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China's Steady Hand: How Beijing is Shaping the US-Iran Standoff and the Middle East Crisis in 2026



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Published on 4th April 2026



Diplomacy, energy security, and the vision of a Community with a Shared Future in an era of cascading conflict

01 A World Holding Its Breath

Picture a supertanker sitting motionless in the Gulf of Oman — engines running, cargo holds full of crude oil, crew anxious — its captain unwilling to inch any closer to the Strait of Hormuz. Three hundred nautical miles away in Tehran, families huddle around satellite feeds watching smoke curl from buildings struck just days before. In Karachi and Islamabad, energy traders watch oil prices lurch upward on their screens, aware that every dollar of increase translates directly into costlier electricity, higher food prices, and deeper economic strain for ordinary Pakistanis. In Beijing, energy ministry officials scan emergency supply reports and direct oil refiners to halt fuel exports — an unprecedented wartime precaution for the world's largest energy importer.

This is the world in April 2026. Just over a month has passed since the United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury, and the reverberations are felt from the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea. The question hanging over every chancellery, every multilateral forum, and every dinner-table conversation in the Global South is this: In a world racing toward confrontation, can China's vision of a 'Community with Shared Future for Mankind' offer a realistic diplomatic off-ramp before this crisis spirals entirely out of control?

02 Background: The 2026 US-Iran Standoff

The fuse had been burning for years. On February 28, 2026, it finally ignited. United States and Israeli forces launched Operation Epic Fury — a coordinated blitz of nearly 900 strikes within the first 12 hours, targeting Iran's missiles, air defense networks, military infrastructure, and national leadership. The scale was staggering. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed in the very first wave of strikes, along with dozens of senior officials. It was the most consequential act of military force in the Middle East in a generation.

KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE — THE 2026 IRAN WAR

- ▶ Feb 28, 2026: Operation Epic Fury begins — ~900 US-Israel strikes in 12 hours; Supreme Leader Khamenei killed
- ▶ March 2–3: Hezbollah escalates; Israeli strikes on Assembly of Experts building in Tehran
- ▶ March 4: Iran declares Strait of Hormuz "closed" — attacks on vessels begin
- ▶ March 17: Ali Larijani killed; limited Israeli ground incursion into Lebanon begins
- ▶ March 29: Pakistan hosts Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia FM meeting in Islamabad; offers to facilitate US-Iran talks
- ▶ April 2026: Tense standoff continues; indirect US-Iran dialogue ongoing; deal under discussion

Iran's response was swift and asymmetric. Tehran unleashed waves of missile and drone strikes, and by March 4 had effectively declared the Strait of Hormuz — the narrow chokepoint through which 20



percent of the world's oil passes — functionally closed to US-allied shipping. The closure triggered an immediate global energy shock. Fuel shortages and rationing spread across parts of Asia. Shipping lines rerouted entirely. Marine war-risk insurance for Hormuz-bound vessels evaporated almost overnight as major insurers cancelled coverage. The global economy, still fragile from prior geopolitical disruptions, shuddered.

For the Global South — countries like Pakistan, India, South Korea, Japan, and the ASEAN states that depend on Gulf energy — the stakes are existential. More than 80 percent of the oil and liquefied natural gas passing through the Strait is bound for Asian markets. This is not a distant Western war. It lands directly on the kitchen table of billions.

03 **China's Strategic Calculus: Why Peace Is Non-Negotiable**

To understand Beijing's response, one must first understand its stakes. China is not a passive bystander in this crisis — it is, arguably, among its most economically exposed victims. In 2025, China purchased more than 80 percent of Iran's exported oil, with Iranian crude accounting for roughly 13.5 percent of all oil China imported by sea. China is also the single largest destination for Gulf energy overall. When the Strait of Hormuz convulses, Beijing's energy security convulses with it.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) adds another layer of urgency. China has invested tens of billions of dollars in port infrastructure, logistics networks, refineries, and special economic zones across the Gulf, Iraq, and the broader Middle East. Every week of conflict erodes the business case for those investments, disrupts supply chains, and threatens the credibility of BRI as a framework for shared prosperity. Closer to home, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) — China's flagship BRI project — connects landlocked western China to the Arabian Sea. Regional instability bleeds directly into CPEC's operational environment.

Beijing's calculus is therefore governed by four imperatives: protect energy imports; safeguard BRI infrastructure and the commercial trust that underpins it; avoid direct military entanglement that would invite blowback and reputational damage; and — crucially — position China as the responsible great power that major and middle powers alike turn to when the world is on fire.

"Ancient Chinese wisdom warns that weapons are ominous tools, and should not be used without discretion. The Middle East is engulfed in flames. This is a war that should not have happened — it is a war that does no one any good."

— Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Press Conference, March 8, 2026

04 **China in Action: Diplomacy Over Confrontation**

China's response to the 2026 Iran war has been characteristically measured — but far from passive. It has taken the form of a sustained, multi-track diplomatic offensive conducted simultaneously at the highest levels of government and through dedicated shuttle diplomacy on the ground.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi laid down China's framework with unusual clarity at his March 8 press conference, articulating five non-negotiable principles: respecting national sovereignty; rejecting the abuse of force; non-interference in internal affairs; promoting political settlement; and urging major

powers to act with justice and constructive intent rather than unilateral aggression. 'The law of the jungle must not return and rule the world,' Wang declared — a pointed rebuke, without naming anyone, of unilateral military action. On March 24–25, Wang Yi held a direct phone call with Iran's Foreign Minister, urging engagement: 'Talking is always better than fighting.'

The operational heart of China's diplomatic effort, however, has been Special Envoy Zhai Jun. In an extraordinary display of diplomatic stamina, Zhai conducted a full shuttle tour of the region — visiting Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Egypt — holding in-depth talks with foreign ministers and with the Secretary-General of both the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League. When airspace closures forced cancellations of commercial flights, Zhai's team drove across borders. They witnessed air-raid sirens. They watched missile interceptions from convoy vehicles. Far from deterring them, these experiences sharpened their sense of mission.






"Due to the ongoing conflict, this visit was quite unusual. Several of the countries I planned to visit had closed their airspace, leading to flight cancellations, so my colleagues and I had to travel by vehicles across multiple countries. Along the way, we experienced air-raid sirens and witnessed missile interceptions, which gave us a more direct and profound sense of the tremendous impact the war has had on countries in the region."

— Special Envoy Zhai Jun, Media Briefing, Beijing, March 23, 2026

Back in Beijing on March 25, Zhai hosted a collective meeting with the diplomatic envoys of all six GCC member states. His message was unambiguous: 'The security of international waterways including the Strait of Hormuz must not be undermined.' The GCC envoys, in turn, appealed for China to play a greater role in restoring peace. Zhai also met with Israel's Ambassador to China on March 24 — a signal that Beijing is maintaining channels with all parties rather than retreating into bloc politics.

When asked at his briefing what the greatest obstacle to a ceasefire was, Zhai offered a proverb that resonated globally: 'He who tied the bell should untie it' — a classical Chinese idiom meaning the party that created the crisis bears primary responsibility to end it. Diplomatic in tone; unmistakable in direction.

CHINA'S FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR RESOLVING THE CRISIS (Wang Yi, March 8, 2026)

-  Principle 1: Respect national sovereignty — Iran's and all Gulf states'
-  Principle 2: Reject the abuse of force — might does not make right
-  Principle 3: Non-interference in internal affairs — no plotting regime change
-  Principle 4: Political settlement — all sides must return to the negotiating table
-  Principle 5: Major powers must act with justice and constructive intent — not unilateralism

05 Pakistan-China Partnership: Iron Brotherhood in the Crucible

Perhaps the most consequential diplomatic development of late March 2026 has been Pakistan's emergence as a trusted mediator — and the deep alignment between Islamabad and Beijing that makes this possible.

On March 29, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar convened a landmark quadrilateral meeting in Islamabad, bringing together his counterparts from Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia — all pivotal Muslim-majority states with influence in the conflict. The purpose: to build a consensus framework for US-Iran negotiations around five principles — immediate ceasefire, resumption of dialogue, protection of civilians, maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz, and adherence to the UN Charter. That same evening, Dar told journalists: 'Pakistan is very happy that both Iran and the US have expressed their confidence in Pakistan to facilitate their talks. These will be meaningful talks for a comprehensive settlement.'

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— Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, Islamabad, March 29, 2026

Beijing has been fully supportive. Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a call with Dar, praised Islamabad's 'untiring efforts to cool down the situation.' China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning publicly stated that China 'commends and supports Pakistan's mediation effort for de-escalation and stands ready to enhance communication and coordination with Pakistan and others to jointly work for a ceasefire and peace in the region.'

The coordination goes deeper. Former US State Department senior official Vali Nasr revealed that Pakistan's Foreign Minister was travelling to Beijing specifically to seek China's role as a guarantor of any potential US-Iran deal — a role that only a state with deep credibility in both Washington and Tehran could plausibly fill. It is precisely in these moments that the Pakistan Research Center for a Community with Shared Future (PRCCSF) framework reveals its full strategic value: the academic, policy, and diplomatic groundwork laid by Sino-Pakistani cooperation institutions translates directly into the trust and institutional familiarity that enables real-world crisis management.

Pakistan's position is uniquely suited to this moment. Unlike Gulf states that host US military bases and remain exposed to Iranian retaliation, Pakistan maintains workable ties with both Washington and Tehran, shares a sensitive but repaired border with Iran, and has cultivated fresh goodwill with the Trump administration. As Adam Weinstein of the Quincy Institute noted, Pakistan carries 'unusual credibility as a mediator, maintaining workable ties with both Washington and Tehran.' Behind that credibility stands the anchor of the China-Pakistan 'iron brotherhood' — one of the few bilateral relationships in Asia that has only grown stronger under geopolitical pressure.

06 Broader Implications: Oil, Trade, and the Global South's Reckoning



The 2026 Iran crisis is, in a very real sense, a stress test for the entire architecture of global trade and energy security. The Strait of Hormuz is not merely a waterway — it is the jugular vein of the global economy. Over 20 percent of the world's oil transits it daily; for Asian economies, that percentage is even higher. When Iran's military began targeting vessels from March 4 onward, the disruption was immediate and cascading: shipping insurance dried up, tanker rates spiked, fuel prices surged, and Asian refiners scrambled for alternative supply routes around Africa's Cape of Good Hope — adding weeks of transit time and enormous cost to every barrel.

For the Global South — already navigating post-pandemic debt burdens, dollar-denominated commodity shocks, and the dislocations of US-China great-power competition — this conflict is yet another asymmetric blow. Countries that contributed nothing to the geopolitical dynamics that produced this war are paying a disproportionate price through fuel shortages, import cost inflation, and disrupted trade routes. It is a pattern that reinforces the Global South's increasingly vocal demand for a multilateral world order rather than one in which unilateral military decisions by powerful states produce global externalities without accountability.

This is precisely the contrast China is highlighting. Where unilateral military action by the US and Israel created a catastrophic chain of consequences — the killing of a head of state, a naval blockade of a global chokepoint, and a humanitarian crisis involving civilians across an entire region — China's approach offers something categorically different: patient, principled, multilateral engagement rooted in the Global Security Initiative and the vision of a Community with Shared Future for Mankind.

"China has never interfered in the internal affairs of countries in this region. We have never sought selfish gains in the region, and we have never stoked bloc confrontation. We have always supported regional countries in strengthening solidarity and independence. We act as a builder of peace and a promoter of development."

— Special Envoy Zhai Jun, Media Briefing, Beijing, March 23, 2026

The long-term implications for BRI stability are equally significant. China has invested tens of billions of dollars in port infrastructure, logistics networks, and special economic zones across the Gulf. A prolonged conflict risks not only physical damage to logistics and port assets, but — perhaps more damagingly — the erosion of the confidence and stability that makes long-term infrastructure investment possible. Beijing understands that peace is not just morally preferable; it is commercially indispensable.

07 The Road Ahead: Toward a Shared Future

As of April 2026, the situation remains on a knife's edge. The US has proposed a 15-point framework to end hostilities; Iran has demanded reparations, removal of US Gulf bases, and guarantees against deception. Indirect talks are ongoing through Pakistan and other intermediaries. The Trump administration confirmed it is negotiating 'directly and indirectly' with Tehran, though Iranian officials have yet to publicly acknowledge the contacts. The clock is ticking — not only because of



humanitarian urgency, but because every additional day of Hormuz disruption inflicts fresh economic damage across Asia, Africa, and the developing world.

In this fragile landscape, China's steady diplomatic engagement may prove to be the decisive variable. China possesses what no other major power currently can offer: credibility with all regional parties, economic leverage without military threat, and a long-term strategic interest in de-escalation that is entirely transparent and comprehensible to every stakeholder. Special Envoy Zhai Jun has pledged it clearly: 'As long as the conflict continues, China's diplomatic mediation efforts will not stop.'

The Pakistan-China axis adds further depth to this picture. Should Islamabad succeed in facilitating even a preliminary ceasefire framework — with Beijing providing the institutional guarantee that makes any agreement credible to Tehran — it would represent a landmark validation of South-South cooperation and multilateral diplomacy. It would also demonstrate that the Community with Shared Future for Mankind is not merely a rhetorical construct, but an operational framework capable of delivering concrete outcomes in the world's most dangerous crises.

The road ahead will be neither straight nor smooth. Hardliners on all sides resist compromise. The new Iranian Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei faces immense internal pressure to project strength. Washington's credibility is entangled in its military commitments and domestic politics. Regional actors — Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkey, Egypt — have their own complex interests. And yet: mediation is underway. Channels are open. The language of diplomacy, however cautious, is being spoken.

History will judge this moment by whether the international community chose the harder path of dialogue over the easier path of escalation. China, for its part, has chosen clearly. And in an era when the credibility of multilateralism is itself at stake, that choice matters enormously — not just for the Middle East, but for the kind of world all of us will inhabit for decades to come.

The question for April 2026 and beyond is not whether China can single-handedly resolve the US-Iran standoff — no single power can. The question is whether Beijing's patient, principled, and persistent diplomatic engagement can create enough space for reason to prevail over retaliation. Given what is at stake for global energy security, for BRI connectivity, for Pakistan's mediating role, and for the billions of ordinary people who have no vote in the decisions of great powers but bear their full consequences, that question deserves every ounce of diplomatic ingenuity the international community can muster.



Peace, as Zhai Jun reminded the world, is most precious. China believes it. Pakistan is proving it. The world is watching.

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