

Strategic Implications of U.S. Intervention in Iran and the U.S.–China Rivalry for Global Leadership

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Abstract

The Middle East in 2025 is witnessing a sharp escalation in geopolitical tensions, particularly between Iran and Israel, amid a direct U.S. military intervention targeting Iranian nuclear facilities. This intervention marks a significant shift in the dynamics of the regional conflict and reopens critical questions regarding the legitimacy of the use of force and the regional balance of power. These developments coincide with an intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China over global leadership. While Beijing seeks to consolidate its influence in the region through active diplomatic mediation and the expansion of infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, Washington continues to rely on its military superiority and traditional alliances.

This study addresses two main areas: the first analyzes the operational context, objectives, and strategic limits of the U.S. intervention; the second examines the implications of this intervention for China's regional strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the broader future of a multipolar international order. In light of declining diplomatic mediation efforts and Iran's growing nuclear ambitions, the conflict is reshaping the international political landscape in the Middle East, making it essential to understand its dimensions and consequences for both regional and global stability.

Keywords: U.S. military intervention; Iran–Israel conflict; China's regional strategy; Belt and Road Initiative; Great power rivalry; Middle East geopolitics

1. Introduction

Envisioning the distant future with confidence requires a kind of crystal ball we simply do not possess. This challenge becomes even more formidable when it comes to the Middle East—a region renowned for its volatility and sudden, dramatic shifts in political trajectories. More critically, it is doubtful whether the future of the region is sufficiently predetermined for anyone to offer a compelling vision of what it might look like two decades from now (Levite & Tertrais, 2008).

Uncertainty and conflict have long dominated the international relations of the Middle East. Foreign interventions, interstate wars, political instability, and sectarian and ethnic violence have been exacerbated by oil price fluctuations and the rise of militant, nationalist, and religious movements (Halliday, 2005).

Today, the Middle East stands as one of the most complex geopolitical arenas in the world. It has recently entered a new and highly volatile phase of conflict marked by unprecedented levels of violence. Following approximately eighteen months of Hamas-led operations and an overwhelming Israeli military response—resulting in over 56,000 deaths and a deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza—the conflict has spread to Lebanon, raising the real risk of wider regional

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escalation. Meanwhile, Syria has transitioned beyond the Assad regime, only to enter a new era of uncertainty (CIDOB, 2025).

By mid-2025, the region witnessed an exceptional surge in geopolitical tensions following a U.S. airstrike targeting Iranian nuclear facilities, amid intensified hostilities between Iran and Israel (Conference Board.org, 2025).

These developments are unfolding within a broader strategic context defined by the intensifying competition between the United States and China over global leadership. Beijing is working to consolidate its influence in the Middle East through a multidimensional strategy that combines active diplomatic mediation, expanded economic partnerships, and large-scale infrastructure investments under the Belt and Road Initiative. This approach reflects a cautious and pragmatic Chinese posture aimed at securing economic interests and promoting regional stability while avoiding direct entanglement in armed conflicts—especially amid rising competition with Western powers (Yasmin, Gill, & Mustafa, 2024). In contrast, Washington continues to assert its dominance through military superiority and traditional alliances (Brands & Feaver, 2017).

Against this backdrop, this study poses a central research question: To what extent does the U.S. military intervention in Iran represent a shift in the dynamics of the Iran–Israel conflict, and what are its implications for Chinese strategic initiatives—such as the Belt and Road Initiative—and for the broader trajectory of the international order in light of escalating U.S.–China rivalry?

To address this question, the study adopts a two-pronged analytical framework. The first section examines the operational context of the 2025 Iran–Israel escalation, focusing on the motivations behind the U.S. intervention, its stated objectives, and its strategic limitations—particularly with respect to regional power realignment. The second section explores the geopolitical consequences of the intervention for China’s regional strategy, including its potential impact on the Belt and Road Initiative, the credibility of China’s non-militarization discourse, and the wider implications for the future of a multipolar international order amid intensifying great power competition.

2. U.S. Military Intervention in Iran within the Context of the Iran–Israel Conflict

The year 2025 witnessed an unprecedented escalation in hostilities between Iran and Israel, as military operations expanded from the Gaza Strip to new fronts in southern Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, intensifying fears of a full-scale regional war. Amid this heightened tension, the United States executed a sudden military strike targeting sensitive Iranian nuclear facilities, which Washington described as a preemptive action aimed at containing the Iranian threat and providing indirect support to Israel (Al Jazeera, 2025; Milanovic, M., 2025). Nevertheless, this U.S. intervention raises critical questions regarding its true objectives, strategic limitations, and its capacity to shift the regional balance of power without escalating into open warfare. This section therefore seeks to analyze the operational context of this rapidly escalating conflict and to explore the underlying motivations behind the American decision, taking into account the complex regional and international dynamics that surround the Iran–Israel confrontation.

2.1. Operational Context of the 2025 Escalation between Iran and Israel

Since early 2025, the Middle East has witnessed a significant escalation in tensions between Iran and Israel, characterized by a growing series of reciprocal attacks—either through direct military operations or via local proxies acting on behalf of both sides. This escalation has occurred amid a clear diplomatic deadlock, with international mediation efforts failing to halt the escalating cycle of violence (Congressional Research Service, 2025).

Within this framework, during the first quarter of 2025, Israel targeted several prominent Iranian scientific and military figures in a deliberate campaign aimed at crippling Iran’s nuclear program and deterring Tehran from continuing uranium enrichment. On June 13, 2025, Tel Aviv launched precise and unexpected strikes that killed nine senior Iranian nuclear scientists, described by Israel as the “masterminds” behind Iran’s military nuclear advancements. The Israeli military regarded these assassinations as a “painful blow” to the Islamic Republic’s ability to develop weapons of mass destruction, especially following intelligence reports—attributed to Mossad—that Iran was only steps away from producing a deployable nuclear weapon. This strike occurred one day after the International Atomic Energy Agency announced that Tehran was no longer complying with nuclear non-proliferation agreements. In retaliation, Iran launched an unprecedented missile barrage targeting deep within Israeli territory, causing civilian casualties and damaging multiple residential buildings in Tel Aviv and its suburbs, thereby heightening the risk of a wider regional conflict (Rosman et al., 2025).

Amid this mutual military escalation in mid-2025, the Israeli Ministry of Defense announced on June 21, 2025, two targeted operations resulting in the deaths of senior commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force. The first strike, carried out on June 18, 2025, targeted an apartment in Qom Province, killing Saeed Izadi, commander of the "Palestine Corps." The second operation, conducted on the night of June 20, 2025, in western Tehran, killed Behnam Shahriari, responsible for coordinating arms transfers to Iran's regional allies, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. These operations form part of an Israeli strategy aimed at undermining the military infrastructure Iran uses to sustain the so-called "Axis of Resistance," following a series of strikes that have continued since the October 7, 2023 attack. Shahriari's death was considered a significant setback given his pivotal role in supporting armed groups posing direct threats to Israeli security, though Tehran has not officially confirmed the losses (Reuters, 2025).

In response, Iran launched intensive missile attacks on Israeli cities and residential areas, causing casualties and raising serious concerns about the possibility of a broader regional war (Motamedi, M., 2025). These attacks coincided with the collapse of nuclear negotiations between Iran and world powers, which were scheduled to resume in Amman but were canceled due to escalating military and political tensions (Rosman et al., 2025).

In April 2025, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Iran's uranium enrichment level had reached 84%, dangerously close to producing weapons-grade fissile material (Henderson, 2023). This enrichment level nears the 90% threshold considered critical for nuclear weapons development, reviving fears of a shift from a civilian nuclear program to a military one. Furthermore, reports indicate modifications to centrifuge piping at the Fordow nuclear facility, enabling accelerated enrichment rates (Henderson, 2023).

The ongoing military escalation has also raised international concerns about its impact on global energy markets, given the Middle East's crucial role in oil and gas supplies (Moore, M., 2025). Regionally, the heightened instability has increased uncertainty among neighboring states and the risk of their involvement in an open conflict, with potentially severe consequences for international security.

In sum, the 2025 escalation represents a qualitative transformation in the Iran-Israel conflict, intertwining direct military confrontations with nuclear and strategic dimensions, all within a tense regional and international environment that has yet to develop effective mechanisms to contain the crisis and prevent its further deterioration into full-scale war.

2.2. Objectives and Limitations of the U.S. Strike

Through its threat—or eventual execution—of a military strike against Iran, the United States pursued several strategic objectives aimed at weakening the Iranian regime and reinforcing regional security. Foremost among these was the intention to halt Iran's nuclear advancements, particularly to prevent it from acquiring uranium enrichment capabilities that could lead to the development of nuclear weapons—a red line Washington has consistently emphasized. The U.S. also sought to curb Tehran's regional influence by diminishing its support for proxy militias and armed groups in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestine—forces often mobilized to challenge U.S. and allied interests, especially those of Israel.

On a tactical level, the strike aimed to deter Iran and its affiliates from launching attacks against U.S. personnel, military assets, or allied infrastructure in the region, while safeguarding the freedom of navigation and movement for American interests in the Gulf and vital maritime corridors (Thomas, C., 2025, May 22).

However, the United States has drawn clear operational boundaries for its military actions, mindful of the significant risks associated with a full-scale conflict with Iran. Washington has no desire to trigger a large-scale war that could result in substantial human and material losses and further destabilize an already fragile region—particularly amid Iran's domestic political tensions and mounting international scrutiny. As such, the U.S. strikes were designed to be limited, targeted, and strategically impactful—allowing room for flexible responses to evolving developments on the ground while keeping the door open for diplomatic negotiations that might reduce tensions without resorting to protracted military conflict.

In this sense, the strike reflects the broader "maximum pressure" doctrine, which combines military force with economic sanctions and diplomatic leverage in an effort to compel Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions and regional military entanglements—while minimizing the risk of unintended escalation (Thomas, C., 2025, May 22; Albino, D. K., et al., 2016).

Despite strong objections from several prominent U.S. policymakers and conservative thought leaders—including Steve Bannon, a vocal critic of direct military intervention—Washington launched a targeted airstrike at dawn on Saturday,

June 22, 2025. The operation, codenamed *Midnight Hammer*, targeted three Iranian nuclear facilities and was carried out amid escalating regional tensions and deep domestic divisions, particularly within the U.S. conservative camp regarding the role of foreign interventions.

Although nationalist factions warned that the strike risked dragging the United States into another prolonged Middle Eastern conflict—similar to Iraq and Afghanistan—the administration proceeded, intensifying the rift between traditional foreign policy hawks and anti-interventionist populists (Al-Amoudi, M., 2025).

The scale of the operation revealed an unprecedented level of escalation against Iran's nuclear infrastructure. It involved B-2 Spirit stealth bombers launched from U.S. soil, supported by Tomahawk cruise missiles fired from naval vessels and submarines positioned south of Iran. For the first time, twelve 13,600-kilogram bunker-busting bombs were deployed to strike the heavily fortified Fordow facility beneath the Zagros Mountains. The operation also targeted key sites in Isfahan and Natanz, signaling a deliberate effort to disable Iran's nuclear capabilities through precision strikes.

Although President Donald Trump described the attack as having "completely obliterated" Iran's nuclear infrastructure, initial assessments from the Pentagon and the International Atomic Energy Agency indicated that while the damage was significant, it fell short of total destruction. Tehran had reportedly evacuated several sites and relocated a portion of its enriched uranium stockpile in anticipation of the strike. These findings raise critical strategic questions regarding the long-term effectiveness of the operation, including whether it will deter Iran—or instead accelerate its nuclear efforts underground and in undisclosed locations (The Associated Press, 2025; Beaumont, P., 2025).

3. Implications of the U.S. Intervention in the Iran-Israel Conflict for China's Strategic Posture

In light of the U.S. military escalation against Iran, the intervention serves as a clear manifestation of the deepening geopolitical rivalry between Washington and Beijing, posing direct challenges to China's strategic positioning in the Middle East. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is increasingly at risk due to the widening scope of regional instability, while China's long-standing narrative of opposing the militarization of crises is now facing a difficult real-world test. This environment demands a careful recalibration between Beijing's diplomatic rhetoric and its evolving strategic interests (Mahmood, A., & Askari, M. U., 2024).

China now faces a strategic dilemma: either remain committed to its declared principles of neutrality and non-intervention, or adopt more assertive measures to safeguard its growing regional influence. This tension revives broader questions about the future of the international order amid a shift toward a volatile and contested multipolarity.

Accordingly, this section analyzes four key dimensions: the growing threat to the Belt and Road Initiative, the stress-testing of China's diplomatic narrative, the tension between soft power and hard power, and the wider implications for the future architecture of the global order.

3.1. The Erosion of the Belt and Road Initiative

The security instability triggered by the military escalation between Israel and Iran—compounded by direct U.S. intervention—poses a substantial threat to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This initiative depends heavily on the stability of strategic trade and energy corridors such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea. These vital maritime routes channel oil shipments essential to China's economy, particularly Iranian crude, which constitutes a significant portion of Beijing's energy imports. Any disruption or closure of the Strait of Hormuz would severely jeopardize China's energy security, especially in light of its limited domestic oil reserves (Yang, 2025).

In parallel, China's extensive investments in infrastructure and logistics in countries like Iran, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates now face heightened exposure to geopolitical risk. The current instability may disrupt supply chains, raise insurance costs, and threaten the security of Chinese assets across the region (Middle East Task Force, 2025). Such developments risk eroding confidence among regional partners in China's ability to ensure project stability, thereby weakening its broader geo-economic ambitions under the BRI framework (Yang, 2025).

Moreover, Beijing is increasingly concerned about the prospect of regime collapse or abrupt political transformation in Iran, which would have far-reaching consequences for Chinese influence and regional stability. While China continues to call for restraint and adherence to international law, the persistent escalation is undermining the long-term viability of its flagship global project. As a result, Beijing faces growing pressure to strike a delicate balance between its strategic interests and its official diplomatic posture (Yang, 2025).

3.2. Testing China's Narrative on the "Non-Militarization of Crises"

Although China has long articulated a principled stance opposing the militarization of international crises and advocating for diplomatic resolution, its behavior in key flashpoints—such as Taiwan and the South China Sea—suggests a dissonance between rhetoric and practice. This inconsistency raises serious questions about the credibility and coherence of China's strategic messaging.

In an effort to reconcile this gap, Beijing has launched new institutional initiatives, most notably its backing of the International Organization for Mediation (IOMed). Framed as a platform for peaceful conflict resolution, the initiative seeks to bolster China's soft power and position it as a responsible global actor committed to multilateralism and conflict prevention—while simultaneously challenging Western dominance in global governance (Scharaw, B., 2025).

Yet, this diplomatic posture forms part of a broader strategic vision. Rather than pursuing global dominance through military force, Beijing aims to reshape international norms by projecting "discourse power"—a concept that refers to the ability to influence global narratives, define legitimacy, and align international standards with China's long-term interests. As documented in in-depth studies on China's worldview (Rolland, N., 2020), this effort is central to Beijing's ambition to establish a form of "selective soft hegemony," particularly across regions of the Global South.

3.3. China's Strategy: Soft Power vs. Hard Power

The U.S. military intervention in Iran—specifically targeting its nuclear facilities—marks a significant geopolitical escalation that is reshaping the global balance of power and placing China's strategic doctrine under intense scrutiny. While Washington has opted for a hard-power approach to reaffirm its presence in a region where its traditional influence is waning, Beijing has responded with its customary emphasis on soft power: calling for a ceasefire and reiterating the principles of state sovereignty and international law, as emphasized by President Xi Jinping in a call with Vladimir Putin. China views the Middle East as a critical arena for expanding its diplomatic and economic footprint, a goal reflected in its trilateral initiative with Russia and Pakistan at the UN Security Council and the establishment of the International Organization for Mediation (IOMed), aimed at filling the global leadership vacuum and reinforcing its discourse on "non-militarization of crises" (Jeyaretnam, 2025).

However, this clash of strategic paradigms reveals what Nizar Krikche (2025) describes as the contours of a "great transformation" akin to the collapse of the central orders following the two World Wars. Traditional concepts such as sovereignty and military alliances are proving inadequate in managing the structural upheavals facing the international system. While the American model remains grounded in military superiority and coercive deterrence, China seeks to promote an alternative based on international legitimacy, multilateral mediation, and the strategic deployment of economic and technological tools as instruments of soft hegemony. Yet, this transition is anything but seamless. It unfolds through a phase of strategic disorder, exposing the fragility of the current global order and its inability to contain regional conflicts—evident in repeated U.S. violations of international law and the declining effectiveness of global institutions in the face of open warfare (Krikche, N., 2025).

In this context, the confrontation between Washington and Beijing is not merely a dispute over specific geopolitical files but a clash of models: an American model that views power as the foundation of stability versus a Chinese model that seeks to build legitimacy through development and long-term equilibrium. The Iranian crisis illustrates, as Krikche argues, that both paradigms are being tested by the realities on the ground, and that the trajectory of this "great transformation" toward a new world order is far from guaranteed. Its outcome will hinge on the ability of rising powers to assert their narratives and institutional visions in an increasingly complex, fragmented, and technologically accelerated international environment (Krikche, N., 2025; Jeyaretnam, 2025).

3.4. The Future of the International Order Amid Escalation

The Iranian–Israeli–American conflict constitutes a critical litmus test for the existing international order—particularly for global treaties such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Continuous Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, coupled with Tehran's ongoing efforts to advance its nuclear program, undermine the foundational principles of the global nonproliferation regime. Denying Iran its legitimate right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes—as enshrined in the NPT—risks deepening mistrust among nations and may prompt others to accelerate their own nuclear programs to ensure deterrence, thereby setting the stage for a regional and potentially global nuclear arms race.

At the same time, the intervention of major powers—especially the United States' steadfast support for Israel and Russia's involvement in mediation efforts—reveals the extent to which regional conflicts are entangled with the

strategic interests of global actors. This entanglement presents mounting challenges for the international system's capacity to manage conflicts and maintain order. The weakening of global institutions and peacekeeping mechanisms, compounded by the risk of escalating conflicts and systemic disorder, calls for a fundamental reassessment of the frameworks of international cooperation—toward a more resilient, multipolar architecture capable of ensuring collective security and global stability (Lesser, I. et al., 2025).

Moreover, ongoing U.S. military interventions in the Middle East and its support for Israeli strikes against Iranian nuclear infrastructure threaten the principles of sovereignty and international law. These developments deepen the polarization among great powers: while the U.S. pursues military dominance, China advocates for diplomatic mediation and international legitimacy through the exercise of soft power. As such, the current crisis underscores the urgent need to reorganize the global order along multipolar lines—where emerging and developing countries often become battlegrounds for influence. Without meaningful reform of international cooperation frameworks, the international system will remain vulnerable to fragmentation and disorder in an increasingly volatile and fast-changing world (Rolland, N., 2020).

4. Conclusion

The recent U.S. military intervention in Iran constitutes a strategic inflection point—not only in the trajectory of the Iranian–Israeli conflict but also in the evolving geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China over global leadership. While Washington continues to assert its influence through military dominance and traditional alliances, Beijing pursues a more nuanced approach centered on multilateral diplomacy, economic connectivity, and soft-power projection—exemplified by initiatives such as the Belt and Road. This contrast reflects a deeper struggle over the rules and norms shaping the future international order.

Against this backdrop, the Middle East has emerged as a decisive arena for testing the credibility and coherence of these competing strategic visions. The intensification of hostilities has exposed the limitations of current crisis management frameworks and revealed the fragility of both regional and global security architectures. It underscores the urgent need for the international community to rethink its approaches to conflict resolution and collective security.

Moving forward, a recalibrated international response must prioritize inclusive dialogue, structural cooperation between global powers, and sustained peacebuilding tailored to the region's unique political and socio-economic complexities. Only through such an integrated framework can a more stable, equitable, and multipolar international order be envisioned—one capable of withstanding the pressures of great power competition while fostering lasting stability in the Middle East and beyond.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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