



well before the current unrest. The escalation effectively closes the door on any near-term revival of energy ties.

One of the most consequential yet understated outcomes of the crisis is China's expanding role in Iran. Beijing and Tehran are bound by a 25-year strategic partnership covering energy, infrastructure, and security cooperation. Unlike India and Western actors, China has demonstrated a willingness to absorb sanctions-related risks in pursuit of long-term strategic gains. As Iran becomes increasingly isolated, it is likely to lean more heavily on China for economic and diplomatic support. In the event of war or prolonged instability, this dependency will only deepen, marginalising India's influence and altering the balance of power in the region.

It is important, however, to understand the nature of China's posture in this unfolding crisis. Beijing's stand has been particularly striking for its restraint. Given China's history of involvement in West Asian affairs and its desire to expand its regional footprint, its limited response has disappointed some observers. Official statements from Chinese leaders have been cautious. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning called on Iran's government and people to overcome difficulties and maintain stability, while Foreign Minister Wang Yi condemned American threats as a return to the law of the jungle and offered China as a constructive mediator. Beyond rhetoric, however, Beijing has taken no decisive action.

This restraint reflects China's broader strategic calculus. Beijing's economic and diplomatic investments in Gulf states far outweigh those in Iran. With relatively limited stakes and few viable tools to shape outcomes, a wait-and-see approach aligns with China's interests. The current crisis is largely beyond Beijing's control, and China's global partners appear to recognise this.

China's credibility as a responsible global actor has not been significantly damaged by its inaction. Analysts have noted that Beijing never positioned itself as Iran's security guarantor or as an anti-Western crusader. Instead, it seeks to function as an alternative partner within a global system from which it also derives enormous benefit. Its diplomacy aims to expand influence while managing rivalry, not to overturn the existing order outright.

Economically, Iran occupies a middling position in China's overseas portfolio. Projects such as the Qom-Yiwu rail freight corridor have symbolic importance but do not place Iran among Beijing's top development financing recipients. The two countries also maintain a security partnership that includes intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and coordination on counterterrorism. China has supplied Iran with various military and dual-use technologies in exchange

Officials attend a ceremony in 2019 to mark the first export convoy to India via Iran at Chabahar port.



Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian (l), along with other Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) leaders, signs documents covering a wide range of cooperative areas at an SCO summit in Tianjin, China.

for discounted energy, infrastructure access, and diplomatic alignment.

The limits of this partnership were evident in June 2025, when US strikes targeted Iranian nuclear facilities. China's response was confined to diplomatic condemnation and calls for dialogue. No material support followed. This episode highlighted the fundamentally opportunistic nature of the relationship. China benefits from Iran's isolation but is unwilling to incur serious costs on its behalf.

Even a disruption in Iranian oil exports would be manageable for China, which has ample reserves and alternative suppliers. The loss of a consistently anti-American partner would be inconvenient but not catastrophic. The deeper concern for Beijing would be symbolic. While there are no signs of comparable unrest within China, its leaders are unlikely to take chances. Increased surveillance, tighter information controls,

and a heightened security presence would be the predictable response. Iran is not existential for China. Domestic stability is.

Now that the important covers are discussed, it is also crucial to understand how Pakistan is one of the most affected parties in this crisis. With Pakistan's disputed border with Afghanistan already tense and prone to frequent clashes, officials have warned that Pakistan cannot afford its border with Iran to become volatile as well. Although not all of this is due purely to the current protests, Pakistan's border trade with Iran has been disrupted in previous regional tensions, hurting border economies. Local communities rely on cross-border commerce, and closures or stricter controls disrupt livelihoods. Wider instability in West Asia, not limited to Iran alone, tends to raise global oil prices, which puts pressure on Pakistan's balance of payments and

inflation, especially given its reliance on imported energy.

At the same time, the crisis has revived questions about the US-Pakistan relationship, which has improved significantly in Trump's second term. With Trump continuing to threaten Iran with attacks, a key concern is whether the United States could seek access to Pakistan's airspace or military bases in the event of a strike. Such a demand would place Pakistan in a difficult position. Denying the request would risk annoying Trump and jeopardising the recent improvement in bilateral relations. Accepting it, however, would risk alienating Pakistan's Shia population and the Islamic world more broadly. Pakistan has around 20% Shia Muslims who sympathise with Tehran, and Iran is a Shia-majority state. There is a serious concern that a US attack on Iran, combined with pressure on Pakistan to facilitate such an attack, could foment unrest within Pakistan itself. Officials fear that any attack on Iran or a regime-change scenario could trigger widespread protests across Pakistan and create additional pressure along the Pakistan-Iran border due to a potential inflow of refugees.

Ultimately, Iran's unrest must be viewed within the broader West Asian context. Rising Iran-US tensions heighten Israel's security concerns, particularly regarding Iran-backed groups in the region and Iran's military capabilities. Persian Gulf states are watching cautiously, wary of being drawn into a wider confrontation while simultaneously fearing disruptions to energy markets and maritime security. The regional order remains fragile, shaped by unresolved conflicts and shifting alliances. A military conflict involving Iran would not remain confined within its borders. It would disrupt shipping lanes, destabilise oil markets, and force regional actors to recalibrate alliances, fundamentally reshaping West Asia's strategic landscape.

In this screengrab, people take to the streets of Kargil, Indian-administered Ladakh, on January 29, 2026, to show their solidarity with Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, after the US president threatened him.

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A border market is inaugurated in southeastern Iran with Pakistani Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif (not pictured) in attendance on May 18, 2023.