GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS · ENKI FOUNDATION · 2025

China's *Long Game*

How thirty years of patient strategy, a war Washington started, and a world desperate for clean energy converged to hand Beijing the decade.

Iran's biggest oil customer is China. Some analysts suggest that part of the reason the United States attacked Iran was **to undermine China's strategic position***. Not the primary objective. But a calculated secondary benefit. The evidence suggests the calculation was flawed.*

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

A Pattern, Not a Coincidence

China has turned each of the past three major global disruptions into strategic advantage. The Iran war is not an exception. It is the third iteration of an established pattern.

01

2020 — The Pandemic

China supplies the world

While rival economies contracted, Chinese firms surged to supply much of the world with medical equipment and pharmaceutical inputs, deepening relationships across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

02

2022–2024 — The AI Boom

China builds the infrastructure

As AI demand surged globally, China became indispensable to the physical buildout of the AI economy: metals, batteries, cooling systems, and industrial components for data centres worldwide.

03

2025 — The Iran War

China leads the transition

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz triggered a global scramble for clean energy alternatives. China is the dominant manufacturer of every technology the world now urgently requires.

In each case, Beijing did not create the crisis. It **prepared for it, positioned for it, and emerged with deepened global influence.** *The Iran war is not an interruption to China's long game. It is a chapter in it. — Fareed Zakaria, Washington Post, April 2026*

ACT ONE · THE PAST

Thirty Years of Quiet Work

1995 — 2024

Mid 1990s

China sets its strategic direction

Beijing's central planners make a decision that will take decades to mature: reduce China's structural dependence on imported oil by electrifying the economy. The objective is energy security. The instrument is sustained, state-directed investment at a scale no other government is prepared to sustain.

2010 — 2020

China becomes the world's renewable energy manufacturer

Through government investment that consistently exceeded anything committed in the West, China comes to dominate the manufacture of solar panels, wind turbines, batteries, and electric vehicles. This dominance is the product of deliberate industrial policy pursued over two decades.

Largest clean energy investor on earth for 10 consecutive years

2024

The strategy produces measurable results

China draws more than 30% of its primary energy from electricity, compared to 20% in the United States, Europe, and the broader OECD. The gap between China's energy independence and that of its principal rivals is empirically confirmed — and widening.

30%+ electricity share vs 20% OECD average

> *"For 30 years, China has been furiously electrifying its economy to reduce its reliance on oil. The rest of the world is only now understanding why."*

— THE TURNING POINT

February 28

The United States and Israel launch Operation Epic Fury against Iran. The Strait of Hormuz is effectively closed. Global energy markets enter acute disruption. Washington concludes it has inflicted significant strategic damage on Beijing.

Chatham House confirmed: China had prepared in advance for a US attack on Iran.

ACT TWO · TODAY

The Disruption That Did Not Break It

February — May 2025

80–90% of Iran's oil output purchased by China in 2025 — the supply disruption is immediate	**115** days of strategic petroleum reserve — three times the buffer of comparable economies	**1.2B** barrels in reserve — accumulated to absorb precisely this category of disruption

February 28

The supply disruption registers immediately

China, purchasing 80 to 90 percent of Iran's oil output in 2025, faces acute supply disruption. Beijing suspends diesel and gasoline exports — 2.7 million tons in February alone. The short-term economic impact is real and acknowledged.

2.7 million tons of fuel exports suspended in February alone

March 2025

Strategic reserves absorb the shock

China's 1.2 billion barrel petroleum reserve — 115 days of supply — functions as the buffer Washington did not adequately account for. Chatham House confirmed that Beijing had prepared in advance for this contingency. While global markets experience acute volatility, China draws on stockpiles built over years of deliberate preparation.

Ongoing

Restraint as deliberate strategy

Despite close ties with Tehran, Beijing adopts deliberate diplomatic restraint. Chatham House analysis notes this is strategic rather than indifferent: China sees Iran as a long-term relationship which Washington's maximum pressure campaign may inadvertently strengthen. Beijing does not need to intervene to benefit from this war.

Chatham House: "China sees Iran as a long game the US may inadvertently help it win"

> "*Beijing's diplomatic restraint over the US standoff with Tehran should not be mistaken for unreliability or indifference.*"
>
> Chatham House, February 2026

ACT THREE · TOMORROW

Who Builds the Future?

2025 — 2035 and beyond

2025 — 2027

The war accelerates the global energy transition

Sustained fuel shortages and prices above $2.50 per litre provide governments worldwide with compelling political justification for accelerating the transition away from oil dependency. Ember reported that China exported 68 gigawatts of solar technology in March 2026 alone — surpassing the previous monthly record by 50%. Fifty countries simultaneously set new records for Chinese clean energy imports.

68 GW of Chinese solar exported in March 2026 — a new global monthly record

2027 — 2030

China positioned as primary supplier

The People's Republic holds structural dominance in the manufacture of renewable energy equipment across solar, wind, batteries, and electric vehicles. As governments accelerate procurement of clean energy infrastructure, China is the country with manufacturing capacity, supply chains, and financing structures to meet demand at scale. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are already among the largest purchasers of Chinese clean technology.

Dominant manufacturer across solar, wind, EV, and battery sectors

Post 2030

Influence deepens through system integration

China's advantage extends beyond manufacturing. Beijing offers financing, infrastructure, and integrated supply chains — securing partner countries within Chinese-designed energy systems. Zakaria observed that Beijing demonstrates to governments that the United States brings volatility, while China brings equipment, credit, and continuity. The disruption that was intended to constrain China's position has accelerated a transition in which Beijing holds structural and financial advantage.

Zakaria: "The US brings volatility. China brings equipment, credit and continuity."

30%+	68 GW	50+
China's primary energy from electricity — highest of any major economy	solar technology exported in March 2026 alone — a new global monthly record	countries setting new records for Chinese clean energy imports during the conflict period

— STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

"The disruption Washington engineered may have accelerated a transition Beijing was already positioned to lead."

The operation that was partly designed to constrain China's strategic position has instead intensified global demand for the technologies China dominates. Beijing did not need to prevail in this conflict. It needed the conflict to produce the conditions it had been preparing for. It did.

> *"China has used the past three economic shocks to further its dominance. During the pandemic, Chinese firms surged to supply much of the world. As the AI boom swelled, China became central to its physical buildout. Now the Iran war has produced a global scramble for new energy. Here again, China is the indispensable power."*
>
> FAREED ZAKARIA · WASHINGTON POST · APRIL 20, 2026

Short Term

Supply disruption

Long Term

Structural advantage

Sources: Chatham House · Fareed Zakaria / Washington Post · CNN / Ember · Enki Foundation · 2026