Jemli** and **Adrien Mugnier** from the Observatoire Français des Nouvelles Routes de la Soie observed that Tunisia's engagement with China "came late" and remained "underexploited" due to a lack of strategic coherence.[112] They argued that Tunisia's weaknesses in logistics and connectivity have hindered it from integrating into China's Belt and Road Initiative, in sharp contrast to Morocco's proactive strategy.[113] French diplomat **Louis Dugit-Gros** and Washington Institute senior fellow **Sabina Henneberg** echoed this diagnosis, noting that "Tunisia's structural obstacles and domestic crises have limited its attractiveness to Chinese investors."[114]

Tunisian discourse frequently juxtaposed the country's trajectory with Morocco's, casting the latter as both a model and a rival. Regarding in-bound Chinese tourism, FTAV president **Ahmed Bettaieb** explicitly identified Morocco and Egypt as "competitors."[115]

Moreover, former Tunisian diplomat **Elyes Kasri** lamented that "thirty years ago, Tunisia was a model for Morocco; today, the positions are reversed,"[116] urging Tunisian leaders to draw inspiration from the Moroccan model in infrastructure, investment, and diplomacy.[117] Writing in *L'Économiste Maghrébin*, Kasri further warned that "time is running out because the gap is widening dangerously."[118]

Tunisie Numérique likewise emphasized Morocco's advantage, presenting its alliance with China as "a significant advance over Tunisia and Algeria" and arguing that Rabat now occupies a privileged position in Beijing's regional strategy.[119] Journalist **Sébastien Le Belzic** reinforced this perception, describing Morocco as "the most legitimate country in the Maghreb" for China's Mediterranean strategy, thanks to the Tangier port – "the third most important hub in the world after Shanghai and Panama."[120]

Recognizing Morocco's lead, Tunisian economic circles have called for introspection. The 2017 report by the Arab Institute of Business Leaders Forum held in Tunis, recommended that policymakers "draw lessons from Morocco's success" in attracting Chinese FDI through a consistent long-term strategy and institutional commitment.[121]

Overall, Tunisian media discourse revealed a mix of admiration, envy, and self-critique, recognizing Morocco's diplomatic dynamism while lamenting Tunisia's own stagnation.

The Sino-Moroccan Partnership in the Reordering of Maghreb Power Dynamics

Across French, Algerian, and Tunisian media, the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement has provoked a range of interpretations reflecting national anxieties and shifting power dynamics.

French discourse, oscillating between wistfulness and alarm, revealed the erosion of a postcolonial comfort zone. Whereas in North Africa, Algerian coverage – despite the dominance of official triumphalism – is challenged by independent voices that betray concerns over losing prominence in Beijing's diplomatic geography vis-à-vis China's deepening ties with Morocco. Tunisian media, meanwhile, articulated a blend of admiration and frustration, positioning Rabat as both a competitor and a successful model to emulate.

Together, these discourses illustrate how Morocco's pragmatic engagement with China – anchored in infrastructure, technology transfer, and industrial diversification – has redefined its image within the Maghreb and beyond. The Kingdom's strategy contrasts sharply with those of its neighbors': while Algeria maintains an ideological and

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[109] Rawaa Qasim, "سفير الصين بتونس وان لي: أدعو الى التكاتف لاتخاذ الذكرى الـ 60 للعلاقات الدبلوماسية بين الصين وتونس نقطة انطلاق جديدة لتعاون أوسع" [Chinese Ambassador to Tunisia Wan Li: I call for solidarity to make the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Tunisia a new starting point for broader cooperation], Al Maghreb, May 23, 2024. https://ar.lemaghreb.tn/مقالات-المغرب/item/108725-سفير-الصين-بتونس-وان-لي-أدعو-الى-التكاتف-لاتخاذ-الذكرى-الـ-60-للعلاقات-الدبلوماسية-بين-الصين-وتونس-نقطة-انطلاق-جديدة-لتعاون-أوسع.

[110] Kamel Ferchichi, "Tunisie – Chine : Une coopération exemplaire qui résiste au temps" [Tunisia – China: Exemplary cooperation that stands the test of time], *La Presse*, October 10, 2025. https://lapresse.tn/2025/10/10/tunisie-chine-une-cooperation-exemplaire-qui-resiste-au-temps/.

[111] Sabrine Ahmed, "FTAV : Le tourisme tunisien se tourne vers la Chine" [FTAV: Tunisian tourism turns to China], *La Presse,* February 19, 2025. https://lapresse.tn/2025/02/19/ftav-le-tourisme-tunisien-se-tourne-vers-la-chine/.

[112] Donia Jemli & Adrien Mugnier, "Chine en Tunisie, affirmation d'une coopération ambitieuse" [China in Tunisia, affirmation of ambitious cooperation], *Observatoire Français,* September 16, 2025. https://observatoirenrs.com/2025/09/16/tunisie-chine-la-genese-une-cooperation-ambitieuse/.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Louis Dugit-Gros & Sabina Henneberg, "Présence de la Chine en Tunisie: jusqu'où va-t-elle et où va-t-elle?" [China's presence in Tunisia: how far and where is it going?], *Kapitalis*, April 8, 2024. https://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2024/04/08/presence-de-la-chine-en-tunisie-jusquou-va-t-elle-et-ou-va-t-elle/.

[115] Sabrine Ahmed, *La Presse,* February 19, 2025. https://lapresse.tn/2025/02/19/ftav-le-tourisme-tunisien-se-tourne-vers-la-chine/.

[116] Elyes Kasri, "Le Maroc est un modèle à suivre pour la Tunisie" [Morocco is a model for Tunisia to follow], *Kapitalis*, September 19, 2023. https://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2023/09/19/le-maroc-est-un-modele-a-suivre-pour-la-tunisie/.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Nadia Dejoui, "Elyes Kasri : « Le Maroc, un modèle de progrès face aux critiques »" [Elyes Kasri: "Morocco, a model of progress in the face of criticism"], *L'Économiste Maghrébin,* December 18, 2024. https://www.leconomistemaghrebin.com/2024/12/18/elyes-kasri-le-maroc-un-modele-de-progres-face-aux-critiques/.

[119] Souleymane Loum, "Maroc-Chine : une sacrée avance sur la Tunisie et l'Algérie avec cette alliance" [Morocco-China: a significant advance over Tunisia and Algeria with this alliance], *Tunisie Numérique,* January 6, 2022. https://www.tunisienumerique.com/maroc-chine-une-sacree-avance-sur-la-tunisie-et-lalgerie-avec-cette-alliance/.

[120] *Tunisie Focus*, "Le Maroc, nouvelle étape de «la Route de la soie» Chine-Afrique?" [Morocco, a new stage of the China-Africa "Silk Road"?], November 27, 2017. https://www.tunisiefocus.com/economie/maroc-nouvelle-etape-de-route-de-soie-chine-afrique-181312/.

[121] *Tunis Forum 2017* - IACE, "Rapport de travail: Tunisie-Chine : Un Partenariat D'avenir" [Working Report: Tunisia-China: A Partnership for the Future], July 7, 2017. http://www.iace.tn/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/TN-CHINE2017.pdf.

traditional rhetoric that obscures its weakening regional position, and Tunisia struggles with domestic and economic instability, Morocco has successfully positioned itself as a critical node in global reconfigurations linking Africa, Europe, and Asia.

Ultimately, the Morocco–China partnership serves not only as a barometer of shifting economic alignments but also as a mirror reflecting how Mediterranean countries perceive themselves in a changing world order. Our analysis of French, Algerian, and Tunisian media suggests that there is an understanding that China's growing role in Morocco signals not only the end of a historical monopoly by the former colonial power in the Élysée – whether political, economic, or symbolic – but also the emergence of a new balance of power in the Maghreb.

CONCLUSION

How to Interpret the Sino-Moroccan Rapprochement?

The deepening Sino-Moroccan relationship lies at the intersection of two macro-trends in the wider Mediterranean region: China's expansion and the rise of Morocco as a middle power.[122] A third macro-trend it intersects with is the geoeconomic shift away from traditional alliances in global diplomacy.[123] Recent shocks from the Covid-19 pandemic, to the U.S.-China trade war and the escalation in the Gulf are driving regional states to securitize their national interests through strategic hedging and diversification. This shift has resulted in a "portfolio diplomacy" through which states in the Maghreb "actively differentiate, combine and compartmentalise relations" among an array of external partners.[124]

Accordingly, by deepening its engagement with China, Morocco is also reengineering its agency and room for manoeuver while maintaining its traditional ties with the United States and Europe. China's economic presence in the Kingdom, albeit still limited compared to European and Gulf partners in overall investment terms,[125] has rapidly expanded in industrial sectors critical for the green transition and the restructuring of global value chains. As Beijing and other external powers continue to seek alternatives to disruptions in the Gulf, Morocco's relative stability, industrial base, and logistical infrastructure position it as a critical node in the rerouting of global trade and connectivity through Africa.

Amid mounting geopolitical volatility, conflict management – in Western Sahara as much as elsewhere in the wider Mediterranean – has become paramount for regional and international stakeholders. While growing recognition of Moroccan sovereignty on the territory has been widely interpreted as a step toward a pragmatic settlement, the trade-off between economic security and local grievances remains a source of tension. The Polisario Front's recent attack on Smara on May 5, 2026, aimed at derailing mediation efforts based on the Moroccan autonomy proposal, drew unanimous criticism from the European Union, the U.S., African and Arab states.[126] Against this backdrop, even China's position on the conflict appears to be evolving from strict neutrality toward a form of pragmatic ambiguity that preserves flexibility to accommodate the emerging order.

This evolving dynamic is also reflected in external perceptions of the partnership. Recent reports highlighting growing American and European concern over Morocco's consolidation as a perceived "industrial platform" for Chinese investment underscore how the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement is being interpreted beyond North Africa itself.[127] The relationship thus functions as both a mirror and a catalyst of broader geopolitical trends, closely monitored not only by neighboring France, Algeria and Tunisia, but also by external actors adjusting their strategies to shifting power dynamics in the Maghreb.

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[122] Lana Bleik, Hafed Al Ghwell, Yusuf Can, "Morocco Country Policy Report," *Stimson Center North Africa Program*, May 15, 2026. https://www.stimson.org/2026/morocco-country-policy-report/.

[123] Kim B. Olsen, "Geoeconomic Diplomacy: Enhancing Abilities to Instrumentalise Economic Means of Power," In *The Geoeconomic Diplomacy of European Sanctions,* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | Nijhoff, 2022), doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004518834_004.

[124] Yahia Zoubir, "Russia and China in the Maghreb: Comparative leverage, state agency, and public opinion," in Caterina Roggero ed., Reviving Euro-Maghreb Ties in a Multipolar Mediterranean, *ISPI Policy Paper*, (Milan, Italy, 2026): 39. https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/reviving-euro-maghreb-ties-in-a-multipolar-mediterranean-236078.

[125] In 2024, China Mainland was Morocco's fifth largest FDI source behind France, the UAE, Germany and Spain. See Gary Ng, "Access Africa – Morocco: A Gateway to MENA and Beyond," *HKTDC Research,* September 22, 2025. https://research.hktdc.com/en/article/MjExOTQzNTIwMw#:~:text=France%20is%20the%20country's%20top,total%20FDI%20inflow%20that%20year.

[126] Muslim World League, "The Muslim World League Condemns the Attack Targeting the Moroccan City of Smara," May 9, 2026. https://www.themwl.org/en/muslim-world-league-condemns-attack-targeting-moroccan-city-smara;
Wissam El Bouzdaini, "Attaque de Smara. Les grandes puissances condamnent, le polisario rattrapé par ses roquettes" [Attack on Smara. Major powers condemn, Polisario caught by its own rockets], *Médias24*, May 8, 2026. https://medias24.com/2026/05/08/attaque-de-smara-les-grandes-puissances-condamnent-le-polisario-rattrape-par-ses-roquettes-1673409/.

[127] Christian Géraud Neema Byamungu, "Morocco, an Unexpected Winner of China's Strategy to Circumvent the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act," *CSIS*, January 23. 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/morocco-unexpected-winner-chinas-strategy-circumvent-us-inflation-reduction-act;
Peter Foster and Andy Bounds, "EU frets as China builds an industrial base in Morocco," *Financial Times,* May 31, 2026. https://www.ft.com/content/706c1db4-effa-4e53-9bdd-f66496407626?syn-25a6b1a6=1;
Jonathan Fulton, "Morocco as a Chinese Industrial Base?," *China–MENA Newsletter,* June 2, 2026. https://chinamenanewsletter.substack.com/p/morocco-as-a-chinese-industrial-base.

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La mediazione cinese nel conflitto israelo-palestinese: sfide e opportunità

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Abstract

This paper examines China's role as a mediator in the Middle East from the announcement of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022 to the October 2025 Gaza ceasefire. It analyses how Beijing has sought to position itself as an alternative to Western powers by leveraging its diplomatic flexibility, inclusive approach and channels of communication with the Palestinian leadership and factions. After outlining China's mediation strategy in the Middle East, it provides a study of the "Beijing Declaration on Palestinian National Unity" signed by Palestinian factions in July 2024. Then, it assesses the major limitations that constrain Beijing's capacity to influence the peace process, as well as the opportunities China's engagement may bring – from the creation of alternative channels for dialogue to even stimulating a "global competition for peace". Overall, the paper argues that despite the uncertain effectiveness of China's selective engagement and pragmatic hedging, Beijing's growing mediation and activism in the region opens new avenues for peacebuilding and multilateral mediation where Palestinians regain an active role.

Keywords

China; Middle East; Israel; Palestine; Conflict mediation.

Introduzione

A distanza di due anni dall'inizio della guerra a Gaza il 7 ottobre 2023, un fragile cessate il fuoco è entrato in vigore il 10 ottobre 2025 grazie all'iniziativa statunitense. In questo quadro, l'articolo esamina il ruolo della Cina come mediatrice in Medio Oriente e, in particolare, nel conflitto israelo-palestinese come caso-studio contemporaneo.

Partendo dalla visione delineata nella *Global Security Initiative* (GSI) del 2022, l'articolo considera il periodo compreso tra il 2022 e il cessate il fuoco per esplorare come l'approccio cinese, caratterizzato da flessibilità diplomatica e canali di comunicazione con la leadership e altre fazioni palestinesi, offra un'alternativa complementare alle potenze occidentali.

L'articolo è strutturato come segue. In primo luogo, delinea la strategia di mediazione della Cina in Medio Oriente, con particolare attenzione ai risultati diplomatici degli ultimi anni. In

secondo luogo, si sofferma sugli sforzi cinesi nella riconciliazione intra-palestinese culminati nella Dichiarazione di Pechino del 23 luglio 2024, nel contesto della guerra a Gaza e del conflitto israelo-palestinese. La terza sezione, dopo aver valutato i principali vincoli dell'influenza di Pechino nella regione, ne mette in evidenza le opportunità inedite: dalla creazione di canali di dialogo alternativi alla promozione di un ordine regionale più multipolare, e persino una "competizione globale per la pace".
Nel complesso, l'articolo sostiene che la mediazione cinese è caratterizzata dalla combinazione di impegno selettivo e cautela pragmatica. Sebbene la sua efficacia rimanga incerta, l'approccio inclusivo e l'attivismo della Cina potrebbero aprire nuove strade per un processo di pace credibile dove i palestinesi tornino a essere parte attiva con il supporto di diversi mediatori.

La mediazione cinese in Medio Oriente

Con la *Global Security Initiative* (GSI) lanciata nell'aprile 2022 durante il Forum di Boao per l'Asia, il Presidente cinese Xi Jinping ha inteso proporre una visione alternativa per la sicurezza globale.[1] L'iniziativa cinese pone enfasi sui mezzi diplomatici e un approccio *proattivo* nella gestione delle sfide alla sicurezza internazionale.[2] In particolare, con la GSI, la Cina ha anche espresso la volontà di promuovere un nuovo ordine globale basato sulla pace attraverso lo sviluppo (*developmental peace*),[3] sul rispetto della sovranità nazionale, sulla non interferenza negli affari interni degli Stati e sulla "multipolarità paritaria" (*equal multipolarity*) – intesa come un sistema in cui i diversi centri di potere godano di pari dignità e influenza nelle relazioni internazionali.[4] Negli anni successivi, questi princìpi sono stati al centro della mediazione cinese nel Medio Oriente, conducendo alla firma di due accordi di pace significativi. Da un lato, il 10 marzo 2023 Iran e Arabia Saudita hanno sottoscritto a Pechino un accordo trilaterale insieme alla Repubblica Popolare che ha ripristinato le piene relazioni diplomatiche tra i due Stati mediorientali dopo oltre sette anni di rottura. Dall'altro, in seguito a una serie di negoziati organizzati dalla Cina, quattordici fazioni palestinesi – tra cui Fatah e Hamas – hanno firmato il 23 luglio 2024 la "Dichiarazione di Pechino per porre fine alle divisioni e per il rafforzamento dell'unità nazionale palestinese". Pechino ha celebrato questi due accordi come un successo diplomatico che non solo ha rafforzato le sue ambizioni di superpotenza, ma ha anche dimostrato il suo crescente ruolo come mediatore nella regione.[5]
Per la Cina, garantire stabilità e sicurezza in Medio Oriente è ormai diventato un interesse chiave dacché la regione fu ridefinita come un'estensione della sua periferia durante la terza Sessione

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1 Erik Green, Meia Nouwens e Veerle Nouwens, "The Global Security Initiative: China's international policing activities", *IISS*, 24 ottobre 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2024/10/the-global-security-initiative-chinas-international-policing-activities/.

2 Xiaodong Chen, "Implementing the Global Security Initiative to build a world of lasting peace and universal security", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 28 marzo 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/swaqsws_665306/xgxw/202403/t20240328_11272725.html.

3 Camille Lons, Jonathan Fulton, Degang Sun e Naser Al-Tamimi, "China's great game in the Middle East", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 21 ottobre 2019, disponibile all'Url https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/.

4 Jon B. Alterman, "China's US-driven Middle East strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 47 (2024) 3: 7–24; Bingbing Wu, "China and new Middle East", in *Geopolitics of the new Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2023), 47-61.

5 Yang Sheng, "China successfully mediates Palestinian factions to sign «historic declaration» for reconciliation", *Global Times*, 23 luglio 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202407/1316602.shtml.

Plenaria del XVIII Comitato Centrale del Partito Comunista Cinese (PCC) nel 2013, lo stesso anno in cui fu annunciata anche la Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[6] Questa riconfigurazione ha reso il Medio Oriente "cruciale per la sua legittimità e sopravvivenza" come grande potenza che aspira alla preminenza internazionale.[7] In funzione all'importanza strategica attribuita a ciascun paese, Pechino ha sviluppato nella regione una gerarchia di partenariati diplomatici. Alcuni paesi – tra cui Emirati Arabi Uniti, Arabia Saudita, Iran, Algeria e, più recentemente, Bahrein – sono stati elevati da Pechino al rango di "partenariati strategici globali" (*comprehensive strategic partnerships*).[8] Con altri la Cina ha instaurato semplici "partenariati strategici" (*strategic partnerships*), come nel caso della Palestina.[9] Israele, invece, rappresenta un caso a parte: con questo paese Pechino ha siglato un raro "partenariato globale per l'innovazione" (*innovative comprehensive partnership*) che non trova corrispettivi altrove.[10] Questi partenariati illustrano il rafforzamento dei legami tra la Cina e la regione, nonché l'impegno attivo di Pechino nel consolidare la cooperazione bilaterale.[11] Nell'ultimo decennio, si è registrato un incremento sostanziale delle iniziative comuni in materia di sicurezza informatica, antiterrorismo e cooperazione tecnologica tra Pechino e gli Stati mediorientali, accompagnato da una crescita dell'80% rispetto al 2013 nelle esportazioni di armi cinesi verso la regione.[12] Parallelamente, la mediazione cinese nei conflitti in Medio Oriente a partire dal 2022 si è rivelata una strategia efficace per tutelare interessi economici cruciali, specialmente nel settore energetico in rapida espansione lungo le Nuove Vie della Seta.[13] Anche da un punto di vista interno, il crescente coinvolgimento della Cina nelle dinamiche di sicurezza regionale le permette di dissuadere i paesi a maggioranza musulmana dal criticare o interferire con la sua politica nella provincia dello Xinjiang, anch'essa a maggioranza musulmana. Essendo percepita come un partner indispensabile e affidabile, la Cina riesce così a schermarsi da potenziali accuse di violazioni dei diritti umani nei confronti delle minoranze etniche cinesi di religione musulmana.[14]

Nel dibattito accademico, tanto tra studiosi cinesi quanto stranieri, la strategia di Pechino in Medio Oriente è stata interpretata come un approccio cauto e flessibile. Secondo Raz, la mediazione cinese si basa su di una varietà di considerazioni: se l'area sia dominata da mediatori concorrenti, se i concorrenti siano percepiti come "in declino", se le parti in conflitto

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6 Nicholas Lyall, "China in the Middle East: past, present, and future," *The Diplomat*, 16 febbraio 2019, disponibile all'Url https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/china-in-the-middle-east-past-present-and-future/.

7 Aleksandra Gadzala Tirziu, "China in the Middle East: from oil to security", *GIS Reports*, 4 luglio 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-middle-east-security/.

8 Jonathan Fulton, "Weekend essay: China's partnership diplomacy in the Middle East", *China-MENA Newsletter*, 1 settembre 2024, disponibile all'Url https://chinamenanewsletter.substack.com/p/weekend-essay-chinas-partnership.

9 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China and Palestine", disponibile all'Url https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2868_663726/.

10 Jonathan Fulton e Michael Schuman, "China's Middle East policy shift from «hedging» to «wedging»", *Atlantic Council*, 5 settembre 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/chinas-middle-east-policy-shift-from-hedging-to-wedging/.

11 Hasan Alhasan, "Contesting the West: China's Middle East strategy", *IISS*, 25 giugno 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/06/contesting-the-west-chinas-middle-east-strategy/.

12 Gadzala Tirziu, 2024, *cit.*

13 James M. Dorsey, "China and the Middle East: venturing into the maelstrom", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11 (2017) 1: 1–14.

14 Lindsay Maizland, "China's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 settembre 2022, disponibile all'Url https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights.

abbiano un interesse strategico per la Cina e se la mediazione possa aumentare il prestigio di Pechino.[15] Queste considerazioni hanno talvolta portato la Cina a impegnarsi in una sorta di "quasi-diplomazia" invece che in una mediazione vera e propria, al fine di raggiungere obiettivi politici senza un coinvolgimento profondo. Sun e Zoubir definiscono la quasi-diplomazia come un "approccio cauto con il quale il potenziale mediatore partecipa volontariamente ma non svolge un ruolo significativo nel processo di mediazione".[16] Allo stesso modo, Sun, Yang e Liu descrivono la strategia di Pechino come una "diplomazia di *hedging*" e "diplomazia imparziale" caratterizzata da una propensione a evitare di impegnarsi in alleanze ufficiali al fine di mantenere relazioni positive con tutti. Questo al fine di perseguire "una politica di zero nemici" volta a "ridurre al minimo i rischi geopolitici e massimizzare i propri interessi geo-economici".[17] L'approccio è coerente con il principio cinese di non interferenza, ed è stato ritenuto piuttosto efficace, poiché ha aiutato Pechino a presentarsi come un mediatore neutrale interessato a prevenire i conflitti e garantire la stabilità attraverso la cooperazione pacifica.[18] Lo stesso Ministero degli Affari Esteri della Repubblica Popolare inquadra costantemente le azioni cinesi come sforzi disinteressati per promuovere la pace e la giustizia in Medio Oriente.[19] Questa narrazione consente alla Cina di guadagnarsi la fiducia dei paesi della regione sempre più disillusi dalle politiche statunitensi percepite come inefficaci o sbilanciate.[20] In tal modo, la Cina si presenta come una potenza anti-egemonica emergente e concorrente agli Stati Uniti, considerati tuttora in grado di condizionare gli equilibri globali ma con una proiezione esterna indebolita dall'influenza di potenti *lobby* e resa meno coesa da profonde fratture interne.[21] Sebbene la mediazione cinese sia stata accolta positivamente da molti attori regionali che vedono in Pechino un'alternativa alla politica "bellica" di Washington,[22] Aluf osserva che "le capacità della Cina, pur essendo sempre più formidabili, sono limitate da vincoli altrettanto formidabili".[23] Infatti, la crescente proiezione di Pechino è spesso percepita dagli Stati Uniti come un'ingerenza nella propria sfera di influenza,[24] rendendo la strategia cinese difficile da sostenere senza compromettere i rapporti con Washington o provocare frizioni dannose per la

15 Ido Gadi Raz, "China's new mediating role and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict", *Israel Affairs* 30 (2024) 5: 1–23.

16 Degang Sun e Yahia Zoubir, "China's participation in conflict resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: a Case of quasi-mediation diplomacy?", *Journal of Contemporary China* 27 (2018) 110: 224–243.

17 Degang Sun, Yingqi Yang e Si Liu, "China's hedging strategy in the Gulf: a case of «even-handedness» diplomacy", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 18 (2024) 3: 1–17.

18 Mordechai Chaziza, "China's mediation efforts in the Middle East and North Africa: constructive conflict management", *Strategic Analysis* 42 (2018) 1: 29–41.

19 Xiaoyu Lu e Xiaodong Ma, "How States empathize? Arab conflicts and the making of China's global emotional order", *Middle East Critique* 1 (2025): 1-21.

20 Syarifah Huswatun Miswar, "The impact of ongoing Israel-Palestine war on China national interest: between benefit and expectation", *Journal of Middle East and Islamic Studies* 11 (2024) 1: 13.

21 Raz, 2024, *cit*.

22 Benjamin Houghton, "China's balancing strategy between Saudi Arabia and Iran: the view from Riyadh", *Asian Affairs* 53 (2022) 1: 124–144.

23 Dale Aluf, "Mirage of coercion: the real sources of China's influence in the Middle East and North Africa", *Survival* 66 (2024) 5: 159–182.

24 Amrita Jash, "Saudi-Iran deal: a test case of China's role as an international mediator", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 23 giugno 2023, disponibile all'Url https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/06/23/saudi-iran-deal-a-test-case-of-chinas-role-as-an-international-mediator/.

sua economia.[25] Tuttavia, la Cina non dispone delle capacità operative necessarie per sostituire gli Stati Uniti nella regione. Lo dimostra la presenza limitata dell'Esercito Popolare di Liberazione (EPL), con meno di un migliaio di truppe, contro oltre centomila soldati statunitensi dispiegati sul campo.[26] Per questa ragione anche la letteratura cinese, pur riconoscendone il relativo declino, ammette che Washington resta l'attore predominante in Medio Oriente. Pertanto, la competizione geopolitica con gli Stati Uniti rischierebbe di "intrappolare" Pechino in una strategia di *wedging*,[27] vale a dire un coinvolgimento progressivo e difficilmente reversibile nei conflitti mediorientali a scapito delle sue stesse ambizioni di lungo periodo.

In questo scenario di competizione geopolitica in Medio Oriente, il riavvicinamento tra Iran e Arabia Saudita nel marzo 2023 e la Dichiarazione di Pechino nel luglio 2024 dimostrano che, nonostante i limiti strutturali, la mediazione cinese offre ancora margini di opportunità. Questi accordi sono stati possibili grazie al principio di "flessibilità" su cui si fonda la strategia cinese, concepito per adattarsi a circostanze in rapida evoluzione senza, almeno in linea di principio, alienare nessuna delle parti coinvolte.[28] La volatilità delle crisi mediorientali ha portato la Cina a tessere con cautela relazioni con una pluralità di Stati e attori tra loro rivali o storicamente avversari – tra cui Arabia Saudita e Iran, e Israele e Palestina.[29] L'accordo di pace tra Riad e Teheran nel marzo 2023 mostra come la mediazione cinese si sia basata su un impegno selettivo e *ad hoc*, poggiando sui due anni di negoziati riservati tra le due parti facilitati da Oman e Iraq a partire dal 2021.[30] Nel caso del conflitto israelo-palestinese, la Cina ha costantemente sostenuto la soluzione a due Stati ed espresso la sua opposizione alla costruzione d'insediamenti israeliani nei territori palestinesi occupati.[31] Anche se la retorica ufficiale filo-palestinese di Pechino non ha determinato la rottura dei legami diplomatici con Israele, la riluttanza israeliana a partecipare a passate iniziative cinesi per la risoluzione del conflitto ha spinto Pechino a concentrarsi sul dialogo intra-palestinese. In altre parole, Pechino sceglie sempre in modo selettivo quali casi mediare, intervenendo solo in presenza di una preesistente apertura da parte delle parti coinvolte.[32]

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25 Niu Xinchun, "Yu meiguo gongchu: Zhongguo zhongdong zhengce de xin tiaozhan 与美国共处：中国中东政策的新挑战 [Coexisting with the United States: New Challenges to China's Middle East Policy]", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* 现代国际关系 11 (2022): 9-24.

26 Tuvia Gering, "Full throttle in neutral: China's new security architecture for the Middle East", *Atlantic Council*, 15 febbraio 2023, disponibile all'Url https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/full-throttle-in-neutral-chinas-new-security-architecture-for-the-middle-east/.

27 Fulton e Schuman, 2024, *cit.*: "Il termine *wedging* indica una strategia con cui uno Stato cerca di impedire, spezzare o indebolire un'alleanza percepita come minacciosa o ostacolante, purché ciò avvenga a costi sostenibili. Nel caso specifico, la Cina ha sfruttato le preoccupazioni regionali riguardo alla politica statunitense in Medio Oriente per creare, e al contempo approfittare, di spazi di divergenza tra gli Stati Uniti e i loro alleati e partner nella regione".

28 Center for Strategic and International Studies, "China in the Middle East", *CSIS*, 4 novembre 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-middle-east-0.

29 Jon B. Alterman, "China and the Middle East", CSIS, 19 aprile 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-middle-east.

30 Yasmine Farouk, "Riyadh's motivations behind the Saudi-Iran deal", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30 marzo 2023, disponibile all'Url https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/03/riyadhs-motivations-behind-the-saudi-iran-deal?lang=en.

31 "China voices opposition to Israeli settlement expansion", *CGTN*, 22 dicembre 2023, disponibile all'Url https://www.news.cgtn.com/news/2023-12-22/China-voices-opposition-to-Israeli-settlement-expansion-1pKpNyVXQoE/p.html.

32 Chaziza, 2018, *cit.*

I risultati raggiunti da questi due accordi sono stati consequenziali. In primo luogo, con il ripristino dei rapporti diplomatici, Teheran e Riad hanno anche recuperato un preesistente accordo di sicurezza bilaterale volto a contrastare corruzione, traffico di droga e tratta di esseri umani nella regione.[33] L'intesa ha inoltre contribuito ad attenuare i vecchi conflitti per procura (*proxy wars*) tra i due paesi, in particolare la guerra civile yemenita nella quale l'Arabia Saudita aveva sostenuto il governo internazionalmente riconosciuto e l'Iran avrebbe fornito sostegno militare agli insorti Houthi (sebbene non esistano prove definitive).[34] Per quanto riguarda la Dichiarazione di Pechino, prima del cessate il fuoco a Gaza quest'ottobre, l'accordo era rilevante non solo perché avrebbe superato l'apparente insanabile divisione storica tra Fatah e Hamas, ma soprattutto perché quattordici fazioni palestinesi vi avevano concordato la "formazione postbellica di un governo di unità provvisoria per Gaza e la Cisgiordania, l'unificazione delle istituzioni palestinesi, piani per la ricostruzione di Gaza e preparativi per le elezioni del Consiglio Nazionale Palestinese".[35] La dichiarazione di Pechino era quindi la concretizzazione della storica retorica filo-palestinese della Cina,[36] che tuttora continua a sostenere pubblicamente la piena adesione della Palestina alle Nazioni Unite come Stato membro e una soluzione a due Stati nel conflitto con Israele – richieste che rimangono inevase nonostante il crescente sostegno internazionale. La dichiarazione di Pechino firmata lo scorso luglio era dunque vista come una tappa cruciale verso il rilancio delle aspirazioni di pace con una soluzione concreta proposta dai palestinesi stessi.

In secondo luogo, i due accordi rientrano anche nei calcoli geoeconomici cinesi nella regione. Sia le controversie tra Riad e Teheran sia il conflitto israelo-palestinese sono percepiti da Pechino come questioni cruciali che minacciano la stabilità e la pace nell'area, tra cui i progetti cinesi nei vicini Egitto, Siria e Libano, associati alle Nuove Vie della Seta.[37] Da questo punto di vista, l'intensificazione dei rapporti commerciali tra la Cina e i Paesi del Medio Oriente e del Nord Africa (MENA) ha fornito a Pechino forti incentivi ad adoperarsi per stabilizzare la regione.[38] In terzo luogo, nell'ottica cinese, i due accordi di pace avevano accresciuto il prestigio internazionale di Pechino e ridimensionato al contempo quello degli Stati Uniti

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33 Giorgio Cafiero, "Amid regional setbacks, how Iran and Saudi Arabia kept the peace in 2024", *TRT World*, 17 dicembre 2024, disponibile all'Url https://trt.global/world/article/18244546.

34 Thomas Juneau, "How war in Yemen transformed the Iran-Houthi partnership", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 47 (2021) 3: 282-283. Qualsiasi discussione deve riconoscere l'impossibilità di quantificare con precisione il sostegno armato dell'Iran agli Houthi. Sebbene una prova definitiva di tale supporto non sia disponibile, indizi crescenti suggeriscono un coinvolgimento iraniano, lasciando al contempo plausibili altre spiegazioni – come spesso ribadito dal Panel degli esperti ONU sullo Yemen. Si veda per esempio: Lipika Majumdar, Roy Choudhury, Ramadan Moussa, Patrícia Pinto e Miriam Zampatti, "Letter dated 15 October 2025 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council", Report preparato per il Presidente del Consiglio di sicurezza ONU, UN Doc. S/2025/650, 17 ottobre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/2140/panel-of-experts/work-and-mandate/reports.

35 Mohamad Zreik, "China mediates a new era of Palestinian unity", *The Diplomat,* 25 luglio 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.thediplomat.com/2024/07/china-mediates-a-new-era-of-palestinian-unity/.

36 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi: China supports Palestine's full membership in the U.N. and calls for working out a timetable and road map for the two-State solution", 7 marzo 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202403/t20240308_11256419.html.

37 China Research Unit, "Challenges facing China's mediation between Palestinian factions", *Emirates Policy Center*, 5 settembre 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.epc.ae/en/details/featured/challenges-facing-china-s-mediation-between-palestinian-factions.

38 Adel Abdel Ghafar, Hana Elshehaby e Omar H. Rahman, "China's approach to Palestine and Israel: towards a greater role?" *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, 16 luglio 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.mecouncil.org/publication/chinas-approach-to-palestine-and-israel-towards-a-greater-role/.

come mediatore tradizionale nella regione.[39] Parallelamente, le politiche estere adottate dai paesi del Golfo e dall'Iran, tese a diversificare i propri interlocutori diplomatici (una strategia di cosiddetta diplomazia multi-vettore), spinte dalla percezione di un progressivo ma selettivo disimpegno statunitense dal Medio Oriente,[40] avevano aperto uno spazio che Pechino ha mirato chiaramente a occupare. Pur perseguendo ciascuno la propria autonomia strategica e la tutela dei propri interessi, gli Stati della regione sembravano avvicinarsi a una fase "post-americana"[41] e a un ordine internazionale più multipolare in cui "si andava delineando un nuovo equilibrio tra Stati Uniti, Unione Europea, Russia e Cina".[42] Sebbene l'intervento americano nella guerra tra Israele e Iran nel giugno 2025[43] e il cessate il fuoco a Gaza annunciato il 10 ottobre dall'amministrazione Trump dimostrino la persistente influenza di Washington, i precedenti risultati diplomatici raggiunti da Pechino evidenziano che l'approccio cinese può ancora svolgere un ruolo significativo e offrire valide alternative.

La Dichiarazione di Pechino nel conflitto israelo-palestinese

La mediazione della Cina nel conflitto israelo-palestinese non è un fenomeno recente, ma trova le sue origini già nel 1989, quando Pechino presentò la sua prima "Proposta in cinque punti" per la risoluzione del conflitto.[44] Fino ad allora, la Cina aveva adottato una politica di confronto verso Israele, con il quale non aveva relazioni diplomatiche, e sostenuto militarmente la resistenza armata dell'Organizzazione per la Liberazione della Palestina (OLP).[45] Un cambiamento ufficiale della politica cinese fu possibile solo quando l'organizzazione palestinese da essa sostenuta – ormai osservatrice all'ONU dal 1974 e riconosciuta come unico rappresentante legittimo del popolo palestinese sulla scena internazionale – iniziò a privilegiare la via diplomatica con la proclamazione dello Stato di Palestina "in esilio" ad Algeri nel 1988 e il riconoscimento del diritto all'esistenza e alla sicurezza di Israele.[46] L'apertura dell'OLP al negoziato, insieme alla riformulazione della politica estera cinese dal fervore rivoluzionario

39 Ramzy Baroud, "China tests the water in Palestinian diplomacy", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 16 settembre 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/china-tests-the-water-in-palestinian-diplomacy/.

40 Nickolay Mladenov e Narayanappa Janardhan, "US-Gulf reset in a shifting global order", *Washington Institute*, 2 novembre 2023, disponibile all'Url https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-gulf-reset-shifting-global-order.

41 Mark Leonard, "The post-American Middle East", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 giugno 2023, disponibile all'Url https://www.ecfr.eu/article/the-post-american-middle-east/.

42 Yamaguchi Shinji, "China's role in conflict mediation in the Middle East: normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the 2023 Israel-Hamas war", *Asia-Pacific Review* 30 (2023) 3: 99–114.

43 Maria Luisa Fantappie, "La guerra dei 12 giorni. L'Iran dopo l'attacco americano", *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 8 luglio 2025, disponibile all'Url https://www.affarinternazionali.it/liran-dopo-lattacco-americano-ai-siti-nucleari/.

44 "Li Peng zongli tong Alafate zongtong juxing huitan woguo zhengfu dui zhongdong wenti tichu wu dian zhuzhang 李鹏总理同阿拉法特总统举行会谈 我国政府对中东问题提出五点主张 [Premier Li Peng held talks with President Arafat, and the Chinese government put forward five propositions on the Middle East issue]", *People's Daily* 人民日报, 6 ottobre 1989.

45 Lillian Craig Harris, "China's relations with the PLO", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7 (1977) 1: 136.

46 Assemblea Generale delle Nazioni Unite, "Questione palestinese/Dichiarazione di Arafat - Dibattito dell'Assemblea Generale (Ginevra) - verbale integrale (estratti)" (A/43/PV.78), 13 dicembre 1988, disponibile all'Url docs.un.org/en/A/43/PV.78/: "A questo proposito abbiamo accolto con favore l'accettazione da parte del Consiglio Nazionale Palestinese delle risoluzioni 242 (1967) e 338 (1973) del Consiglio di Sicurezza come base per una conferenza internazionale, che implica l'accettazione del diritto all'esistenza e alla sicurezza di Israele nonché di tutti gli altri Stati della regione."

maoista (1949-1976) alla cooperazione e allo sviluppo sotto la leadership di Deng Xiaoping,[47] rese possibile per la Cina normalizzare i rapporti con Israele nel 1992. Da quel momento, la diplomazia di Pechino ha assunto una configurazione più equilibrata, volta a conciliare il tradizionale sostegno retorico alla causa palestinese con una crescente cooperazione economica con Tel Aviv.[48] Questa diplomazia bilanciata ha permesso alla Cina di consolidare il proprio ruolo come attore pragmatico e non ideologico, proponendo dal 1989 a oggi sette piani di pace per la risoluzione del conflitto sulla base della soluzione a due Stati, e organizzando quattro "simposi della pace Palestina-Israele" (*Ba yi heping renshi yantao hui* 巴以和平人士研讨会) che hanno riunito rappresentanti di spicco della società civile israeliana e palestinese.[49] Nel "Piano in quattro punti" cinese per la risoluzione del conflitto presentata nel 2017 in occasione della visita a Pechino del Presidente palestinese Mahmoud Abbas, la Cina aveva anche proposto per la prima volta la convocazione di una conferenza di pace trilaterale ufficiale. Il tempismo sembrava opportuno, in quanto lo stesso anno era stato siglato anche il "partenariato globale per l'innovazione" con Israele durante la visita del Primo ministro Benjamin Netanyahu a Pechino.[50] Tuttavia, l'assenza di una risposta formale e il silenzio di Tel Aviv rispetto a tale proposta suggeriscono un tacito rifiuto da parte di Netanyahu di impegnarsi in negoziati ufficiali sotto egida cinese, nonostante i simposi cinesi organizzati precedentemente per la società civile israeliana-palestinese.

Se già Israele aveva mostrato scarso interesse verso la proposta di una conferenza di pace trilaterale, la retorica filo-palestinese di Pechino durante la guerra a Gaza e il progressivo deterioramento dell'immagine cinese nell'opinione pubblica e ufficiale israeliana hanno ulteriormente ridotto i margini di cooperazione politica tra i due paesi.[51] Malgrado la resilienza dei legami economici,[52] l'influenza diplomatica di Pechino su Tel Aviv rimane minima, confermando la riluttanza israeliana a coinvolgere la Cina nel dossier palestinese, considerato da Israele una questione di politica interna.[53] La situazione è aggravata dal fatto che, come dimostrato dal cessate il fuoco a Gaza del 10 ottobre 2025 mediato da Trump, gli Stati Uniti restano il principale, e di fatto l'unico, attore in grado di esercitare una reale pressione sul

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47 Pascal Abb e Xinyu Yuan, "Chinese concepts of peace – historical foundations and implications for contemporary conflict agency", *Peace Research Institute Frankfurt,* 12 novembre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://frient.de/publikation/chinese-conceptions-of-peace/.

48 Guy Burton, "China and the Palestinian–Israeli conflict", in *Routledge handbook on China–Middle East relations* (London: Routledge, 2021), 368-383.

49 Amanda Chen, "China's evolving role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: from bystander to mediator", 2025, tesi di laurea non pubblicata, Peking University, Beijing, 38, disponibile all'Url https://www.lib.pku.edu.cn/portal/en/zy/dzzy/xueweilunwen. Questi quattro simposi si sono tenuti nel 2006 a Pechino, nel 2013 a Gerusalemme, nel 2017 a Pechino e nel 2021 online a causa della pandemia globale. Gli ultimi due simposi hanno prodotto due documenti di consenso sulla "Risoluzione del conflitto tra Palestina e Israele sulla base della soluzione a due Stati".

50 Chen Yang, "China's Position on the Palestine-Israel Issue: A Historical Perspective", *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 9 (2017) 2: 21.

51 Amanda Chen, "Enduring disillusionment: the Israeli media debate on China in 2024", *ChinaMed Project*, 11 febbraio 2025, disponibile all'Url https://www.chinamed.it/observer/enduring-disillusionment-the-israeli-media-debate-on-china-in-2024.

52 Secondo il Ministero degli Affari Esteri cinese, il volume degli scambi commerciali tra Cina e Israele ammontava a 22.7 miliardi di dollari nel 2024, rivelando solo un calo del 3% durante il primo anno della guerra a Gaza rispetto al volume totale di 23.4 del 2023. Per i dati 2024, si veda Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China and Israel", disponibile all'Url https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2828_663646/. Per i dati 2023, si veda l'Indice ChinaMed per la cooperazione economica, militare e diplomatica tra Cina e Israele, disponibile all'Url www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/israel.

53 Itamar Eichner, "Tomekhet BeKhamas, Be'ad "Zkhut HaShiva", Kakh Karsa HaKonseptzia Mul Sin [Supporting Hamas, in favor of the "right of return": this is how the belief about China collapsed]", *Ynet*, 20 dicembre 2023, disponibile all'Url https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/rjuwfm1vp.

governo Netanyahu. In questo contesto, appare oggi improbabile che Tel Aviv possa accettare un processo di pace guidato dalla Cina o riconoscerne la piena imparzialità come mediatrice.[54] Di conseguenza, la crescente ostilità israeliana verso la posizione di Pechino negli ultimi due anni ha spinto la leadership cinese ad allontanare la sua strategia di mediazione dallo Stato ebraico, ricalibrandola verso una cooperazione più stretta con i paesi arabi e musulmani della regione, e la riconciliazione intra-palestinese come dimostrato dalla Dichiarazione di Pechino del 23 luglio 2024.

Sin dallo scoppio della guerra a Gaza nell'ottobre 2023, la Cina ha perseguito una diplomazia multilivello verso il conflitto israelo-palestinese che ha coinvolto diversi attori mediorientali e istituzioni multilaterali, sia a livello regionale che globale. Nel 2023, l'inviato cinese speciale per gli affari mediorientali Zhai Jun ha intrattenuto contatti e conversazioni telefoniche dirette con funzionari governativi palestinesi e di altri paesi della regione MENA, svolto attività di *shuttle diplomacy*, e preso parte alla Conferenza umanitaria internazionale per la popolazione civile di Gaza insieme alle organizzazioni internazionali impegnate nella crisi. Parallelamente, altri funzionari del Ministero degli Affari Esteri cinese hanno condotto negoziati diretti con le loro controparti in Palestina, nei paesi arabi e nei paesi del Sud globale. Anche i rappresentanti cinesi alle Nazioni Unite si sono adoperati per promuovere la costruzione di uno Stato palestinese indipendente e la soluzione a due Stati. Con l'obiettivo di favorire un processo equo e inclusivo, infatti, la mediazione cinese ha coinvolto anche altri paesi, in particolare quelli non occidentali.[55] Emblematica, in questo senso, è stata la presenza di Egitto, Algeria, Arabia Saudita, Qatar, Giordania, Siria, Libano, Russia e Turchia alla firma della Dichiarazione di Pechino nel luglio 2024: su invito cinese, hanno tutte inviato delegazioni, testimoniando così un processo di mediazione guidato interamente da attori del Sud globale. Dal lato palestinese, la Dichiarazione ha coinvolto al tavolo delle trattative quattordici fazioni[56] che, pur divise tra loro su questioni quali l'uso della violenza, la laicità e la soluzione a due Stati, si sono unite per sostenere congiuntamente l'appello a una temporanea unità nazionale palestinese nel corso della guerra a Gaza.

Nell'intero processo, la Cina si è presentata come un mediatore imparziale, in contrapposizione alla perdita di credibilità attribuita agli Stati Uniti nella regione. Il Ministero degli Affari Esteri cinese sottolinea regolarmente che Pechino non ha interessi diretti nel conflitto, ma si impegna a favore della pace e della giustizia. Rispetto ad altri membri permanenti del Consiglio di Sicurezza delle Nazioni Unite, la Cina può rivendicare una legittimità particolare: non ha un passato coloniale nella regione e la sua politica di non allineamento le consente di non essere

54 Roy Ben Tzur, "Biased neutrality: China's rhetoric amid escalating tensions in the Middle East," *INSS Insight*, 14 agosto 2025, disponibile all'Url https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-middle-east-2025/.

55 Alaa Aldeek e Jun Ding, "The impact of China's consistent stance on the Palestinian issue on the embodiment of international pluralism", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 17 (2023) 1: 49-65.

56 Queste fazioni includono: Fatah, Hamas, Fronte Popolare per la Liberazione della Palestina (FPLP), Fronte Democratico per la Liberazione della Palestina (FDLP), Jihad Islamica Palestinese (JIP), Partito del Popolo Palestinese (PPP), Fronte Popolare di Lotta Palestinese (FPLP), Iniziativa Nazionale Palestinese (INP), Fronte Popolare per la Liberazione della Palestina-Comando Generale (FPLP-CG), Unione Democratica Palestinese (UDP), Fronte per la Liberazione della Palestina (FLP), Fronte di Liberazione Arabo (FLA), Fronte Arabo Palestinese e *Al-Sa'iqa* (Avanguardia per la Guerra di Liberazione Popolare). Le fazioni possono essere suddivise in 11 membri dell'OLP, oltre a Hamas, Jihad Islamica Palestinese e Iniziativa Nazionale Palestinese.

percepita come parte di alcun blocco.[57] Idealmente, questa posizione dovrebbe permetterle di presentarsi come l'unico mediatore "capace di portare tutti gli attori al tavolo negoziale".[58] Oltre alla neutralità, la Cina mette in pratica anche i princìpi di non interferenza e inclusione. Da un lato, a differenza di altri paesi, la mediazione cinese viene offerta con condizionalità limitate o totalmente assenti, in modo da stimolare la volontà politica verso la riconciliazione tra gli attori coinvolti. Dall'altro lato, la strategia cinese di includere tutte le parti interessate nel processo di mediazione si è tradotta nell'enfasi posta sulla sovranità e sullo Stato palestinese, sintetizzata nello slogan "i palestinesi governano i palestinesi" (*ba ren zhi ba* 巴人治巴), richiamato più volte nella Dichiarazione di Pechino. Tale formula racchiude l'idea che siano i palestinesi stessi a dover definire il proprio percorso politico e il proprio processo di pace, senza che siano attori esterni a determinarne agenda ed esito.

L'approccio cinese, dunque, si contrappone nettamente alla politica statunitense nella regione. Dopo il fallito tentativo di rovesciare Hamas come partito al governo nel 2006, Washington aveva adottato una strategia più defilata verso il gruppo, trattando e relegando il "problema di Gaza" a una questione di secondo piano da affrontare soltanto nell'eventualità di un avanzamento concreto nel processo di pace. Prima dei negoziati di Doha volti a porre fine alla guerra degli ultimi due anni a Gaza con i rappresentanti di Hamas,[59] gli Stati Uniti non avevano mai stabilito un canale di comunicazione diretto con il gruppo.[60] Sulla base del rifiuto del Quartetto per il Medio Oriente di avviare un dialogo con Hamas, Washington aveva invece perseguito una politica volta a minarne la legittimità. L'allineamento sistematico con Israele ha ulteriormente ridotto l'efficacia dell'approccio statunitense al conflitto. Inoltre, il processo di normalizzazione tra Israele e i paesi arabi di Bahrein, Emirati Arabi Uniti, Marocco e Sudan mediato dagli Stati Uniti nel 2020 con gli "Accordi di Abramo" è stato percepito dai palestinesi come un'ulteriore marginalizzazione delle loro legittime rivendicazioni nella diplomazia regionale, oltre che come un allontanamento dallo spirito dell'Iniziativa di Pace Araba proposta nel 2002.[61] Il piano di pace della Lega araba prevedeva che la normalizzazione con Tel Aviv sarebbe avvenuta solo a condizione del ritiro israeliano dai territori occupati dopo il 1967, la definizione di una soluzione giusta per i rifugiati palestinesi e la costruzione di uno Stato palestinese indipendente con Gerusalemme Est come capitale.[62] Nessuna di queste condizioni è stata soddisfatta al presente.

Da parte cinese, gli Accordi di Abramo erano stati accolti con notevole cautela, spingendo Pechino a ribadire che la risoluzione della questione palestinese rimane il fulcro della stabilità

57 Bo Zhou, "In Ukraine and Gaza, China's great power comes with great responsibility", *Tsinghua University Center for Strategic and Security Studies*, 16 agosto 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/china_wzft/7368.

58 Tiewa Liu, "China and mediation: principles and practice", in *New paths and policies towards conflict prevention* (London: Routledge, 2021), 85–99.

59 "US-Hamas direct talks: What's happening and what comes next", *Al Jazeera*, 6 marzo 2025, disponibile all'Url https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/6/us-hamas-direct-talks-whats-happening-and-what-comes-next.

60 Tamer Qarmout e Daniel B-Land, "The politics of international aid to the Gaza strip", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41 (2012) 4: 32–47.

61 Rafał Soroczyński, "The impact of the Abraham Accords on the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002", *Rocznik Bezpieczeństwa Międzynarodowego*18 (2024) 1: 65-80; Ali Alsayegh, "Saudi Arabia's normalization with Israel could be a security nightmare", *Gulf International Forum*, 22 agosto 2022, disponibile all'Url gulfif.org/saudi-arabias-normalization-with-israel-could-be-a-security-nightmare/.

62 Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations, *Arab Peace Initiative - LAS Summit - Letter from Lebanon (excerpts) - Question of Palestine* (A/56/1026|S/2002/932), 24 aprile 2002, disponibile all'Url docs.un.org/en/A/56/1026%7CS/2002/932.

regionale a lungo termine.[63] Non a caso, prima dell'*escalation* del 7 ottobre 2023, oltre il 60% dei palestinesi non riteneva che Washington avrebbe potuto svolgere un ruolo positivo nella mediazione[64] — una percezione tuttora diffusa, alimentata dalle incertezze e dai timori legati al futuro della Striscia di Gaza delineato nel cosiddetto "Piano di pace di Trump" firmato al vertice di Sharm el-Sheikh del 13 ottobre 2025. È significativo che né il Primo ministro israeliano né i rappresentanti di Hamas abbiano preso parte al vertice, e che l'accordo sia stato invece sottoscritto dal Presidente statunitense Donald Trump insieme ai leader di Qatar, Egitto e Turchia che hanno mediato il cessate il fuoco a Gaza insieme agli Stati Uniti.[65] Questa dinamica ha ulteriormente minato la percezione di inclusività del processo data la mancanza di *ownership* palestinese, nonostante la presenza del Presidente Mahmoud Abbas alla cerimonia per la firma dell'accordo. Come sottolineato da Ramzi Rabah, membro del Comitato Esecutivo dell'OLP e dell'Ufficio Politico del Fronte Democratico per la Liberazione della Palestina (FDLP), la maggior parte dei palestinesi ritiene che le decisioni politiche dovrebbero spettare esclusivamente a loro stessi e alle loro fazioni nazionali: "una sconfitta militare del popolo palestinese, seguita da un complesso accordo politico plasmato secondo la prospettiva americana, è del tutto irrealistica".[66] In questo contesto, il principio di non interferenza della Cina si distingue con chiarezza rispetto al Piano di Trump e ai ripetuti veti statunitensi nel Consiglio di Sicurezza che rafforzano in Israele la convinzione di essere uno Stato eccezionale al di sopra della legge[67] – reso palese dall'attacco israeliano contro i leader di Hamas nella capitale qatarina Doha.[68] Diversamente, la mediazione intra-palestinese promossa da Pechino ha invece aperto uno spazio politico in cui la parte palestinese ha potuto tornare a esercitare un ruolo attivo nell'immaginare il proprio futuro nazionale, dopo essere stata più volte marginalizzata o esclusa dalle principali iniziative statunitensi e israeliane come gli Accordi di Abramo del 2020 e l'ultimo Piano di pace di Trump per Gaza proposto ad ottobre.[69] In quest'ottica, la partecipazione cinese alla mediazione del conflitto israelo-palestinese non solo potrebbe ampliare lo spazio negoziale, ma soprattutto *riequilibrare*, almeno in parte, la dinamica complessiva verso un processo di pace più equo e inclusivo.

L'enfasi cinese sulla *national ownership* del processo di pace ha spinto Pechino a valorizzare i canali di comunicazione di cui disponeva con i vari attori palestinesi per consolidare i propri sforzi di mediazione. Nel luglio 2024, il presidente dell'Autorità Palestinese Mahmoud Abbas e

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63 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, "Waijiao bu fayan ren Zhao Lijian zhuchi li xing jizhe hui 外交部发言人赵立坚主持例行记者会 [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian Hosts Regular Press Conference]", 14 agosto 2020, disponibile all'Url https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202008/t20200814_5419235.shtml.

64 Mirvat Ouf, "Fangqi Meiguo Balesitan minzu quanli jigou weihe zhuanxiang Zhongguo? 放弃美国巴勒斯坦民族权力机构为何转向中国? [Why did the Palestinian National Authority abandon the United States and turn to China]", 5 ottobre 2023, disponibile all'Url https://chinese.aljazeera.net/more/2023/10/5/.

65 "Mediators Egypt, Qatar and Turkey sign with Trump document on Gaza ceasefire deal", *Reuters*, 13 ottobre 2025, disponiibile all'Url https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/mediators-egypt-qatar-turkey-sign-with-trump-document-gaza-ceasefire-deal-2025-10-13/.

66 Ramzi Rabah, "The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs engaged with various Palestinian factions and forces", *PLO Official Website*, 20 maggio 2023, disponibile all'Url: https://www.plo.ps/ar/Article/63054.

67 Fidelis B. M. Ngosa e Dumisani Ngoma, "The power of the veto versus the rule of law: a United Nations (UN) dilemma", *Mulungushi University Multidisciplinary Journal* 5 (2024) 2: 57–63.

68 Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), "Attacco in Qatar: un'altra "linea rossa" superata", 10 settembre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/attacco-in-qatar-unaltra-linea-rossa-superata-216781.

69 Chen, 2025, *cit*., 38.

l'ormai defunto Ismail Haniyeh, capo dell'Ufficio politico di Hamas fino al suo assassinio da parte di Israele, erano stati invitati a Pechino in un raro incontro con i rappresentanti delle principali fazioni palestinesi durante il quale Abbas aveva annunciato la creazione di "un comitato per proseguire il dialogo, porre fine alla divisione e raggiungere l'unità nazionale palestinese".[70] Pur avendo incentrato il consenso soprattutto sulla resistenza a Israele, i partecipanti avevano sottolineato che l'inclusione di tutte le forze e le fazioni palestinesi sotto l'egida dell'OLP – tuttora riconosciuta come l'unico rappresentante legittimo del popolo palestinese – rimaneva un passaggio fondamentale. L'OLP, da parte sua, aveva ripetutamente sostenuto che l'unità nazionale è l'unica via per garantire la sopravvivenza dello Stato palestinese. È proprio su questi accordi e canali già consolidati che la Cina aveva scelto di innestare la propria azione diplomatica, sempre facendo appello al legame storico con l'OLP, essendo stata il primo paese non arabo a riconoscerla.[71] Inoltre, i contatti che Hamas aveva sviluppato con Russia e Iran sono oggi intrecciati anche con la Cina,[72] rendendola un attore sempre più rilevante persino per gli attori politici della Striscia di Gaza. L'approccio cinese di dare priorità al dialogo e alla riconciliazione intra-palestinesi si era dimostrato particolarmente utile nei momenti in cui i negoziati internazionali sul cessate il fuoco erano in stallo negli ultimi due anni.

In questo approccio, la Cina ha dunque incorporato il suo principio di "cercare un terreno comune pur mantenendo le differenze" (*gezhi zhengyi, gongtong kaifa* 搁置争议，共同开发). Infatti, la Dichiarazione di Pechino ha evitato di menzionare apertamente le divergenze politiche tra i vari gruppi lasciandole in sospeso, preferendo piuttosto evidenziare il terreno comune sul quale potrebbe essere costruito un consenso. È così che il Ministro degli esteri cinese Wang Yi è riuscito a invitare le diverse fazioni palestinesi a parlare con una sola voce per la liberazione nazionale, ponendo enfasi sugli obiettivi condivisi tra loro quali l'indipendenza, l'adesione alle Nazioni Unite, la resistenza contro l'occupazione israeliana e il cessate il fuoco a Gaza. Secondo la Cina, solo il potere collettivo delle fazioni palestinesi sottolineato nella Dichiarazione di Pechino può permettere loro di ottenere un maggiore sostegno internazionale.[73] Ciononostante, il cammino verso la riconciliazione palestinese resta complesso e irto di ostacoli anche dopo il cessate il fuoco di ottobre, da più parti definito "fragile" date le ripetute violazioni e gli impedimenti continui che tuttora limitano l'ingresso degli aiuti umanitari.[74] Mentre permangono forti dubbi sul futuro di Hamas, che ha dichiarato di essere disposto a disarmarsi a condizione della costruzione di uno Stato palestinese indipendente dopo l'implementazione del Piano di pace di Trump,[75] l'Autorità Palestinese guidata dall'OLP si ritrova confinata al di fuori della Striscia fino a quando la comunità internazionale non riconoscerà che Ramallah avrà realizzato le riforme

70 "Palestinian rival governments form «reconciliation committee»", *Al Jazeera*, 30 luglio 2023, disponibile all'Url: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/30/palestinian-rival-governments-form-reconciliation-committee.

71 Sun, Yang e Liu, 2024, *cit*.

72 Rachel Brandenburg, "Iran and the Palestinians", in *The Iran primer: power, politics, and US policy*, a cura di Robin B. Wright (Washington, D.C.: US Institute of Peace Press), 171–174.

73 Yu Guoqing, "Balesitan neibu hejie: «he» zai Beijing, «jie» wei Zhongdong 巴勒斯坦内部和解：“和”在北京，“解”围中东 [Palestinian reconciliation: "peace" in Beijing, "solution" of the Middle East crisis]", *Shijie Taishi* 世界态势 16 (2024), disponibile all'Url http://www.mesi.shisu.edu.cn/d3/10/c3719a185104/page.htm.

74 "UN official calls for swift action to secure fragile peace in Gaza", *UN News*, 24 ottobre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://palestine.un.org/en/303852-un-official-calls-swift-action-secure-fragile-peace-gaza.

75 Eric Tlozek, "Hamas will disarm but only if a Palestinian state is promised, spokesperson says", *ABC News*, 24 ottobre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-10-25/hamas-disarm-political-solution-palestinian-state/105912450.

richieste per rafforzare le istituzioni politiche e il controllo sulla sicurezza in Cisgiordania.[76] In questo contesto, Gaza rimane in uno stato di "né guerra né pace", mentre gli abitanti della Striscia vivono quotidianamente sotto la minaccia che la violenza riesploda.

I limiti e le opportunità offerte dalla mediazione cinese

Nonostante Pechino abbia presentato la Dichiarazione di Pechino come un passo avanti fondamentale, resta incerto se essa produrrà risultati concreti o se la sua rilevanza sia stata superata dal Piano di pace di Trump. Nei fatti, la Cina – tanto nel caso palestinese quanto più in generale in Medio Oriente – deve ancora confrontarsi con i limiti della propria influenza e con il profondo divario di capacità rispetto agli Stati Uniti, suoi principali rivali nella regione.
La prima limitazione dell'influenza di Pechino deriva proprio dai princìpi fondativi della sua politica estera: rispetto della sovranità, non interferenza e *national ownership*. Questi vincoli, se da un lato conferiscono alla Cina credibilità tra molti paesi della regione, dall'altro ne riducono significativamente la capacità di incidere in contesti frammentati come quello del conflitto israelo-palestinese. Il rispetto della sovranità nazionale e la non interferenza negli affari interni degli Stati implicano che Pechino può solo agire quando tutte le parti coinvolte esprimono la volontà politica di impegnarsi in una mediazione esterna guidata dalla Cina. Nello scenario attuale, la prospettiva di una futura mediazione cinese tra Israele e Palestina rimane difficile. Da un lato, malgrado i solidi legami economici, l'influenza politica di Pechino su Tel Aviv rimane minima e continua a diminuire in un contesto dove le relazioni sino-israeliane sono indebolite dalle pressioni statunitensi, dai sospetti israeliani riguardo ai rapporti Cina-Iran, e dall'esplicito sostegno cinese alla causa palestinese. Ad oggi, dunque, appare improbabile che Israele possa accettare un processo di pace guidato da Pechino, non riconoscendone l'imparzialità come mediatore. È proprio per questo che Israele è rimasto "completamente assente" nella Dichiarazione di Pechino, non avendo il governo Netanyahu mostrato alcuna disponibilità a farsi coinvolgere in un'iniziativa cinese sulla questione palestinese, percepita come una questione di politica interna. Dal lato palestinese, il principio cinese di *national ownership* permette a Pechino di coinvolgere ufficialmente solo attori politicamente riconosciuti, trascurando però il loro effettivo peso e la loro legittimità presso la popolazione locale. Infatti, l'OLP soffre oggi di scarsa popolarità in Cisgiordania, dove ampi settori della società palestinese contestano la sua legittimità.[77] La frammentazione e le crisi interne alla politica palestinese, dunque, diminuiscono ulteriormente la capacità della Cina di incidere sulle relazioni intra-palestinesi. L'assassinio di Ismail Haniyeh il 31 luglio 2024 da parte di Israele, una settimana dopo la firma della Dichiarazione di Pechino, ha compromesso gravemente la proposta di unità nazionale palestinese, respinta sia da Tel Aviv sia da Washington. Inoltre, rimane incerto se il cessate il fuoco dell'ottobre 2025 e l'impegno di Hamas al disarmo riusciranno a consolidarsi nel lungo periodo, soprattutto considerando che il Piano di Trump li ha esclusi dal futuro governo della Striscia e da qualsiasi ruolo nel sistema politico palestinese, creando così un

76 Mariel Ferragamo, "A guide to the Gaza peace deal", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 ottobre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://www.cfr.org/article/guide-trumps-twenty-point-gaza-peace-deal.

77 Aseel Mafarjeh, "Abbas's succession decree: masking the PA's crisis of legitimacy", *The New Arab*, 5 novembre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://www.newarab.com/analysis/abbass-succession-decree-masking-pas-crisis-legitimacy.

potenziale incentivo alla delegittimazione del processo stesso. Questi fattori mostrano come i princìpi stessi che conferiscono alla Cina la sua immagine di mediatore "neutrale" limitino anche la sua capacità di intervenire in profondità nel conflitto in continua evoluzione.

La seconda limitazione riguarda la dimensione geopolitica. L'obiettivo cinese di presentarsi come potenza responsabile e come alternativa all'egemonia statunitense può, paradossalmente, ridurre l'efficacia dei suoi sforzi di mediazione. A differenza di Washington, Pechino non dispone ancora di sufficiente esperienza e di reti locali per gestire sul campo processi politici complessi – ossia quell'infrastruttura istituzionale e di società civile sul territorio necessaria per sostenere una mediazione a lungo termine.[78] Ciò la rende più passiva che proattiva nel caso palestinese.[79] La sua strategia di *hedging* la porta inoltre a privilegiare contesti a basso rischio reputazionale, dove l'obiettivo è spesso la *de-escalation* piuttosto che la risoluzione definitiva del conflitto. Come hanno osservato Barron, Scobell e Gallagher, "non ci sono piani concreti per la formazione di un governo di unità nazionale o per qualsiasi altra iniziativa chiave" nella Dichiarazione di Pechino, ambigua in merito a tempistiche, istituzioni, strumenti e meccanismi di attuazione.[80] Altre omissioni riguardano come i palestinesi avrebbero gestito il controllo della sicurezza a Gaza dopo la guerra. Questi dettagli sono al momento in discussione nel Piano di pace Trump (anch'esso in evoluzione), che nella sua versione di ottobre aveva assegnato il governo della Striscia a un comitato tecnico palestinese ancora da formare e la sua sicurezza alla polizia dell'Autorità palestinese insieme a una forza di stabilizzazione internazionale che opererà da Israele.[81] Durante la conferenza stampa ordinaria del Ministero degli Affari Esteri cinese del 30 settembre 2025, il portavoce aveva espresso il supporto di Pechino al cessate il fuoco a Gaza, ma sottolineando che i princìpi secondo cui "i palestinesi devono governare la Palestina" e la soluzione a due Stati devono rimanere saldamente al centro del processo politico.[82] Tuttavia, il posizionamento della Cina come potenza non occidentale e membro del Sud globale potrebbe renderla riluttante a collaborare con istituzioni statunitensi, anche laddove esista una chiara convergenza di interessi sulla stabilità regionale. La dinamica competitiva con Washington e la stessa strategia di *hedging* perseguita dalla Cina rischierebbero così di rivelarsi insostenibili nel lungo periodo. Un sostegno più marcato alla Palestina e un ulteriore rafforzamento dei legami con i paesi arabi potrebbero infatti alienare ulteriormente Israele e gli Stati Uniti, rendendo sempre più difficile per Pechino mantenere la reputazione di mediatore neutrale, soprattutto qualora la solidarietà con il mondo arabo dovesse prevalere sulle sue relazioni con le potenze occidentali. Casi particolarmente complessi come quello di Gaza rischiano dunque di mettere a dura prova la capacità della Cina di presentarsi come una "potenza emergente responsabile" impegnata a sostenere una soluzione equa per la causa palestinese.[83]

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78 Sheng, 2024, *cit*.

79 Guy Burton, "China and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict", *Confluences Méditerranée* 109 (2019) 2: 158.

80 Robert Barron, Andrew Scobell e Adam Gallagher, "Palestinian factions pledge unity: another diplomatic win for China?", *United States Institute of Peace*, 25 luglio 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/palestinian-factions-pledge-unity-another-diplomatic-win-china.

81 Intervento di Nomi Bar-Yaacov alla conferenza "After Sharm el-Sheikh: decoding Israel's future," *ISPI Dialoghi Mediterranei,* 17 ottobre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://events.ispionline.it/after-sharm-el-sheikh-decoding-israels-future/.

82 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun's regular press conference on September 30, 2025", 30 settembre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202509/t20250930_11721876.html.

83 Sheng, 2024, *cit*.

Nonostante le significative sfide e limitazioni che Pechino deve affrontare, è importante riconoscere anche le opportunità che la sua mediazione può aprire per rinnovare meccanismi di diplomazia regionale e rafforzare la volontà delle parti a impegnarsi in un processo di pace credibile e inclusivo.

Il crescente "attivismo" filo-palestinese della Cina potrebbe incentivare una forma di "competizione globale per la pace", spingendo altre potenze come gli Stati Uniti a intensificare il proprio impegno nella regione e ad adottare politiche più equilibrate nel conflitto israelo-palestinese. Questa dinamica competitiva potrebbe da un lato indurre Washington a intensificare gli sforzi diplomatici per mantenere lo status di egemone,[84] sebbene con esiti spesso difficili da prevedere e fortemente condizionati dal sostegno a Israele. Dall'altro, l'attivismo cinese riflette e rafforza la crescente multipolarità della regione, dove l'influenza della Cina e degli Stati Uniti è condivisa con Unione Europea, Russia e potenze regionali come Arabia Saudita, Emirati Arabi Uniti, Qatar, Turchia e Iran.[85] Due mesi dopo la Dichiarazione di Pechino infatti, nel settembre 2024 Arabia Saudita e il gruppo di contatto arabo-islamico per Gaza[86] avevano guidato insieme a Norvegia e Unione Europea la formazione di un'"Alleanza globale per l'implementazione della soluzione a due Stati" alle Nazioni Unite.[87] Questa diversificazione dell'arena diplomatica grazie all'impegno attivo di altri mediatori nel conflitto israelo-palestinese riduce la dipendenza da un singolo attore e apre margini per iniziative collaborative più robuste.

Un secondo vantaggio deriva dalla disponibilità della Cina a offrire canali alternativi di dialogo. La sua posizione di potenza non occidentale, con rapporti relativamente positivi sia con Israele sia con l'Autorità e le varie fazioni palestinesi, le conferisce una credibilità che altri mediatori difficilmente possiedono. Queste relazioni le permettono di fungere da ponte diplomatico tra attori che spesso mantengono contatti limitati con l'Occidente, come precedentemente Hamas o l'Iran, contribuendo alla prevenzione di *escalation* regionali come dimostrato dall'appello rivolto a Teheran di lasciare aperto lo Stretto di Hormuz durante il conflitto Israele–Iran del giugno 2025.[88] Parallelamente, l'approccio cinese basato sul multilateralismo e su di una politica di "zero nemici" favorisce processi di integrazione regionale, incoraggiando il dialogo tra attori con interessi divergenti. Come ribadito dall'inviato speciale dell'Unione Europea per la regione del Golfo, Luigi Di Maio, il coordinamento con nuovi partner non implica sovrapposizione, ma piuttosto una divisione dei compiti: "se non siamo in grado di dialogare con un attore specifico, come Hamas, abbiamo bisogno di partner affidabili che possano

84 Charles Dunne, "Russia and China in the Gaza crisis: trying to beat Washington at its own game", in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2004* (Barcelona: IEMed, 2024), 134 - 139.

85 Shinji, 2024, *cit*.

86 Il gruppo di contatto riunisce rappresentanti della Lega degli Stati arabi (LAS) e l'Organizzazione per la cooperazione islamica (OIC). È stato formato nel novembre 2023, appena un mese dopo l'inizio della guerra a Gaza, in occasione di un vertice straordinario convocato dall'Arabia Saudita con l'obiettivo di porre fine alla guerra e riaffermare il sostegno ai palestinesi. Si veda Necva Tastan, "Gaza Contact Group discusses steps to pressure Israel, boost recognition of Palestine", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 24 aprile 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/gaza-contact-group-discusses-steps-to-pressure-israel-boost-recognition-of-palestine/3204530.

87 EEAS Press Team, "Israel/Palestine: global alliance for the implementation of the two-State solution announced in the UNGA margins", *European External Action Service*, 26 settembre 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/israelpalestine-global-alliance-implementation-two-state-solution-announced-unga-margins_en.

88 Amanda Chen, "From estrangement to reassessment? Israeli media and expert views on China after the twelve-day war", *ChinaMed Project*, 23 agosto 2024, disponibile all'Url https://www.chinamed.it/observer/from-estrangement-to-reassessment-israeli-media-and-expert-views-on-china-after-the-twelve-day-war.

raggiungere l'obiettivo attraverso i loro canali".[89] Di Maio ha richiamato, a questo proposito, come il più grande scambio di prigionieri tra Ucraina e Russia fosse stato mediato dall'Arabia Saudita e dagli Emirati Arabi Uniti.[90] Questo esempio evidenzia dunque l'importanza dei canali di dialogo alternativi offerti dalla Cina, che potrebbero essere integrati in futuri sforzi di mediazione non più affidati a un unico attore, ma strutturati secondo una divisione di ruoli tra diversi mediatori dove ciascuno contribuisce sulla base dei propri vantaggi. L'approccio inclusivo di Pechino aprirebbe la strada a una più ampia coordinazione regionale, ponendo enfasi su obiettivi comuni come la stabilità e lo sviluppo economico in Medio Oriente, nonché la costruzione e il riconoscimento internazionale dello Stato palestinese.

Avendo sostenuto che un'efficace costruzione della pace non possa essere unilaterale e dipendere da un singolo attore, si sostiene che una mediazione inclusiva debba fondarsi su meccanismi di collaborazione "orizzontali" e "verticali", ossia coinvolgere anche la società civile. Sul piano orizzontale, è necessaria una mediazione con partecipazione attiva ed equilibrata delle due parti del conflitto coordinata dalle grandi potenze e dagli attori regionali – dagli Stati Uniti alla Cina, dall'Unione Europea alla Russia fino ai paesi del Golfo. Questo approccio complementare che valorizza i punti di forza di ciascun mediatore – dall'esperienza istituzionale europea al sostegno economico del Golfo, e dalle iniziative di sviluppo a lungo termine promosse dalla Cina fino all'approccio umanitario del Qatar – permetterebbe di ridurre rivalità potenzialmente dannose, allineare gli obiettivi e rafforzare la credibilità complessiva del processo. Sul piano verticale, è indispensabile coinvolgere la società civile, così da tradurre la diplomazia ufficiale in una base sociale reale per la riconciliazione. Attraverso iniziative di diplomazia di secondo livello e il coinvolgimento di rappresentanti della società civile israelo-palestinese come anticipato dai precedenti simposi cinesi, gli accordi diplomatici possono radicarsi nelle comunità locali e consolidare la legittimità dei processi di pace per renderli sostenibili nel lungo periodo. In ultima analisi, il futuro della mediazione cinese dipenderà non solo dalla sua capacità di bilanciare interessi geopolitici contrastanti con una collaborazione "orizzontale" con altri mediatori, ma anche dalla sua abilità di promuovere meccanismi "verticali" per includere le comunità locali.

Conclusione

La mediazione cinese in Medio Oriente e in particolare nel contesto del conflitto israelo-palestinese illustra sia i limiti che i vantaggi di un approccio non occidentale alla risoluzione dei conflitti. Se da un lato Pechino rappresenta per molti paesi della regione un'alternativa credibile a una politica statunitense percepita come filo-israeliana e inefficace, dall'altro deve fare i conti con vincoli strutturali significativi che ne limitano la capacità di incidere in profondità: la ridotta presenza militare, un approccio volutamente selettivo, e l'assenza di reti locali. Nel caso israelo-palestinese, tali criticità si traducono in una limitata influenza su

89 Intervento di Luigi Di Maio alla conferenza "After Sharm el-Sheikh: the Gulf and the quest for a new Middle East," *ISPI Dialoghi Mediterranei,* 17 ottobre 2025, disponibile all'Url https://events.ispionline.it/after-sharm-el-sheikh-the-gulf-and-the-quest-for-a-new-middle-east/.

90 *Ibidem*.

entrambe le parti, aggravata dalla complessità della politica interna palestinese e dal crescente rischio per la Cina di essere percepita da Israele come un attore non completamente neutrale. Eppure, la mediazione cinese offre opportunità inedite. I suoi canali di comunicazione alternativi e il suo approccio inclusivo le conferiscono una posizione unica di mediatrice non occidentale. Allo stesso tempo, la "minaccia" che la Cina rappresenta per l'egemonia statunitense in Medio Oriente potrebbe perfino stimolare una "competizione globale per la pace" capace di promuovere iniziative nuove e rilanciare quelle già esistenti. Ciò dimostra come gli approcci alternativi della mediazione cinese e la Dichiarazione di Pechino possano contribuire all'integrazione regionale e alla cooperazione multilaterale. Una pace duratura non può basarsi sull'azione di un singolo attore, ma deve necessariamente valorizzare le risorse dei diversi mediatori e coinvolgere in modo attivo anche la società civile, così da porre le basi sociali e di lunga durata per la riconciliazione.
L'evoluzione del ruolo della Cina come mediatore riflette la sua più ampia aspirazione a presentarsi come una potenza globale responsabile. Se tale ambizione si tradurrà in risultati concreti dipenderà non solo dalla capacità di Pechino di bilanciare interessi geopolitici contrastanti e di mantenere impegni di lungo periodo, ma anche e soprattutto, dalla collaborazione con altri mediatori in un quadro multilaterale. Sebbene l'efficacia della mediazione cinese rimanga incerta, il suo approccio inclusivo e il suo attivismo potrebbero aprire nuove strade per un processo di pace credibile dove i palestinesi tornino a essere parte attiva con il supporto di diversi mediatori.

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LA CHINE ET LE MOYEN-ORIENT À L'ISSUE DE LA GUERRE DES DOUZE JOURS

China

Une analyse des débats d'experts chinois, israéliens, iraniens et arabes

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Une analyse des débats d'experts chinois, israéliens, iraniens et arabes

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Les opinions exprimées dans ce rapport sont uniquement celles des auteurs et ne reflètent pas nécessairement celles du ministère des Affaires étrangères et de la Coopération internationale.

RÉSUMÉ

La guerre ayant opposé Israël à l'Iran en juin 2025 a profondément reconfiguré le paysage sécuritaire du Moyen-Orient et a eu des répercussions majeures sur les relations sino–moyen-orientales. En s'appuyant sur l'analyse des débats académiques et médiatiques en Chine et dans la région, ainsi que sur les déclarations officielles chinoises, ce rapport évalue la manière dont le conflit a redéfini les perceptions du rôle et de l'avenir de la Chine au Moyen-Orient.

Une grande partie du débat médiatique s'est concentrée sur le fait que, malgré l'existence d'un partenariat stratégique, la Chine s'est abstenue d'apporter un soutien matériel direct à l'Iran durant la guerre. La réponse officielle de Pékin, articulée autour d'appels à la désescalade et au respect de la souveraineté, a été largement interprétée comme «équilibrée» et «neutre», alimentant le débat sur la nature de l'engagement chinois dans la région. Les experts chinois se sont globalement alignés sur cette rhétorique, condamnant les actions des États-Unis et d'Israël tout en analysant les causes structurelles du conflit. Face aux réactions limitées suscitées par l'intervention américaine en faveur d'Israël, plusieurs commentateurs chinois ont également mis en doute la capacité réelle des acteurs régionaux à promouvoir un ordre multipolaire, révélant ainsi les contradictions du discours chinois sur le déclin de l'Occident. Par ailleurs, l'absence relative d'analyses portant sur le rôle potentiel de la Chine a mis en lumière une certaine incertitude parmi les chercheurs quant à la capacité de Pékin à contribuer de manière significative à la stabilisation régionale, soulignant de fait les limites apparentes de son influence.

Pour autant, au Moyen-Orient, Pékin n'est nullement perçu comme un acteur secondaire. Les chercheurs et commentateurs de la région continuent de considérer la Chine comme un partenaire essentiel avec lequel leurs gouvernements doivent maintenir un engagement actif. En Israël, si la méfiance à l'égard des liens sino-iraniens reste palpable, plusieurs experts et diplomates voient dans la «position équilibrée» de Pékin une occasion de redéfinir la relation bilatérale, tant pour des raisons économiques que par crainte d'un isolement diplomatique croissant. En Iran, bien que la déception suscitée par la réponse mesurée de Pékin soit largement partagée, de nombreux commentateurs ont orienté leurs critiques vers leur propre gouvernement, jugé incapable d'approfondir la coopération stratégique avec la Chine, notamment dans les domaines de la défense et des infrastructures. Dans l'ensemble du monde arabe, et plus particulièrement dans les médias proches des États du Golfe, la «neutralité positive» adoptée par Pékin a été généralement favorablement accueillie. De manière générale, les analystes de la région ont reconnu et même justifié le pragmatisme et la retenue de la Chine estimant cette posture conforme à ses priorités stratégiques globales.

Le rapport conclut en examinant plusieurs évolutions récentes et en soulignant que, si le rôle de la Chine au Moyen-Orient reste contraint par sa prudence et par des capacités encore limitées, les observateurs régionaux la considèrent, et continueront probablement de la considérer, comme un partenaire économique, stratégique et diplomatique indispensable. La guerre a certes conduit à une réévaluation de la fiabilité de Pékin, mais non à un souhait de distanciation; au contraire, de nombreux experts semblent plaider pour des partenariats réajustés, fondés sur des intérêts mutuels plutôt que sur des attentes excessives. Dans un contexte régional en constante transformation, les relations sino-moyen-orientales demeurent plus centrales et débattues que jamais.

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INTRODUCTION AU PROJET CHINAMED

La Méditerranée élargie est une vaste région qui s'étend du plateau iranien au détroit de Gibraltar et des Alpes à la Corne de l'Afrique. Façonnée par des dynamiques historiques de longue durée, cette région constitue également un nœud stratégique où s'articulent, se croisent et parfois s'opposent les trajectoires politiques, économiques et sécuritaires de l'Europe, de l'Afrique et de l'Asie. Dans le cadre du projet ChinaMed, notre équipe de recherche analyse la manière dont ces configurations régionales interagissent avec l'une des transformations systémiques majeures du XXIe siècle: la transition de la Chine, forte de ses 1,4 milliard d'habitants, de la périphérie vers le centre du système international.

Notre projet de recherche a pour objectif d'examiner la manière dont la présence chinoise contribue, de façon graduelle mais tangible, à la reconfiguration des équilibres de pouvoir au sein de la région. Pour ce faire, nous collectons des données et élaborons des indicateurs permettant d'étudier l'intensification des liens économiques, commerciaux et sécuritaires entre la Chine et les pays de la Méditerranée élargie. L'ensemble de ces analyses est mis à la disposition du public par le biais de la base de données ChinaMed Data.

Nous publions également le ChinaMed Observer, qui offre une analyse fine et ciblée des discours médiatiques produits en Chine et dans les pays de la Méditerranée élargie, portant sur les événements les plus récents et les tendances les plus pressantes des relations sino-méditerranéennes.

Par ailleurs, nous contribuons activement au développement des relations entre la Chine et la Méditerranée élargie à travers notre participation à diverses initiatives académiques — parmi lesquelles le *China Management and Business Program* — ainsi qu'à des publications scientifiques et à de nombreux événements universitaires. Le ChinaMed Project, intégré au TOChina Hub de l'Université de Turin et soutenu par le Torino World Affairs Institute, mène ses activités grâce à un réseau de partenariats comprenant notamment le *HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme* de l'Université de Durham, le *China Global South Project* ainsi que l'Unité d'études asiatiques du département de recherche du *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies.* Le projet bénéficie en outre du soutien du Ministère italien des Affaires étrangères et de la *Fondazione CRT,* l'une des principales fondations philanthropiques italiennes.

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Nous sommes par ailleurs reconnaissants du soutien apporté à notre projet – conformément à l'article 23 bis du Décret Présidentiel de la République italienne n° 18/1967 – par l'Unité d'analyse, de planification politique, de statistiques et de documentation historique de la Direction générale de la diplomatie publique et culturelle du Ministère italien des Affaires étrangères et de la Coopération internationale, ainsi que par sa brillante directrice, la conseillère Giuliana Del Papa, et sa précieuse équipe. Il va de soi que les analyses et opinions formulées dans ce rapport relèvent exclusivement de la responsabilité de leurs auteurs et ne reflètent pas nécessairement les positions du ministère des Affaires étrangères et de la Coopération internationale.

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INTRODUCTION

Le 13 juin 2025, Israël a lancé une série de frappes aériennes contre l'Iran, visant des installations nucléaires, des infrastructures militaires, des systèmes de défense aérienne, ainsi que d'éminents responsables militaires, politiques et scientifiques[1]. Le Premier ministre israélien, **Benjamin Netanyahu**, a présenté cette opération comme une «frappe préventive», justifiant son action par la nécessité d'empêcher ce qu'il estimait être le développement imminent de l'arme nucléaire par l'Iran. En réponse, l'Iran a mené des frappes à l'aide de drones et de missiles contre Israël, touchant à la fois des cibles militaires et civiles.

Le 21 juin, les États-Unis sont intervenus en soutien à Israël, lançant plusieurs frappes aériennes contre trois sites nucléaires iraniens. Selon le président américain **Donald Trump**, l'objectif affiché de ces opérations était de neutraliser les capacités nucléaires de l'Iran et de mettre fin au conflit. Le 23 juin, l'Iran a riposté en lançant des missiles sur une base militaire américaine au Qatar, sans faire de victimes. Le lendemain, la télévision d'État iranienne a annoncé un cessez-le-feu avec Israël, quelques heures seulement après que Trump eut déclaré qu'un accord avait été conclu.

Baptisée «guerre des Douze jours» par le président Trump, cette brève mais intense confrontation a marqué l'apogée d'un conflit prolongé, multidimensionnel et en constante escalade entre Tel-Aviv et Téhéran. Longtemps contenues malgré les tensions persistantes autour du programme nucléaire iranien, les hostilités ont finalement éclaté dans le contexte de la guerre de Gaza. Dans les mois ayant suivi l'attaque du 7 octobre 2023, Israël a intensifié ses opérations militaires dans la région, bien au-delà du Hamas, s'engageant dans des affrontements soutenus avec les autres membres de l' «Axe de la Résistance» dirigé par l'Iran, notamment le Hezbollah au Liban et les Houthis au Yémen. Outre leurs conséquences humanitaires catastrophiques, ces opérations ont accentué le conflit direct entre Israël et l'Iran, en particulier après la frappe aérienne israélienne contre le consulat iranien à Damas le 1er avril 2024 et, plus tard la même l'année, après les assassinats du leader politique du Hamas, **Ismaïl Haniyeh** (tué à Téhéran le 31 juillet 2024) et du leader du Hezbollah, **Hassan Nasrallah** (tué à Beyrouth le 27 septembre 2024).

La guerre de juin 2025 a marqué l'escalade la plus dramatique de ce conflit, entraînant la mort d'environ trente Israéliens et de plus de mille Iraniens, parmi lesquels des centaines de femmes et d'enfants, et causant des milliers de blessés des deux côtés. S'il est difficile de déterminer si ce conflit constitue un tournant géostratégique durable, il a néanmoins mis en évidence la prédominance militaire régionale d'Israël (sans démontrer son invulnérabilité), révélé des failles critiques dans les capacités de défense aérienne et de renseignement iraniennes, et suscité des inquiétudes parmi les États arabes quant aux conséquences d'une escalade plus large au Moyen-Orient.

Au-delà de ses effets immédiats, la guerre des Douze jours a également mis en lumière le rôle et l'influence - ou absence d'influence - de la Chine au Moyen-Orient. Ces dernières années, Pékin avait été de plus en plus perçu comme un acteur majeur dans la région, tant sur le plan économique que diplomatique, comme en témoigne son rôle de médiateur dans le rétablissement des relations diplomatiques entre l'Iran et l'Arabie saoudite en mars 2023. Cependant, depuis le début de la guerre de Gaza, la Chine est apparue réticente, voire incapable, de s'engager de manière significative dans le paysage sécuritaire régional en pleine évolution.

L'absence de réaction ferme de Pékin aux frappes israéliennes contre l'Iran, l'un de ses partenaires régionaux les plus importants, a relancé le débat sur la profondeur de l'engagement chinois au Moyen-Orient. En dépit de la signature, en mars 2021, de l'Accord de coopération globale de 25 ans entre l'Iran et la Chine, du soutien de Pékin à la normalisation des relations entre Téhéran et les États du Golfe, et de l'adhésion de l'Iran à des organisations multilatérales soutenues par la Chine telles que l'Organisation de coopération de Shanghai (OCS) et les BRICS, la République populaire s'est abstenue de toute réaction diplomatique ou stratégique concrète face à l'attaque israélienne. Cette inaction a suscité des interrogations quant à la solidité du partenariat sino-iranien, souvent présenté par les analystes occidentaux comme un pilier d'une coalition révisionniste plus large – aux côtés de la Russie et, parfois, de la Corée du Nord – défiant l'ordre international établi[2].

Certains observateurs ont interprété la prudence de la Chine comme une atteinte à sa crédibilité auprès des acteurs régionaux, notamment en raison de la supériorité militaire d'Israël et du soutien indéfectible des États-Unis à sa sécurité[3]. Toutefois, comme le montre ce rapport, cette perception est loin d'être unanimement partagée par les chercheurs et commentateurs de la région.

Pour appréhender ces divergences d'interprétation et les tendances régionales plus larges, l'équipe de recherche de ChinaMed a analysé les débats d'experts et les médias en Chine, en Israël, en Iran et dans le monde arabe concernant

[1] Pour une chronologie détaillée des événements ayant mené à la guerre israélo-iranienne et s'étant déroulés pendant celle-ci, voir Kevin Huggard et Mallika Yadwad, « The road to the Israel-Iran war » [La route vers la guerre israélo-iranienne], Brookings, 23 juillet 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-road-to-the-israel-iran-war/

[2] Jean-Loup Samaan, "Is the cautious China-Iran military cooperation at a turning point?" [La coopération militaire prudente entre la Chine et l'Iran est-elle à un tournant ?], Atlantic Council, 29 août 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/is-the-cautious-china-iran-military-cooperation-at-a-turning-point;
Simone McCarthy, "China was on the sidelines of the Iran-Israel war. That's just where it wanted to be" [La Chine était en marge de la guerre Iran-Israël. C'est juste là où elle voulait être], *CNN*, 18 juillet 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/18/china/china-iran-sco-israel-axis-intl-hnk.

[3] John Calabrese, "The 12-day Israel-Iran war: China's response and its implications" [La guerre de 12 jours entre Israël et l'Iran : la réponse de la Chine et ses implications], Middle East Institute, 10 juillet 2025, https://www.mei.edu/publications/12-day-israel-iran-war-chinas-response-and-its-implications;
Anna Borshchevskaya & Grant Rumley, "Exploiting Fault Lines in Iran's Relations with Russia and China After the Israel War" [Exploiter les lignes de faille dans les relations de l'Iran avec la Russie et la Chine après la guerre d'Israël], The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 août 2025, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exploiting-fault-lines-irans-relations-russia-and-china-after-israel-war;
Jesse Marks, "Iran's bid for Beijing's backing meets its limits" [L'offre de l'Iran pour le soutien de Pékin atteint ses limites], *East Asia Forum*, 22 août 2025, https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/08/22/irans-bid-for-beijings-backing-meets-its-limits.

les relations sino-moyen-orientales au lendemain de la guerre israélo-iranienne.

Si les commentaires chinois se sont révélés moins explicites que ceux de leurs homologues occidentaux, ils ont néanmoins exprimé, par omission, une certaine incertitude quant à la capacité de Pékin à contribuer efficacement à la résolution des conflits et à la stabilisation régionale. Les déclarations officielles et les analyses d'experts ont fourni peu de propositions politiques concrètes, se concentrant principalement sur l'évaluation des motivations des États régionaux et sur leur capacité réelle — ou leur engagement — à promouvoir un nouvel ordre multipolaire en partenariat avec la Chine, plutôt que sur l'élaboration d'une stratégie pilotée par Pékin. Cette approche a révélé les tensions inhérentes au discours dominant de la Chine sur le déclin de l'Occident.

À l'inverse, les analystes israéliens, iraniens et arabes ont reconnu l'importance à long terme de la Chine pour l'avenir de la région. Bien que certains aient exprimé des réserves sur l'approche de Pékin, ils considèrent généralement la Chine comme un acteur indispensable pour les échanges commerciaux, le développement économique et la politique étrangère de leurs pays respectifs, et saluent souvent, à divers degrés, sa «neutralité». Plusieurs experts ont non seulement expliqué, mais aussi défendu la réponse mesurée de la Chine, exhortant leurs gouvernements à entretenir, voire à renforcer, leurs relations avec Pékin.

En Israël, si le discours public souligne une méfiance persistante envers un supposé soutien chinois à Téhéran, plusieurs experts ont interprété la position «équilibrée» de la Chine comme une opportunité pour renouer les liens avec Pékin. En Iran, la déception face à la réaction discrète de la Chine a été éclipsée par des critiques internes adressées au gouvernement, jugé incapable de développer sa coopération avec Pékin, perçue comme la seule grande puissance disposée et capable de soutenir la République islamique. Dans le monde arabe, et notamment dans les médias proches des pays du Golfe, les appels à la désescalade de la Chine, sa posture de «neutralité positive» et la perception d'une «trahison» de Téhéran ont été largement bien accueillis.

Nous espérons que ce rapport offrira aux lecteurs une vue éclairée des perspectives chinoises et régionales sur les relations sino-moyen-orientales, contribuant ainsi à enrichir les débats entre chercheurs, analystes et décideurs sur le rôle de la Chine dans la région, au sein d'un ordre international en pleine mutation.

UNE RÉGION PASSIVE, UNE CHINE ABSENTE: DÉCLARATIONS OFFICIELLES ET DÉBATS D'EXPERTS CHINOIS APRÈS LA GUERRE DES DOUZE JOURS

Par Miriam Verzellino et Andrea Ghiselli

La réaction officielle de la Chine à la guerre opposant Israël à l'Iran a suivi un schéma désormais familier : condamnation d'Israël et des États-Unis, appels à un cessez-le-feu immédiat et exhortations à un retour à la voie diplomatique. Pourtant, malgré les propos des diplomates chinois, la position générale de la Chine est apparue prudente, Pékin s'étant gardée d'apporter tout soutien direct à l'Iran. Cette posture, en apparence ambiguë, et la réticence manifeste des dirigeants chinois à critiquer ouvertement Israël et les États-Unis ont nourri de nombreuses spéculations parmi les analystes du Moyen-Orient quant à l'avenir des relations chinoises avec Téhéran et avec Tel-Aviv (un sujet abordé dans les prochains chapitres de ce rapport).

Les commentateurs chinois se sont pour l'essentiel alignés sur la position officielle de Pékin, ou l'ont développée davantage. Leurs analyses ont principalement imputé le déclenchement de la guerre à la politique erratique de Washington dans la région et à la liberté d'action dont Israël a bénéficié. Néanmoins, beaucoup ont eu du mal à intégrer ce conflit dans le récit habituel sur le déclin des États-Unis et l'ascension d'un ordre international dirigé par la Chine. Ils ont observé que les acteurs régionaux — qu'il s'agisse des États arabes, de la Russie ou de l'Europe — n'avaient démontré ni la volonté ni la capacité de mettre un terme aux hostilités. S'agissant du rôle de la Chine, les commentaires sont demeurés rares et prudents, laissant transparaître une frustration partagée : l'importance stratégique de l'Iran est reconnue, mais la marge de manœuvre de Pékin reste étroite.

La position officielle de la Chine

Le 13 juin, **Lin Jian**, porte-parole du ministère chinois des Affaires étrangères, a exprimé la profonde préoccupation de Pékin face à l'attaque israélienne contre l'Iran et à ses conséquences. Il a réaffirmé l'opposition constante de la Chine à toute atteinte à la souveraineté, à la sécurité ou à l'intégrité territoriale de l'Iran. Il a également appelé l'ensemble des acteurs à œuvrer pour la paix régionale, à éviter toute escalade supplémentaire et a rappelé la disponibilité de la Chine à jouer un rôle constructif dans l'apaisement de la crise[4].

Le même jour, le représentant permanent de la Chine auprès des Nations Unies, **Fu Cong**, a déclaré que la Chine exhortait Israël à «cesser immédiatement tout aventurisme militaire» et invitait toutes les parties concernées à respecter la Charte des Nations Unies et le droit international, en privilégiant la résolution politique et diplomatique des différends[5].

Le lendemain, le ministre chinois des Affaires étrangères, **Wang Yi**, s'est entretenu par téléphone avec son homologue iranien, **Abbas Araghchi**. Selon le compte rendu officiel chinois, M. Wang a «condamné sans équivoque la violation par Israël de la souveraineté, de la sécurité et de l'intégrité territoriale de l'Iran», estimant que ces actions constituaient une «atteinte grave aux buts et principes de la Charte des Nations Unies». Il a souligné la gravité particulière des attaques visant les installations nucléaires iraniennes, avertissant qu'elles risquaient de créer un précédent dangereux aux conséquences potentiellement catastrophiques[6].

Le 17 juin, plus de quatre jours après le début de la campagne militaire israélienne, le président chinois **Xi Jinping** a évoqué le conflit lors du deuxième sommet Chine-Asie centrale à Astana (Kazakhstan). Il a exprimé sa vive inquiétude face à l'escalade des tensions au Moyen-Orient provoquée par les actions militaires israéliennes contre l'Iran, rappelant l'opposition ferme de Pékin à toute violation de la souveraineté, de la sécurité ou de l'intégrité territoriale d'un État. Xi a de nouveau affirmé la volonté de la Chine de collaborer avec toutes les parties afin de favoriser la paix régionale. Les observateurs, en Israël comme en Iran et dans le monde arabe, ont particulièrement relevé son appel adressé à «toutes les parties» à œuvrer à une désescalade rapide et à prévenir toute nouvelle aggravation de la situation — une formulation perçue comme visant simultanément Tel-Aviv et Téhéran[7].

[4] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Èr líng èr wǔ nián liù yuè shí sān rì wài jiāo bù fā yán rén Lín Jiàn zhǔ chí lì xíng jì zhě huì" 2025年6月13日外交部发言人林剑主持例行记者会 [Le porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères, Lin Jian, a tenu une conférence de presse régulière le 13 juin 2025], 13 juin 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250613_11648029.shtml.

[5] Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN, "Remarks on the Situation in the Middle East by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council Briefing" [Remarques sur la situation au Moyen-Orient par l'ambassadeur Fu Cong lors de la réunion d'information du Conseil de sécurité des Nations Unies), 13 juin 2025, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202506/t20250614_11648590.htm

[6] Lu Yuansheng, "Wáng Yì fēnbié tóng yīlǎng wàizhǎng 、 yǐsèliè wàizhǎng tōnghuà" 王毅分别同伊朗外长、以色列外长通话 [Wang Yi a parlé avec les ministres des Affaires étrangères iranien et israélien respectivement], *Guancha*, 14 juin 2025, https://m.guancha.cn/internation/2025_06_14_779390.shtml.

[7] Yan Jun, "Xí Jìnpíng： gèfāng yīnggāi tuīdòng zhōngdōng júshì jǐnkuài jiàngwēn" 习近平：各方应该推动中东局势尽快降温 [Xi Jinping : toutes les parties devraient promouvoir une désescalade au Moyen-Orient dès que possible], *CCTV*, 17 juin 2025, https://content-static.cctvnews.cctv.com/snow-book/index.html?item_id=4495386130084596908.

Lors de la réunion d'urgence du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU, le 22 juin, au lendemain des frappes américaines contre trois sites nucléaires iraniens, **Fu Cong** a déclaré que la Chine condamnait fermement les attaques américaines et le bombardement des installations nucléaires iraniennes. Il a formulé quatre demandes : un cessez-le-feu immédiat, une protection effective des civils, un engagement résolu en faveur du dialogue et de la négociation, ainsi qu'une action rapide du Conseil de sécurité[8].

Le 23 juin, le porte-parole du ministère chinois des Affaires étrangères, **Guo Jiakun**, a annoncé que la Chine, conjointement avec la Russie et le Pakistan, avait soumis au Conseil de sécurité un projet de résolution reprenant les quatre points avancés par **Fu Cong**[9]. Il s'agissait de la première initiative allant au-delà d'une simple condamnation verbale, bien qu'aucun vote n'ait finalement eu lieu.

Le 24 juin, un accord de cessez-le-feu a été conclu entre Israël et l'Iran. Lors de conférences de presse ultérieures, **Guo Jiakun** a rappelé que la Chine avait constamment affirmé que la voie «appropriée» vers un cessez-le-feu reposait sur le dialogue, et non sur l'usage de la force militaire. Il a également souligné que la Chine et l'Iran entretenaient une amitié ancienne et que Pékin restait disposé à poursuivre son partenariat avec Téhéran et à contribuer à la préservation de la paix au Moyen-Orient[10].

Les motivations d'Israël selon les experts chinois

Au début du conflit israélo-iranien, plusieurs spécialistes chinois ont débattu des motivations ayant conduit Israël à mener des frappes militaires contre l'Iran, identifiant généralement trois facteurs principaux. Dans l'ensemble, leurs analyses ne diffèrent guère de celles de leurs homologues étrangers.

Le premier facteur serait la volonté d'empêcher l'Iran de se doter de capacités nucléaires à visée militaire. Selon **Li Shaoxian**, président du *China–Arab Research Institute* à l'Université de Ningxia, l'administration Biden avait jusque-là dissuadé Tel-Aviv de lancer une «frappe létale» contre les installations nucléaires iraniennes. Toutefois, le retour de Donald Trump au pouvoir aurait modifié l'environnement régional, renforçant la pression exercée par Washington sur Téhéran[11]. **Tian Wenlin**, directeur de *l'Institute of Middle East Studies* à l'Institut national de recherche régionale de l'Université Renmin, a invoqué l'idiome chinois «choisir le moindre mal» (liǎng hài xiāng quán qǔ qí qīng 两害相权取其轻), arguant qu'Israël avait agi pour neutraliser une future menace nucléaire iranienne, en dépit du coût élevé de cette opération. Bien que ces frappes aient constitué un «défi existentiel sans précédent» pour l'Iran depuis la révolution islamique de 1979, Tian conclut qu'elles pourraient finalement se retourner contre Israël en renforçant la détermination de Téhéran à poursuivre son programme nucléaire[12].

Le deuxième objectif visé aurait été d'entraver la conclusion d'un éventuel nouvel accord sur le nucléaire iranien. **Li Shaoxian** a souligné les inquiétudes d'Israël concernant les négociations américano-iraniennes (dont un sixième cycle était prévu pour le 15 juin), qu'Israël rejetait fermement si l'accord autorisait, même sous le seuil de 3,67 %, la poursuite de l'enrichissement de l'uranium par la République islamique[13]. Liu Zhongmin, professeur à l'Institute of Middle East Studies de l'Université des études internationales de Shanghai (SISU), a ajouté que le «Trump 2.0» n'avait pas su contenir Tel-Aviv pendant ces discussions, tout en exacerbant l'instabilité dans d'autres points de tension régionaux, notamment en Israël-Palestine, en mer Rouge et en Syrie[14].

Enfin, le troisième objectif aurait été de provoquer des troubles en Iran. **Ding Long**, également professeur à l'Institut d'études du Moyen-Orient de la SISU, estime que les frappes visant des dirigeants politiques et militaires iraniens avaient pour but de susciter des bouleversements internes susceptibles d'ébranler la stabilité du régime[15].

Impliqués ou non? Les acteurs régionaux, les États-Unis, la Chine, la Russie et l'Europe

Pour **Niu Xinchun**, directeur exécutif du *China–Arab Research Institute* à l'Université de Ningxia, la guerre israélo-iranienne a constitué le moment le plus dangereux pour le Moyen-Orient depuis le 7 octobre 2023. À la différence des crises précédentes, elle opposait directement deux États souverains

[8] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Remarks on Iran by Ambassador Fu Cong at the UN Security Council Emergency Meeting" [Discours sur l'Iran par l'ambassadeur Fu Cong lors de la réunion d'urgence du Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies], 22 juin 2025, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202506/t20250623_11654794.htm.

[9] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2025 nián 6 yuè 23 rì wàijiāobù fāyánrén Guō Jiākūn zhǔchí lìxíng jìzhěhuì," 2025年6月23日外交部发言人郭嘉昆主持例行记者会, [Le porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères Guo Jiakun a tenu une conférence de presse régulière le 23 juin 2025], 23 juin 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250623_11655121.shtml.

[10] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "2025 Nián 6 yuè 24 rì wàijiāo bù fāyán rén Guō Jiākūn zhǔchí lì xíng jìzhě huì" 2025年6月24日外交部发言人郭嘉昆主持例行记者会 [Le 24 juin 2025, le porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères Guo Jiakun a organisé une conférence de presse régulière], 24 juin 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250624_11657850.shtml;
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "2025 Nián 6 yuè 25 rì wàijiāo bù fāyán rén Guō Jiākūn zhǔchí lì xíng jìzhě huì" 2025年6月25日外交部发言人郭嘉昆主持例行记者会 [Le 25 juin 2025, le porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères Guo Jiakun a organisé une conférence de presse régulière], 25 juin 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202506/t20250625_11658600.shtml

[11] Zhang Wenjun, "Yīsèliè wèishénme xuǎnzài cǐshí kōngxí yīlǎng? zhuānjiā fēnxī" 以色列为什么选在此时空袭伊朗？专家分析 [Pourquoi Israël attaque-t-il l'Iran? Analyse d'expert], *CCTV*, 13 juin 2025, https://ysxw.cctv.cn/article.html?toc_style_id=feeds_default&item_id=16726319730139111086&channelId=1119.

[12] Feng Qikun, "Zhōngdōng júshì zǒuxiàng shīkòng? Zhuānjiā jiědú cǐ cì yǐ yī chōngtú bèihòu yuányīn yǔ yīngxiǎng 中东局势走向失控？专家解读此次以伊冲突背后原因与影响 [La situation au Moyen-Orient devient-elle incontrôlable ? Les experts interprètent les causes et les impacts derrière le conflit Israël-Iran.], *CRI online*, 13 juin 2025, https://news.cri.cn/20250613/8c21ac01-e2ed-8cc8-2fcf-652e5e1b5341.html.

[13] Voir la note 11, Zhang Wenjun, *CCTV*, 13 juin 2025.

[14] Liu Zhongmin, "Zhōngdōng ruì píng ｜ tèlǎngpǔ de "sānwú" zhèngcè shì yīsèliè yīlǎng chōngtū de zhòngyào gēnyuán" 中东睿评｜特朗普的"三无"政策是以色列伊朗冲突的重要根源 [La politique des « trois non » de Trump est une source importante du conflit entre Israël et l'Iran], *The Paper*, 17 juin 2025, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30991499.

[15] *The Paper*, "Zāo wǔ lún kōngxí hòu Yīlǎng liào hěnhuà: Jiāng wú zhījìng bàofù! Duōfāng jǐnjí fāshēng! Yīsèliè wèihé cǐshí dòngshǒu? Zhuānjiā fēnxī zhǔyào yǒu 3 dà mùdì!" 遭五轮空袭后伊朗撂狠话：将无止境报复！多方紧急发声！以色列为何此时动手？专家分析主要有3大目的 [Après cinq rounds de frappes aériennes, l'Iran a dit cruellement : il y aura des représailles sans fin ! Voix d'urgence multipartite ! Pourquoi Israël le fait-il à l'heure actuelle ? Il y a trois principaux objectifs de l'analyse d'expert], 13 juin 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30979310.

dotés de capacités militaires importantes, une situation rendue encore plus périlleuse par l'implication des États-Unis[16]. **Ding Long** a partagé cette analyse, allant jusqu'à qualifier la frappe israélienne contre l'Iran de véritable déclaration de guerre[17].

Évaluant les risques d'une escalade régionale, **Liu Qiang**, chercheur principal et président du comité académique du *Shanghai Centre for RimPac Strategic and International Studies*, a relevé que le 16 juin 2025, 21 pays arabes et musulmans avaient publié une déclaration commune condamnant l'attaque israélienne. Bien que la déclaration ait appelé au respect de la souveraineté et de l'intégrité territoriale de l'Iran, Liu y a vu «en réalité, une démonstration claire de parti pris» en faveur de la République islamique de la part des États du Moyen-Orient, y compris des puissances régionales majeures comme l'Arabie saoudite et la Turquie[18].

Néanmoins, **Tian Wenlin** et d'autres experts chinois ont affirmé que les États arabes ne disposent ni des capacités ni de la volonté de défier Israël, soulignant qu'aucune mesure significative n'avait été prise à son encontre dans le contexte de la guerre de Gaza. En raison de leurs différends de longue date avec l'Iran, Tian et ses collègues ont conclu que les États arabes se contenteraient vraisemblablement de «regarder sans agir»[19].

Concernant les États-Unis, **Liu Zhongmin** a décrit la politique moyen-orientale de la seconde administration Trump comme une politique «des trois 'non'»: immorale, chaotique et inconséquente (wúdào, wúxù, wúcháng ; 无道、无序、无常):

> «*[La politique étrangère américaine est] immorale car les États-Unis ont abandonné les prétendues «valeurs universelles» du passé, telles que la protection du Moyen-Orient et la transition démocratique; [...] chaotique car elle souffre d'un manque de planification stratégique cohérente ; [...] inconséquente car dépourvue de continuité, ce qui a entraîné un déclin constant de la crédibilité de la politique américaine au Moyen-Orient.*»[20]

De même, **Sun Degang** a soutenu que l'administration Trump adopte une approche fondamentalement transactionnelle, tandis que **Steve Witkoff**, envoyé spécial américain pour le Moyen-Orient, manquerait d'une stratégie claire et d'une compréhension fine des dynamiques régionales. En raison de l'incapacité de Washington à «mesurer les conséquences de ses actes» et de sa tendance à «n'agir qu'étape par étape», le conflit israélo-iranien aurait ainsi dégénéré en un «affrontement incontrôlé et chaotique»[21].

Liu Zhongmin a également observé que le Moyen-Orient est passé d'une hégémonie américaine à une multipolarité accrue, bien que les implications de ce changement pour la Chine demeurent incertaines. Concernant l'action de Pékin, **Liu Qiang** a affirmé que la sécurité de l'Iran constitue une question relevant directement de la sécurité nationale chinoise. Il a expliqué :

> «*Pour la Chine, afin d'éviter que l'Iran, maillon le plus fragile de la chaîne de sécurité internationale, ne s'effondre à la suite du conflit militaire avec Israël - voire d'une possible prise de contrôle conjointe par les États-Unis et Israël - il est indispensable d'adopter des mesures proactives et positives pour minimiser l'impact sur les intérêts nationaux chinois.*»[22]

Liu Zhongmin a par ailleurs souligné que le rôle constructif des puissances émergentes, représentées par la Chine, s'est consolidé grâce à la promotion de coopérations concrètes dans le cadre de l'initiative des «Nouvelles routes de la Soie» (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI), de l'Initiative globale pour la sécurité et de l'Initiative globale pour le développement[23]. Toutefois, ni **Liu Qiang** ni **Liu Zhongmin** n'ont fourni d'exemples précis de mesures que Pékin aurait pu mettre en œuvre. Sans surprise, cette absence de propositions concrètes n'a pas empêché certains médias chinois de relayer les remerciements de responsables iraniens saluant le «soutien de la Chine dans les moments les plus difficiles»[24] ainsi que sa «compréhension de la position de l'Iran»[25].

Concernant la Russie, **Sun Degang** a relevé que, bien que Moscou ait affirmé vouloir jouer un rôle de médiateur entre Israël et l'Iran, elle demeure profondément engagée dans la guerre contre l'Ukraine. Il a également noté que la Russie inspire peu de confiance à Israël, notamment en raison du soutien de Tel-Aviv à Kiev. De son côté, **Liu Zhongmin** a rappelé que le retrait antérieur de la Russie de Syrie avait affaibli la sécurité de l'Iran et fragilisé le régime de Bachar al-Assad[26].

Quant à l'Europe, **Dong Yifan**, chercheur associé à la *Belt and Road Academy* de la *Beijing Language and Culture University*, décrit l'Europe comme prise au piège d'un dilemme cornélien:

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[16] Su Xiaojing, "Yīlǎng duì yīsèliè bàofù yǐ zhǎnkāi zhōngdōng chǔyú "zuì wéixiǎn" shíkè zhuānjiā fēnxī" 伊朗对以色列报复已展开 中东处于“最危险”时刻 专家分析 [L'Iran a déjà répondu à Israël. L'analyse des experts : le Moyen-Orient est dans le moment le plus dangereux], *CNR*, 14 juin 2025, https://news.cnr.cn/sq/20250614/t20250614_527210408.shtml.

[17] Zhao Yifan & Han Jiaojiao, "Quánmiàn xuānzhàn"! Zhuānjiā jiědú yīsèliè xíjí yīlǎng gēnběn yuányīn "全面宣战"！专家解读以色列袭击伊朗根本原因 «Déclaration de guerre totale »! Les experts expliquent la cause profonde de l'attaque d'Israël contre l'Iran], *Sina Finance*, 13 juin 2025, https://finance.sina.com.cn/jjxw/2025-06-13/doc-inezxpez7122647.shtml.

[18] Liu Qiang, "Liú Qiáng： yīsèliè yǔ yīlǎng jūnshìchōngtū de kě yùjiàn hé bùkěyùjiàn de wēixiǎnxìng" 刘强：以色列与伊朗军事冲突的可预见和不可预见的危险性 [Liu Qiang : Les dangers prévisibles et imprévus du conflit militaire entre Israël et l'Iran], *Aisixiang*, 20 juin 2025, https://www.aisixiang.com/data/164046.html.

[19] Voir la note 12, Feng Qikun, *CRI online*, 13 juin 2025.

[20] Voir la note 14, Liu Zhongmin, *The Paper*, 17 juin 2025.

[21] Zhu Runyu, "Yīlǎng háixiǎng jìxù hé měiguó tánpàn？ zhuānjiā：“dàtòng” yīsèliè cáiyǒu tánpàn dǐqì" 伊朗还想继续和美国谈判？专家：“打痛”以色列才有谈判底气 [L'Iran veut-il toujours continuer les négociations avec les États-Unis ? Expert : Ce n'est qu'en « frappant » Israël qu'il peut avoir la confiance nécessaire pour négocier], *The Paper*, 17 juin 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30995725

[22] Voir la note 18, Liu Qiang, *Aisixiang*, 20 juin 2025.

[23] Voir la note 14, Liu Zhongmin, *The Paper*, 17 juin 2025

[24] *Sina*, "Gǎnxiè Zhōngguó zhèngfǔ hé rénmín zài Yīlǎng zuì jiānnán shíkè jǐyǔ de zhīchí" 感谢中国政府和人民在伊朗最艰难时刻给予的支持 [« Nous remercions le gouvernement et le peuple chinois pour le soutien apporté pendant la période la plus difficile de l'Iran »], 29 juin 2025, https://cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/1887344341/707e96d502001myf8.

[25] Sohu, "Yīlǎng fángzhǎng liányè gǎndào Zhōngguó, dāngmiàn gǎnxiè Zhōngfāng zhīchí, Shànghé shí guó fángzhǎng quánbù dàoqí" 伊朗防长连夜赶到中国，当面感谢中方支持，上合十国防长全部到齐 [Le ministre iranien de la Défense s'est précipité en Chine pendant la nuit pour remercier personnellement la partie chinoise de son soutien. Les dix ministres de la Défense de l'Organisation de coopération de Shanghai étaient présents], 26 juin 2025, https://www.sohu.com/a/908051021_121462186.

[26] Chen Qinhan, "Yuánzhuō ｜ cǐ lún yǐ yī chōngtū huìdǎozhì yīlǎng zhèngquán gēngdié ma?" 圆桌｜此轮以伊冲突会导致伊朗政权更迭吗？[Ce conflit entre Israël et l'Iran mènera-t-il à un changement de régime en Iran ?],*The Paper*, 17 juin 2025, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_30992652.

désireuse de promouvoir un cessez-le-feu, mais incapable d'adopter une position autonome vis-à-vis des États-Unis et d'Israël[27]. Selon lui, l'Europe peine à concilier ambitions géopolitiques et capacités réelles, révélant les contradictions persistantes entre ses responsabilités morales et ses intérêts stratégiques.

Enfin, **Cui Hongjian**, chercheur principal et directeur du département d'études européennes au *China Institute of International Studies* (CIIS), a souligné que les échanges diplomatiques entre l'Iran et les pays européens demeurent essentiellement symboliques. Ces derniers seraient peu enclins à s'engager sur une voie véritablement indépendante, de peur d'affecter leurs relations avec Washington et Tel-Aviv[28].

Perspectives d'avenir

Les experts chinois se sont également interrogés sur les voies possibles pour un engagement iranien en faveur de la paix. **Liu Zhongmin** a soutenu que, même si l'Iran choisissait une approche pacifique, sa marge de manœuvre resterait limitée par des facteurs régionaux et internationaux, notamment l'érosion du leadership mondial des États-Unis et l'affaiblissement d'institutions internationales telles que le Conseil de sécurité des Nations Unies[29].

Jin Liangxiang, chercheur au *Center for West Asian and African Studies* et professeur associé à *l'Institute for International Strategic Studies*, a observé que, bien que l'administration Trump se soit dite ouverte à des négociations avec l'Iran, elle se heurtait à plusieurs obstacles. Washington demeurerait vraisemblablement incapable de contenir Israël, en raison de l'influence des lobbies pro-israéliens et du «capital juif» dans la politique américaine[30].

Après l'annonce par Trump d'un cessez-le-feu entre Israël et l'Iran, le débat parmi les experts chinois s'est déplacé vers l'évaluation de la durabilité de cette trêve. **Li Zixin**, chercheur associé au *China Institute of International Studies*, a avancé que l'administration Trump semblait adopter une stratégie du «stop there», visant à éviter un enlisement durable au Moyen-Orient, incompatible avec ses priorités politiques intérieures[31]. Selon Li, le cessez-le-feu a été rendu possible parce que les trois parties pouvaient chacune présenter l'accord comme une victoire devant leur opinion publique nationale : les États-Unis avaient «détruit» les installations nucléaires iraniennes, l'Iran avait riposté contre la principale base militaire américaine de la région et Israël avait saboté les négociations américano-iraniennes tout en interrompant le programme nucléaire de Téhéran[32].

Liu Zhongmin a proposé une analyse similaire, estimant improbable que l'Iran renonce à ses ambitions nucléaires et soulignant que l'hostilité envers Israël demeurera vraisemblablement[33]. Wang Lixin, chercheur associé à *l'Institute of International Relations* de la *Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences*, a quant à lui insisté sur le climat d'incertitude qui prévaut après l'intervention américaine : d'une part, Trump semble déterminé à stabiliser rapidement la région ; de l'autre, il conserve la possibilité d'accentuer la pression sur l'Iran, ce qui fait peser le risque d'une nouvelle escalade[34].

Conclusion

La position officielle de la Chine s'est montrée critique à l'égard d'Israël et des États-Unis, conformément à ses réactions lors des crises antérieures dans la région. De nombreux experts chinois ont repris cette ligne gouvernementale, exprimant de vives inquiétudes face à l'escalade et imputant à Washington la responsabilité d'avoir laissé à Tel-Aviv une marge de manœuvre excessive. Tout en dénonçant les frappes israéliennes, plusieurs observateurs ont néanmoins reconnu la cohérence des arguments avancés par Israël et les États-Unis concernant la nécessité de neutraliser les capacités nucléaires iraniennes.

Leurs analyses révèlent également la difficulté à intégrer cette crise dans le récit désormais bien établi du déclin de l'influence américaine au Moyen-Orient et de la montée en puissance concomitante de la Chine et d'autres acteurs non occidentaux. Selon eux, les acteurs régionaux, tout comme la Russie et l'Europe, ne disposent ni de la volonté ni des capacités nécessaires pour tenter de résoudre une crise d'une telle ampleur.

Quant au rôle de la Chine, une forme de frustration semble transparaître aussi bien chez les responsables que chez les experts chinois : l'Iran est un partenaire important, mais la Chine dispose de moyens limités pour lui apporter un soutien véritablement efficace. Les rares références à la Chine dans les sources analysées demeurent d'ailleurs très générales, suggérant un désintérêt relatif pour une situation dans laquelle Pékin ne peut — ou ne souhaite — s'engager de manière concrète dans la gestion des crises régionales.

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[27] Dong Yifan, "Dǒng Yīfán: Yī yī chōngtú, ōuzhōu lìchǎng wèihé níng bā?" 董一凡：以伊冲突，欧洲立场为何拧巴？[Pourquoi la position de l'Europe est-elle si maladroite dans le conflit entre Israël et l'Iran ?], *Aisixiang*, 24 juin 2025, https://www.aisixiang.com/data/164215.html.

[28] *CCTV*, "Ōuzhōu jiēshǒu yī hé huìtán yǒu nǎxiē kǎoliáng? Zhuānjiā fēnxī" 欧洲接手伊核会谈有哪些考量？专家分析 [Quelles considérations l'Europe a-t-elle à prendre en charge les pourparlers sur le nucléaire iranien ? Analyse d'experts], 19 juin 2025, https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20250619A08FLO00.

[29] Sun Degang, "Péngpài xīnwén：Sūn Dégāng：yuánzhuō｜ yīsèliè cǐ lún néng dǎozhì yīlǎng zhèngquán gēngdié ma? "澎湃新闻：孙德刚：圆桌｜以色列此轮能导致伊朗政权更迭吗？[The Paper : Sun Degang : Table ronde : Le tour d'Israël peut-il mener à un changement de régime en Iran ?] Institute of International Studies Fudan University, 17 juin 2025, https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/43/66/c6893a738150/page.htm.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Shi Xunfeng, "Túshuō gǔn yīsèliè yǔ yīlǎng tínghuǒ, zhōngdōng júshì zǒuxiàng rúhé" 图说丨以色列与伊朗停火，中东局势走向如何 [Illustration 丨 Un cessez-le-feu entre Israël et l'Iran, quelle est la direction de la situation au Moyen-Orient ?], *The Paper*, 24 juin 2025, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_31032902.

[32] *CNR*, "Yǐ yī 12 tiān zhànzhēng jiéshù tínghuǒ kě chíxù ma? Zhuānjiā fēnxī" 以伊12天战争结束 停火可持续吗？专家分析 [Le cessez-le-feu est-il durable après 12 jours de guerre en Iran ? Analyse d'expert], 25 juin 2025, https://news.cnr.cn/sq/20250625/t20250625_527228959.shtml.

[33] *The Paper*, "Liú Zhōngmín jiàoshòu jiù yīsèliè yǔ yīlǎng tínghuǒ jiēshòu xīnhuá shè cǎifǎng" 刘中民教授就以色列与伊朗停火接受新华社采访 [Le professeur Liu Zhongmin a été interviewé par l'agence de presse Xinhua sur le cessez-le-feu entre Israël et l'Iran], Shanghai International Studies University, 24 juin 2025, https://mideast.shisu.edu.cn/07/02/c3991a198402/page.htm.

[34] *Sina*, "Yǐ Yī tínghuǒ néng fǒu chíxù? Zhuānjiā: quēfá zhànlüè hùxìn, chōngtú huò chángqī huà" 以伊停火能否持续？专家：缺乏战略互信，冲突或长期化 [Le cessez-le-feu entre Israël et l'Iran va-t-il durer ? Experts : il y a un manque de confiance stratégique mutuelle, le conflit pourrait se prolonger], 25 Jjuin 2025, https://news.sina.com.cn/w/2025-06-25/doc-infchyza7831346.shtml.

DE LA DISTANCIATION À LA RÉÉVALUATION? PERSPECTIVES ISRAÉLIENNES SUR LA CHINE APRÈS LA GUERRE DES DOUZE JOURS

Par Amanda Chen

Avant même le déclenchement des hostilités, les experts et les médias israéliens faisaient état d'une inquiétude croissante concernant les liens entre Pékin et Téhéran, consacrant une large couverture aux rapports évoquant une supposée coopération militaire sino-iranienne. Ces préoccupations ont persisté pendant et après la guerre des Douze Jours, en dépit des démentis répétés des autorités chinoises.

Cette représentation médiatique majoritairement défavorable témoigne d'un sentiment persistant de distance, voire de méfiance, à l'égard de la Chine au sein de l'opinion publique israélienne[35]. Parallèlement, la perception des limites du partenariat sino-iranien semble avoir incité plusieurs experts israéliens spécialisés sur la Chine et les questions sécuritaires à envisager ce conflit comme une possible opportunité de réévaluer les relations bilatérales avec Pékin.

Suspicion générale: La Chine arme-t-elle l'Iran ?

Au début du mois de juin, dans les semaines précédant la guerre, les médias israéliens ont largement relayé un article du *Wall Street Journal* affirmant que, parallèlement aux négociations nucléaires, Téhéran avait acquis auprès de Pékin plusieurs milliers de tonnes de composants chimiques – notamment des propergols pour missiles balistiques – afin de reconstituer des capacités militaires endommagées par les frappes israéliennes d'octobre 2024[36]. Il a été avancé que certaines de ces cargaisons auraient été destinées à des groupes soutenus par l'Iran dans la région, tels que les Houthis au Yémen. Ces informations ont suscité une vive inquiétude en Israël quant au réarmement de Téhéran et à l'ampleur de ce soutien chinois, présumé mais non vérifié[37].

Après le déclenchement de la guerre, les soupçons d'un appui chinois à l'Iran ont été ravivés par les médias occidentaux et relayés par *Maariv* à la suite d'informations selon lesquelles des avions-cargos en provenance de Chine auraient mystérieusement disparu des radars à proximité de la frontière iranienne[38]. Cette rumeur a été démentie par **Tuvia Gering**, chercheur invité au *Israel–China Policy Center* de *l'Institute for National Security Studies* (INSS), qui a expliqué dans les colonnes de *Maariv* que ces appareils avaient simplement effectué une escale au Turkménistan et appartenaient à la compagnie cargo luxembourgeoise Cargolux. Il a ajouté qu' «au-delà de toute considération de bon sens, il est difficile d'imaginer qu'une grande entreprise européenne de transport de fret puisse être utilisée pour acheminer des systèmes d'armes sophistiquées de la Chine vers l'Iran»[39]. L'expert a toutefois souligné que, si la probabilité d'une coopération militaire sino-iranienne demeurait faible, celle-ci «ne devait pas être écartée et méritait une surveillance attentive»[40].

Ce prisme analytique s'est maintenu après la fin des combats consécutive au cessez-le-feu négocié par les États-Unis le 24 juin. Ainsi, les médias israéliens ont présenté la visite du ministre iranien de la Défense, **Aziz Nasirzadeh**, en Chine le 25 juin – à l'occasion de la conférence des ministres de la Défense de l'OCS - comme un nouvel indice du soutien supposé de Pékin au réarmement de l'Iran[41].

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[35] Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, "Enduring Disillusionment: The Israeli Media Debate on China in 2024" [Désillusion persistante : le débat médiatique israélien sur la Chine en 2024] *ChinaMed Observer,* 11 février 2025, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/enduring-disillusionment-the-israeli-media-debate-on-china-in-2024.

[36] Laurence Norman, "Iran Orders Material From China for Hundreds of Ballistic Missiles," (L'Iran commande du matériel à la Chine pour des centaines de missiles balistiques), *The Wall Street Journal,* 5 juin 2025, https://www.wsj.com/world/iran-orders-material-from-china-for-hundreds-of-ballistic-missiles-1e874701;
Guy Ulster, "Divuach - Iran Hizmina MeSin Chomarim LeYitzur Meot Tilim Balistim" דיווח: איראן הזמינה מסין חומרים לייצור מאות טילים בליסטיים [Rapport : l'Iran a commandé des matériaux à la Chine pour produire des centaines de missiles balistiques], Walla, 6 juin 2025, https://news.walla.co.il/item/3755426;
Israel Hayom, "HaHazmana HaIranit MeSin: Markivim LeYitzur Tilim Balistim BeMishkal Alfei Tonot | Divuach" ההזמנה האיראנית מסין: מרכיבים לייצור טילים בליסטיים במשקל אלפי טונות - והקשר לחות'ים | דיווח [La commande iranienne à la Chine : composants pour la production de missiles balistiques pesant des milliers de tonnes - et le lien avec les Houthis | Rapport], 6 juin 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/middle-east/article/18126465;
Srugim News, "Chashash BeIsrael MeHaMahalach HaChadash Shel Iran" חשש בישראל מהמהלך החדש של איראן [L'inquiétude d'Israël concernant la nouvelle tendance de l'Iran], 6 juin 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1133805-חשש-בישראל-מהמהלך-החדש-של-איראן;
Ynet, "Divuach - Iran Hizmina MeSin Chomarim LeYitzur Meot Tilim Balistim" דיווח: איראן הזמינה מסין חומרים לייצור מאות טילים בליסטיים [Rapport : l'Iran a commandé des matériaux à la Chine pour produire des centaines de missiles balistiques], 6 juin 2025, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hkas5jj7xg.

[37] Yair Amar, "BaOlam Chosfim: Ze HaMakor HaMaftia LaNeshek HaMitkadem Shel HaChutim" בעולם חושפים: זה המקור המפתיע לנשק המתקדם של החות'ים [Le monde révèle : C'est la source surprenante des armes avancées des Houthis], *Srugim News*, 8 juin 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1134317-בעולם-חושפים-זה-המקור-המפתיע-לנשק-המתק.

[38] Sophia Yan, "China sends mystery transport planes into Iran," (La Chine envoie des avions de transport mystérieux en Iran), *The Telegraph*, 17 juin 2025, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/06/17/china-sends-mystery-transport-planes-into-iran/

[39] *Maariv*, "Ma Mastir Tzir HaResha? Tisot Mistoriot Yatz'u MeSim – VeNe'elmu MeHaRadar Samuch LeIran?" מה מסתיר ציר הרשע? טיסות מסתוריות יצאו מסין – ונעלמו מהרדאר סמוך לאיראן [Que cache l'Axe du Mal ? Des vols mystérieux ont quitté la Chine et ont disparu des radars près de l'Iran.], 20 juin 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1207286.

[40] Voir la note 38, Sophia Yan, *The Telegraph*, 17 juin 2025.

[41] Dudi Kogan, "Iran Kvar Ovedet Al HaShikum: HaBikur Shel Sar HaBitachon BeSin" איראן כבר עובדת על השיקום: הביקור של שר הביטחון בסין [L'Iran travaille déjà à sa reconstruction : visite du ministre de la Défense en Chine], *Israel Hayom*, 25 juin, 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/article/18281419.

Yair Amar, correspondant politique du média conservateur *Srugim*, a avancé que ce déplacement s'inscrivait vraisemblablement dans une démarche visant à acquérir de nouveaux systèmes de défense aérienne, voire le chasseur chinois J-10, dérivé du programme israélien Lavi — abandonné — et que l'Égypte envisagerait également d'acheter[42]. Plusieurs analystes ont relevé que le J-10, qui a démontré une efficacité notable lors des affrontements aériens indo-pakistanais de début mai 2025, pourrait, s'il était acquis par des États de la région, remettre en cause la supériorité aérienne israélienne au Moyen-Orient[43]. Enfin *Middle East Eye*, citant des responsables arabes s'exprimant sous couvert d'anonymat, a rapporté que les États-Unis et leurs alliés arabes étaient informés des efforts iraniens de réarmement, avançant en outre que Téhéran financerait l'achat de missiles par des livraisons de pétrole[44].

Réaction des experts : La coopération reste possible

Malgré la suspicion dominante dans les médias israéliens quant à un éventuel soutien militaire chinois à l'Iran, certains experts et diplomates israéliens ont adopté des analyses plus nuancées. Si certains ont interprété ces informations comme le signe d'un éloignement croissant entre Pékin et Tel-Aviv, la majorité a privilégié une approche plus prudente, appelant à un réexamen de la politique israélienne à l'égard de la Chine. Ces analystes ont souligné qu'en dépit de la couverture médiatique, la diplomatie chinoise durant le conflit n'avait pas porté atteinte de manière directe aux intérêts israéliens et aurait même, à certains égards, pu s'avérer favorable à Tel-Aviv.

Parmi les critiques les plus virulentes à l'égard de la Chine figure celle exprimée par l'ambassadeur d'Israël à Washington, **Yechiel Leiter**, qui a dénoncé la prétendue coopération militaire sino-iranienne. Dans une interview accordée à *The Voice of America*, reprise par *Ynet*, il a averti qu'Israël devait faire de la prévention de toute aide chinoise à la reconstruction du programme balistique iranien une priorité stratégique. Tout en affirmant l'importance d'«entretenir de bonnes relations avec le peuple chinois», il a estimé qu'Israël ne pouvait accepter que la Chine «collabore étroitement avec un pays qui menace ouvertement de nous détruire»[45].

Nadav Eyal, chroniqueur pour *Yediot Ahronot*,[46] a fait écho à ces préoccupations, jugeant que «la question [d'une coopération militaire chinoise avec l'Iran] est profondément inquiétante et susceptible d'avoir des implications stratégiques», en dépit des déclarations de sources officielles selon lesquelles Pékin «n'a pas confirmé ces allégations»[47]. De son côté, **Yoram Evrom**, professeur associé de sciences politiques et études chinoises à l'Université de Haïfa, a estimé que, même si la Chine prenait le risque d'aider l'Iran, elle le ferait probablement par le biais de fournitures classées à «double usage», précisément afin de rester en deçà du seuil de visibilité, dans la mesure où Pékin, fondamentalement, «n'est pas disposé à compromettre ses propres intérêts pour autrui»[48].

Contrairement à son homologue américain, la consule générale d'Israël à Shanghai, **Ravit Baer**, a adopté un ton plus pragmatique lors d'une interview accordée à *Bloomberg TV*, reprise par *Maariv*. Elle a directement exhorté Pékin à limiter le réarmement iranien, déclarant que «la Chine est le seul acteur en mesure d'exercer une influence réelle sur l'Iran», tout en soulignant que la poursuite des achats chinois de pétrole iranien compliquait toute tentative de contenir la politique régionale agressive de Téhéran[49]. Elle a par ailleurs averti qu'un renforcement de l'armée de l'air iranienne par l'acquisition de chasseurs chinois J-10 constituerait une menace non seulement pour Israël, mais également pour d'autres États du Moyen-Orient, notamment l'Arabie saoudite, partenaire clé des intérêts et ambitions régionales de la Chine[50]. Néanmoins, tout en reconnaissant les divergences politiques persistantes entre Tel-Aviv et Pékin, elle a mis en avant la solidité des échanges bilatéraux pour souligner que:

> «*Même en cas de désaccord politique, la coopération reste possible. Un dialogue positif est toujours en place.*»[51]

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[42] Yair Amar, "Mitkonenim LaMilchama HaBa'a? Sar HaHagana HaIrani Higia LeMasa Rechesh BeSin" מתכוננים למלחמה הבאה? שר ההגנה האיראני הגיע למסע רכש בסין [Préparation à la prochaine guerre ? Le ministre iranien de la Défense arrive en Chine pour une mission d'approvisionnement.], *Srugim News*, 25 juin 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1143285-מתכוננים-למלחמה-הבאה-שר-ההגנה-האיראני;
Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, "Israeli Media Examines Trade and Tech Relations with China," (Les médias israéliens examinent les relations commerciales et technologiques avec la Chine), *ChinaMed Observer*, 25 février 2025, https://www.chinamed.it/observer/israeli-media-examines-trade-and-tech-relations-with-china.

[43] Neta Bar, "Yecholot Muchachot VeMekorot Israelim: Ze Matos HaKrav SheIran Meunienet Liknot MeSin" יכולות מוכחות ומקורות ישראליים: זה מטוס הקרב שאיראן מעוניינת לקנות מסין [Capacités éprouvées et sources israéliennes : voici l'avion de chasse que l'Iran souhaite acheter à la Chine.], *Israel Hayom*, 27 juin 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/middle-east/article/18292340.

[44] *Maariv*, "Chashavtem SheLeIran Nigmeru HaTilim? Chaval - HaMa'atzma SheMemalet Et HaMachsanim BeTehran" חשבתם שלאיראן נגמרו הטילים? חבל - המעצמה שממלאת את המחסנים בטהרן [Vous pensiez que l'Iran était à court de missiles ? Tant pis pour lui – la superpuissance qui remplit les entrepôts de Téhéran], 8 juillet 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1212691.

[45] Sean Mathews, "Iran receives Chinese surface-to-air missile batteries after Israel ceasefire deal," (L'Iran reçoit des batteries de missiles sol-air chinoises après l'accord de cessez-le-feu avec Israël.), *Middle East Eye*, 7 juillet 2025, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-receives-chinese-surface-air-missile-batteries-after-israel-ceasefire-say-sources;
Itamar Eichner, "Shagrir Israel BeArtzot HaBrit Neged Sin: 'Mesaya'at LeIran Lehachayot Et Tochnit HaTilim Shela'" שגריר ישראל בארה"ב נגד סין: "מסייעת לאיראן להחיות את תוכנית הטילים שלה" [L'ambassadeur d'Israël aux États-Unis s'oppose à la Chine : « Aider l'Iran à relancer son programme de missiles »], *Ynet*, 26 juillet 2025, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/s1hffvfwgl.

[46] *Yediot Ahronot* (version papier de *Ynet*) et *Israel Hayom* sont les plateformes d'information les plus lues d'Israël.

[47] Nadav Eyal, "Iran Rotza Leshakem Et Ma'arach HaTilim - BeEzrat Sin; Israel 'Mutredet Meod'" איראן רוצה לשקם את מערך הטילים - בעזרת סין; ישראל "מוטרדת מאוד" [L'Iran souhaite reconstruire son système de missiles avec l'aide de la Chine ; Israël est « très inquiet ». "], *Ynet*, 15 août 2025, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hkc5q2odgg

[48] Dudi Kogan, "HaMilchama Yim Iran Hochicha: HaOlam Adain Shayach LeWashington" המלחמה עם איראן הוכיחה: העולם עדיין שייך לוושינגטון [La guerre contre l'Iran a prouvé que le monde appartient toujours à Washington.], *Israel Hayom*, 24 juin 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/usa/article/18273678.

[49] *Maariv*, "Hitya'ashu MeTrump? HaDrisha HaChariga Shel Israel MeSin Neged Iran" התייאשו מטראמפ? הדרישה החריגה של ישראל מסין נגד איראן [Ont-ils renoncé à Trump ? L'inhabituelle demande d'Israël à la Chine contre l'Iran], 7 juillet 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/article-1212395.

[50] Ibid.

[51] *Maariv*, "Bimkom Lehitasek Yim Iran Yeshirot - Israel Pona LeTzinor HaChamtzan Shela" במקום להתעסק עם איראן ישירות - ישראל פונה לצינור החמצן שלה [Au lieu de traiter directement avec l'Iran, Israël se tourne vers son pipeline d'oxygène.], 2 juillet 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1210887.

Plusieurs analystes ont partagé cette lecture, rappelant les pressions exercées par Pékin sur Téhéran pour empêcher la fermeture du détroit d'Ormuz, malgré le vote unanime du Parlement iranien en faveur de cette mesure le 22 juin, peu après les frappes américaines contre les installations nucléaires iraniennes[52]. Le 23 juin, les médias israéliens ont ainsi souligné le rôle de la Chine en rapportant que le ministre chinois des Affaires étrangères, **Wang Yi**, avait contacté son homologue iranien, **Abbas Araghchi**, «afin d'éviter des dommages économiques encore plus graves pour le commerce mondial»[53]. **Amatzia Baram**, professeure émérite d'histoire du Moyen-Orient à l'Université de Haïfa, a expliqué que la Chine avait tout intérêt à prévenir une escalade du conflit, dans la mesure où elle dépend fortement du pétrole iranien et serait «la première à souffrir» d'une rupture d'approvisionnement[54].

Si certains analystes ont interprété les pressions exercées par la Chine sur l'Iran avant tout à l'aune de considérations économiques, d'autres y ont vu la manifestation de «fissures au sein de l'axe anti-occidental», soulignant que ni Moscou ni Pékin n'avaient apporté de soutien substantiel à Téhéran durant le conflit. Il convient également de noter que la Chine s'est abstenue d'isoler Israël aux Nations unies, contrairement aux attentes de certains observateurs[55]. **Galia Lavi**, directrice du *Israel–China Policy Center* de l'INSS, a estimé que la rhétorique mesurée adoptée par Pékin depuis la «frappe préventive» israélienne du 13 juin traduisait à la fois la prudence chinoise - soucieuse d'éviter tout enlisement dans le conflit - et son opposition constante au développement d'armes nucléaires par l'Iran, un scénario perçu par Pékin comme contraire à ses propres intérêts stratégiques au Moyen-Orient. Elle a conclu que «cette politique d'équilibre montre que Pékin ne se considère pas comme partie prenante d'un axe iranien», mais cherche plutôt à maintenir un ajustement subtil entre ses relations avec l'Iran, Israël et les États arabes[56].

Un tournant pour les relations bilatérales ?

Contrairement aux déclarations sévères formulées à la suite de l'attaque du Hamas le 7 octobre 2023, les médias d'État chinois se sont abstenus de critiquer explicitement Israël durant la guerre des Douze Jours. Leur discours s'est limité à la condamnation des atteintes à la souveraineté iranienne tout en appelant à la retenue et à la désescalade. Cette tonalité plus conciliante à l'égard de Tel-Aviv s'inscrit dans la continuité d'une inflexion amorcée l'année précédente, notamment depuis l'entrée en fonction du nouvel ambassadeur de Chine en Israël, **Xiao Junzheng** (肖军正)[57]. Au début du mois de juillet 2025, ce dernier a accordé une interview au quotidien *Israel Hayom*, dans laquelle il a fermement rejeté les accusations selon lesquelles la Chine aurait apporté un soutien militaire à l'Iran, comme par exemple le transfert de missiles et d'avions de chasse J-10. Qualifiant ces allégations de désinformation, il a déclaré qu'«un mensonge répété mille fois reste un mensonge»[58]. Les journalistes d'*Israel Hayom* ont reconnu que cette prise de parole incarnait, dans une certaine mesure, «le changement de ton de la Chine envers Israël pendant la guerre»[59].

Doron Cucos, chercheur en relations internationales, spécialiste de l'Asie de l'Est et collaborateur invité à l'Institut Mitvim, a qualifié à la fois l'évolution du discours chinois et les succès militaires israéliens contre l'Iran de «tournant décisif» dans la redéfinition des relations sino-israéliennes[60]. Selon lui, Tel-Aviv aurait intérêt à rechercher un alignement pragmatique avec Pékin sur des enjeux d'intérêt commun, «notamment la limitation des ambitions nucléaires iraniennes et la réduction de l'instabilité régionale»[61].

Dans une analyse convergente, l'analyste géopolitique **Anat Hochberg-Marom** a également interprété ce conflit comme un moment charnière pour la stratégie régionale de la Chine. Elle souligne que, si les frappes israéliennes et américaines ont affaibli l'Iran, elles ont simultanément accru la dépendance énergétique de Pékin à l'égard des exportateurs arabes du Moyen-Orient. Elle a ainsi encouragé Tel-Aviv à saisir cette opportunité pour «adopter une nouvelle politique étrangère pragmatique» à l'égard la Chine et approfondir les relations bilatérales[62]. Hochberg-Marom va jusqu'à avancer que «face à l'intensification des critiques internationales visant Israël, à la reprise des négociations nucléaires avec l'Iran et à l'imprévisibilité de la politique étrangère du président des États-Unis», un rapprochement avec la Chine pourrait contribuer à améliorer l'image d'Israël auprès des pays du Sud, tandis que Pékin renforcerait sa stature de médiateur crédible sur la scène internationale[63].

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[52] Yair Amar, "Srugim News, Sin Shigra Azhara Charifa LeIran: 'Tza'ad SheLo Mekubal Aleinu'" סין שיגרה אזהרה חריפה לאיראן: "צעד שלא מקובל עלינו" [La Chine a adressé un avertissement sévère à l'Iran: «Une mesure inacceptable pour nous. »], 23 juin 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1141999-סין-שיגרה-אזהרה-חריפה-לאיראן-צעד-שלא-מ;

[53] *Maariv*, "Iran Notra Levada: BeTehran Zoamim Al HaRusim, Gam Sin Medashdeshet" איראן נותרה לבדה: בטהרן זועמים על הרוסים, גם סין מדשדשת [L'Iran se retrouve isolé : Téhéran est furieux contre les Russes, la Chine est également en difficulté.], 23 juin 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/article-1208232.

[54] Maya Cohen, "Lo Osim Cheshbon: Vladimir Putin VeSin Tzfuyim Lintosh Et Iran" לא עושים חשבון: ולדימיר פוטין וסין צפויים לנטוש את איראן [Sans calculs : Vladimir Poutine et la Chine devraient abandonner l'Iran], *Maariv*, 19 juin 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/article-1206484.

[55] *Maariv*, "HaShagrir HaIrani Leshe'avar Boche: Eich HaRusim Mochrim Otanu Kol Pa'am MeChadash" השגריר האיראני לשעבר בוכה: איך הרוסים מוכרים אותנו כל פעם מחדש [L'ancien ambassadeur iranien s'écrie : « Comment les Russes nous trahissent sans cesse ! »], 7 juillet 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/world/article-1212380.

[56] Galia Lavi, "Sin, Iran VeIsrael: Diplomatia Zehira BeZira Boeret" סין, איראן וישראל: דיפלומטיה זהירה בזירה בוערת [Chine, Iran et Israël : une diplomatie prudente dans une arène en feu], INSS, 13 Juin, 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/he/social_media/סין-איראן-וישראל-דיפלומטיה-זהירה-בזיר/.

[57] Voir la note 35, Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, *ChinaMed Observer*, 11 Février, 2025,

[58] Yair Amar, "Shagrirut Sin BeIsrael Machchisha: Lo He'evarnu Ma'archot Tilim LeIran" שגרירות סין בישראל מכחישה: לא העברנו מערכות טילים לאיראן [L'ambassade de Chine en Israël dément : nous n'avons transféré aucun système de missiles à l'Iran.], *Srugim News*, 9 Juillet, 2025, https://www.srugim.co.il/1149149-שגרירות-סין-בישראל-מכחישה-לא-העברנו-מע.

[59] Dudi Kogan & Erez Linn, "Shagrir Sin Al HaHashamot BeIsrael: 'Ha'avarat Neshek LeIran? Sheker'" שגריר סין על ההאשמות בישראל: "העברת נשק לאיראן? שקר" [L'ambassadeur de Chine réagit aux accusations d'Israël : «Transférer des armes à l'Iran ? Un mensonge !»*Israel Hayom*, 10 Juillet, 2025, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/world-news/other/article/18390553.

[60] Doron Cucos, "China's strategic shift: Navigating relations with Israel, Iran in a changing Middle East - opinion," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 22, 2025, https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-861723

[61] Ibid.

[62] Anat Hochberg-Marom, "Itut MeBeijing: Yitachen SheSin Hevina SheIsrael Hi Neches - VeYesh Lechach Siba | Dr. Anat Hochberg-Marom" איתות מבייג'ינג: ייתכן שסין הבינה שישראל היא נכס - ויש לכך סיבה | ד"ר ענת הוכברג-מרום [Signal de Pékin : la Chine a peut-être compris qu'Israël est un atout – et il y a une raison à cela | Dr Anat Hochberg-Marom], *Maariv*, 1 Août, 2025, https://www.maariv.co.il/journalists/opinions/article-1219979.

[63] Ibid.

Si l'hypothèse d'une coopération sino-israélienne plus étroite est généralement considérée comme envisageable, voire souhaitable, la plupart des experts demeurent toutefois sceptiques quant à la capacité réelle de la Chine à jouer un rôle de médiateur au Moyen-Orient. **Dudi Kogan**, dans *Israel Hayom*, affirme ainsi que la guerre et l'intervention américaine ont, au contraire, réaffirmé la primauté de Washington en tant que garant ultime de la sécurité régionale[64].

Cette analyse est partagée par **Galia Lavi** et **Ori Sela**, chercheurs au *Israel–China Policy Center* de l'INSS, qui soulignent que, dans le contexte du conflit, «les pays de la région n'ont jamais attendu de la Chine davantage que de la rhétorique». Selon eux, les acteurs moyen-orientaux «font la distinction entre l'importance de la Chine dans les domaines économiques et infrastructurels et les enjeux politico-militaires, où ils dépendent clairement des États-Unis»[65]. De même, **Roy Ben Tzur**, assistant de recherche au sein du même institut, estime que, compte tenu de l'alignement diplomatique perçu de Pékin avec les adversaires d'Israël, la crédibilité de la Chine comme médiateur restera limitée à moins qu'elle «ne choisisse de nuancer ses positions et de reconnaître la complexité» des menaces sécuritaires qui pèsent sur Tel Aviv[66].

Conclusion

Le débat médiatique israélien sur la Chine pendant et après la guerre avec l'Iran met en évidence une inflexion notable du discours par rapport à l'année précédente, comme le montre ce rapport[67]. Si l'importante couverture médiatique du soutien militaire présumé de Pékin à Téhéran a révélé une distance persistante à l'égard de la Chine au sein de l'opinion publique israélienne, plusieurs experts spécialisés dans les relations sino-israéliennes et les questions de sécurité ont interprété le conflit comme une opportunité de réévaluer les relations bilatérales.

Parmi les voix plaidant publiquement en faveur d'un rapprochement figure celle de **Ravit Baer**, consule générale d'Israël à Shanghai, qui a insisté sur l'importance de préserver les échanges commerciaux bilatéraux. Ceux-ci, a-t-elle souligné, «ne se sont pas détériorés de manière significative malgré les conflits depuis 2023»[68], et pourraient contribuer à soutenir l'économie israélienne en période de guerre. L'émergence d'une approche plus pragmatique à l'égard de la Chine chez certains experts israéliens s'explique ainsi non seulement par des considérations économiques, mais aussi par des facteurs diplomatiques, notamment l'action du nouvel ambassadeur chinois en Israël et l'assouplissement du discours de Pékin à l'égard de Tel-Aviv.

Néanmoins, en dépit de la solidité des échanges commerciaux et du renforcement des relations diplomatiques, ces évolutions n'ont pas fondamentalement transformé la perception israélienne de la Chine. Les préoccupations liées à la sécurité nationale demeurent primordiales, et si un nombre croissant d'analystes se prononcent en faveur d'une coopération accrue avec Pékin, rares sont ceux qui partagent cet optimisme quant à la capacité réelle de la Chine à s'imposer comme médiateur au Moyen-Orient.

[64] Voir la note 48, Dudi Kogan, *Israel Hayom*, 24 Juin, 2025.

[65] Galia Lavi & Ori Sela, "Committed to Itself: China and the Israel-Iran War," (L'engagement envers soi-même : la Chine et la guerre israélo-iranienne), INSS Insight No. 2003, July 14, 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-iran-israel/.

[66] Roy Ben Tzur, "Biased Neutrality: China's Rhetoric Amid Escalating Tensions in the Middle East," (Neutralité partiale : la rhétorique de la Chine face à l'escalade des tensions au Moyen-Orient), INSS Insight No. 2004, August 14, 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-middle-east-2025/.

[67] Enrico Fardella, Amanda Chen & Leonardo Bruni, "China in the Shadow of October 7: Israeli Media Coverage of China in 2024,"(La Chine à l'ombre du 7 octobre : la couverture médiatique israélienne de la Chine en 2024), ChinaMed Project, March 21, 2025, https://www.twai.it/journal/chinamed-report-2024/.

[68] Voir la note 51, *Maariv*, 2 Juillet, 2025.

L'INTROSPECTION AVANT L'«EST» TROSPECTION: PERSPECTIVES IRANIENNES SUR LA CHINE APRÈS LA GUERRE DES DOUZE JOURS

Par Théo Nencini et Veronica Turrini

De nombreux Iraniens s'attendaient à une réaction chinoise plus ferme à la suite des frappes israéliennes. Or, la réponse de Pékin s'est limitée à une condamnation jugée tardive et, à notre connaissance, ne s'est accompagnée d'aucune forme de soutien matériel ou opérationnel. Dans les jours qui ont suivi, plusieurs hauts responsables iraniens, parmi lesquels le ministre de la Défense **Aziz Nasirzadeh** et le ministre des Affaires étrangères **Abbas Araghchi**, se sont rendus à Pékin et ont publiquement exprimé leur gratitude envers la Chine pour son «précieux soutien»[69].

Cette retenue manifeste de Pékin durant la guerre des Douze Jours a néanmoins pesé de manière significative sur le débat intérieur iranien relatif à sa relation avec la Chine. Elle a suscité des réactions contrastées, allant des critiques reprochant à Pékin de ne pas s'être davantage engagé, aux mises en cause du gouvernement iranien, accusé de ne pas avoir su convaincre la Chine de l'importance stratégique de Téhéran et de la valeur de l'Iran en tant que partenaire.

En deçà des attentes, du moins pour certains

L'hésitation initiale de la Chine à condamner promptement et sans équivoque les premières frappes israéliennes a déstabilisé de nombreux experts iraniens issus des milieux institutionnels, universitaires et médiatiques.

«La Chine n'a pas condamné l'attaque avant la riposte iranienne, se contentant d'appels à la retenue», a souligné **Mehdi Kharratiyan**, directeur de l'Institut pour la renaissance des politiques publiques[70]. Selon lui, du point de vue chinois, la République islamique aurait pu se trouver au bord de l'effondrement après la première frappe israélienne. Cet élément est loin d'être anodin dans la mesure où de nombreux commentateurs iraniens considèrent le renforcement des liens avec la Chine comme une forme d'«assurance-vie», permettant à un État affaibli par les sanctions de préserver sa survie. Comme le note **Rahman Qahremanpour**, universitaire et analyste politique[71], «cela pourrait nuire à la crédibilité de la Chine»[72], une appréciation partagée par plusieurs observateurs.

Qahremanpour attribue cette retenue à l'absence d'une stratégie de sécurité chinoise cohérente pour la région. Selon lui, la Chine «n'a pas de plan de sécurité pour le Moyen-Orient»[73]. Il cite à cet égard un ancien ambassadeur iranien en Chine, **Mohammad Hossein Malaek** (1997-2001), selon lequel «la Chine n'a pas de stratégie d'envergure au-delà du Pakistan»[74]. Dans cette perspective, les intérêts chinois dans la région se limiteraient essentiellement à la sécurisation des approvisionnements pétroliers du golfe Persique et au développement des investissements infrastructurels liés à l'initiative BRI. Par conséquent, Qahremanpour estime que l'Iran ne peut raisonnablement déléguer sa sécurité à Pékin: «Quel genre de puissance êtes-vous si, en temps de crise, vous déclarez 'je n'interviendrais pas là-dedans, résolvez vos problèmes par vous-mêmes'?»

Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, directrice du *China-MENA Project* au Centre de recherche scientifique et d'études stratégiques sur le Moyen-Orient de Téhéran (CSRMESS), renforce cette analyse en affirmant que «l'Iran et la Chine ne peuvent pas entretenir de relation stratégique»[75]. Elle rappelle que la Chine mène une politique étrangère officiellement non alignée et ne conclut pas d'alliances formelles, mais seulement des partenariats hiérarchisés. Dès lors, «l'Iran ne peut prétendre à un niveau de protection comparable à celui qu'offrent les États-Unis à leurs alliés». Un partenariat avec la Chine implique l'absence

[69] *Bloomberg News*, "Iran's Defense Minister Visits China in First Trip Since War," [Le ministre iranien de la Défense se rend en Chine pour la première fois depuis le début de la guerre], 25 juin 2025, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-06-25/iran-s-defense-minister-visits-china-in-his-first-trip-since-war; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Wang Yi Meets with Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi," [Wang Yi rencontre le Ministre iranien des Affaires étrangères Seyed Abbas Araghchi], 16 juillet 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202507/t20250717_11672131.html.

[70] L'Institut pour la renaissance des politiques (اندیشکده احیای سیاست) est un petit think-tank axé sur l'Iran qui produit des analyses vidéo diffusées en direct en persan, mais publie peu de recherches universitaires formelles et ne possède pas d'affiliations institutionnelles clairement documentées.

[71] Qahremanpour est un spécialiste du désarmement et des affaires internationales, ancien directeur du Groupe de recherche sur le désarmement au Centre iranien de recherche stratégique et rédacteur en chef de Hamshahri Diplomatic, connu pour ses nombreux commentaires médiatiques sur la diplomatie nucléaire iranienne et pour avoir été détenu entre 2011 et 2014 suite à des critiques de la politique nucléaire.

[72] Il présente son analyse dans une interview pour la chaîne YouTube « Azad », une plateforme de podcasts et de vidéos liée à l'Université de technologie Sharif: Azad, پیدا و پنهان جنگ ۱۲ روزه گفتگوی رحمان قهرمانپور و مهدی خراتیان [Les aspects visibles et cachés de la guerre des douze jours. Entretien avec Rahman Qahremanpour et Mehdi Kharratiyan], 15 juillet 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vp1EzPREjC0&t=102s.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Bien que cette formulation exacte n'ait pu être retrouvée, la reformulation de Qahremanpour peut raisonnablement être considérée comme plausible, compte tenu de la méthode d'analyse habituelle de Malaek concernant la politique étrangère et les priorités stratégiques de la Chine.

[75] Azad, غیبت چین در جنگ ۱۲ روزه؟ گفتگوی حامد وفایی و زکیه یزدانشناس [L'absence de la Chine pendant la guerre des douze jours ? Un entretien entre Hamed Vafaei et Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas], 30 juillet 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ.

d'obligations de défense et de soutien militaire; en cas de réactivation du mécanisme de *snapback* par les Européens, Pékin, selon elle, ne vendrait pas d'armes à l'Iran.[76]

Pour d'autres observateurs, le problème réside moins dans la prudence chinoise que dans l'incapacité de Pékin à saisir pleinement l'importance stratégique de l'Iran. **Mehdi Khorsand,** directeur du département de la diplomatie économique de la municipalité de Téhéran et spécialiste des affaires eurasiennes, l'affirme sans détour : «Seul l'Iran peut être un partenaire stratégique de la Chine dans la région en tant qu'acteur "indépendant" et "anti-occidental".[77]»

À l'inverse, certaines voix iraniennes se montrent moins critiques à l'égard de Pékin et semblent reconnaître que «trop attendre» de la Chine relève d'une méconnaissance de sa politique étrangère. **Hossein Qaheri**, président de l'Institut irano-chinois d'études stratégiques et acteur central des canaux informels entre les deux pays[78], soutient ainsi que «la Chine n'a pas adopté une posture passive durant la guerre»[79]. Il souligne que «la Chine a maintenu ses achats de pétrole iranien, a fourni à l'Iran des produits de première nécessité […] et a adopté une position claire à l'égard de l'Iran»[80].

Qaheri attribue cette distance chinoise aux frictions récurrentes dans les relations bilatérales, notamment aux difficultés d'exécution de nombreux accords et contrats dans des secteurs clés tels que l'énergie, l'industrie, les transports et les technologies de l'information. Depuis la signature des premiers grands contrats pétroliers et gaziers en 2004, plusieurs projets, souvent majeurs, ont été annulés ou reportés[81], un schéma également observable dans le domaine du génie civil[82]. Ces dysfonctionnements, souligne-t-il, ne peuvent être imputés exclusivement aux sanctions américaines : dans certains cas, les contrats ont été abandonnés en raison de lacunes techniques du côté chinois; dans d'autres, les retards résultent de lourdeurs administratives et de la rigidité de l'appareil étatique iranien[83].

Sur cette base, Qaheri conclut, non sans amertume, que «les Chinois n'ont plus de "confiance stratégique" en l'Iran»[84]. Dans cette perspective, l'Accord de coopération globale sino-iranien signé en mars 2021 revêtirait avant tout une portée symbolique.

Hamed Vafaei, directeur du Centre de recherche sur l'Asie et codirecteur de l'Institut Confucius de l'Université de Téhéran[85], inscrit quant à lui la réserve chinoise dans les principes structurels de la politique étrangère de Pékin. Il décrit l'attitude chinoise face au conflit irano-israélien comme un processus en trois temps : hésitation («attendre de voir si le gouvernement iranien était encore stable et capable de riposter»[86]), décision (condamnation de l'attaque) et consolidation (proposition de médiation)[87].

Dans un entretien accordé à *Asr-e Iran*[88], Vafaei cite des sources selon lesquelles les responsables chinois eux-mêmes décriraient leur posture comme celle de « rester assis sur une montagne à regarder les tigres s'affronter». Il avertit ainsi que «l'Iran ne doit pas s'attendre à un soutien direct et total de la Chine », dans la mesure où «ce soutien doit être évalué à l'aune de la rationalité et des intérêts nationaux propres à la Chine»[89]. Il rappelle que la Chine recherche avant tout l'évitement d'engagements contraignants et que sa conception de la politique étrangère diffère fondamentalement de celle des États-Unis.

Vafaei insiste également sur le fait que, dans la hiérarchie des intérêts chinois, l'Iran — «qui n'a guère plus à offrir que du pétrole»[90] — voit son poids stratégique relatif décliner. La Chine ayant diversifié ses sources d'approvisionnement énergétique, la part du pétrole iranien, encore significative (10 à 13 %), pourrait diminuer à moyen et long terme et « ne suffirait pas à inciter Pékin à s'impliquer sérieusement dans les affaires iraniennes»[91].

Enfin, dans un article publié dans le quotidien économique *Donya-e Eqtesad*, **Ehsan Citsaz,** vice-ministre des Communications, et Behzad Ahmadi, conseiller aux affaires

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[76] Ibid.

[77] Fatemeh Sadat Mortazavi, اژدها از خواب بیدار میشود؟ [Le dragon va-t-il se réveiller ?], *Farikhtegan Daily*, 15 juillet 2025, https://farhikhtegandaily.com/page/269806/.

[78] Les activités professionnelles d'Hossein Qaheri sont axées sur le renforcement des relations bilatérales irano-chinoises, notamment la coopération économique, commerciale et scientifique. En tant que PDG de plusieurs entreprises – Iran-China Cooperation Development Group, Nikan Industrial Group et Naipco Investment Company – il pilote des partenariats avec des conglomérats chinois dans les secteurs de l'énergie, du commerce et de l'industrie. Il siège également au conseil d'administration d'Alabusiness Bank et de l'Institut Bashir Saleh, où il favorise les synergies financières et technologiques avec des entités chinoises. Par ailleurs, il préside la Cryptocurrency Exchange Association, qui se concentre sur les collaborations dans le domaine de la blockchain avec les plateformes numériques chinoises. Pour plus d'informations, veuillez consulter son site web: https://hosseinghaheri.com/.

[79] Fatemeh Sadat Mortazavi, چین واقعا در جنگ ۱۲ روزه منفعل بود؟ | فرهیختگان آنلاین [La Chine a-t-elle vraiment été passive pendant la guerre des 12 jours ?], *Farikhtegan Daily*, 15 juillet 2025, https://farhikhtegandaily.com/news/210606/چین-واقعا-در-جنگ-۱۲-روزه-منفعل-بود؟/.

[80] Ibid.

[81] News Agencies, "Iran says Chinese state oil firm has withdrawn from $5bn deal," [L'Iran affirme que la compagnie pétrolière d'État chinoise s'est retirée d'un accord de 5 milliards de dollars], *Al Jazeera*, 7 octobre 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/10/7/iran-says-chinese-state-oil-firm-has-withdrawn-from-5bn-deal;
Reuters, "Iran says China's Sinopec might not develop Yadavaran oilfield," [L'Iran affirme que la société chinoise Sinopec pourrait ne pas exploiter le champ pétrolier de Yadavaran], 2 mai 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/currencies/iran-says-chinas-sinopec-might-not-develop-yadavaran-oilfield-idUSKCN1S8191/.

[82] *Reuters*, "Iran cancels $2 billion dam deal with China: report," [L'Iran annule un contrat de barrage de 2 milliards de dollars avec la Chine: rapport], 31 mai 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/iran-cancels-2-billion-dam-deal-with-china-report-idUSBRE84U085/.

[83] *Reuters*, "Iran cancels oilfield deal with China's CNPC," [L'Iran annule un accord pétrolier avec la CNPC chinoise], 30 avril 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/commodities/iran-cancels-oilfield-deal-with-chinas-cnpc-idUSL6N0NM2D3/;
Mahdi Rahmati, Mahdi Rojhani & Mohammad Amin Raoof, "Causes of Delays in Iranian Building Construction Projects," (Causes des retards dans les projets de construction de bâtiments en Iran), *AUT J. Civil Eng.*, 5(4), 19 février, 2022, http://doi.org/10.22060/ajce.2022.19293.5725.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Les Instituts Confucius sont généralement gérés conjointement par l'université hôte (locale) et un partenaire chinois, et la plupart des instituts ont des accords de codirection qui comprennent un directeur local (côté hôte) et un directeur ou codirecteur chinois (côté partenaire).

[86] Voir la note 75, *Azad*, 30 Juillet, 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ.

[87] Il réitère son analyse lors de la 3e Conférence internationale sur «Le déclin des États-Unis: la nouvelle ère du monde» (19 août 2025): China's Approach to the Twelve-Day War in Three Phases: Hesitation, Decision, and Consolidation.

[88] *Asr-e Iran*, چرا چین در جنگ ۱۲ روزه طرف ایران را نگرفت؟ [Pourquoi la Chine n'a-t-elle pas pris parti pour l'Iran pendant la guerre des 12 jours ?] 19 juillet 2025, https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/1077981/چرا-چین-در-جنگ-۱۲-روزه-طرف-ایران-را-نگرفت

[89] Ibid.

[90] Voir la note 75, *Azad*, 30 juillet 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ

[91] Ibid.

internationales auprès du ministre des Communications, tous deux également chercheurs à l'Université de Téhéran, développent une analyse convergente:

> «*La Chine adopte une approche équilibrée visant à protéger ses intérêts multiples dans la région, et il est illusoire pour l'Iran de s'attendre à ce qu'elle compromette ses relations avec Israël et les États-Unis. Dès lors, notre vision idéalisée de la Chine semble davantage le fruit d'années de construction de mythes et de souhaits stratégiques que la manifestation d'une compréhension juste du comportement d'une puissance pragmatique*[92]».

Une stratégie vouée à l'échec

Si de nombreux commentateurs iraniens semblent avoir intégré les limites du soutien chinois, et même compris les raisons de la prudence de Pékin, leurs critiques à l'égard des dirigeants iraniens et de la conduite de la politique chinoise de Téhéran se révèlent, en revanche, nettement plus sévères.

Comme indiqué précédemment, **Hamed Vafaei** souligne qu'une hypothèse ancienne a longtemps structuré le débat iranien sur la Chine : l'idée selon laquelle l'Iran occuperait une position centrale dans les équations géopolitiques chinoises au Moyen-Orient. Il affirme:

> «*La République islamique est le rempart occidental de la Chine. Si elle tombe, la Chine en subira les conséquences. C'est ce qui animait nos dirigeants politiques ces dernières années: si nous coupons les approvisionnements pétroliers, la Chine aura des problèmes ; sans l'Iran, la Chine sera confrontée à des défis. Si nous ne parvenons pas à maintenir l'Amérique occupée dans cette région, elle s'en prendra à la Chine.*[93]»

Cependant, les sources que nous avons consultées, notamment une veille approfondie réalisée sur la plateforme X (anciennement Twitter)[94], convergent vers une critique de la mauvaise gestion des relations avec la Chine par les gouvernements iraniens successifs. Les analystes s'accordent sur la responsabilité des autorités nationales, qu'ils désignent l'«élite dirigeante» de manière générale ou qu'ils ciblent des administrations spécifiques, notamment celles de Hassan Rohani (2013–2021) et du gouvernement Pezeshkian depuis 2024[95]. Ces analyses rejoignent l'observation formulée par Mehdi Khorsand, selon laquelle « les Chinois ont, à plusieurs reprises, proposé à l'Iran des projets majeurs de coopération économique et infrastructurelle […] sans que les autorités iraniennes n'y donnent suite de manière concrète»[96].

Reprenant des termes fréquemment associés à la politique chinoise au Moyen-Orient, **Hossein Qaheri** affirme ainsi dans *Eghtesad 120* que «la politique iranienne à l'égard de la Chine est fondamentalement opportuniste. L'Iran ne s'est tourné vers la Chine que par nécessité, c'est-à-dire lorsque l'Occident lui a tourné le dos»[97]. Il soutient que le partenariat sino-iranien ne pourra être qualifié de véritablement «stratégique» tant que les dirigeants iraniens n'auront pas clarifié la portée réelle de ce concept et, surtout, tant qu'ils n'auront pas défini conjointement avec leurs homologues chinois la manière d'inscrire cette relation dans leurs cadres respectifs de politique étrangère. Dans cette optique, Qaheri affirme sans ambiguïté que «l'Iran doit changer d'approche vis-à-vis de la Chine»[98].

Hamed Vafaei développe une analyse similaire:

> «*L'Iran doit engager un véritable dialogue stratégique avec la Chine. Les relations ne doivent pas se limiter à des visites officielles, à des déclarations ou des slogans comme celui de la route de la Soie. Les deux pays doivent discuter du rôle concret que l'Iran peut jouer dans la mise en œuvre des initiatives chinoises. […] L'incertitude initiale de la Chine durant la guerre des Douze Jours démontre que nous manquons cruellement d'un système de relations bilatérales stratégiques.*[99]»

Il approfondit son raisonnement en comparant la position iranienne à celle de l'Arabie saoudite et des Émirats arabes unis dans la stratégie régionale de Pékin:

> «*L'Iran n'a pas su s'imposer dans la stratégie de Pékin. L'Arabie saoudite et les Émirats arabes unis, en revanche, sont devenus des maillons essentiels de la chaîne de valeur chinoise. […] Si l'Iran ne parvient pas à consolider sa place dans cette chaîne de valeur, il ne doit pas s'attendre à ce que la Chine le défende sur le plan sécuritaire. L'Iran doit démontrer à la Chine qu'une attaque israélienne contre l'un de ses partenaires équivaut à une attaque contre les intérêts chinois.*[100]»

Ces débats convergent vers une question centrale des discussions iraniennes sur la Chine, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur du pays: celle de l'acquisition d'armements. Les frappes israéliennes ont mis en évidence les profondes lacunes techniques et opérationnelles du dispositif de défense iranien.

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[92] Ehsan Citsaz & Behzad Ahmadi, رابطه اقتصادی ایران و چین [Relations économiques Iran-Chine], *Donya-e Eqtesad,* 13 juillet 2025, https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/بخش-خبر-دیپلماسی-64/4204443-رابطه-اقتصادی-ایران-چین.

[93] Voir la note 75, *Azad*, 30 juillet 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtdOqC-PMQ

[94] Voici une liste indicative des tweets collectés: @alhosseini (15 août 2025): https://x.com/alhosseini/status/1956338794971406528 and https://x.com/alhosseini/status/1956338486329348588; @JBehieh (2 Juillet): https://x.com/JBehieh/status/1940458261289095194; @Jangjouye (1 juillet): https://x.com/Jangjouye/status/1939982109546094705; @javad_farahani (29 juin): https://x.com/javad_farahani/status/1939359313094439310; @mahdi_alipour (23 juin): https://x.com/mahdi_alipour/status/1937083087109734813.

[95] C'est notamment le cas de l'analyste Mehdi Kharatiyan, qui critique sévèrement les administrations réformistes dans ce tweet: https://x.com/MehdiKharratya/status/1938676789691183267.

[96] Voir la note 79, Fatemeh Sadat Mortazavi, *Farikhtegan Daily*, 15 juillet 2025, https://farhikhtegandaily.com/page/269806/.

[97] *Eghtesad 120*, چین میترسد آخرین مدل پدافند و جنگنده خودش را به ایران بدهد، ولی ما بعد از برجام جدید با آمریکا تکنولوژی آن را در اختیار آمریکاییها بگذاریم/ ما هر زمان نیاز بوده چینیها را معامله کردیم و به غرب و آمریکا فروختیم – اقتصاد 120 [La Chine craint de céder son dernier modèle d'armement et d'avion de chasse à l'Iran, mais suite au nouvel accord JCPOA avec les États-Unis, nous mettrons cette technologie à la disposition des Américains. Nous avons commercé avec les Chinois chaque fois que cela s'avérait nécessaire et nous avons vendu nos produits à l'Occident et aux États-Unis], 28 juillet 2025, https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/بخش-خبر-دیپلماسی-64/4204443-رابطه-اقتصادی-ایران-چین.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Voir la note 75, *Azad*, 30 juillet 2025.

[100] Voir la note 88, *Asr-e Iran,* 19 juillet 2025.

Malgré la rhétorique officielle et les démonstrations de force du Corps des Gardiens de la Révolution islamique (CGRI), un consensus semble émerger quant au retard technologique des forces armées iraniennes[101]. Dans ce contexte, l'impératif d'acquérir des équipements militaires chinois de pointe — en particulier des systèmes de défense anti-aérienne, dont l'efficacité a été mise en lumière lors du récent affrontement indo-pakistanais — occupe une place croissante dans les analyses des experts iraniens.

L'analyse la plus structurée et contextualisée est proposée par **Mohammad Keshavarzadeh**, ancien ambassadeur d'Iran en Chine (2018-2023)[102]. Dans un entretien accordé au journal réformiste *Shargh*[103], il revient sur les hésitations passées des autorités iraniennes concernant l'acquisition d'armements chinois. Il affirme que l'Iran a, à plusieurs reprises, manqué des occasions d'acheter des systèmes d'armes chinois et de former ses forces à leur utilisation, et qu'il est illusoire d'espérer des transferts immédiats à la suite d'une crise soudaine. Historiquement, l'Iran s'est d'abord appuyé sur des équipements occidentaux, puis russes, sans jamais s'engager sérieusement dans une coopération militaire avec la Chine.
Selon lui:

> «*Nous aurions dû procéder à l'achat d'armes plus tôt et de manière plus systématique, plutôt que de […] nous précipiter vers les Chinois et d'espérer maintenant qu'ils nous fournissent du jour au lendemain les armes que nous désirons*.[104]»

Keshavarzadeh insiste sur le fait que les contrats et les transferts d'armes nécessitent du temps, une confiance mutuelle et une planification préalable. Les demandes formulées dans l'urgence ne produiront pas de résultats instantanés: des échéanciers réalistes et un engagement soutenu sont indispensables. Dans l'interview, l'ancien ambassadeur évoque également les débats internes relatifs à la volonté iranienne de réduire sa dépendance aux systèmes satellitaires américains[105]: «Je me souviens même qu'à un moment donné, nous avons tenté d'utiliser un système chinois alternatif au GPS pour la navigation, mais malheureusement, nous n'avons pas donné suite à cette initiative[106]». Ce témoignage est extrêmement révélateur, car il atteste clairement de la réflexion – et du débat – qui anime l'Iran depuis des années quant à la possibilité d'équiper et de former ses forces armées à l'utilisation d'armements chinois. Il souligne que la Chine est désormais un producteur et fournisseur d'armements crédible, et que l'Iran devrait établir avec elle des cadres de défense formels, institutionnalisés et à long terme: «Sa puissance n'est désormais pas inférieure à celle des Occidentaux.» Il ressort donc de ce récit que les Iraniens ont, par le passé, douté de la qualité des armements chinois.

Par conséquent, Keshavarzadeh formule plusieurs recommandations visant à élever les relations avec la Chine au rang de liens indéfectibles, à l'instar des relations sino-pakistanaises. Il insiste sur la nécessité d'élargir et de diversifier les mécanismes d'échange notamment par des mécanismes non monétaires, des échanges en nature et des solutions logistiques innovantes, afin de contourner les sanctions. Critiquant l'absence de volonté politique et de diplomatie active, ainsi que ce qu'il qualifie de «passivité et de pensée unidimensionnelle» des autorités iraniennes, qui continuent à percevoir la Chine uniquement comme un acheteur de pétrole, il affirme que Téhéran doit prendre l'initiative de développer des liens militaires, diplomatiques et logistiques. Il rappelle les initiatives entreprises durant son mandat d'ambassadeur (sous l'impulsion de personnalités telles qu'**Ali Larijani**[107]) et appelle à la mise en œuvre d'une campagne diplomatique durable et de mécanismes domestiques pour opérationnaliser cette relation, avec des mandats clairs et des ressources allouées.

Keshavarzadeh étend enfin son analyse au niveau régional, estimant que l'Iran devrait tirer parti de la stratégie chinoise d'équilibrage en Asie occidentale.

> «*Les Chinois ont pu signer un accord de non-agression avec le Conseil de coopération du Golfe (CCG) ainsi qu'avec l'ASEAN. […] J'ai soulevé ces questions lors de discussions avec des think tanks chinois, et certains d'entre eux ont proposé un plan similaire pour réguler les relations de la Chine entre l'Iran et les pays du CCG, […] un traité de non-agression conjoint. […] Un accord qui pourrait concrètement jeter les bases d'un système de sécurité collective au Moyen-Orient*.[108]»

Keshavarzadeh estime ainsi que la Chine pourrait, à terme, jouer un rôle de garant de la sécurité régionale, tout en reconnaissant que Pékin ne dispose ni des capacités ni, probablement, de la volonté de se substituer aux États-Unis.

Quant à la dimension économique des relations sino-iraniennes, **Ehsan Citsaz** et **Behzad Ahmadi** avancent également un ensemble de recommandations. À l'instar de la majorité des interlocuteurs mobilisés dans cette étude, ils estiment indispensable de repenser les relations sino-iraniennes dans une perspective véritablement stratégique, et non à travers une approche de court terme ou purement tactique. Une telle réorientation supposerait de préparer l'économie iranienne à l'accueil d'investissements chinois et de consolider la position de l'Iran comme pays de transit régional: offrir un environnement perçu comme sûr par les investisseurs, mener à bien des projets clairement identifiés et intégrés aux réseaux des Nouvelles

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[101] *Press TV,* "Iran 'fully ready for any scenario', IRGC chief commander says amid escalating threats," [L'Iran «parfaitement préparé à toute éventualité», déclare le commandant en chef des Gardiens de la révolution dans un contexte de menaces croissantes], 12 juin 2025, http://presstv.ir/Detail/2025/06/12/749680/IRGC-Salami-Iran-ready-any-scenario;

[102] Durant son mandat, l'ambassadeur Keshavarzadeh a joué un rôle central dans les négociations du partenariat stratégique de 25 ans. Reconnu pour sa connaissance approfondie de l'économie politique et des pratiques diplomatiques chinoises, il s'adresse régulièrement aux médias et aux groupes de réflexion chinois afin d'expliquer les priorités de Téhéran et de promouvoir une coopération concrète. Bien intégré aux cercles officiels de Pékin, il s'attache à traduire les relations politiques en résultats commerciaux et institutionnels tangibles. Il recourt également à la diplomatie publique (conférences, interviews et actions culturelles) pour renforcer la compréhension mutuelle et dissiper les préjugés.

[103] *Shargh*, رقص اژدهای زرد [La Danse du Dragon Jaune], 22 juillet 2025, https://www.magiran.com/article/4621365.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Voir Zhao Ziwen, "Iran looks to tap into China's BeiDou navigation system to plug security gaps," [L'Iran cherche à exploiter le système de navigation chinois BeiDou pour combler ses lacunes en matière de sécurité], *South China Morning Post*, 8 août 2025, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3321043/iran-looks-tap-chinas-beidou-navigation-system-plug-security-gaps.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ali Larijani, ancien président de l'Assemblée consultative islamique (2008-2020) et, depuis août 2025, secrétaire du Conseil suprême de sécurité nationale, est une figure conservatrice de premier plan et conseiller du Guide suprême. Entre 2018 et 2023, il est largement reconnu pour avoir initié des mécanismes diplomatiques visant à approfondir les relations irano-chinoises, notamment en faisant progresser les négociations qui ont contribué à l'accord-cadre de coopération stratégique de 25 ans.

[108] Ibid.

routes de la Soie, réformer le cadre juridique national, lever les obstacles bancaires et financiers et renforcer le rôle du secteur privé. Parallèlement, ils soulignent la nécessité de diversifier les exportations iraniennes vers la Chine au-delà des hydrocarbures, en positionnant l'Iran comme partenaire technologique dans des secteurs tels que les technologies de l'information et de la communication, l'intelligence artificielle, l'ingénierie, l'agriculture, la pharmacie, la pétrochimie, les ressources minérales et l'exploitation minière. Dans cette optique, les entreprises iraniennes devraient accroître leur présence sur le marché chinois en s'appuyant sur les forums des Nouvelles routes de la Soie et des BRICS, mais également sur les salons commerciaux et les plateformes de commerce électronique. Enfin, Citsaz et Ahmadi insistent sur la nécessité pour l'Iran d'élaborer des stratégies visant à mobiliser des financements auprès de la Banque asiatique d'investissement pour les infrastructures[109].

Citsaz, Ahmadi, ainsi que l'ambassadeur Keshavarzadeh, soulignent toutefois que l'Iran ne saurait «mettre tous ses œufs dans le panier chinois»[110]. Afin d'éviter le risque de tomber dans un «piège de la dette», ils rappellent que «l'Iran doit veiller à ne pas perdre de vue ses intérêts de long terme (tels que la propriété d'actifs stratégiques ou une juste valorisation des ressources) dans sa quête d'investissements chinois, […] et qu'il lui revient de promouvoir un modèle de développement fondé sur la coopération plutôt que sur l'exploitation». Ils conditionnent par ailleurs la mise en œuvre de ces recommandations à plusieurs préalables politiques: une réduction des tensions internationales entourant l'Iran, une clarification des attentes mutuelles et une redéfinition de la relation bilatérale avec la Chine « non pas sur la base du fantasme d'un "destin partagé", mais sur une compréhension claire des "intérêts convergents"»[111].

Conclusion

Si certains commentateurs iraniens ont exprimé une profonde déception face à l'attitude de Pékin durant la guerre des Douze Jours, d'autres ont adopté une lecture plus nuancée, soulignant à la fois la prudence diplomatique structurelle de la Chine et les limites objectives de ses intérêts stratégiques en Iran. Dans l'ensemble, les critiques se sont davantage concentrées sur les dirigeants iraniens, accusés d'avoir mal interprété les priorités chinoises, surestimé la centralité de l'Iran dans les calculs de Pékin et échoué à transformer une relation largement transactionnelle en partenariat stratégique.

Pour autant, les pistes envisagées ne relèvent pas d'un désengagement, mais d'un approfondissement prudent des relations avec la Chine. Sur le plan bilatéral, l'Iran devrait intensifier ses efforts en matière d'acquisition d'armements chinois. Toutefois, comme l'a souligné l'ambassadeur Keshavarzadeh, l'initiative repose désormais en grande partie sur Pékin, qui décidera si — et dans quelle mesure — les forces iraniennes auront accès à ses technologies militaires. Sur le plan multilatéral, Téhéran aspire à une meilleure intégration dans les initiatives et organisations promues par la Chine, tandis qu'une coordination renforcée avec les États du Golfe, sous l'égide de Pékin, est perçue comme une possible base pour une nouvelle architecture régionale.

Il est probable que ces propositions soient motivées par la prise de conscience que, malgré ses limites, la Chine demeure la seule grande puissance à la fois capable et potentiellement disposée à soutenir l'Iran. Les importations chinoises de pétrole iranien auraient d'ailleurs atteint un niveau record[112]. Néanmoins, rien ne garantit que les avions de chasse chinois deviendront un jour le pilier d'une armée de l'air iranienne, ni que les investisseurs chinois traiteront l'Iran comme un partenaire économique ordinaire. Pékin semble toutefois déterminé à maintenir la République islamique «à flot». Dans un contexte où une large partie de la société iranienne demeure réticente à une dépendance accrue vis-à-vis de la Chine, ce sentiment ambivalent de vulnérabilité et de frustration pourrait encore s'intensifier.

[109] Voir la note 92, Ehsan Citsaz & Behzad Ahmadi, *Donya-e Eqtesad,* 13 juillet 2025.

[110] Voir la note 103, *Shargh*, 22 juillet 2025.

[111] Voir la note 92, Ehsan Citsaz & Behzad Ahmadi, *Donya-e Eqtesad*, 13 juillet 2025.

[112] Dalga Khatinoglu, "Defying 'maximum pressure', China uptake of Iranian oil hits pre-Trump high," (Défiant les prévisions de « pression maximale », la consommation de pétrole iranien par la Chine atteint un niveau record depuis l'arrivée au pouvoir de Trump.), *Iran International,* 12 septembre 2025, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202509121567.

UN AMI «PEU FIABLE»: PERSPECTIVES ARABES SUR LA CHINE APRÈS LA GUERRE DES DOUZE JOURS

Par Francesco Scala et Leonardo Bruni

Bien que certains groupes soutenus par l'Iran aient déjà mené des attaques contre des sites situés dans le Golfe, la frappe directe de Téhéran contre une base militaire américaine au Qatar a mis en évidence la vulnérabilité des États du Golfe face à une escalade régionale, ainsi que leur dépendance persistante à l'égard de l'architecture sécuritaire dirigée par les États-Unis. En réponse, les autorités qatariennes ont rapidement condamné l'attaque iranienne, affirmé leur droit à une riposte militaire et reçu le soutien immédiat des autres États du Golfe. Le conflit a toutefois été rapidement circonscrit : les tensions se sont apaisées à la suite de l'appel téléphonique du président iranien **Massoud Pezeshkian**, au cours duquel il a exprimé ses regrets, ainsi que du soutien américain en faveur d'un cessez-le-feu entre Israël et l'Iran.

Cette désescalade rapide témoigne de la résilience du processus de rapprochement engagé entre la République islamique et les États du Golfe. Or, malgré son rôle médiatisé de médiateur et de garant du rapprochement antérieur entre l'Arabie saoudite et l'Iran, la Chine demeure absente de cette dynamique.

La Chine est restée quasi absente des débats en langue arabe concernant l'évolution du paysage sécuritaire régional. Cette omission ne saurait toutefois être interprétée comme le signe d'une hostilité à son égard. Lorsque Pékin était évoqué pendant et immédiatement après la guerre israélo-iranienne, les commentateurs arabes saluaient fréquemment sa «neutralité positive». Néanmoins, au lendemain du conflit, l'attention s'est de nouveau focalisée sur la décision chinoise de ne pas apporter de soutien direct à l'Iran. À cet égard, les analystes arabes ont généralement manifesté une compréhension du pragmatisme de Pékin et des logiques stratégiques qui le sous-tendent, tout en s'interrogeant sur la mesure dans laquelle cet épisode a mis en lumière les limites de l'influence régionale de la Chine.

S'agissant de l'avenir des relations sino-iraniennes, certains médias proches des pays du Golfe ont exprimé une forme de satisfaction face à la perspective d'un Iran désormais dépendant d'un partenaire perçu comme intéressé et peu fiable. Parallèlement, plusieurs journalistes arabes — en particulier au sein de médias panarabes indépendants — ont toutefois mis en garde contre les risques inhérents à une dépendance accrue à l'égard de la Chine, des préoccupations dépassant largement le seul cas iranien.

Regards positifs sur la «neutralité positive» de la Chine

Les médias arabes ont largement couvert la guerre entre Israël et l'Iran, analysant attentivement les déclarations des responsables israéliens, iraniens et américains ainsi que le déroulement des opérations militaires. Les positions adoptées par la Chine ont également retenu l'attention, quoique dans une moindre mesure. Si les appels chinois à la désescalade, au respect de la souveraineté et au rejet du recours à la force ont généralement été rapportés de manière neutre, voire légèrement favorable, les analyses arabophones ont fréquemment exprimé un certain scepticisme quant à la volonté ou à la capacité de Pékin d'influer de manière décisive sur l'évolution du conflit.

Par exemple, dans les jours précédant les frappes américaines contre l'Iran, le quotidien londonien *Asharq Al-Awsat,* proche de la famille royale saoudienne, a publié un article synthétisant des travaux du *Washington Institute for Middle East Policy*, un think tank américain réputé pour ses positions pro-israéliennes. L'article écarte l'hypothèse d'un rôle chinois significatif dans la crise, estimant que, bien que «la Chine dépende de l'Iran pour ses approvisionnements pétroliers et pour contrebalancer l'influence américaine, et qu'elle subirait de lourdes pertes en cas de guerre de grande ampleur entre l'Iran et Israël impliquant les États-Unis, elle dispose de peu de leviers pour influer sur la situation». Le texte, s'appuyant sur des analyses d'experts américains et chinois, souligne l'improbabilité d'une intervention militaire chinoise en faveur de l'Iran. À l'inverse, tout en privilégiant la stabilité régionale, Pékin pourrait même tirer profit d'un enlisement américain au Moyen-Orient, susceptible de détourner l'attention de Washington de l'Asie orientale et d'offrir à la Chine des enseignements utiles en cas de crise autour de Taïwan[113].

L'article met également en exergue la position jugée «remarquablement mesurée» de Pékin, notant que les déclarations chinoises évitaient à la fois de condamner explicitement Israël et d'appeler directement les États-Unis à renoncer à toute frappe contre l'Iran. Il rejette néanmoins l'idée que cette retenue puisse traduire une volonté de médiation, avançant qu'«Israël remettrait probablement en cause la neutralité de la Chine en raison de son biais en faveur de l'Iran et de ses ouvertures envers le Hamas», tout en soulignant qu'«il

[113] *Asharq Al-Awsat*, "Taqrīr: muhāğima Amrīka al-Irān sataẓharu maḥdudiya quwa al-Ṣīn" تقرير: مهاجمة أميركا لإيران ستظهر محدودية قوة الصين [Rapport: Une attaque américaine contre l'Iran démontrera les limites de la puissance chinoise], 24 juin 2025, https://aawsat.com/تقرير-مهاجمة-أميركا-لإيران-ستظهر-محدودية-قوة-الصين-5156440-شؤون-اقليمية?__cf_chl_rt_tk=YeHICw5MdDOsb3n.PZYwpToIOmPl_uPu5y1g3DAKSWY-1755876619-1.0.1.1-MYxWjABJNBDmRMNIDz8Gduvb1ge7gvPPhqWbNrHxxac

n'est pas certain que la Chine ait entrepris le moindre effort concret pour favoriser une solution diplomatique»[114].

Après l'instauration du cessez-le-feu irano-israélien, les rares commentaires arabes consacrés à la Chine ne lui ont pas reproché son manque d'initiative ni son ambiguïté diplomatique. Au contraire, certains analystes ont adopté une lecture globalement favorable, mettant en avant la retenue et l'impartialité relative de Pékin. Ainsi, dans une tribune publiée par *Al Majalla*, autre média londonien affilié à l'Arabie saoudite, le journaliste libanais **Charbel Barakat** a qualifié le refus de la Chine de condamner sans équivoque Israël, conjugué à sa posture mesurée, de «neutralité positive calculée». Selon lui, cette attitude ne relève pas d'une incapacité à agir, mais d'un choix stratégique délibéré, «marqué par la prudence et la sélectivité». Tout en reconnaissant l'existence de débats parmi les chercheurs chinois sur les principes traditionnels de la politique étrangère de Pékin, Barakat estime que des considérations stratégiques — en particulier liées à Taïwan — ont pesé de manière déterminante dans la décision chinoise de ne pas apporter de soutien militaire à l'Iran.[115]

S'appuyant sur les analyses d'experts taïwanais, chinois et arabes, Barakat conclut que «l'approche de neutralité positive adoptée par la Chine s'est révélée judicieuse», dans la mesure où :

> «*La guerre n'a pas ouvert de véritable fenêtre stratégique pour Pékin, ni sur la question de Taïwan, ni dans le cadre de la rivalité géopolitique avec les États-Unis, ni même en termes d'expansion de son influence au Moyen-Orient, où la Chine ne s'était d'ailleurs pas positionnée comme un médiateur de premier plan. Néanmoins, Pékin est sorti de la crise fort d'une expérience précieuse en matière de gestion d'équilibres délicats, de limitation des risques et de consolidation de son image de puissance responsable dans un contexte marqué par des coûts élevés et des résultats incertains.*[116]»

Une interprétation encore plus élogieuse de la «neutralité active» chinoise est apparue dans une tribune de **Waref Kumayha**, président de la *Lebanese–Chinese Dialogue Road Association*, publiée par *Asharq Al-Awsat*. Kumayha y soutient que la Chine est sortie renforcée du conflit, consolidant l'image d'une puissance responsable — y compris au Moyen-Orient — qui ne cherche pas à supplanter Washington, mais à «partager le pouvoir mondial» et à promouvoir un ordre international multipolaire[117].

Selon lui:

> «*[La Chine] n'est ni totalement neutre ni ouvertement conflictuelle. […] Elle invoque le respect de la souveraineté, sans pour autant négliger ses propres intérêts. Ce faisant, Pékin continue de cultiver l'image d'une puissance responsable qui ne recherche pas de rôles héroïques dans les médias, mais des résultats concrets sur le terrain. […] La Chine a démontré que son silence ne constitue pas une absence, mais bien un modus operandi.*[118]»

Une lecture plus nuancée et analytique de la «position prudente» de Pékin a été proposée par l'Unité de recherche sur la Chine de l'**Emirates Policy Center** (EPC), un think tank basé à Abou Dhabi. Dans leur analyse détaillée, les chercheurs de l'EPC soulignent que l'approche «équilibrée» de la Chine face au conflit n'a pas été immédiate: Pékin a initialement condamné fermement Israël pour la violation de la souveraineté iranienne. Ce n'est qu'après l'appel du président chinois **Xi Jinping**, le 17 juillet, invitant «toutes les parties» à la désescalade, que la Chine a adopté un ton plus modéré à l'égard d'Israël. Les analystes avancent également qu'au-delà de la préservation de sa relation de long terme avec Tel-Aviv, Pékin a pu chercher à se prémunir contre l'hypothèse d'une défaite iranienne, alors même que les experts chinois, tout comme l'opinion publique, manifestaient une confiance décroissante envers Téhéran[119].

L'analyse identifie enfin quatre considérations stratégiques expliquant la posture mesurée de la Chine, et en particulier sa réticence à fournir un soutien décisif à l'Iran. Premièrement, une assistance militaire directe aurait compromis les intérêts de long terme de Pékin, notamment sa réputation d'acteur neutre et responsable. Deuxièmement, Pékin nourrit depuis longtemps des inquiétudes quant à la stratégie régionale offensive de l'Iran, inquiétudes renforcées depuis le 7 octobre par de nouvelles préoccupations liées à Israël. Troisièmement, la Chine dispose d'un levier limité tant sur l'Iran que sur Israël. Quatrièmement, Pékin cherche à éviter l'ouverture d'un nouveau front de confrontation avec les États-Unis, alors même qu'il s'efforce de progresser dans les négociations commerciales tout en concentrant son attention stratégique sur Taïwan[120].

L'avenir des relations sino-iraniennes et leurs implications régionales

Bien que de nombreux commentateurs arabes aient exprimé une certaine compréhension — voire une approbation — de la «neutralité» chinoise, Pékin n'est généralement pas considéré comme une alternative crédible aux États-Unis, ni en matière de sécurité régionale ni dans le domaine de la médiation des conflits. Cette appréciation ne traduit toutefois pas une adhésion enthousiaste à la politique américaine. Les analystes saoudiens, par exemple, ont critiqué la réponse militaire jugée «tardive» des États-Unis face aux Houthis au Yémen, estimant que l'offensive américaine entrait en contradiction avec les priorités actuelles des États du Golfe, désormais axées sur le «développement

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[114] Ibid.

[115] Šarbel Barakāt, "'ḥiyād' al-Ṣīn fī 'ḥarb al 12 yauman'… Taiwan ḳariğ 'ḥasābāt al-nār'" "حياد" الصين في "حرب الـ 12 يوما"... تايوان خارج "حسابات النار" [La « neutralité » de la Chine pendant la « guerre des 12 jours »… Taïwan est en dehors des « calculs belliqueux »], *Al Majalla*, 25 juillet 2025, https://www.majalla.com/node/326182/سياسة/حياد-الصين-في-حرب-الـ12-يوما-تايوان-خارج-حسابات-النار.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Wārf Qamīḥa, "l-Ṣīn wa-al-Irān wa-Isrā'il… lu'ba al-tawāzun fī Šarqin iataġaiyar" الصين وإيران وإسرائيل... لعبة التوازن في شرقٍ يتغير [Chine, Iran et Israël… Un exercice d'équilibre délicat dans un Orient en mutation], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 28 juin 2025, https://aawsat.com/الصين-وإيران-وإسرائيل-لعبة-التوازن-في-شرق-يتغير-5159071/في-العمق/حصاد-الأسبوع.

[118] Ibid.

[119] China Research Unit, "Al-Mufāḍala bayn al-sayyi' wa-al-aswa': Kayfa naẓarat al-Ṣīn ilā al-ḥarb al-Irāniyya–al-Isrā'īliyya, wa kayfa satata'āṭā ma'a natā'ijihā?" المُفاضلة بين السيئ والأسوأ: كيف نظرت الصين إلى الحرب الإيرانية-الإسرائيلية، وكيف ستتعاطى مع نتائجها؟ [Le choix difficile de la Chine: comment Pékin a-t-il perçu la guerre Iran-Israël et comment en gérera-t-il les conséquences ?], Emirates Policy Center, 26 juin 2025, https://epc.ae/ar/details/featured/kayf-nazarat-alsiyn-ila-alharb-al-irania-al-israyilia [Traduction anglaise disponible sur: https://www.epc.ae/en/details/featured/china-s-tough-choice-how-did-beijing-view-the-iran-israel-war-and-how-will-it-deal-with-its-consequences-].

[120] Ibid.

et la paix»[121]. Néanmoins, même parmi les voix critiques, un consensus semble se dégager quant à l'absence de substitut immédiat au leadership américain en matière de sécurité régionale.

La guerre israélo-iranienne semble avoir renforcé cette lecture. *Asharq Al-Awsat* a ainsi relayé un article de l'AFP citant plusieurs experts régionaux et internationaux pour affirmer que le conflit avait mis en évidence les limites de l'influence chinoise au Moyen-Orient. **Ahmed Aboudouh**, chercheur associé à Chatham House et directeur de l'unité de recherche sur la Chine de l'EPC, s'est exprimé sans ambiguïté sur le levier supposé de Pékin sur Téhéran, observant que «la position de la Chine au Moyen-Orient s'est considérablement affaiblie depuis le début du conflit», et ajoutant que «tout le monde dans la région comprend désormais que la Chine dispose de peu, voire d'aucune capacité réelle, pour jouer un rôle significatif dans la désescalade»[122].

Les analystes arabes ont généralement interprété l'érosion du rôle potentiel de la Chine en matière de sécurité non pas comme une perte pour leurs propres États, mais plutôt comme un revers pour l'Iran[123]. De leur point de vue, Téhéran est apparu comme le principal perdant du conflit : la guerre a mis en lumière la fragilité de ses partenariats avec la Chine et la Russie, tout en confirmant la solidité de l'alliance américano-israélienne, y compris sous la présidence imprévisible de **Donald Trump**.

Certains analystes du Golfe ont d'ailleurs exprimé une satisfaction à peine dissimulée face à la situation délicate de l'Iran. Le commentateur saoudien **Adel Alharbi**, écrivant pour The Independent Arabia (média également connu pour sa proximité avec la famille royale saoudienne), a ainsi observé que Téhéran, «malgré ses diatribes révolutionnaires et ses slogans grandiloquents, apparaît aujourd'hui plus vulnérable que jamais, prisonnier d'alliances instables»[124].

Il a notamment affirmé que:

> «*Même la Russie, en dépit du soutien substantiel que l'Iran lui a apporté pour la guerre en Ukraine, s'est abstenue de prendre position, se contentant de déclarations tièdes […]. La Chine, quant à elle, est restée quasiment silencieuse, n'ayant guère intérêt à investir son capital politique dans un dossier dépourvu de perspectives claires et de consensus international. Pékin est conscient que l'escalade iranienne nuit davantage à ses propres intérêts qu'à ceux de Washington, puisque 45% des importations pétrolières chinoises transitent par le détroit d'Ormuz, ce qui rend Pékin sans doute plus enclin à l'apaisement que Téhéran lui-même*[125]».

Malgré l'absence manifeste de soutien de la part des alliés de Téhéran au sein du supposé « axe trilatéral » avec Moscou et Pékin, les observateurs arabes s'accordent largement à considérer que l'Iran n'a d'autre choix que de poursuivre ses efforts de rapprochement avec la Chine, notamment dans l'objectif de moderniser ses capacités aériennes et de défense. Des informations ont ainsi circulé selon lesquelles Téhéran espérerait acquérir des avions de chasse chinois J-10C, dont l'efficacité a été démontrée lors des affrontements aériens entre le Pakistan et l'Inde au début de l'année[126].

Toutefois, le quotidien panarabe laïque ***Al-Arab,*** basé à Londres, tout en reconnaissant ces ambitions iraniennes, a mis en garde contre un optimisme excessif, soulignant que «cette option ne semble pas aussi sûre que l'espère le leadership iranien». Selon le journal:

> «*Si Pékin a exprimé une volonté générale de coopération, il évite de s'engager dans des accords militaires directs susceptibles de l'entraîner dans une confrontation indésirable avec les États-Unis ou de compromettre ses intérêts économiques.*[127]»

L'unité de recherche sur la Chine de l'EPC a également avancé que «la faiblesse et l'inefficacité militaires de l'Iran lors du conflit pourraient conduire à une réévaluation de la réflexion stratégique chinoise», notant que «l'Iran pourrait avoir perdu son avantage fonctionnel en tant que contrepoids à l'influence occidentale capable de maintenir l'attention américaine sur le Moyen-Orient pendant des décennies»[128].

Néanmoins, selon ces analystes, la Chine pourrait continuer à exporter des armes vers l'Iran, à contribuer à sa reconstruction industrielle et à lui apporter un soutien diplomatique – tout en s'opposant fermement à toute tentative iranienne d'acquérir l'arme nucléaire – pour des raisons plus profondes:

> *« Une inquiétude centrale du Parti communiste chinois réside dans la possibilité que le changement de régime en Iran devienne un objectif explicite de la politique américaine. […] Une tentative forcée de renverser la direction iranienne pourrait engendrer un chaos interne ou un conflit civil, aux répercussions régionales imprévisibles, nourrissant des récits susceptibles de légitimer des défis directs au système politique chinois lui-même et de renforcer les efforts visant à fragiliser la domination du Parti. En d'autres termes, les impératifs sécuritaires du régime continueront d'alimenter son opposition à toute tentative extérieure — en particulier israélienne ou américaine — visant à renverser l'establishment iranien.*[129]»

Parmi les analystes et les médias proches des gouvernements du Golfe, le ton dominant à l'égard de la Chine demeure ainsi neutre et pragmatique. Cette posture reflète probablement à

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[121] Mišārī al-Ḏāīdī, "wulli ḥārrahā man taūallā qārrahā" ولّ حارّها من تولّى قارّها [Et celui qui l'a réchauffé est celui qui en a pris le contrôle], *Asharq Al-Awsat,* 26 janvier 2024, https://aawsat.com/الرأي/4813876-ولّ-حارّها-من-تولّى-قارّها.

[122] *Asharq Al-Awsat*, "al-širā' al-Isrā'īlī – al-Irānī iuḍ'ifu al-nufūḏ al-Ṣīnī fī Al-Šarq al-Āwsaṭ" الصراع الإسرائيلي - الإيراني يُضعف النفوذ الصيني في الشرق الأوسط [Le conflit israélo-iranien affaiblit l'influence chinoise au Moyen-Orient], 24 juin 2025, https://aawsat.com/شؤون-إقليمية/5157917-الصراع-الإسرائيلي-الإيراني-يُضعف-النفوذ-الصيني-في-الشرق-الأوسط.

[123] Rasūl Āl Ḥāyī, "mushārakat Buzkīyān bi-qimmat Shīnghāy.. mādhā ḥaqqaqat Ṭahrān jarāʾ siyāsat al-ittijāh sharqan?" مشاركة بزشكيان بقمة شنغهاي.. ماذا حققت طهران جراء سياسة الاتجاه شرقا؟ [La participation de Pezeshkian au sommet de Shanghai… Qu'a obtenu Téhéran grâce à sa politique d'ouverture vers l'Est ?], *Al Jazeera*, 4 septembre 2025, https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2025/9/4/مشاركة-بزشكيان-بقمة-شنغهاي-ماذا-حققت.

[124] Adel al-Ḥarbī, "ḥarb al-12 yauman: inkišāf al-hašāša" حرب الـ12 يوما: انكشاف الهشاشة [La guerre des 12 jours : la fragilité mise à nu], *The Independent Arabia*, 25 juin 2025, https://www.independentarabia.com/node/626499/آراء/حرب-الـ12-يوما-انكشاف-الهشاشة.

[125] Ibid.

[126] BBC Monitoring, "Briefing: Media assess China's possible missile, fighter jet sales to Iran," [Point presse : Les médias analysent les possibles ventes de missiles et d'avions de chasse de la Chine à l'Iran] 10 juillet 2025, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b00047xk.

[127] *Al-Arab*, "al-Ṣīn ḫiyar maḍmūn li-taḥdīṯ tirsāna Irān al-'askariya" الصين خيار غير مضمون لتحديث ترسانة إيران العسكرية [La Chine représente une option incertaine pour la modernisation de l'arsenal militaire iranien], 17 juillet 2025, https://alarab.co.uk/الصين-خيار-غير-مضمون-لتحديث-ترسانة-إيران-العسكرية.

[128] Voir la note 119, China Research Unit, Emirates Policy Center, 26 juin 2025.

[129] Ibid.

la fois l'ampleur des liens économiques unissant ces États à Pékin et leur ambivalence face à un conflit opposant leur rival historique, l'Iran, à Israël, de plus en plus perçu dans la région comme une source majeure d'instabilité et comme un violateur récurrent de la souveraineté nationale.

En revanche, bien que leur couverture demeure limitée, les médias panarabes indépendants semblent avoir adopté une position plus critique. Le quotidien numérique londonien *Rai al-Youm*, connu pour ses analyses contestataires et souvent favorables à la «résistance», a publié un article de l'analyste **Mahdi Mubarak Abdullah** affirmant que l'attitude de la Chine constituait une «trahison pure et simple de l'Iran». Suggérant que les implications du comportement chinois pourraient dépasser le seul cadre iranien, Abdullah soutient que la crise a révélé une diplomatie chinoise avant tout soucieuse de préserver ses propres intérêts économiques et stratégiques[130].

Pour lui, la leçon est sans équivoque:

> «*La Chine n'est pas un ami fiable en temps de crise et n'hésite pas à tourner le dos à ses partenaires lorsqu'ils ont le plus besoin de soutien. Ceux qui considèrent Pékin comme un allié indéfectible et un pilier de leur sécurité et de leur stabilité doivent reconnaître que ces attentes sont profondément erronées. La diplomatie chinoise, qu'elle se manifeste sous une forme douce ou plus affirmée, demeure fondamentalement instrumentale et transactionnelle.*[131]»

Conclusion

La Chine n'a pas occupé une place centrale dans la couverture médiatique arabophone du conflit israélo-iranien. Les rares commentateurs qui se sont penchés sur le rôle potentiel de la République populaire chinoise ont, dans un premier temps, salué les appels de Pékin à la désescalade ainsi que sa «neutralité positive», probablement en raison des craintes d'un embrasement régional et d'une perception négative des deux parties belligérantes.

Toutefois, l'extension du conflit au Golfe a mis en lumière la fragilité de l'ordre régional et ravivé les inquiétudes quant au risque qu'une escalade future compromette les aspirations des États du Golfe en matière de paix, de développement et de coopération régionale. Dans ce contexte, l'approche prudente et principalement guidée par ses propres intérêts adoptée par la Chine fait désormais l'objet d'un examen plus attentif. Les analystes arabes ont, dans l'ensemble, saisi la logique stratégique sous-jacente à la réticence de Pékin à apporter un soutien militaire direct à l'Iran, attribuant cette prudence à la volonté de préserver ses relations économiques et diplomatiques avec Israël et les États-Unis.

Les débats ont également porté sur l'avenir des relations sino-iraniennes. Certains commentateurs du Golfe ont soutenu, souvent avec une satisfaction à peine voilée, que Téhéran avait surestimé la fiabilité de Pékin, conduisant l'Iran à un isolement accru et à une dépendance envers un partenaire perçu comme opportuniste et imprévisible. Reste toutefois à déterminer si la frappe israélienne sur le territoire qatari — qui semble avoir mis en évidence les limites de l'engagement américain en faveur de la souveraineté et de la sécurité du Golfe — amènera les commentateurs arabes à reconsidérer le rôle potentiel de la Chine dans l'architecture sécuritaire régionale.

[130] Mahdī Mubārak ʻAbd Allah, "kaifa ḥālat maṣāliḥ al-Ṣīn al-ḫāṣṣa ʻan daʼim Irān?" كيف حالت مصالح الصين الخاصة عن دعم ايران؟ [Comment les intérêts propres de la Chine l'ont-ils empêchée de soutenir l'Iran ?], *Rai al-Youm*, 5 juillet 2025, https://www.raialyoum.com/كيف-حالت-مصالح-الصين-الخاصة-عن-دعم-ايرا/.

[131] Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Par Leonardo Bruni

Ce rapport avait pour objectif d'examiner les débats d'experts sur l'avenir des relations sino moyen orientales tant au sein de la région qu'en Chine, à la suite de la guerre israélo-iranienne. Bien que ce conflit meurtrier — heureusement bref et circonscrit — reste vraisemblablement dans les mémoires comme un tournant du paysage sécuritaire du Moyen-Orient, l'histoire poursuit néanmoins son cours, et de nouveaux développements significatifs commencent déjà à reconfigurer les débats régionaux et chinois analysés dans cette étude.

Le développement le plus marquant à cet égard est l'accord de cessez-le-feu conclu entre Israël et le Hamas, négocié sous l'égide de l'administration Trump. Longtemps attendu, cet accord a permis l'échange d'otages israéliens et palestiniens, ainsi qu'une pause fragile dans des violences qui, selon la Cour internationale de justice, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, ainsi que de nombreux gouvernements nationaux, plusieurs experts et rapporteurs spéciaux des Nations unies, ainsi qu'un large éventail d'universitaires et de spécialistes du génocide, ont constitué — ou ont présenté un risque plausible de — génocide à l'encontre de la population de la bande de Gaza au cours des deux dernières années[132].

Le cessez-le-feu, signé le 9 octobre, a culminé dans un sommet à Charm el-Cheikh. On notera toutefois l'absence des représentants d'Israël, du Hamas, de l'Iran ainsi que, dans le cadre de cette étude, de la Chine. Si Pékin a salué l'accord, il n'a joué aucun rôle direct dans sa mise en œuvre[133]. Il serait néanmoins inexact d'affirmer que la Chine n'a déployé aucun effort diplomatique: elle avait notamment contribué à la conclusion, aujourd'hui largement oubliée, d'un accord entre factions palestiniennes visant à la formation d'un gouvernement d'union nationale en juillet 2024. Toutefois, son implication au cours de l'année écoulée s'est principalement limitée au soutien des positions défendues par les États arabes et musulmans[134]. L'absence de la Chine à Charm el-Cheikh ne doit cependant pas être surestimée, dans la mesure où un débat substantiel demeure quant à la contribution réelle des États européens, arabes et musulmans représentés au sommet à la cessation effective des hostilités[135].

De fait, du point de vue des commentateurs chinois, la dynamique régionale a peu évolué. Leur analyse — selon laquelle les acteurs régionaux apparaissent incapables, peu disposés ou inefficaces à façonner durablement l'ordre régional — demeure pleinement pertinente. Le sommet de Charm el-Cheikh, au cours duquel de nombreux dirigeants ont salué Donald Trump comme le «président de la paix», a également montré que le déclin de l'influence américaine, souvent annoncé, reste pour l'instant largement hypothétique[136].

Néanmoins, la mise en œuvre du plan de paix en vingt points proposé par Trump s'annonce particulièrement délicate. La volonté du Hamas de se désarmer et de céder le contrôle demeure incertaine, les violations du cessez-le-feu par Israël sont fréquentes, et la proposition d'instaurer une autorité de transition placée sous l'égide de l'ancien Premier ministre britannique Tony Blair a suscité de vives critiques en raison de ses connotations perçues comme néocoloniales[137]. Le maintien de cette paix fragile pourrait ainsi placer les États-Unis dans une

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[132] International Court of Justice, "South Africa v. Israel, Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (Provisional Measures)" [Afrique du Sud c. Israël, Application de la Convention pour la prévention et la répression du crime de génocide dans la bande de Gaza (Mesures provisoires)], 26 janvier 2024, https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192/provisional-measures;
Amnesty International, "Amnesty International investigation concludes Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza" [Une enquête d'Amnesty International conclut qu'Israël commet un génocide contre les Palestiniens à Gaza], 5 décembre 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/;
Human Rights Watch, "Israel's Crime of Extermination and Acts of Genocide in Gaza" [Crime d'extermination et actes de génocide commis par Israël à Gaza], 19 décembre 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/19/israels-crime-extermination-acts-genocide-gaza;
Department of International Relations and Cooperation - Republic of South Africa, "South Africa delivers evidence of Israel genocide to ICJ" [L'Afrique du Sud soumet des preuves du génocide israélien à la CIJ], 28 octobre 2024, https://dirco.gov.za/south-africa-delivers-evidence-of-israel-genocide-to-icj/;
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Israel has committed genocide in the Gaza Strip, UN Commission finds" [Israël a commis un génocide dans la bande de Gaza, conclut une commission de l'ONU], 16 septembre 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/israel-has-committed-genocide-gaza-strip-un-commission-finds;
Raz Segal, "A Textbook Case of Genocide" [Un cas d'école de genocide], *Jewish Currents*, 13 octobre 2023, https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide.

[133] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Wáng Yì jiù jiāshā chōngtú dáchéng dì yī jiēduàn xiéyì biǎomíng lìchǎng" 王毅就加沙冲突达成第一阶段协议表明立场 [Wang Yi expose la position de la Chine sur l'accord de première phase concernant le conflit de Gaza], 11 octobre 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202510/t20251011_11730824.shtml.

[134] *Global Times*, "China welcomes statement by 21 Arab and Islamic countries on Israel-Iran conflict, calling for de-escalation of situation: FM spokesperson" [La Chine salue la déclaration de 21 pays arabes et islamiques sur le conflit israélo-iranien, appelant à une désescalade : porte-parole du ministère des Affaires étrangères], 17 juin, 2025, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202506/1336344.shtml.

[135] James Crisp & Joe Barnes, "Europe is stuck on the sidelines of Gaza peace deal" [L'Europe reste à l'écart des négociations sur l'accord de paix à Gaza], *The Telegraph,* 18 octobre 2025, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/10/18/gaza-peace-europe-sidelined/.

[136] Ferdinand Knapp, "Europe hails Trump's Israel-Gaza peace announcement" [L'Europe salue l'annonce de paix de Trump entre Israël et Gaza], *Politico*, 9 octobre 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-hail-donald-trump-gaza-peace-plan-israel/;
Asharq Al-awsat, "Arab, Western Countries Hail Trump's Peace Plan for Gaza" [Les pays arabes et occidentaux saluent le plan de paix de Trump pour Gaza], 30 septembre 2025, https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5191903-arab-western-countries-hail-trump's-peace-plan-gaza.

[137] *Le Monde* with AFP, "Hamas launches Gaza crackdown as Trump vows to disarm group," [Le Hamas lance une offensive à Gaza tandis que Trump promet de désarmer le groupe], *Le Monde*, 15 octobre 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/10/15/hamas-launches-gaza-crackdown-as-trump-vows-to-disarm-group_6746445_4.html;
Sally Ibrahim, "From Lebanon to Gaza, Israel is imposing a very violent 'ceasefire'" [Du Liban à Gaza, Israël impose un « cessez-le-feu » très violent], *The New Arab*, 30 octobre 2025, https://www.newarab.com/news/lebanon-gaza-israel-imposes-very-violent-ceasefire;
Maziar Motamedi, "Why is the divisive Tony Blair now touted for post-Gaza war interim role?" [Pourquoi Tony Blair, personnage controversé, est-il désormais pressenti pour un rôle intérimaire après la guerre de Gaza ?], *Al Jazeera*, 28 septembre 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/28/why-is-the-divisive-tony-blair-now-touted-for-post-gaza-war-interim-role.

position délicate, en révélant leurs propres limites en matière d'influence, de capacités et de volonté politique dans la région — à l'image des limites de la Chine mises en lumière lors de la guerre des Douze Jours.

La cessation des combats à Gaza confronte également Israël à un avenir incertain, le pays attendant de voir si sa position internationale s'en trouvera améliorée[138]. Les opérations militaires menées au cours de l'année écoulée — qui se sont étendues bien au-delà de la Palestine, touchant la Syrie, le Liban, le Yémen, la Tunisie, l'Iran et le Qatar — ainsi que leurs conséquences humanitaires, ont suscité une indignation internationale croissante. Cette réaction ne se limite pas au «Sud global»: en Europe et plus largement en Occident, un nombre croissant de gouvernements ont reconnu un État palestinien, tandis que la société civile et les mouvements militants se sont mobilisés pour tenter de briser le blocus de Gaza, accompagnés de grèves et de manifestations de grande ampleur en solidarité avec les Palestiniens.

La crainte d'une relégation au statut d'État paria — largement partagée au sein de l'establishment israélien[139] — pourrait expliquer la tendance de certains experts israéliens à interpréter la rhétorique «équilibrée» adoptée par la Chine durant la guerre avec l'Iran comme un signal d'ouverture. L'angoisse de l'isolement international semble ainsi nourrir le désir de nouer ou de renforcer des liens avec tout acteur mondial susceptible d'atténuer cette marginalisation, y compris Pékin, malgré une méfiance persistante à l'égard de la position chinoise sur la question palestinienne et de ses relations avec l'Iran.

Toutefois, toute perspective de «normalisation», évoquée avec prudence par certains universitaires et diplomates israéliens, paraît désormais compromise à la suite de la décision du Premier ministre Benyamin Netanyahou d'attribuer l'isolement d'Israël non pas aux politiques de son gouvernement, mais au Qatar et à la Chine, accusés d'orchestrer un «siège médiatique» contre le pays[140]. Cette prise de position a entraîné un refroidissement diplomatique immédiat, illustré notamment par la publication d'un éditorial du *China Daily* affirmant que «ce qu'Israël qualifie aujourd'hui d'"isolement" est en réalité le produit de ses propres choix politiques»[141].

Parallèlement, l'Iran fait face à des perspectives comparables d'isolement international, principalement sur le plan économique. Comme l'avaient anticipé les experts chinois, bien que les frappes américaines aient considérablement endommagé – sans toutefois détruire – l'infrastructure nucléaire iranienne, Téhéran demeure déterminé à faire valoir son droit à un programme nucléaire civil en tant qu'État signataire du Traité sur la non-prolifération des armes nucléaires.

Néanmoins, le 28 août, les pays du groupe E3 – la France, l'Allemagne et le Royaume-Uni – ont annoncé leur intention d'activer le mécanisme de rétablissement automatique des sanctions, entraînant la réimposition des sanctions onusiennes antérieures à 2015. En invoquant les restrictions imposées par l'Iran à l'accès de ses installations nucléaires pour les inspecteurs internationaux, les Européens semblaient motivés à la fois par le souci de réaffirmer leur pertinence malgré leur marginalisation diplomatique croissante et par la volonté de s'aligner sur Washington, dans l'espoir d'obtenir le soutien des États-Unis pour l'Ukraine et la sécurité européenne[142]. Cette dynamique s'est traduite par leur ralliement à l'exigence américaine d'un «enrichissement zéro», inacceptable pour Téhéran et incompatible avec les termes initiaux de l'accord nucléaire[143].

La Chine et la Russie ont, pour leur part, soutenu la contestation par l'Iran de l'autorité des E3, Téhéran accusant les puissances européennes non seulement de ne pas avoir respecté leurs engagements en matière de normalisation économique — en refusant de s'opposer à la campagne de «pression maximale» menée par la première administration Trump — mais également de s'être abstenues de condamner les attaques israéliennes contre l'Iran[144]. Pékin et Moscou ont ainsi laissé entendre qu'ils ne respecteraient pas, ou chercheraient à contourner, le régime de sanctions rétabli[145]. Dans ce contexte, la production et les exportations de pétrole iraniens ont continué d'augmenter, la Chine demeurant son principal client[146]. Dès lors, les analyses iraniennes présentant Pékin comme la seule grande puissance disposée à offrir à Téhéran un soutien économique et diplomatique substantiel apparaissent de plus en plus crédibles, en contraste avec les espoirs — désormais largement illusoires — des réformistes iraniens de rétablir des relations avec l'Occident[147].

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[138] Jamie Dettmer, "Israel bets the world will forgive and forget Gaza" [Israël parie que le monde pardonnera et oubliera Gaza], *Politico*, 1 octobre 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-war-in-gaza-benjamin-netanyahu/.

[139] Nava Freiberg, Lazar Berman & Tol Staff, "Netanyahu admits Israel economically isolated, says will need to become 'super-Sparta'" [Netanyahu admet qu'Israël est économiquement isolé et affirme qu'il devra devenir une « super-Sparte »], *The Times of Israel*, 15 septembre 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-admits-israel-is-economically-isolated-will-need-to-become-self-reliant/.

[140] Nava Freiberg "PM says Qatar, China attempting to 'blockade' Israel politically, but 'the US is with us'" [Le Premier ministre affirme que le Qatar et la Chine tentent de «bloquer» politiquement Israël, mais que « les États-Unis sont avec nous»], *The Times of Israel*, 15 septembre 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/pm-says-qatar-china-attempting-to-blockade-israel-politically-but-the-us-is-with-us/.

[141] Li Yang, "Israel's 'isolation' is not caused by others, but of its own making" [L'« isolement » d'Israël n'est pas causé par d'autres, mais par ses propres choix], *China Daily,* 19 septembre 2025, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202509/19/WS68cc9a3fa3108622abca199a.html.

[142] Ellie Geranmayeh, "The risks of the draw: Europe's post-snapback move on Iran" [Les risques du match nul : la réaction de l'Europe face à l'Iran après le rétablissement des sanctions], European Council on Foreign Relations, 29 septembre 2025, https://ecfr.eu/article/the-risks-of-the-draw-europes-post-snapback-move-on-iran/.

[143] Laurence Norman & Noemie Bisserbe, "Europeans Shift to Back Trump's Zero-Enrichment Demand," [Les Européens se rallient à la demande de Trump de mise en place d'un enrichissement zéro], *The Wall Street Journal*, https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/iran-israel-conflict-latest-news/card/europeans-shift-to-back-trump-s-zero-enrichment-demand-QO271IESHRYD4X0XUHGS.

[144] Riccardo Alcaro, "The Tragic Irony of the E3's Snapback Move on Iran," [L'ironie tragique de la riposte de l'E3 envers l'Iran], *IAI Commentaries*, 8 septembre 2025, https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/tragic-irony-e3s-snapback-move-iran.

[145] Maryam Sinaiee, "Tehran pins hopes on Russia and China to blunt sanctions impact" [Téhéran fonde ses espoirs sur la Russie et la Chine pour atténuer l'impact des sanctions], *Iran International,* 4 octobre 2024, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202510034828.

[146] Umud Shokri, "Iran's Oil Exports: Resilience Amid Sanctions and 'Snapback'" [Exportations de pétrole iraniennes : résilience face aux sanctions et au «snapback»], Stimson Center, 2 octobre 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2025/irans-oil-exports-resilience-amid-sanctions-and-snapback/.

[147] Pour en savoir plus sur l'évolution du débat intérieur iranien sur la Chine, consultez notre rapport : Enrico Fardella & Andrea Ghiselli (eds.), "Power Shifts? China's Growing Influence in the Gulf: Key Trends and Regional Debates in 2023" [Changements de rapports de force? L'influence croissante de la Chine dans le Golfe: tendances clés et débats régionaux en 2023] *ChinaMed Project*, 15 avril 2024, https://www.chinamed.it/publications/power-shifts-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-gulf-key-trends-and-regional-debates-in-2023.

De l'autre côté du Golfe, les États arabes, et en particulier ceux du Conseil de coopération du Golfe, s'efforcent de gérer les conséquences de la frappe israélienne meurtrière menée au Qatar[148]. Bien que le président Trump ait affirmé que Washington n'était pas informé de l'opération, la coordination étroite entre les forces armées américaine et israélienne a alimenté les doutes quant à la fiabilité des garanties de sécurité américaines. De nombreux observateurs estiment désormais que les engagements des États-Unis envers la sécurité du Golfe sont subordonnés aux ambitions régionales d'Israël[149]. À la suite de l'attaque, Washington a tenté de réparer ses relations avec Doha en promettant un accord de sécurité inspiré de l'article 5 de l'OTAN, un engagement longtemps souhaité par d'autres États du Golfe, notamment l'Arabie saoudite. Trump a également semblé exercer de nouvelles pressions sur Israël, contribuant possiblement à la conclusion du cessez-le-feu à Gaza[150].

Il reste toutefois à déterminer si ces mesures suffiront à restaurer durablement la confiance. Si la défiance persistait, cet épisode pourrait constituer un premier pas concret vers une plus grande autonomie régionale et une orientation multipolaire, telles qu'envisagées par de nombreux chercheurs et décideurs politiques chinois.

[148] Ahmed Aboudouh, "Egypt now sees Israel as an imminent threat" [L'Égypte perçoit désormais Israël comme une menace imminente], Chatham House, 17 septembre 2025, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/09/egypt-now-sees-israel-imminent-threat.

[149] *The Economist*, "America can't or won't protect its friends in the Gulf," [L'Amérique ne peut ou ne veut pas protéger ses amis du Golfe], 10 septembre 2025, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/09/10/america-cant-or-wont-protect-its-friends-in-the-gulf.

[150] Dasha Burns & Diana Nerozzi, "'Qatar was the turning point': How Israel's bombing of Doha ignited a peace process" [«Le Qatar a été le tournant»: Comment les bombardements israéliens sur Doha ont déclenché un processus de paix], *Politico*, 10 octobre 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/2025/10/10/qatar-was-the-turning-point-how-israels-bombing-of-doha-ignited-a-peace-process-00604017.

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