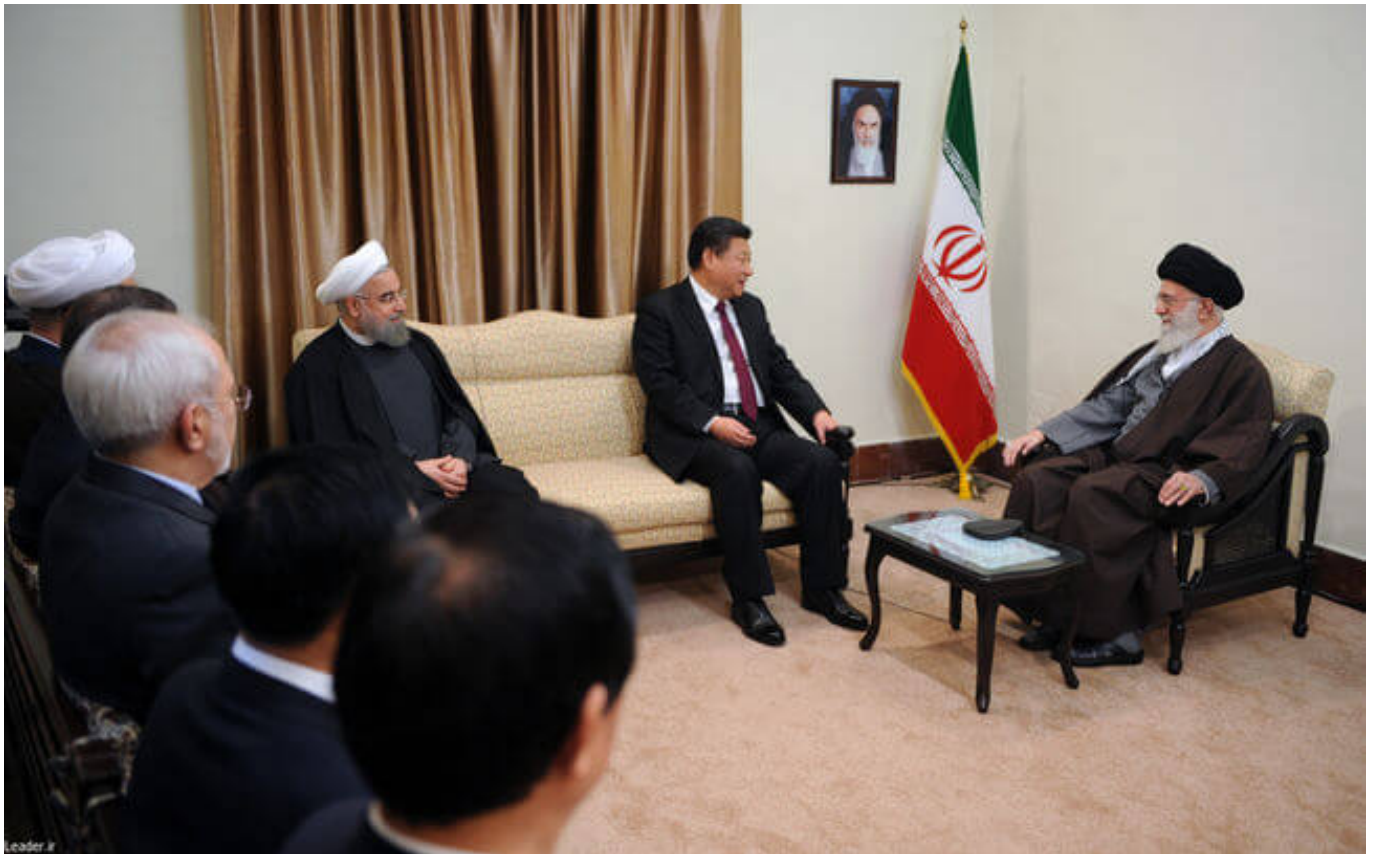




By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Did Iran's attack on Israel mark China's withdrawal from the Middle East?



An Iranian attack on Israel will cool down China's ambitions of assuming a more significant role in the Middle East, where it has invested a great deal of diplomatic and economic effort.

Beijing remained on the side-lines of an unprecedented event in the Middle East, thus showing a lacking of any role as a global political and security power, which it has wanted since the beginning of Xi Jinping's rule.

Beijing had no adequate response to Iran's direct attack on Israel, the first in history.

The unprecedented event exposed China's increasing presence in the Middle East as a short-sighted **diplomatic-economic agenda** without any long-term strategy.

Moreover, Iran's massive air attack, completely repelled by Israel with the support of its allies, left Beijing in a gap between its strategic expectations about the "invasion" of its influence in the Middle East and the realistically small possibilities to achieve it.

## Voluntary withdrawal

Beijing **did not condemn** Iran's attack on Israel. It reacted mildly and routinely, as if it were a matter of petty shooting in some "unimportant" part of the world. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing stated with the usual bothsidesism that it was the end of it.

But, in the same statement, Beijing called for a "constructive role for the peace and stability of the region", especially countries "with influence". Does this mean that it excluded itself from the circle of states that have influence in the Middle East?

**The disproportion in the reactions to the 2 important events has placed Beijing among the supporters of Tehran, with little room to correct its bias in its subsequent positions**

On the other hand, Beijing strongly **condemned** the bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, when some of the most significant generals of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps were killed.

"China strongly condemns the attack on the Iranian embassy in Syria", said the head of Chinese diplomacy, Wang Yi, in a conversation with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The disproportion in the reactions to the 2 important events has placed Beijing among the supporters of Tehran, with little room to correct its bias in its subsequent positions.

## Missed opportunities

In at least 2 crucial situations in the Middle East, China refused to act as a power capable of participating in solving global crises. The US provided both opportunities, which seems to have been the principal reason for Beijing to reject them.

China has steadfastly refused US calls to pressure Tehran to end attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea by its proxy Houthis in Yemen.

Beijing used its influence only to get Iran to stop the Houthis from targeting Chinese ships in the Red Sea zone. Russian ships have also received such an exemption from attack.

Another plea that Beijing did not hear came after the attack on the Iranian consulate in Syria, when it failed to influence Tehran to refrain from retaliating against Israel.

Both cases declared Beijing either a staunch ally of Iran in conflicts in the Middle East or a factor that has almost no influence on Tehran.

**It turned out that wait-and-see tactics only meant that China had no other options when it came to crises in the Middle East**

Iran's attack on Israel and Beijing's silence on the matter nullified China's diplomatic breakthrough from just a year ago, when it mediated the historic restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

This agreement was a confirmation that China has started to politically capitalise on its previously significant economic presence in the region. Its influence on complex relations in the Middle East happened simultaneously with the decline of the American presence and hinted at further Chinese offensive actions.

Beijing, however, was unable to get involved in resolving significant security crises, which eliminated it as a potentially powerful player in this region going forward.

It turned out that wait-and-see tactics only meant that China had no other options when it came to crises in the Middle East.

## Beijing has no influence over Tehran

Beijing is a newcomer to handling major global crises. It never dealt with them because, until the arrival of Xi, Beijing was traditionally uninterested in global affairs and limited itself to economic expansion.

After the Iranian attack on Israel, it turned out that its influence on Tehran was not nearly as significant as it was supposed to be, given that their economic ties had strengthened in the past few years.

China buys 90% of Iran's oil for export, satisfying 10% of its needs, but Beijing does not have the capacity to turn this economic influence on Tehran into a political one.



*Tens of billions of dollars have poured into the Arab economies in the area, whereas Chinese investments in Iran have increased by only approximately \$200 million since 2021*

It has been ruled out that Beijing would use some form of sanctions against Tehran, primarily because this is not China's style of behaviour on the international stage, but even more so because it is the result of Beijing's awareness that economic benefit was the maximum that its influence could provide on the global stage.

On the other hand, Tehran does not have many reasons to believe in an alliance with China because the promises from the 2021 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership about the arrival of large Chinese investments are missing.

*Tens of billions of dollars have poured into the Arab economies in the area, whereas Chinese investments in Iran have increased by only approximately \$200 million since that agreement.*

If China's motive for entering the Middle East more aggressively was to permanently take over dominant influence from the hands of the US, such ambitions ended with Iran's attack on Israel over the weekend.

The participation of the US and allies, particularly the Arab states in the region, in the defence of Israel was a strong confirmation of its presence in the Middle East and a factor that will continue to shape regional relations in the future.

China will not be part of that circle. At least

not to the extent that it has wanted to be so far.