



By: TA | AP Insight

China's diplomatic push in the Middle East – mediation or empty rhetoric?



China is stepping up its diplomacy on the Iran war, putting forward a five-point proposal with Pakistan, rallying support from Gulf countries and opposing a United Nations proposal to use any force necessary to open the **Strait of Hormuz**.

It is China's latest push for a more prominent role in global affairs, though it may prove to be more rhetorical than substantive, with the U.S. appearing uninterested in Beijing's efforts.

"The war with Iran is the priority of all countries in and outside the region," said Sun Yun, director of the China program at the Stimson Center, a Washington-based think tank. "It is an opportunity China will not miss to demonstrate its leadership and diplomatic initiative."

Danny Russel, a former senior U.S. diplomat, described China's diplomacy as "performative" and compared the five-point proposal for ending the Iran war with its 12-point plan for Ukraine in 2023, which was "filled with platitudes but never acted on."

"Its narrative is that while Washington is reckless, aggressive and heedless of the cost to others, China is a principled and responsible champion of peace," said Russel, a distinguished fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute. "What we are seeing from China is messaging, not mediation."

China has been working "tirelessly for peace" since the outbreak of the war, said Liu Pengyu, spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington.

How the US views China's diplomacy

The Trump administration appears to have little enthusiasm for the prospect of China's mediation, according to U.S. officials.

The U.S. has soured on third-party mediation efforts, and it has little interest in boosting China's international stature or giving it an

opening to claim success in the Middle East, said three U.S. officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss potential diplomatic options.

One of the officials described the administration's position on the Chinese-Pakistani effort as "agnostic," neither endorsement nor rejection, but all three stressed that could change if President Donald Trump weighs in before his planned **summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping**.

There is no guarantee that Trump may not delay the trip to China again if the war rages on - Sun Yun

For Beijing, there could be an incentive to see the war subside before Trump travels to China in mid-May. Citing demands of the war, Trump postponed the trip initially set for the end of March.

"There is no guarantee that Trump may not delay the trip to China again if the war rages on," Sun said.

The war saw a major **escalation** Friday when Iran shot down two U.S. military aircraft, a first since the war began five weeks ago. Trump told NBC News that it would not impact negotiations with Iran, just days after declaring in a **national address** that the U.S. has "beaten and completely decimated Iran."

Beijing is calculating the pain from the closure of the Strait of Hormuz

For now, China is more insulated from the disruption in the Strait of Hormuz than other countries after diversifying its energy sources and reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

China relies on Iran for only about 13% of its oil imports, and Beijing is working with Tehran

to allow the passage of Chinese-flagged vessels through the critical waterway, where Iran's stranglehold has sent energy prices soaring. China also maintains a large strategic petroleum reserve.

Beijing is worried about a protracted war and has an interest in trying to bring it to an end

While China has positioned itself to cushion short-term shocks, analysts say Beijing is worried about a protracted war and has an interest in trying to bring it to an end.

"An escalation of the conflict will start to harm Chinese interests," Russel said. "Because China's growth model is so export-heavy, prolonged energy shocks and shipping disruption will mean costlier inputs and weaker global demand that damage its vulnerable economy."

Besides not wanting to see a long war, China "welcomes the opportunity to suggest that it is helping mitigate a crisis of America's making, especially as the Trump administration's lack of a considered strategy for containing the fallout becomes more apparent," said Ali Wyne, a senior research and advocacy adviser on U.S.-China relations at the International Crisis Group.

China has undertaken a flurry of diplomacy

After the war began, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke with counterparts from Russia, Oman, Iran, France, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

He told Iran that China cherished its friendship, urged Israel to cease military actions and expressed that China would be willing to play a role in seeking peace.

This past week, Wang hosted his Pakistani counterpart in Beijing to hash out their five-

point proposal, calling for an end to hostilities and the reopening of the strait.

He has held more than 20 phone calls with regional foreign ministers, and a special envoy has visited several countries in the region, aiming to promote peace and deescalate tensions, Liu said.

Wang sought support for China's plan from the European Union's foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas, telling her it represented "broad, international consensus," the Chinese foreign ministry said.



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Wang also spoke this week with Bahrain's foreign minister, Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, to explain why China opposed Bahrain's U.N. proposal to allow military force to open the Strait of Hormuz.

Wang said actions by the U.N. Security Council should help ease tensions "rather than endorse illegal acts of war, still less add fuel to the fire."

China and Russia argued that the U.S. or other countries could exploit a U.N.-backed mechanism to escalate the deadly war, according to a U.N. diplomat, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss diplomatic conversations.

Both countries appear to have less immediate need to see the strait fully open.

While China has been able to pay to get some of its ships through, Russia is benefiting from the high price of oil, its main export.

Hoping to avoid a veto, Bahrain significantly **watered down** its proposal to authorize defensive – but not offensive – action to ensure vessels can safely transit the strait. A vote was pushed back until next week.

To solve the problem of the strait, China says a ceasefire is needed. But its plan with Pakistan has been met with mostly silence from the U.S.

One of the U.S. officials said the plan is difficult to assess because it is less of a roadmap to peace than a vague appeal for respect for international law and the importance of diplomacy and the U.N.'s role.