



150 Days of Iran War

What Are China's Strategic Lessons

Yang Zi



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150 Days of Iran War: What Are China's Strategic Lessons?

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *Chinese analysts believe the Iran War revealed weaknesses in President Donald Trump's wartime leadership, US military capabilities, and solidarity within the US-led alliance system.*
- *China now has a clearer understanding of the limits of US intervention and deterrence. As a result, it may feel more confident in taking a firmer stance on security issues.*
- *Furthermore, Beijing may test US alliance commitments more actively while seeking to reshape the international order in China's favour by building ties with countries disenchanted with Washington's leadership.*

COMMENTARY

Wars are unpredictable. In the immortal words of [Niccolò Machiavelli](#), "wars begin when you will, but they do not end when you please". What seems like assured victory at first can easily turn into a military disaster. Yet, one predictable feature of war is that it reveals the strengths and weaknesses of armies.

Since February 2026, the Iran War has exposed the advantages and shortcomings of the belligerents. While China is not an active participant in the conflict, it has been tracking developments closely, as the war's corollaries directly affect China's economy and geopolitical priorities.

This paper explores the strategic lessons China has learned from the Iran War, now at its 150-day mark. It argues that the war has laid bare three major US limitations, which carry important strategic implications for China's security policy.

Limitations Expose

Chinese researchers have used the Iran War to assess US capabilities and limitations. According to their reports, the war has exposed three major constraints on American power: Donald Trump's leadership limits, US military limits, and vulnerabilities of US-led alliances.

As observed by [Xinhua](#), the war revealed the soft underbelly of Trump's leadership. Since returning to office in 2025, his [foreign policy](#) has been characterised by provocations, brinkmanship, and unilateralism – but only generating limited pushback. While the Venezuela operation represented the culmination of the Trumpist foreign policy, the Iran War became a sobering reality check. Chinese analysts argue that [Trump's personality](#) is suited to limited operations with swift returns, rather than prolonged campaigns that require significant resource commitments and meticulous calculations. Additionally, Trump's haphazard wartime leadership and unsuccessful Iran strategy prove him to be an [inept commander-in-chief](#).

According to analysts at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), the conflict also [exposed limitations in US military capability](#). Although the initial air campaign successfully decapitated the Iranian leadership and destroyed key military targets, [its effectiveness declined](#) as Iranian resistance hardened and moved to close the Strait of Hormuz, imposing heavy costs on the Trump administration. Moreover, US air defence systems based in the Gulf states proved [less effective in an age of drone warfare](#) – not to mention the significant number of pricey [US interceptors expended](#) to counter Iranian attacks, raising concerns about munition readiness and replenishment rates. Finally, there have been clear signs of [leadership overconfidence](#) and continued [internecine conflict](#) within the US defence establishment.

The US-led alliance system forms the foundation of Pax Americana, and prior administrations took great care in maintaining alliance cohesion. However, Trump 2.0 has demonstrated a lack of interest in strengthening these partnerships. CICIR researchers note that Trump [failed to take the Gulf Arab allies' opposition into account](#) before launching strikes against Iran. When those same allies came under Iranian attack, Trump failed to provide the necessary protection, driving some to [engage with Beijing](#). While the United States worked closely with Israel at first, it [neglected Israeli interests](#) in the recent Islamabad memorandum. Gulf Arab allies were also [dissatisfied with the memorandum of understanding](#), since its terms mostly favour Iran's interest.

NATO allies were [not informed of the war ahead of time](#). However, after Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz, Trump called on European states to help reopen the critical waterway. Yet, due to his prior disputes with European leaders, [few came to Trump's aid](#).

The CCP Central Committee's official journal, *Qiushi*, maintains that [fragilities within the US-led alliance system](#) have been fully exposed. Trump's foolhardy and disjointed

foreign policy damaged alliance cohesion, leading to questions regarding the future of these relations and even the [credibility of US security commitments](#).

Influence on Chinese Strategic Behaviour

If the intervention in Venezuela enhanced the reputation of the US military, the Iran War undermined its fearsome image. Trump's unpredictable foreign policy [had some deterrent effect on Beijing](#), yet the Iran War revealed Trump's limits and how far the US president is willing to go when confronted with a tenacious opponent.

During the trade war, China adopted a strategy of [tit-for-tat reciprocal retaliation](#). Looking ahead, China is likely to take a hardened stance in the security realm, having gained a clearer understanding of Trump's limits and realised that his way of war, while unpredictable, has limitations.

The conflict has also [weakened the deterrent power of the US military](#). As a peacetime force that has not fought a war for [almost 50 years](#), it remains somewhat challenging for outsiders to assess the People's Liberation Army's genuine capability. By contrast, the Iran War has exposed the vulnerabilities of the US military in the Trump era. These revelations give China an edge in strategic planning and strengthen hawkish voices within the party-state and the military.

Finally, weak points within the US-led alliance system provide China with [opportunities to expand its influence](#) and reshape the international order in its favour. China is already [strengthening ties with the Gulf states](#), some of which have been disappointed by how the US handled the war and have sought Chinese assistance in [restoring regional stability](#). Tsinghua University's [Yan Xuetong forecasts](#) that the conflict will lead to an increase in China's influence over US partners and global security matters. Moreover, hawks within China's defence establishment might seek to advocate more calibrated probes to test alliance cohesion, assess Washington's commitments, and shift the existing boundaries of acceptable behaviours. The 6 July 2026 [submarine-launched ballistic missile test](#) that landed in the southern Pacific Ocean during the [Rim of the Pacific exercises](#) could be interpreted as an example. Likewise, intensifying China Coast Guard activities in the [Taiwan Strait](#) and [South China Sea](#) may also form part of this broader probing strategy.

Conclusion



The Iran War has exposed three US limitations, which carry important strategic implications for China's security policy. *Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

At the time of writing, [Iran has launched new attacks on civilian tankers](#) transiting the Strait of Hormuz. In response, the United States has apparently scrapped the Islamabad memorandum and [launched air strikes against Iranian targets](#), prompting Tehran to escalate further by [attacking US-allied Arab states](#). Such déjà vu takes the world back to square one, putting [renewed constraints](#) on global energy supplies.

Watching from a distance, China is learning important lessons on US capabilities and limits. Utilising this knowledge, Beijing is likely going to be better prepared in its contestations with Washington while seeking to reshape global geopolitics. Ultimately, the Iran War serves as a cautionary tale of war's unpredictable nature that can produce consequences far beyond the battlefield.

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