

Silk Cage Series - V

Hormuz in the Silk Cage: China's Choke Point Strategy by 2030–35

Webinar Report

May 7, 2026



Institute for Security & Development Policy

Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA)

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

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LIST OF SPEAKERS



Dr. Gedaliah Afterman is Head of the Asia Policy Program at the Abba Eban Institute for Diplomacy and International Relations, a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) in Abu Dhabi, and a Fellow at the Centre for Advanced Security, Strategic and Integration Studies (CASSIS) at the University of Bonn. He is also a lecturer at Reichman and Tel Aviv Universities. His work focuses on Asian regional security, Chinese foreign policy, superpower competition, and the growing role of middle powers in Asia and the Middle East. He previously served as an International Strategic Policy Specialist at the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) and as a diplomat at the Australian Embassy in Beijing.



Lieutenant General (Ret.) In-bum Chun is a Senior Fellow for the Association of the United States Army, President of the Society for Army Alliance-Korea, President of the Korea AI Security Association, and a Board Member of the Korean Animal Welfare Association. Chun has previously served as Vice President of the Korea Freedom Federation, Chief of the Election Support Branch, Civil Military Affairs/Strategic Operations Directorate at the Multi-National Force (MNF) in Iraq. He was recognized by both the Republic of Korea and the United States for his contribution to the first “Fair and Free” elections in Iraq on January 30, 2005, with the Hwa-Rang Combat Medal and the U.S. Bronze Star Medal. From November 2005, Lieutenant General (Ret.) Chun served as the Director of U.S. Affairs at the Korean Ministry of National Defense and was involved in negotiations and cooperation with the U.S. on the relocation of U.S. forces, camp returns, ROK/U.S. Joint Vision Study, Special Measures Agreement, and the transition of the Wartime Operational Control.



Dr. Norah M. Huang is the director of international relations and research fellow at The Prospect Foundation. Her research focuses on Taiwan-U.S. relations and U.S.-China relations. She writes commentaries on Taiwan’s foreign policies and regional security issues. Before joining The Prospect Foundation, she was an assistant research fellow in the Foundation on Asia-Pacific Peace

Studies, with an interest in cross-strait relations. She received her Ph.D. from National Taiwan University. She was a winner of the Ministry of Science and Technology Overseas Project Award for Post-Graduate Research and was a visiting scholar at the Elliot School of George Washington University in Washington, D.C.



Dr. Dominik Mierzejewski is an associate professor at the University of Łódź, where he leads the Department of Asian Studies and the Centre for Asian Affairs (think-tank), specializing in China's political discourse, local China, and China's international behaviours. Mierzejewski studied at Shanghai International Studies University and was a visiting professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He is the author of *China's Provinces and the Belt and Road Initiative* (Routledge, 2021) and co-author of *China's Vertical Multilateralism and the Global South. Narratives, Networks and Money* (Routledge 2026) has been published in journals such as *Asian Affairs* and the *Journal of Contemporary China*.



Dr. Kristian Alexander is a Senior Fellow and Lead Researcher at the Rabdan Institute for Security & Defence Research, Abu Dhabi, UAE. He is an adviser at Gulf States Analytics, a Washington-based geopolitical risk consultancy. He previously worked as a Senior Fellow at Trends Research & Advisory and before that as an Assistant Professor at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Moderator



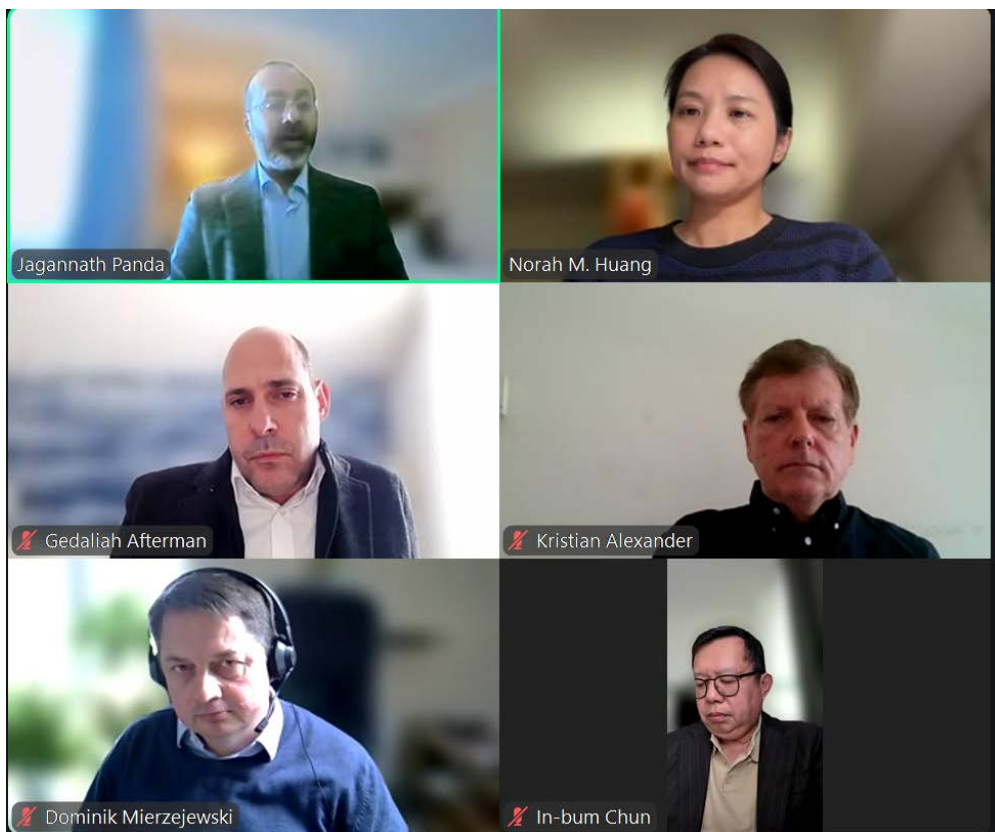
Dr. Jagannath Panda is the Head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), Sweden. Dr. Panda is also a Professor at the Department of Regional and Global Studies at the University of Warsaw; and a Senior Fellow at The Hague Center for Strategic Studies in the Netherlands. As a senior expert on China, East Asia, and Indo-Pacific affairs, Prof. Panda has testified to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission at the US Congress on 'China and South Asia'. He is the Series Editor for *Routledge Studies on Think Asia*.

DISCUSSION

This webinar, the fifth in the Silk Cage Series, examined whether the Strait of Hormuz is becoming another node in China's evolving strategic cage, where connectivity, commerce, and coercive potential increasingly intersect. Looking toward 2030–35, it asked whether Beijing can convert dependency into dominance, or whether Hormuz will remain the place where China's global ambitions meet their sharpest limits.

The Strait of Hormuz has traditionally been described as the world's most important energy chokepoint. A significant share of globally traded oil and liquefied

natural gas passes through this narrow maritime corridor each day, linking the Gulf to Asian, European, and global markets. Yet by 2030–35, Hormuz may be defined not only by energy flows but also by strategic competition. The emerging debate is no longer simply whether China depends on the Strait of Hormuz, but whether Beijing is steadily transforming that dependence into long-term geopolitical leverage. As China broadens its commercial reach, maritime footprint, and political influence across the Gulf and the wider Indian Ocean, Hormuz is increasingly becoming part of a larger Chinese strategic architecture.



This webinar is part of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) project, “The Silk Noose: China’s Power Architecture in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region.” The entire webinar is available on [YouTube](#).

The webinar addressed the following questions:

- Will the Strait of Hormuz become central to China’s strategic architecture by 2030–35?
- How does the Maritime Silk Road connect Chinese commerce with geopolitical leverage in the Gulf?
- Is post-war Iran becoming China’s strategic asset or strategic liability?
- How significant are Pakistan and Gwadar to China’s Hormuz calculations?
- How are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, and Qatar balancing China’s rise with US security influence?
- Will China eventually need a larger naval role to protect its shipping interests?
- What would a stronger Chinese presence in Hormuz mean for India, Europe, Japan, and the United States?

Dr. Jagannath Panda opened Jagannath Panda opened the discussion by describing the Strait of Hormuz not only as an energy chokepoint, but also as a critical theatre for strategy, competition, and geopolitical influence. He particularly emphasized the shift in China’s engagement



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in the Strait of Hormuz, from securing oil supplies to building strategic architecture in the Gulf region.

For China, the Strait of Hormuz is central to economic security. Chinese industrial growth, manufacturing resilience, and domestic energy stability remain closely linked to uninterrupted supplies from Gulf producers. This structural dependence has long created what Chinese strategists often describe as a vulnerability dilemma: how can a major power rely so heavily on sea-lanes that remain influenced by others, particularly the United States and its naval partners? Beijing's answer has not been direct confrontation, but gradual positioning. Through the Maritime Silk Road, China has invested in ports, industrial zones, logistics hubs, telecommunications infrastructure, and transport corridors stretching from the South China Sea to the Arabian Sea and beyond. These projects, while commercial in appearance, also carry strategic implications.

He further noted that developments in Hormuz will not affect China alone. Rather, they carry significant implications for countries across the region, including India, Japan, South Korea, Europe, and the United States, which is becoming increasingly involved in the conflict itself. In this context, Hormuz is emerging as a test case for how the future global order, maritime governance, connectivity, political dynamics, and strategic competition are likely to evolve by 2030 and 2035.

The first expert, **Dr. Gedaliah Afterman** noted that China, at least on the surface, has remained relatively passive during the current conflict involving Iran, particularly with regard to the Strait of Hormuz. He pointed out that although President Trump at one stage called on China to join efforts to reopen the Strait, Beijing refrained from taking such a role. Instead, China reportedly reached an arrangement with Iran that allowed Chinese vessels, and ships bound for China, to pass through despite the Iranian blockade.

From China's perspective, he argued, the Strait of Hormuz represents not only an energy chokepoint but also a critical arena for geopolitical influence. While energy security remains central given China's substantial dependence on Gulf oil, its engagement is equally tied to broader China-US competition, particularly in the Gulf and the wider Middle East, but also in connection with the Indo-Pacific and other regions globally. China's swift efforts to secure continued access to Iranian oil reflected the importance of maintaining uninterrupted energy flows in the event of disruption in the Strait.

At the same time, Afterman emphasized that China's strategy in the Strait of Hormuz extends beyond energy concerns. Rather than relying on military means, Beijing seeks to shape the broader geopolitical environment surrounding the chokepoint. Unlike the United States, China is not attempting to dominate the region through



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naval power or direct security guarantees. Instead, it leverages its regional presence, influence over Iran, and ability to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics. This approach has enabled China to position itself as an economic power capable of shaping strategic outcomes without assuming the risks associated with a military role.

He further argued that the Chinese model in the Strait of Hormuz has, at present, proven relatively effective. Through geoeconomic influence, China is able to secure its energy and strategic interests while limiting direct investment in security commitments and avoiding major geopolitical risks.

Beyond the immediate crisis, Beijing is also positioning itself for the post-war regional order by strengthening its role in economic infrastructure, technological partnerships, and long-term regional connectivity..

Lieutenant General (Ret.) In-bum Chun argued that the recent US-led incursion involving Iran, supported by Israel, has prompted a growing realization in South Korea, particularly among the Korean public, about the potential consequences of a similar crisis occurring in the Taiwan Strait.

He observed that many in South Korea had previously assumed that the country might be able to remain neutral in the event of a blockade, quarantine, or military conflict involving Taiwan. However, the developments surrounding the Strait of Hormuz, he suggested, have demonstrated the severity of the economic and strategic repercussions such crises can generate, making neutrality increasingly unrealistic. In this regard, he described the Hormuz situation as a “wake-up call” for South Korea, highlighting the serious and far-reaching implications that instability in critical maritime chokepoints could have for the country.

At the same time, Chun expressed concern that the South Korean government has not sufficiently addressed these realities in public discourse or adequately educated the population about the possible consequences of such geopolitical crises. He also criticized segments of the Korean media for focusing heavily on criticism of the current US administration, arguing that divisions within the United States are troubling from a South Korean security perspective.



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From his standpoint, a strong and unified United States remains essential for regional stability and South Korea's security interests. He therefore stressed the importance of the United States, including the Trump administration, achieving its stated objectives, which he identified as the denuclearization of Iran and ensuring free access through the Strait of Hormuz.

Dr. Norah M. Huang argued that China's restrained posture in the current crisis reflects the limitations of its influence in the Middle East, particularly in relation to the Strait of Hormuz. According to her, China's broader strategy toward strategic chokepoints is centered on mitigating vulnerability by developing bypass routes and cultivating strong relationships with local states in order to reduce the potential impact of disruptions.

In the case of the Strait of Hormuz, however, she noted that China has not established the kind of overseas military infrastructure that would allow it to project power directly in the region. As a result, Beijing's options remain limited largely to diplomatic engagement, particularly through its bilateral relationship with Iran, in an effort to manage the consequences of any disruption in the Strait.

Huang further emphasized that, compared with several of its Asian neighbors such as South Korea, Japan, and parts of South Asia, China's dependence on Middle



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Eastern oil is relatively lower. She also pointed to estimates from the US Energy Information Administration indicating that China possesses approximately 1.4 billion barrels in strategic reserves, sufficient

to cover several months of domestic consumption. This reserve capacity, she argued, provides Beijing with greater flexibility and time to absorb short-term disruptions.

At the same time, she stressed that China lacks the military projection capabilities necessary to shape events directly in the Strait of Hormuz. Instead, Beijing relies primarily on its diplomatic relations with Iran. She observed that even after Iran initially imposed restrictions in the Strait, Iranian oil exports to Asia, including China, continued until countermeasures by the US Navy reportedly disrupted those flows.

Huang also noted reports suggesting that Chinese officials encouraged Iran to return to negotiations with the United States. In her view, this reflected China's broader concern not only with energy supplies but also with the stability of the global economy. As an export-oriented economy deeply integrated into global markets, China is particularly vulnerable to wider economic disruptions caused by prolonged instability in the Gulf. Consequently, the broader economic fallout from a crisis in Hormuz could ultimately harm China more severely than temporary energy supply disruptions alone.

Finally, she argued that China seeks to preserve stable relations with countries such as Russia, Iran, and North Korea, including through measures such as purchasing Iranian oil despite sanctions pressures. In this context, Beijing's encouragement of

negotiations could be interpreted not only as support for de-escalation favored by the United States, but also as a means of assisting Iran by buying time to regroup and manage its domestic and strategic challenges.

Dr. Dominik Mierzejewski argued that China's response to the current conflict is consistent with its broader approach to international crises, in which Beijing seeks to portray itself as a neutral and benevolent power. In the current context, particularly amid growing uncertainty in relations with the Trump administration, China is also attempting to strengthen its image among countries of the Global South.

He further emphasized that China's approach to Iran is deeply rooted in the importance Beijing attaches to maintaining a stable and predictable government in Tehran as part of its broader peripheral diplomacy strategy. Referring to bilateral agreements and strategic partnership documents signed between China and Iran from 2016 to 2023, Mierzejewski noted that Beijing increasingly views Iran as an essential component of the regional order. In particular, China sees Iran as an actor that contributes to the stabilization of Afghanistan and, together with Pakistan, plays a significant role in shaping what Beijing describes as a peaceful regional neighborhood.



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According to Mierzejewski, while China is concerned with protecting the global economy, it is equally focused on stabilizing South Asia and its immediate periphery. He pointed out that official declarations signed in 2023 framed Iran as a central actor not only in relation to the Persian Gulf, Syria, Yemen, and Palestine, but also Afghanistan and the broader Middle East. In this sense, China’s support for Iran is linked not only to Gulf politics or energy interests, but also to Beijing’s security concerns regarding Afghanistan.

He also highlighted that Afghanistan remains an important issue in China’s diplomatic engagement with the United States, the United Nations Security Council, Russia, and Pakistan, including through multilateral coordination mechanisms aimed at regional stabilization. The growing refugee crisis, including the reported return of approximately 1.2 million Afghans from Iran and Pakistan in 2025, further underscores the regional instability confronting Chinese diplomacy.

Ultimately, Mierzejewski argued that China’s engagement with Iran should be understood not solely through the lens of great-power politics, but also as part of Beijing’s efforts to secure its broader neighborhood and protect core interests, including territorial integrity and stability in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The next speaker, **Dr. Kristian Alexander** argued that, from a Gulf and particularly UAE perspective, the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a maritime chokepoint but a central artery for Gulf economic survival, state stability, and international relevance. He noted that roughly one-fifth of globally traded oil, alongside significant LNG volumes, passes through the Hormuz corridor, underscoring its systemic importance to global energy markets.

He observed that China increasingly views the Strait through a similar strategic lens, albeit for different reasons. Beijing is not seeking territorial or military control; rather, its primary concerns are predictability, uninterrupted energy flows, diversified supply chains, and insulation from external coercion. In this context, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman, have become indispensable to China's long-term energy security architecture.

Alexander emphasized that any prolonged disruption in Hormuz would directly affect Chinese industrial output, manufacturing stability, shipping insurance costs, and domestic growth. Even though China has some buffers through strategic reserves, supplier diversification, renewable energy expansion, nuclear development, and electric vehicle adoption, it remains exposed to sustained instability in the Strait.

He further highlighted that China now increasingly views the Gulf as a broader logistical, financial, digital, technological, and maritime connectivity hub linking Asia, Africa, and Europe. In this sense, the Strait of Hormuz is embedded within Beijing's wider connectivity and security strategy, which prioritizes resilient corridors for energy, trade, telecommunications infrastructure, industrial zones, and financial partnerships designed to reduce vulnerability to systemic shocks.

From the UAE perspective, he noted, this strategic outlook aligns with Abu Dhabi's own ambitions to position itself as a middle power, logistical hub, and maritime stabilizer. Accordingly, Chinese investment in Emirati ports, free zones, industrial parks, renewable energy, and AI infrastructure reflects a growing convergence of interests between China and the Gulf states.

At the same time, GCC countries generally prefer not to see China militarize its presence in the region in a way that would turn the Gulf into an arena of direct US–China rivalry. Instead, they favor strategic diversification rather than replacement of existing security structures. This produces a structural paradox: China benefits from US naval protection of maritime routes in the Gulf while simultaneously seeking, over the long term, to reduce dependence on US-controlled security systems.

From Beijing's perspective, this reliance represents a strategic vulnerability,



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whereas from the Gulf perspective, a complete erosion of the US maritime presence could itself generate instability and uncertainty. Alexander also stressed that China’s approach to Hormuz differs fundamentally from Iran’s, as Tehran often frames the Strait in coercive or leverage-oriented terms during crises, whereas China consistently prefers it to remain open, stable, and commercially functional.

He concluded that China has become somewhat less passive in recent Gulf security crises, explicitly emphasizing that Hormuz must remain open and calling for restraint among all parties. From the Gulf viewpoint, this signals that China increasingly sees disruption in Hormuz not as a distant regional issue, but as a direct threat to its own national interests. Ultimately, while China is unlikely to replace the United States as the primary security guarantor in the region, it is more plausibly becoming a key political and economic architect of a diversified regional order, alongside continued US provision of the core security umbrella..

ROUND 2

In the second round of discussion, **Dr. Dominik Mierzejewski** raised a comparative question on whether China's evolving behaviour toward Iran in the Strait of Hormuz resembles its long-standing approach toward Pakistan, and whether Beijing might ultimately prefer a weaker Iran that becomes increasingly dependent on China.

In response, he noted that recent Chinese media discourse and Chinese Embassy activity in Iran, including statements associated with Ambassador Cong Peiwu, suggest that Iran is increasingly being framed as part of China's broader global initiatives, extending beyond the Belt and Road Initiative. However, he questioned the assumption that China necessarily seeks a weakened Iran. Instead, he argued that Beijing's priority remains a stable Iranian government, primarily due to its relevance in managing regional spillover effects, particularly the Afghan refugee crisis, which has direct implications for internal security concerns in Xinjiang. In his view, China is more likely to favour a stable and predictable Iran that can function as a reliable partner within its peripheral diplomacy framework, alongside Russia and Pakistan, contributing to regional stability rather than fragmentation.

Dr. Mierzejewski further explained

that, in China's current diplomatic practice, especially within United Nations Security Council discussions, Beijing has sought to position Iran as a victim of illegal force rather than as a nuclear threat.

He also highlighted the structural importance of China's domestic energy economy in shaping its external behaviour. In particular, he pointed to Guangdong Province as a critical economic engine whose energy security is highly sensitive to disruptions in Middle Eastern supply chains. According to this perspective, shocks in the Strait of Hormuz would not only affect national-level energy prices but would significantly impact Guangdong's industrial base, thereby influencing China's broader economic stability.

Dr. Gedaliah Afterman argues that China's strategic downgrading of Iran is a decade-long shift rather than a sudden reaction to recent conflict. As Israel seeks a stable or weakened Iran to ensure trade security, Beijing's calculations have pivoted toward the Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This transition reflects a move away from simple oil procurement toward "new frontier" sectors like green energy, technology, and infrastructure. Over a 20-year horizon, Iran's strategic utility appears limited due to sanctions, whereas

other regional players offer significantly more value to China's long-term interests.

China's current approach is characterized by an "in-between phase" of pragmatic diplomacy. While Beijing is not "wedded" to the Iranian regime, it prioritizes regional stability over regime change. Recent diplomatic efforts by officials like Zaijun have focused heavily on the Arab Gulf to ensure the security of the Strait of Hormuz, signaling that China's Middle East strategy is no longer Iran-centric. Unlike Russia, China maintains an asymmetrical relationship with Tehran; Iran is now almost entirely dependent on Beijing, which consumes 90 percent of its oil exports. This leverage explains why the heralded USD 400 billion strategic agreement remains largely unimplemented, as China treats Iran as a tactical tool rather than a primary ally.

In the broader context of superpower competition, **Dr. Afterman** views China's influence over Iran as a "strategic card" used to manage its relationship with the United States. By exerting economic pressure or encouraging Tehran to negotiate with Washington, Beijing positions itself as a critical broker ahead of high-level summits. For Israel, this trajectory offers little immediate relief, as internal regime change in Iran remains unlikely in the short term. Consequently, the regional landscape is shifting toward a Chinese geo-economic model, centered on infrastructure and economic integration,

which is becoming increasingly attractive to Gulf monarchies and poses a growing challenge to the traditional U.S.-led security order.

The discussion shifted focus toward Northeast Asia as **Dr. Jagannath Panda** sought input from Lieutenant-General In-Bum Chun regarding the prevailing debates in Seoul. Dr. Panda's inquiry centered on 'how South Korea perceives the unfolding crisis in Iran and how China intends to secure its maritime interests in the Strait of Hormuz looking toward 2030 and 2035.'

In response, **General Chun** emphasized that the primary concern is the strategic "lessons learned" by the Chinese leadership from the current conflict. He noted a fundamental tension in Beijing's position: while a disruption in the Strait of Hormuz (or the Taiwan Strait) is economically detrimental to China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains driven by a deeply ideological and traditional worldview. This perspective views a hegemonic global role as the "destiny" of the Chinese people, necessitating a posture of absolute strength. However, **General Chun** observed that the current situation in Iran reinforces a sobering reality for Beijing: the United States remains a formidable opponent that China may not yet be capable of defeating in a direct confrontation.

Regarding maritime security, the General took a firm stance on international

law, arguing that there is no room for negotiation when it comes to the freedom of navigation. He asserted that the international community cannot permit Iran to exercise unilateral control over international waters. This presents a significant dilemma for South Korea and other middle powers. While there is a natural reluctance to become militarily involved in distant conflicts, **General Chun** argued that it is in the collective interest of all nations to ensure that international waters remain free. He cautioned that a failure to commit to the protection of the Strait of Hormuz now would set a dangerous precedent for other critical global chokepoints in the future.

Finally, **General Chun** addressed the bilateral relationship between Seoul and Tehran. While acknowledging a long history of positive economic ties, he concluded with a principled warning. He argued that despite the potential for economic benefit, South Korea must maintain a standard of international conduct, suggesting that Seoul or other nations should refrain from deep engagement with nations that consistently operate outside the boundaries of international law.

Dr. Norah M. Huang offered a high-level strategic analysis of China's long-term interests in Iran, particularly within the context of maritime security and the broader U.S.-China rivalry. Dr. Huang argued that China's perspective on Iran is inextricably linked to its competition with

Washington. From Beijing's viewpoint, a persistent rivalry between the U.S., Israel, and Iran serves Chinese interests by acting as a "strategic distraction." By forcing the United States to continue pouring significant military and diplomatic resources into the Middle East, as it has for the past three decades, China effectively delays the full implementation of the U.S. "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific.

Dr. Huang also examined the intricacies of potential negotiations between the Trump administration and Tehran. She noted that while leaked drafts of agreements suggest varying timeframes for nuclear enrichment, a more critical factor is Iran's future relationship with its regional proxies. She observed that Iran often maintains a degree of "plausible deniability," characterizing its proxy networks as autonomous actors with their own interests. Currently, Iran appears eager to secure a deal, possibly aiming to reach an agreement before the U.S. midterm elections in November 2026. It's more likely the Trump administration would offer a better deal under the pressure of mid-term election. While President Trump is focused on stabilizing global oil prices and securing a lasting diplomatic legacy, **Dr. Huang** cautioned that Iran might view any nuclear "stoppage" as a temporary measure designed to buy time until a change in U.S. leadership.

Finally, the discussion touched upon the role of the international community in

securing the Strait of Hormuz. **Dr. Huang** highlighted a notable irony: while the stability of this regional chokepoint is vital to the global economy, many international actors, specifically European nations, have been hesitant to take decisive action. Despite verbal commitments to assist in keeping the Strait open, there has been a lack of visible progress in mobilizing a collective force for this purpose. She concluded by expressing hope that during the current “window” of negotiations, international partners will find the resolve to contribute more actively to regional security and the protection of global trade routes.

To conclude the round, **Dr. Kristian Alexander** provided an analysis of China’s broader strategic footprint in the Gulf, momentarily stepping back from the specific Iran-Israel dynamic to look at the regional “ecosystem of influence” Beijing is cultivating. He argued that China’s presence is becoming increasingly pervasive across diverse sectors including sports, logistics, telecommunications, and energy. This multifaceted approach is designed to ensure both commercial resilience and geopolitical flexibility, allowing Beijing to embed itself deeply within the fabric of the Middle East.

Dr. Alexander highlighted the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a primary example of this trend. For China, the UAE is no longer just an energy supplier; it has evolved into a critical logistical

hub, financial gateway, and aviation crossroads. This integration is evidenced by for example the connectivity of Emirati ports to global shipping and the success of commercial hubs like Dragon Mart ; the proliferation of Confucius Institutes and Chinese language programs ; a significant expatriate community of roughly 300,000 to 400,000 Chinese residents, largely concentrated in Dubai.

Addressing maritime security, **Dr. Alexander** noted that Beijing is acutely concerned with “chokepoint vulnerability.” Any conflict involving Iran that disrupts the Strait of Hormuz poses a direct threat to China’s energy supply and has already led to increased transport costs and fluctuating trade volumes. Consequently, Chinese diplomacy has begun to converge with the priorities of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). While Beijing avoids direct public criticism of Tehran, it has shifted its emphasis toward the absolute necessity of keeping the Straits open and preventing regional escalation, a message that aligns closely with the interests of the Gulf monarchies.

However, this deepening relationship presents a complex balancing act for GCC states. **Dr. Alexander** pointed out that while countries like the UAE welcome Chinese investment and diversification, they are wary of the friction this creates with Washington. The United States has placed significant pressure on the UAE regarding Chinese technology partnerships, telecommunications

infrastructure, and concerns over “dual-use” facilities. As a result, Gulf states are increasingly adopting a policy of “strategic balancing” to navigate the rivalry between the two superpowers.

In closing, **Dr. Alexander** highlighted that China’s appeal to Gulf leadership

stems from its policy of non-interference. By focusing on sovereignty, economic modernization, and infrastructure development, Beijing’s rhetoric resonates strongly with national transformation agendas such as Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE’s long-term diversification strategies.

Q & A

Moving onto the Q&A part of the webinar, **Dr. Jagannath Panda** read the questions asked in the chat.

“Whilst the talk is set at the diplomatic level, what are some of the malign activities carried out if not by the PLA, by the proxy networks perhaps ? what happens when Iranian proxies meet Chinese proxies?”

“In a scenario where the Strait of Hormuz is fully blocked, does Gwadar actually possess the inland pipeline and rail capacity to serve as a viable energy bypass for China by 2030?”

“Given the infrastructure damage Iran sustained in the recent war, is China likely to pivot its 25 years investment towards reconstruction diplomacy or will the risk of further entitlement in Iran’s regional rivalries cause Beijing to favour more stable partners like Saudi Arabia and the UAE?”

“What are the biggest constraints preventing China from assuming a larger maritime security role today?”

Dr. Panda posed the following questions to all the panellists: “What are the three primary points that you know about China’s role in this particular war and in the context of this regional complexities, both in the context of Iran, Israel, US war as well as in the regional complexity? What are the three critical points you would highlight and identify about China’s role in this war?”

In this final segment, **Dr. Gedaliah Afterman** returned to the discussion to evaluate China’s tactical response to the ongoing conflict. He characterized Beijing’s behavior as a “wait-and-see” approach, a gradualist strategy focused on positioning China as a credible, neutral mediator rather than a military protagonist. This posture has yielded tangible diplomatic results, as Dr. Afterman noted that officials in Abu Dhabi increasingly view China as a reliable backchannel for conveying critical messages to Tehran during periods of high tension.

Dr. Afterman highlighted that China is successfully navigating an “in-between” position, carefully balancing its diverse regional interests. This includes maintaining a functional dialogue with Israel, where Chinese diplomats continue to project an image of a stability-seeking power. According to Dr. Afterman, Beijing views the current crisis as an opportunity to challenge the traditional American security model. Since the Gulf states remain under threat, China can argue that the U.S. security umbrella has failed, allowing Beijing to promote its own geo-economic model which prioritizes development and trade over military alliances.

Furthermore, **Dr. Afterman** reaffirmed that the diversion of Chinese investment from Iran toward more stable partners like the UAE and Saudi Arabia is already well underway. This cooperation has expanded far beyond energy to include high-tech sectors, telecommunications, and critical infrastructure. Ultimately, China is seeking a strategic alignment with the long-term domestic visions of the Gulf monarchies. By integrating itself into initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030, Beijing aims to become an indispensable partner in the region’s future, leveraging economic integration to secure the kind of influence that the United States traditionally maintained through defense guarantees.

Dr. Afterman noted that the trend of China prioritizing stable Gulf partners over Iran is expected to intensify as these

nations continue to rebuild and reposition themselves as the primary economic drivers of the Middle East. By deepening these ties, Beijing is attempting to “enjoy the best of all worlds,” reaping the benefits of energy security, technological collaboration, and diplomatic influence without the heavy costs associated with military entanglements. This approach allows China to maintain its status as a critical economic partner while avoiding the volatility that has historically hindered long-term investment in sanctioned or conflict-prone states.

In his concluding remarks, **Dr. Afterman** emphasized that the most significant takeaway from the current conflict is the set of lessons China is gathering for its own backyard. Beijing is closely observing the dynamics of the war in Iran and the security challenges within the Strait of Hormuz to inform its strategy in the Indo-Pacific. For the Chinese leadership, this regional crisis serves as a valuable case study in maritime blockades, superpower intervention, and proxy warfare. These observations are being actively synthesized to prepare for potential future conflicts closer to home, particularly regarding maritime sovereignty and the protection of critical trade routes in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

In his final remarks, **Lieutenant-General In-Bum Chun** provided a nuanced distinction regarding regional dynamics, beginning with a clarification

on the nature of North Korea's relationship with Beijing. He asserted that Pyongyang should not be viewed as a traditional Chinese proxy in the same vein as Hamas, Hezbollah, or Iraqi militias. Instead, he emphasized that North Korea remains a highly autonomous actor that prioritizes its own strategic interests above all else, rather than serving as a direct instrument of Chinese foreign policy.

Turning to China's role in the current Iran-Israel-US conflict, **General Chun** characterized Beijing's posture as being in "observer mode." While China has significant economic stakes in the region, it has remained strategically prudent, preferring to watch the capabilities of all parties unfold. However, he noted that this neutrality is not absolute; China has provided "under the table" support to Tehran through the export of materials, equipment, and intelligence. According to **General Chun**, this indirect support has effectively prolonged the conflict by bolstering Iranian confidence and providing them with the resources to resist Western pressure.

General Chun further argued that Beijing views the current situation as a test of American endurance. From China's perspective, the United States has made a strategic error by engaging in a conflict it may not be able to sustain over the long term. He noted that Chinese leadership has been particularly surprised by the unpredictability and aggression of the

Trump administration, citing not only the war in Iran but also recent interventions in Venezuela. This has turned the Middle East into a critical "test bed" for Chinese strategists, who are closely studying U.S. behavior to identify vulnerabilities in American military and political frameworks.

General Chun concluded that the primary lesson Beijing is taking from the conflict is that high-level acts of violence will no longer go ignored by the international community. He expressed hope that the People's Republic of China would take heed of these developments and avoid following the destabilizing path taken by Iran. By observing the costs of regional escalation and the resilience of U.S. power, he suggested that China may reconsider its own approach to maritime sovereignty and proxy engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Dr. Norah M. Huang addressed the specific constraints that prevent China from assuming a more dominant maritime security role in the short term. She argued that the primary obstacle is a lack of physically established logistical "posts" along critical sea lanes. While China opened its first official overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, its second major facility, the modernized Ream Naval Base in Cambodia, only became fully operational in early 2025. With only one official base and a handful of logistics and training outposts, Beijing currently lacks

the infrastructure necessary to sustain large-scale, far-sea naval operations.

Furthermore, **Dr. Huang** pointed out that China's naval power is still evolving in terms of technology. Although the Type 003 aircraft carrier, the Fujian, is expected to reach full operational capability in 2026, Beijing has not yet deployed a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier strike group. This technological gap explains why China is prioritizing the development of a global network of logistics hubs before attempting to displace traditional maritime powers. While Beijing is building battleships at an unprecedented pace, she stressed that the timing for a global maritime pivot is "not just yet."

Regarding the broader Middle East conflict, **Dr. Huang** identified three critical areas to watch. First is the eventual outcome of negotiations and whether Iran will maintain its status as a permanent rival to the U.S. and Israel. Second is the survival of the current Iranian regime; she noted that even if the conflict ends, the possibility of internal regime change remains a significant variable. Third is China's tactical interest in maintaining the conflict's intensity. By continuing to supply Iran and its proxy networks with materials and intelligence support, Beijing can leverage the region's instability as a diplomatic asset while shielding its own economy from direct damage.

Finally, **Dr. Huang** warned of China's "quiet penetration" through infrastructure.

By investing heavily in communication networks and renewable energy, sectors where China leads the world in battery and solar technology, Beijing is creating deep dependencies. This is particularly important because so far Middle East countries relied on security partnership with the US and would depend on their security communication systems. Coming back to Kristian's point on the UAE and other Middle East countries facing pressure from the US about using Chinese build communication infrastructures. **Dr. Huang** concluded that this technological entanglement is a serious strategic challenge that could eventually undermine the security partnerships between the United States and its regional allies.

To provide a final perspective, **Dr. Dominik Mierzejewski** shifted the focus to China's domestic landscape to better contextualize its response to the conflict. He emphasized that any analysis of Beijing's regional strategy must begin with the newly released 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030). This ambitious roadmap identifies Artificial Intelligence (AI) as the primary engine for China's future economic growth. However, the successful execution of this high-tech transformation is entirely dependent on securing stable and affordable energy sources to power the massive computing clusters and industrial automation envisioned by the Chinese Communist Party.

According to **Dr. Mierzejewski**,

this domestic focus creates two distinct dynamics in China's energy strategy. The first is an urgent push to integrate a domestic energy market that remains highly fragmented across different provinces. By streamlining internal distribution and energy management, Beijing hopes to build a more resilient foundation for its AI-driven industrial base. The second dynamic is a pivot toward Southeast Asia as a critical theater for energy transactions. While the Middle East remains a vital source of oil, its geographical distance and susceptibility to conflict make it a volatile partner. In contrast, Southeast Asia is much closer to the mainland, allowing China to exert greater influence and manage trade through more direct, asymmetrical relationships.

In summary, **Dr. Mierzejewski** identified three critical pillars that define China's role in the current global climate. First is the overarching influence of the 15th Five-Year Plan, which dictates the country's technological and energy requirements. Second is the dual effort to diversify energy imports while simultaneously integrating the domestic market. Third is the strategic strengthening of ties with Southeast Asia, which Beijing views as a more controllable and accessible alternative for securing the resources necessary to fuel its technological supremacy. By focusing on these areas, China aims to insulate its "AI-plus" economy from the shocks of the Middle East conflict while expanding its sphere

of influence closer to home. To sum up, there are three main points: the five year plan, then diversification but integration of domestic market, and stronger relations in the energy sector.

Dr. Kristian Alexander addressed the future of regional integration, describing a trajectory that is becoming increasingly multidimensional and risk-oriented. He outlined three major dimensions that will define China's strategic evolution in the Middle East. First is the diversification of routes, where Beijing will continue to invest in both overland and maritime corridors to reduce its exclusive dependence on the Strait of Hormuz. This includes strengthening links through Pakistan and Central Asia, expanding presence in the Indian Ocean and East Africa, and potentially exploring Arctic shipping routes as a long-term alternative.

The second dimension involves strategic infrastructure integration. **Dr. Alexander** argued that Beijing is likely to deepen its involvement in Gulf ports, logistics hubs, and energy storage facilities, while increasingly utilizing AI-enabled shipping management to streamline regional trade. The third dimension is selective maritime security engagement. Rather than openly replicating the military posture of the United States, China is expected to gradually expand its naval access arrangements, anti-piracy cooperation, and maritime surveillance partnerships, maintaining a focus on naval

diplomacy rather than overt hegemony.

From the perspective of the Gulf states, this evolution represents a significant strategic shift toward a model of commercial security. In this framework, China's role revolves around protecting the continuity of shipping and the integrity of physical infrastructure. However, **Dr. Alexander** noted that Gulf nations remain cautious, as they wish to avoid a scenario where the Strait of Hormuz becomes an overt arena for Sino-American competition.

Finally, **Dr. Alexander** highlighted that China's relationship with Iran grants Beijing a unique, albeit complicated, position regarding the Strait. While China values Iran as a strategic counterweight to Western pressure and a key energy supplier, it recognizes that aggressive Iranian behavior in the Strait directly threatens Chinese commercial interests and broader regional stability. Consequently, China's long-term objective appears to be the active management of Iran rather than unconditional support. Moving forward, the Gulf states will be watching closely to see if Beijing is truly willing to exercise its significant economic leverage with Tehran in future maritime crises.

Dr. Jagannath Panda wrapped up the seminar by thanking all the speakers and synthesizing the key elements of the discussion:

- *Observation of Current Strategic Behavior:*
A primary takeaway from the session is the necessity of closely monitoring China's immediate actions and tactical

planning, particularly its behavior during the recent war and the ongoing crisis in the Strait of Hormuz.

- *Long-term Planning and the 15th Five-Year Plan:* As Dr. Mierzejewski noted, it is equally vital to evaluate Chinese patterns through a future-oriented lens. With the release of the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030), Beijing has placed a significant emphasis on securing stable energy sources and integrating its domestic market to build more resilient supply chains.
- *Regional Connectivity:* This domestic strategy involves strengthening connections with both immediate and extended neighboring countries. In this broader context, the stability of the Strait of Hormuz and the future of Iran remain critical, non-negotiable elements for China's strategic success.
- *Intersection of Energy and Power Politics:* The next few years will be a decisive period, not only for China's quest for energy security but also for the wider regional power politics currently unfolding in the Middle East.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- China's interest in Iran has transitioned from a primary strategic partnership to a more tactical, "limited" one. Beijing is increasingly viewing Iran as a high-risk partner due to persistent sanctions and regional volatility.
- While China provides "under-the-table" support to Tehran (intelligence and dual-use equipment), it avoids formal defense commitments. Beijing is not "wedded" to the Iranian regime and would likely adapt to any potential regime change as long as regional stability is maintained.
- China is aggressively redirecting its investment and diplomatic energy toward the UAE and Saudi Arabia. These nations are viewed as more reliable hubs for long-term projects in technology, green energy, and infrastructure.
- China is intentionally aligning its Belt and Road Initiative with regional transformation plans like Saudi Vision 2030, offering a model of "modernization without Westernization."
- China's ability to play a larger maritime security role is currently limited by a lack of overseas bases and nuclear-powered carrier groups. To compensate, Beijing is building a "logistical ecosystem" of ports and surveillance partnerships along the Indian Ocean.
- To reduce reliance on the Strait of Hormuz, China is prioritizing alternative corridors through Pakistan (Gwadar), Central Asia, and even long-term Arctic shipping routes.
- China benefits from the U.S. being "bogged down" in Middle Eastern conflicts. By keeping American resources focused on Iran and Israel, Beijing effectively delays the U.S. military's "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific.
- Gulf states are increasingly practicing "strategic balancing" welcoming Chinese investment while trying to maintain their traditional security ties with Washington. However, the deep integration of Chinese technology (telecoms and energy) is creating significant friction with the U.S.
- China's domestic 15th Five-Year Plan identifies Artificial Intelligence as a leading force. This creates an urgent need for the "stable energy sources", as AI infrastructure requires massive, consistent power.



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