



## **CHINA’S RESPONSE TO OPERATION MIDNIGHT HAMMER: CAUTION OR PARALYSIS?**

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On 22 June 2025, the U.S. military carried out Operation Midnight Hammer, conducting night strikes on Iran’s three main nuclear facilities with submarine-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles and B-2 bombers carrying GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrators (MOP), or “bunker-buster,” bombs.<sup>1</sup> The operation, which occurred nine days into the Iran-Israel war, inflicted significant damage on the Fordo, Natanz, and Isfahan nuclear sites.<sup>2</sup> Following intensive U.S. diplomacy, Iran and Israel agreed to a ceasefire on June 24.<sup>3</sup> Although the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is Iran’s most consequential economic partner and the two countries have a comprehensive strategic partnership, Beijing’s response to the attacks was relatively muted.

### **The Strategic Context**

China is by far the largest purchaser of Iranian oil, providing Iran with a vital economic lifeline amidst international sanctions.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the PRC was a tertiary actor in the broader June 2025 Israel-Iran conflict in which Midnight Hammer occurred, limiting its response to providing diplomatic backing to Tehran and criticizing the U.S. and Israel for breaching international laws and norms. Some observers have posited that this relative passivity may have been due to Beijing being caught flat-footed by the U.S. strikes.<sup>5</sup> However, the PRC’s approach was likely heavily influenced by its desire to prevent escalation that would negatively impact its broader interests.

Heavily dependent on oil and gas imports, China has a strong interest in ensuring the Strait of Hormuz remains open as a major international energy supply route.<sup>6</sup> This concern aligns closely with Saudi Arabia, also a comprehensive strategic partner of the PRC, and the five other Gulf Cooperation Council states.<sup>7</sup> Following the Midnight Hammer strikes, the Iranian parliament endorsed a measure to close the Strait of Hormuz, a retaliatory step that Chinese experts noted would inflict serious economic harm by constraining global oil supplies.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to undermining China's interest in averting an oil shock, more actively supporting Iran during the conflict would likely have negatively impacted relations with the United States, incurring significant costs on a relationship that, despite its myriad difficulties, bears heavily on the PRC's core interests. In June 2025, the PRC may have been particularly inclined to take a more cautious approach with the new U.S. administration.<sup>9</sup>

PRC state media coverage, including commentary by security experts, also revealed unease about the U.S. demonstration of its ability to mount undetected, long-range precision strikes against hardened targets in the heart of an adversary state. Several such sources sought to emphasize the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) improving offensive and defensive air strike capabilities.<sup>10</sup> This underscores that the operational success of the Midnight Hammer strikes may have stirred up broader concerns in PRC defense circles over the security of China's own nuclear deterrent capabilities. PRC strategists have long been concerned about the U.S.'s advanced conventional precision strike capabilities, particularly the threat they could pose to China's nuclear deterrent.<sup>11</sup>

## Official Responses

Authoritative PRC statements regarding Operation Midnight Hammer were strongly critical of the U.S. and generally sympathetic to Iran. Beijing objected to the U.S. action as a unilateral use of military force that it deemed a serious violation of international law, maintaining that dialogue is the only solution to the Middle East conflict.<sup>12</sup> At the U.N. Security Council, the PRC, along with Russia and Pakistan, introduced a draft resolution condemning the U.S. strikes on Iran and proposing an immediate ceasefire.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to denouncing the U.S. for violating international law, Beijing also accused Washington of inflaming an already volatile regional conflict in the Middle East. On June 24, shortly after Iran and Israel reached a tentative ceasefire, Foreign Minister Wang Yi had a call with his Iranian counterpart, Abbas Araghchi.<sup>14</sup> According to the PRC foreign ministry readout, Araghchi briefed Wang on the recent Israeli and U.S. attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities, which he characterized as "serious violations of international law, leaving Iran no choice but to retaliate."<sup>15</sup> Wang noted that China "immediately condemned" the Israeli and U.S. attacks on Iran.<sup>16</sup> He stressed that China is a "builder of peace" in the Middle East and emphasized that Xi had advanced multiple ceasefire proposals.<sup>17</sup> Wang also expressed concern that attacks on nuclear facilities subject to International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards not only contravene international law but "could potentially also trigger nuclear leaks or even a nuclear disaster."<sup>18</sup> The PRC readout of the call between Wang and Araghchi did not mention Iranian missile or drone attacks on Israel or U.S. bases in the Middle East, nor did it indicate that the Chinese side had asked Iran to exercise restraint. It is possible that Beijing privately urged Tehran to avert further escalation, but the readout stresses China's interest in supporting "Iran's commitment to safeguarding its sovereignty

and security, and on this basis, achieving a genuine ceasefire, allowing people to resume normal life, and promoting a rapid de-escalation of the conflict in the Middle East.”<sup>19</sup>

At an emergency U.N. Security Council meeting on June 22, Fu Cong, Permanent Representative of China to the U.N., said that the U.S. strikes violated the “U.N. Charter and international law, infringe upon Iran's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity, escalate tensions in the Middle East, and are severely detrimental to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime.”<sup>20</sup> Fu also noted that China was deeply concerned that the situation could further escalate and that it considered diplomacy the only way to address the conflict.

The next day, on June 23, PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Guo Jiakun stated that the U.S. attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities was a grave violation of the purposes and principles of the U.N. Charter and exacerbated tensions in the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> Guo stressed that China urged all parties to take measures to prevent further escalation in the conflict and return to the track of seeking a political settlement.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to offering rhetorical support to Iran, PRC officials and state media responded to Operation Midnight Hammer by portraying the strikes as evidence of the U.S.’s purportedly hegemonic nature and propensity to use disinformation and military blackmail to subdue countries that reject American dominance, such as Iraq in 2003.<sup>23</sup>

## **State Media and Think Tank Responses**

### *Charges of U.S. Stoking Middle East Chaos*

Coverage of Operation Midnight Hammer in PRC state media and think tanks echoed official sources in portraying the U.S. attacks as a reckless bid to retain hegemony in the Middle East. For example, on June 25, Xinhua published a column by its Baghdad Bureau titled “Midnight Hammer: A Dangerous Display of Hegemony.”<sup>24</sup> It argued that the U.S.’s “ferocious operation” occurred amidst “high-intensity” conflict between Iran and Israel, when both sides had expressed willingness to negotiate a ceasefire, but that the attacks threatened to drive the Middle East further into a “dangerous abyss.”<sup>25</sup> According to the Xinhua column, the U.S. determination to join Israel to attack Iran fits with a long pattern of Washington using “disinformation” as a pretext for military interventions in the Middle East. The operation, notes the column, provided a reminder that the “painful lessons” of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq predicated on contested claims of Saddam Hussein building a weapon of mass destruction arsenal are “still fresh.” More broadly, the piece claims that the U.S. has “made it evident to the international community that “when dealing with a country that practices ‘gunboat diplomacy,’ one must constantly guard against military blackmail” that erodes international trust and cooperation.

### *The Long Shadow of U.S. Airpower*

PRC observers generally portrayed Operation Midnight Hammer as strategic overreach and a reckless misuse of U.S. military power. Beneath these observations, however, the U.S.'s continued ability to mount precision deep strikes into the territory of China's strategic partners has also stirred unease about Beijing's capacity to influence the contemporary international security environment. According to the Jamestown Foundation's Shijie Wang, state television coverage of Midnight Hammer underscored that the PRC likely also viewed the operation as a demonstration of U.S. capabilities intended to deter potential rivals.<sup>26</sup>

Immediately following the attacks, CCTV interviewed a PLA Army Engineering University professor who discussed China's development of an advanced defensive system to protect its underground infrastructure against potential adversary strikes.<sup>27</sup> Some PRC experts and media sources also sought to play up China's own air attack weapons, such as bunker buster bombs, alluding to the PLA possessing similar capabilities to those of the U.S. military. For example, CCTV ran a segment showing fighter-bombers launching the Yunjian-1000 [云箭-1000] precision-guided munition using air-to-ground missiles, showcasing its own "bunker buster" to underscore that the PLA is also not lacking in MOP capabilities.<sup>28</sup>

PRC concerns over its deterrence capabilities could also intensify as a result of the U.S. decision to pursue advanced strategic missile defense through the "Golden Dome" system and nuclear modernization.<sup>29</sup> For example, the PLA displayed an array of new long-range nuclear and conventional strategic strike capabilities, as well as missile and air defense systems, in China's September 3 military parade to commemorate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory in World War II.<sup>30</sup> This is notable because PLA texts on strategic deterrence identify military parades as opportunities to demonstrate the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent.<sup>31</sup>

### *Quagmire or Quick Fix?*

While media and experts at state-linked think tanks in the PRC acknowledged that the inability of Iran to detect or intercept the Midnight Hammer strikes made for a significant operational success for the U.S. military, they also echoed broader international debates about the extent of the damage the U.S. attacks inflicted on Iran's nuclear infrastructure.<sup>32</sup> For example, an article in the *Global Times* Chinese edition immediately following the strikes was headlined "How badly were Iran's nuclear facilities damaged after the U.S. airstrike?"<sup>33</sup> The article noted that the Natanz nuclear facility may have suffered the most damage; that it was too early to determine the extent of damage at Fordow, which was struck by MOPs; and that the extent of damage to the underground facilities at Isfahan was not fully known.

Other sources assessed that while the U.S. air and missile strikes were tactically effective, they may ultimately prove strategically counterproductive. For example, a post immediately after Operation Midnight Hammer by Xu Bingjun, a senior researcher at the Huayu Think Tank [华语智库] and a special military observer at Xinhua News Agency's Outlook Think Tank [瞭望智库], framed the strikes as a moment "when deterrence failed."<sup>34</sup> While Xu noted the attacks

demonstrated an ability to undertake complex multidomain operations, “showcasing the apex of the U.S.’s stealth strategic strike capabilities,” the end result was more of a “tactical success” than a “strategic victory.”<sup>35</sup> According to Xu, the attacks could not “address the root cause of the differences between Iran and the U.S.; while Iran views its nuclear capabilities as ensuring regime survival, the U.S. sees the Iranian nuclear program as a threat to its regional hegemony.”<sup>36</sup>

While state media commentary tended to cast Operation Midnight Hammer as the first step in another full-scale U.S. military intervention, akin to Iraq in 2003, China’s Middle East experts largely assessed the strikes as pursuing the more limited objective of degrading Iran’s nuclear program. However, PRC experts differed as to whether the U.S. strikes could achieve this aim while averting escalation in the ongoing regional conflict. Zou Zhiqiang, a researcher at the Fudan University Center for Middle East Studies, stated that the U.S. wanted a quick strike and withdrawal, but that Washington had crossed Tehran’s “red line,” which could lead to undesirable outcomes, including continued confrontation between the two sides and attacks on U.S. military bases.<sup>37</sup> According to an article in *China Youth Daily*, the strike against Iran had “gradually pushed ‘Uncle Sam’ into another strategic quagmire with high costs, low returns, and enormous risks.”<sup>38</sup>

Other PRC experts argued that the U.S. would be able to control the situation and prevent further escalation by applying force to achieve its objectives while limiting the scope of retaliation by Iran. For example, Wang Jin, associate professor at the Institute of Middle East Studies at Northwest University in Xi’an, told *Beijing News* that the operation had limited objectives, with Washington seeking to compel Iran to make concessions on its nuclear program.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

The PRC’s generally passive response to the Iran-Israel conflict and Operation Midnight Hammer put Beijing in a difficult position in terms of its international and domestic messaging. China backed Iran diplomatically and deployed naval assets to the region but was not otherwise a major actor in the twelve-day Iran-Israel War.<sup>40</sup> Beijing did not serve as a mediator, despite recently becoming more active in regional diplomacy, including brokering the restoration of Saudi-Iran relations in early 2023.<sup>41</sup> Nor did China lend substantial assistance to its strategic partner at its moment of immense need, largely focusing on securing its own nationals and interests in Iran.

The PRC’s passivity calls into question the effectiveness of its overall diplomatic efforts. Under Xi Jinping, China has launched numerous multilateral initiatives, including the Global Security Initiative (GSI), seeking to project an image as a new kind of great power and partner, particularly for states in the Global South.<sup>42</sup> Beijing played a key role in brokering the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in early 2023, which the PRC Foreign Ministry often cites as a major early success for GSI that validates China’s self-prescribed role under the initiative as a “promoter of political solutions to regional and international hotspots.”<sup>43</sup> However, the quick procession from B-2 and Tomahawk strikes on Iran to an Israel-Iran ceasefire

underscored that the U.S.'s ability to influence Middle Eastern security dynamics still exceeds that of China. Given these developments, PRC state messaging fell back on familiar themes of stressing the centrality of dialogue to resolve conflicts and emphasizing the principle of state sovereignty, while also airing a stream of "commentaries" castigating the U.S. for its purportedly hegemonic and interventionist proclivities.

While the PRC is increasingly seen as a superpower, China's military limitations, including the PLA's limited force projection capabilities, hamper its capacity to influence the outcomes of crises beyond its periphery. Outside East Asia, the U.S., Russia, and regional powers are still the primary military actors. This puts PRC officials in an uncomfortable position. They must continue to portray China as a global security leader through the Global Security Initiative and other international security cooperation platforms put forward in the Xi era, but they must also find ways to operate in an international security environment in which China remains in many ways a second-tier power.

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