

# China and the Iran Negotiations

by George Friedman - April 6, 2026

The United States and Iran have been engaged in indirect negotiations in Pakistan on ending the Middle East conflict. Indirect talks are always complex and only sometimes effective, but they do have their benefits. President Donald Trump can publicly say that talks are ongoing and that they are promising, soothing some Americans who object to the war, while Iran's leadership can reasonably deny that negotiations are underway, projecting strength at home. Also present at the talks are representatives from Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Muslim nations that have reasonably good to excellent relations – and thus influence – with the U.S. and sometimes Iran, as well as an interest in ending the war. There is something for everyone, but it is still unclear that these talks will be the vehicle for resolving the conflict.

What is most interesting is that China, which had criticized the U.S. attack on Iran, has now entered the talks. The Chinese assigned their ambassador to join the discussions, and together with Pakistan **they called for an end to the war** based on five principles:

1. An immediate cessation of hostilities and the provision of humanitarian aid to all areas affected by the conflict.
2. An immediate start to peace talks, ensuring the sovereignty, territorial integrity, national independence and security of Iran and the Gulf states.
3. An immediate cessation of attacks on civilian and non-military targets, in particular energy facilities and peaceful nuclear facilities such as power plants.
4. Ensuring the security of shipping lanes through the Strait of Hormuz.
5. Ensuring the primacy of the U.N. Charter and international law.

Normally, the Chinese would be pleased to see the U.S. bogged down in a war like the one in Iran. They would use it as an opportunity to condemn the United States while seeking increased influence in nations in the region and elsewhere, including the countries involved in these negotiations as intermediaries. This may still be the case, but there are also two reasons China would want to participate in a negotiating process that has every possibility of failing.

First, China is heavily dependent on imported oil and natural gas, and Iran is an important source of its oil. Of course, Iran makes a great deal of money selling energy to China, so in this sense, they

both need the war to end. Second, Beijing needs a new relationship with Washington. China has faced a significant economic problem ever since the U.S. imposed major tariffs on its goods. This is what the summit between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping will be about. In both cases, China needs the U.S. to cooperate, and so Beijing does not want to appear too pro-Iran. The role of neutral peacemaker is useful.

Iran's importance to China is obvious. The relationship with the United States is more complex. China's economy surged to become the world's second-largest, behind only the U.S., to a great extent because of American demand for its goods and U.S. investment. After four decades of dramatic growth, the Chinese economy was becoming mature and less dynamic, and so some decrease was inevitable. But U.S. tariffs significantly decreased the attractiveness of Chinese goods in the United States by increasing their cost, compounding the slowdown in Chinese growth. The result has been significant economic problems in China, with decreased growth rates, bank failures, declines in its real estate market (a form of savings in China) and an increasing unemployment rate, particularly among the young.

What is vital for Beijing is also of real interest to Washington, if not quite as urgent. For the U.S., the decline in the availability of lower-priced goods from China has contributed significantly to an affordability problem. Reintroducing cheaper Chinese products is a major part of the solution. At the same time, the U.S. cannot continue to be economically dependent on a nation with which it has potentially hostile military relations. What is clearly needed is a broad understanding between the United States and China over both economic and military relations.

That is the purpose of the now-delayed Trump-Xi summit, which was supposed to begin at the end of March. Both countries need this understanding, but the Chinese need it more than the Americans. China did not welcome Trump's request to delay the summit because of the war in Iran, but it could not afford to cancel the meeting altogether. Nor could Beijing afford to alienate Washington by taking an overly hostile stance toward the U.S. attack on Iran. The conflict already posed a serious economic problem for China due to the disruption to energy imports. A more critical response to the war risked a breakdown in the emerging negotiations and likely settlement with the United States over trade and military issues.

The Chinese therefore took two steps. The first was to allow the summit to go forward at a date convenient for Trump, rather than cancel it based on the Iran war. The second was to enter the U.S.-Iran talks in Pakistan as a neutral party. Granted, the five points of the joint Chinese-Pakistani proposal primarily are things China wants the U.S. to do, but they are not so critical as to provoke

Trump into threatening to cancel the summit with Xi. Indeed, China's relatively neutral stance and willingness to postpone the summit without critical comments made the summit more likely, and possibly the United States more forthcoming.

Two interests are driving Chinese decision-making: its need for enough oil and natural gas to maintain its economy, and its need for an understanding with the U.S. on economic matters. The latter can come only with a settlement of military issues. The Chinese have raised Taiwan as the primary outstanding issue on the military front, and there are indications that Trump will make an effort to find an accommodation with them.

For China, the Iran war is a significant challenge to its fundamental interests. China has criticized the U.S. but not acted in any way to alienate it. Its presence in Pakistan is a signal to the United States that it would not be so hostile as to undermine American interests in the region, and indeed will help mediate an end to the war. So while the war is itself important, and there is increasing pressure inside the United States for Trump to bring it to a close, China is trying to mediate rather than increase the pain that Trump is experiencing. It is calling for American shifts, but neither demanding them nor attacking the United States to the degree that it normally would. This would seem to be a measure of how much China wants the coming summit to succeed, and the degree to which it does not want the war to intrude.

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